

NOT ME

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1. Core Definition

The **Not Me** is a crucial component within the **self-system** structure proposed by American neo-Freudian psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1892-1949). Defined as the profoundly dissociated portion of the individual's personality, the Not Me represents aspects of the self and experiences that are so deeply associated with overwhelming emotional states--specifically **horror, dread, fear**, and worry--stemming from early, traumatic interpersonal events that they must be denied consciousness to maintain psychological stability. It serves as the repository for feelings and impulses deemed too threatening or incompatible with the established, functional sense of self, often arising from highly punitive, neglectful, or frightening interactions with primary caregivers during infancy and early childhood.

This concept marks a critical distinction from the other two personifications of the self established in Sullivan's framework: the **Good Me**, which is constructed from experiences that elicit approval, security, and tenderness from significant others, and the **Bad Me**, which incorporates experiences that cause manageable anxiety and disapproval but remain partially accessible to consciousness. The experiences that form the Not Me, however, transcend ordinary anxiety; they involve sensations of profound terror, depersonalization, or impending annihilation. Sullivan posited that these intense, terrifying experiences, which often feel alien or non-human, are relegated to the Not Me domain through the defensive mechanism of **dissociation**, rendering them unavailable to conscious recall or rational integration.

While deeply submerged in the unconscious, the Not Me exerts a significant, destabilizing influence. It surfaces primarily under conditions of extreme psychological stress, illness, or through symbolic manifestations such as intense **nightmares** and sudden, acute **traumatic emotional events**. Its sudden eruption into consciousness is associated with the most severe forms of psychopathology, including phenomena related to **schizophrenic responses**. The existence of the Not Me underscores Sullivan's belief in the fundamentally relational nature of identity formation, where the structure of the self is built upon interpersonal approval and the necessity of avoiding overwhelming emotional chaos.

2. The Self-System in Interpersonal Theory

Understanding the **Not Me** requires a grounding in Sullivan's broader **Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry**, which posits that personality is not an inherent, fixed structure, but rather a dynamic system of recurrent interpersonal patterns, termed **dynamisms**. The most critical of these

dynamisms is the **self-system**, which begins to emerge during the earliest stages of infancy as a protective organization dedicated to minimizing the experience of anxiety and maximizing security operations. The function of the self-system is primarily defensive; it acts as an emotional and cognitive filter, selectively allowing or rejecting experiences based on whether they increase or decrease the infant's sense of security, which is inherently linked to the primary caregiver's responses.

The development of the self-system is driven by the innate human need to avoid anxiety, which Sullivan viewed as the chief disruptive and painful force in human life. Anxiety is not internal in origin but is transmitted or induced empathically from the caregiver to the infant, who quickly learns to associate certain actions or feelings with this painful state. As the self-system develops and becomes more rigid over time, it achieves a functional stability by categorizing all experiences into the three core personifications of the self: Good Me, Bad Me, and Not Me. This structured categorization allows the individual to predict outcomes and manage interpersonal interactions, albeit often at the expense of genuine spontaneity and psychological integration.

The stability of the personality is contingent upon the successful maintenance of boundaries between these three personifications. While the Good Me and Bad Me remain relatively accessible--allowing the individual to acknowledge socially approved and disapproved behaviors, respectively--the Not Me signifies a radical rupture in experience. The experiences relegated to the Not Me are those so terrifying that the standard security operations used for the Bad Me content (such as selective inattention or repression) prove utterly inadequate. The formation of the Not Me is thus an emergency measure taken by the nascent self to ensure the survival of its core functions in the face of perceived annihilation.

3. Formation and Origin of the Not Me

The formation of the **Not Me** is intrinsically linked to interpersonal events characterized by sudden, extreme, and overwhelming emotional distress that occur early in life. These are experiences that threaten the very coherence and existence of the self, leaving the individual helpless, speechless, and utterly terrified. Sullivan argued that these traumatic events typically predate the development of mature cognitive and linguistic abilities, meaning the trauma is encoded in a primitive, non-symbolic, and often somatic way. Because these experiences cannot be assimilated into the developing self-structure--as they defy rational explanation and evoke feelings of profound horror--they are immediately and forcefully ejected from awareness.

The sources of the material that forms the Not Me often include abrupt, overwhelming expressions of parental rage, extreme forms of parental neglect that induce physiological panic, or situations involving violence or sensory overload where the infant is completely unable to cope or predict the outcome. These interactions instill not merely **fear** (which is integrated into the Bad Me), but true

dread and **horror**--emotions that are intrinsically depersonalizing and threaten to dissolve the sense of self. When this profound threat occurs, the resulting internal material is so foreign and intolerable that, when it surfaces, the individual often perceives it as external, alien, or non-human, cementing the designation "Not Me."

Crucially, the Not Me is not simply forgotten; it is actively dissociated. This means the individual maintains a persistent, though unconscious, psychic effort to keep this content separate from the rest of the personality. The dissociated material retains its affective charge and potential for disruption. The intensity of the associated emotion dictates the severity of the dissociation; the more terrorizing the interpersonal event, the more complete the dissociation must be to preserve the functioning self.

4. The Role of Dread, Horror, and Anxiety

Sullivan made a critical delineation between the various forms of anxiety to precisely define the boundary of the Not Me. While ordinary anxiety, which is uncomfortable but manageable, generates the Bad Me, the emotional precursors of the Not Me involve qualitatively different and far more intense affective states: **horror** and **dread**. These emotional states are fundamentally disorganizing and operate outside the normal scope of self-system management.

Horror, in this context, refers to the feeling of confronting something utterly grotesque, unnatural, or wrong that shatters one's foundational assumptions about reality. **Dread** is the overwhelming, agonizing anticipation of immediate, unmanageable suffering or psychological annihilation. When an interpersonal experience is so profoundly threatening that the infant perceives their very existence or sanity is at stake, the resultant terror bypasses the standard anxiety-management systems. The experience is not merely bad or disapproved of; it is psychologically impossible, necessitating its complete banishment from the self-concept.

Paradoxically, the utilization of these extreme defenses is a protective mechanism. The individual, unable to process the intensity of the experience while maintaining a functional self, sacrifices the ability to integrate that experience into conscious life. By consigning the terror and the memory of the event to the Not Me, the core self-system--the Good Me and the Bad Me--remains sufficiently intact and stable, allowing the individual to interact effectively with the social environment. However, this stability comes at the profound cost of harboring a latent, highly volatile reservoir of unprocessed, potentially explosive traumatic content.

5. Functional Mechanism: Dissociation and Projection

The primary security operation responsible for managing the **Not Me** component is **dissociation**. Sullivan viewed dissociation as a drastic and radical psychological measure where experiences, memories, and intense affects are actively held separate from conscious awareness and are

functionally incapable of being integrated into the organized self-system. This mechanism is distinct from repression, which typically handles content that is merely unacceptable or conflictual (Bad Me material). Dissociation, by contrast, handles material that is catastrophic, primitive, and incompatible with maintaining one's sense of reality or sanity.

When elements of the Not Me are partially activated or threaten to leak into consciousness--often due to severe stress or environmental cues--the individual frequently employs **projection** as a necessary secondary defense. Since the terrifying elements cannot be acknowledged as internal ("it is not me; I am not capable of that horror"), they are displaced onto the external world, other people, or supernatural forces. This mechanism can manifest clinically as intense paranoid ideation, wherein the individual believes that others are hostile, frightening, or actively plotting harm. This projection serves to reinforce the belief that the terror resides outside the self, thereby maintaining the critical dissociation of the core Not Me material.

The psychological effort required to sustain this radical dissociation is immense, consuming a significant portion of psychic energy. This continuous labor contributes to various non-specific symptoms, including chronic fatigue, emotional restriction, pervasive feelings of emptiness, and overall inefficiency in daily functioning. Moreover, the dissociation is inherently fragile; the Not Me material frequently expresses itself symbolically through recurring, vivid **nightmares**, inexplicable anxiety attacks, or sudden, overwhelming affective crises triggered by seemingly minor environmental stresses that unconsciously resonate with the original traumatic interpersonal event.

6. Clinical Significance and Psychopathology

The concept of the **Not Me** is profoundly significant in clinical practice, particularly in understanding the developmental origins of severe mental illnesses. Sullivan specifically linked the sudden, acute eruption of Not Me content into consciousness with the onset of certain severe **schizophrenic responses**. In Sullivan's psychodynamic formulation, schizophrenia was frequently understood not as a biological inevitability but as a dramatic disorganization of the self-system, precipitated by an acute, overwhelming threat to security that causes the previously dissociated material to flood conscious awareness.

The clinical experience of the Not Me breaking through is characterized by profound feelings of depersonalization (the self feels unreal), derealization (the world feels unreal), and acute psychological fragmentation. Because this material was never integrated through verbal or symbolic processes during development, its re-emergence is typically non-rational and intensely terrifying, manifesting as bizarre thoughts, overwhelming sensory distortions, or florid delusions centered around themes of profound horror or existential threat. The individual experiences a terrifying collapse of reality, feeling utterly disconnected from themselves and their environment.

The goal of therapeutic intervention, according to the Interpersonal School, involves establishing a

therapeutic relationship so genuinely secure, accepting, and non-threatening that the client can slowly and safely begin the integration process. This involves bringing the terrifying, dissociated material into a coherent self-structure, effectively moving the content from the radical domain of the Not Me into the more manageable domain of the Bad Me, where it can finally be symbolized, verbalized, and processed therapeutically. Furthermore, the Not Me concept remains highly relevant today in understanding the dynamics of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) and severe dissociative identity disorders, where chronic, early trauma leads to the creation of highly protected, non-integrated self-states that mirror Sullivan's earliest observations.

7. Further Reading

[Harry Stack Sullivan \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Interpersonal Psychoanalysis: The Legacy of Harry Stack Sullivan \(APA Division 39\)](#)

[Interpersonal Psychoanalysis \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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