

Embeddedness, Reflection, Mindfulness and the Unthought Known

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In his important new book, *Attachment in Psychotherapy*, David Wallin, PhD, highlights several important concepts from recent research in attachment theory, interpersonal neurobiology and mindfulness meditation. In this article I would like to explore four key concepts that have emerged from his and others work: "*embeddedness*", "*reflection (or mentalizing)*," "*mindfulness*" and the "*unthought known*", and relate them to the Theory of Living Human Systems (TLHS).

Embeddedness, Reflection and Mindfulness

The first three of these ideas may be considered as a triad that illuminates a progression of consciousness from a limited state in which we are blended or embedded in the content of our experience, to a more liberated state in which we discover ourselves as the *awareness of awareness*. From this meta-awareness, we discover that we can learn to dis-identify with the contents of our awareness and as that "awareness of awareness" that we are capable of interacting with every dimension of our experience with a sense of freedom and flexibility. Where a person is on this continuum also has great relevance for assessing their attachment status as understood in the research of Mary Main, (2000), and Fonagy (2001).

Let's begin by defining our terms:

Embeddedness refers to the frame of mind that has the experience that for as long as an experience is happening, it *is* the experience. In other words, in an embedded frame of mind, we are blended or merged with the experience and have no capacity to reflect on the feelings, emotions, somatic sensations, or mental representations that are passing through our awareness as *information* about our experience.

This state of mind has both pluses and minuses. For example if we are immersed in the experience of listening to music, playing a sport, or dancing, we don't want to be 'one off' from our experience, reflecting on the information. Similarly, if we are in a dangerous situation, such as when we encounter a poisonous snake on a mountain path, we simply want to be able to jump out of harms way as fast as we possibly can. Stopping to reflect on the particular variety of snake would have negative survival value. Neurologically, the state of embeddedness is connected with the "fast path" of neurological processing that involves the limbic system and the amygdala, bypassing the hippocampus and the frontal cortex (Siegel, 2007). On the negative side of the equation, if we are in a discussion with our spouse, and she or he says something that makes us angry, stimulating inside us the impulse to strike out, acting on this impulse will have obvious negative consequences. In this way, the state of "embeddedness" has both adaptive and maladaptive roles in the human experience. It is when we are fixated in an embedded state that it is indicative of difficulties in early attachment experiences. (Wallin, 2007)

Reflection refers to our capacity to reflect on the sensations, thoughts and emotions that are passing through our awareness *as information* about our inner and outer environment. In reflection we have the capacity to look at our experience symbolically, to process the information that we are receiving and reflect on it before we act on it. Neurologically, this capacity to reflect on our experience involves the

frontal cortex and the hippocampus (Siegel, 2007). It is arguable that all forms of psychotherapy, including (perhaps even especially) SCT, develop our capacity for reflecting on our experience as information about our inner and outer context. In fact, without the capacity for reflection, the whole project of psychotherapy (and perhaps human civilization as well!) would have no foundation to stand on.

The capacity for reflection is also a critical measure used in the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI), which Mary Main and others have used to assess attachment status in adults (Main, 2000). In broad strokes, without elaborating too much on this important tool for assessing someone's attachment status, the less developed someone's capacity to convey a coherent, reflective narrative of their attachment history, the more insecure their attachment status. Individuals that are able to convey a coherent narrative of their early history have developed a coherent sense of self based either on secure early attachment experiences or on an 'earned' secure attachment status. (An earned secure attachment refers to the important finding that although someone may have been born into a situation that afforded him or her little opportunity to develop a secure attachment, it is possible to "earn" a secure attachment later in life through reflective work.) In Wallin's words, these individuals demonstrate a self that "(1) makes sense rather than being riddled with inconsistencies, (2) hangs together as an integrated whole rather than being fractured by dissociations and disavowals: and (3) is capable of collaboration with other selves." (Wallin, 2007, p. 133).

All psychotherapies have the goal of developing an individual's (or a systems', if we think isomorphically) capacity to live from a coherent, centered self. This coherent, centered self, by definition has the capacity to reflect wisely on experience and to make choices that are less and less predetermined by the reactivity, conditioning and fixations of old roles and redundant, repetition compulsions and that further the goals of whatever context he or she is in. In Systems Centered terms, people who have a coherent, centered, self are more capable of taking up citizenship (a member role) and of using the information in their personal systems in the service of the groups goals.

Mindfulness takes this capacity the next step and can be seen as the natural, developmental flowering of our capacity for reflection.

In a mindful frame of mind, we are not so concerned with the content of our experience and using that content as information by which to steer our choices in life, as we are with our capacity to be *aware of awareness* itself. In other words, in mindfulness, we realize that all of the contents of our awareness are impermanent and that at the center of our being is a distinct and separate capacity to observe our experience without blending with that experience. As we cultivate this inner observer, we discover a spacious openness and acceptance that grasps at none of the thoughts or experiences that are floating through awareness and instead rests simply as awareness itself, without subject or object. In a mindful state of being, we discover the consciousness that is the ground of our experience and dis-identify from all of the contents of that experience. We become the "hovering attention" that Freud discovered was at the heart of a healing, psychotherapeutic stance, capable of holding all of the contents of our own and others experience with compassion, clarity and acceptance, without identifying with any position. This choiceless awareness, without agendas or preconditions, is the heart of mindfulness. As we uncover and cultivate this natural capacity, we discover with greater precision, subtlety and acuity, the different fixations in our bodies and minds that hinder our freedom. We also become progressively more skillful at untangling the knots in our own and others reactivity and defenses. Gradually we shift our

fundamental understanding of our identity from whatever roles we might play in life to simple *awareness itself with no essential, permanent content* to it at all.

This mindful stance has tremendous relevance for our practice as psychotherapists and as SCT practitioners, as well as ontological significance for our philosophical understanding of human nature.

If we take seriously that at the center of being is *pure awareness without any permanent or essential content*, we are called to a continual process of deconstructing the identities and fixations that we erect to protect us from the unknown. The capacity to “sit at the edge of the unknown” becomes not simply a minor breakthrough in the mental constructs and maps of our mind reads or negative predictions, but also a philosophical statement about the ultimate nature of being human. This capacity for mindfully holding the impermanence of all that is, including ourselves, becomes the fundamental stance from which we intervene with everyone that comes to us for consultation. From this perspective, when we consciously take on the role of “SCT Therapist” we do so from a place of great inner freedom and creatively play a functional role in the service of the goals of whatever context we are consulting to. From this view, the important question to ask is not whether our experience is authentic (all experiences are authentic) but whether it is functional and in the service of the greater good and the systems goals. In systems-centered thinking, this is the boundary between our “*person system*” and our “*member/consultant system.*” From the perspective of mindfulness, it also introduces the implicit goal that the people who come to us for consultation awaken to the realization that the core of who they are, is this *pure awareness of awareness* free from fixations in their body and mind. From the perspective of mindfulness practice, this is the goal of *liberation*.

Neurologically, the cultivation of mindfulness has tremendous ramifications. Again without elaborating too deeply here, the practice of mindfulness calms the reactivity in the autonomic nervous system and produces a state of neurological coherence that is stable, adaptive, flexible and energized. Interestingly, it also seems to develop the areas in the brain that are associated with happiness. (If you are interested in exploring the neurological implications of mindfulness, you may want to read Dan Siegel’s’ book, “The Mindful Brain” (Siegel, 2007).)

The Unthought Known

What then is the “unthought known”? Christopher Bollas first coined this provocative phrase in 1987 (Bollas, 1987). Basically it refers to what we “know” but for a variety of reasons may not be able to think about, have “forgotten”, “act out”, or have an “intuitive sense for” but cannot yet put into words. In psychoanalytic terms, it refers to the boundary between the “unconscious” and the “conscious” mind, i.e. the “preconscious mind.” In systems-centered terms, it refers to the boundary between what we know apprehensively, without words, and what we know, or will allow ourselves to know, comprehensively with words. (In many ways, although the methods are very different, the psychoanalytic goal of “making the unconscious conscious” is equivalent to the systems-centered goal of making the boundary permeable between apprehensive and comprehensive knowledge, .)

If we conceptualize the unthought known as what we already know but don’t yet know that we know, there are several ways that we can excavate this knowledge. According to Wallin, one of the most important methods is to pay exquisite attention to our bodies. The systems-centered methods for undoing tension can go a long way towards this goal.

When we turn our mindful attention to our bodies we begin to uncover knowledge and experience that has been buried for many years. When we make old, fixated patterns of tension conscious we begin to dissolve blockages in the flow of energy and information at multiple levels of our bodies and mind. As this energy and information begins to flow, we begin to decode the non-verbal information in our present here and now environment as well as release energy and information that we may have compartmentalized at some point in our past. Historically, it may have been important to wall off this knowledge because to have allowed ourselves to truly know our experience at the time would have been disruptive and perhaps even dangerous.

Another source of uncovering the unthought known is to explore the repetitive roles that we act out in our interpersonal relationships and the corresponding redundant roles that we induce in others. When we release the energy and information that is held in these roles, we travel a long way towards the goal of liberating ourselves from unconscious fixations and patterns. Once we have done this we are free to choose the roles that are adaptive for the situation that we are in at the moment and release the roles that are maladaptive.

Perhaps the deepest level of the unthought known is the heart of the teachings of mindfulness meditation. The heart of these teachings, which we know already but have forgotten, is that fundamentally *we are awareness itself*, already liberated from our fixations, fears and redundancies, without essential content, beyond subject and object, everything and nothing, and that whatever we are in life we also are not. This is the “non-dual” consciousness at the heart of so many mystical and meditative traditions (Wilber, 2003). In other words, the deepest level of the unthought known and the *edge of the unknown*, are the same thing.

-Michael Robbins

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