Studies of “I-experience” in Japan

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Abstract

“I-experience” (originally in German “Ich-Erlebnis”) is a phenomenon discussed by Charlotte Buehler (1923) to refer to the remarkable experiences of the “discovery of self in adolescence”. She characterized it as “suddenly experiencing the self in its isolation and locality”. After her classical work, the study of I-experience has not progressed in the systematic fashion. Recently several Japanese psychologists have started to study it. Takaishi (1989) made the “I-experience scale” and administered it to 622 junior high school and high school students. Amaya (1997), using a half-structured interview, conducted research into this experience on two groups: 160 college students and 18 junior high school children. In our own study (Watanabe and Komatsu 1999) 345 undergraduates completed the “I-experience Questionnaire” containing 19 items by responding them “yes” or “no”. They then chose their first and most impressive experience items and described their memory of the experiences with free responses. On the basis of these and other related studies, the unknown real features of this experience are now becoming clear: the “I-experience” is the experience of incongruity and uncertainty over the self-evident knowledge of self. Its typical expressions are “Am I really me?” “Why am I me?” and “Why am I now and here?” About 25% of undergraduates and 60% of junior high school students have had this experience at least once. The peak of their first occurrences is situated in childhood, but their memory may be apt to fade away before adulthood. Lastly, the methodological programs and philosophical connotations of these studies will be discussed.

Key Words: “I-experience”, discovery of self in adolescence, questionnaire, Charlotte Buehler, “I” and “me”.

Aims and method

“I-experience” (originally in German “Ich-Erlebnis”) is a phenomenon discussed by

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4 The word “Ego-experience” has been used in Japan us the English translation of Ich-Erlebnis. We want to introduce the word “I-experience”, as a new translation. We owe it to the suggestion by Dr. Giorgi (2004).
some German psychologists Buehler (1923) and Spranger (1948) to refer to the remarkable experiences of the "discovery of self in adolescence". Buehler defined it as "suddenly experiencing the self in its isolation and locality". Spranger defined it as a "metaphysically fundamental experience of individualization". Here is an typical example cited by both Buehler and Spranger:

[Example 1] (Case: "Rudi Delius") I was about twelve years old. I woke up very early. (......) In this moment I had the I-experience (Ich-Erlebnis). ~ It was as if every thing broke away from me and I was suddenly isolated. A strange floating feeling. And at the same time I proposed the bewildering question to myself: Are you Rudi Delius? Are you the same person whom your friends call so? The same who has a certain name and gets a certain mark in school? ~ Are you the same person as him? At that moment, inside myself, a second ‘I’ faced the first ‘I’ (the one that worked here entirely objectively as a name)\(^1\).

After these classical works, the study of I-experience has not progressed in a systematic fashion. Recently several Japanese psychologists have started to study it. We survey their studies.

Results

Nishimura (1979), clinical psychologist, through considerations of the case "Ludi Delius" and several other episodic cases, characterized this phenomenon as: "The experience of encountering inner self where I am me"; "A kind of revelation"; "sometimes accompanied with the sense of isolation". He also pointed out the difference between this theme and the identity study by saying: "In the psychology of Erikson, although the ego-identity is emphasized, it is treated not as I-experience itself, but only as an important base for role behaviors."

Takaishi (1988), another clinical psychologist, based on the work of Nishimura, made a first systematic research on this phenomenon. Hypothesizing that I-experience may not be a special experience, but occur to everyone at least partially, she made the "I-experience scale" containing 7 subspects: solitude, I-consciousness, autonomy, consciousness of change, inclination to fantasy, impression of nature. It was administered to 622 Junior high school and high school students. These subjects were also asked to report the age of their experience and it's estimated situation and consequence. The results were as follows: Most of subjects reported at least one or more partial experiences; the first I-experience was estimated to occur mainly around the age of 10; its dominant trigger were conflictive relationships with friends; the immediate emotional reactions toward these I-experience was mostly negative, but the

\(^1\) I owe Dr. Th. Teo for the perfect translation from German.
Watanabe (1992) administered to 227 undergraduate students a questionnaire with four passages illustrating the experience in question, and asked them to “describe your first impressive memory of any thoughts you have had which are similar to these passages”. 45 cases were assessed as “I-experience”. The peaks of age of the first experience were distributed between the ages of 10 and 14. In 9 cases the first experience seem to have occurred between the ages of 3 and 9. These cases were classified as 4 types:

A. Questions about self-identity, expressed as: Why am I me?
B. Questions about own birth, expressed as: Why was I born as (e.g.) Ichiro, not as some other child?
C. Questions about “place and time”, expressed as: Why am I here, and why now?; why am I not in another country or another era; why am I not in another country or another era, etc.
D. Other questions which are difficult to classify: for example, Why was I born?.

We will describe below examples of type A, B, and C.

[Example 2] At the age of 6 or 7, on some fair Sunday, just before noon, I was in an upstairs room of my house. I was vaguely gazing at the sunlight through the window. Suddenly, I thought, “Why am I me? Why am I here?” [female, age 19]

[Example 3] At the age of 10 or 11, I thought, “Why was I born as me, Ichiro? If I had been born as one of my friends, then who would be this Ichiro? [male, age 18]

[Example 4] I don’t remember since when, but I have sometimes wondered why I exist now, at this time. It was several million years ago that human beings began to live on the earth. Is it not possible that I could have been alive in some other era? [female, age 19]

Amaya (1997) conducted a research into this experience on two groups: 160 college students and 18 junior high school children. Her method used a half-structured interview. 10.6% of the college group and 65.0% of the junior high school group were assessed to have had the I-experience. Amaya interpreted this difference between the two age groups as an indication that almost all people have this experience in their childhood but during their adolescence progressively lose the memory of having had it.

In the study of Watanabe and Komatsu (1999), 345 undergraduates completed the “I-experience Questionnaire” containing 19 items, by responding to them “yes” or “no”. Then they were asked to describe their memory of the first experiences. 27.5% of them were assessed as having had the I-experience at least once. As indicated by Figure 1, the peak age of the first experience was in the lower grades of elementary school (age 6-7). The situations in which I-experiences were experienced and the causes (or triggers)
of these experiences were classified as in Figures 2 and 3. Finally, all 145 cases assessed as I-experience were classified into 4 subaspects, which were named as 1: “question about origin and basis of the self”, 2: “separation of I and me”, 3: “awareness of original uniqueness of the self”, 4: “solipsistic skepticism”. Their typical expressions and hypothetical relationship to each other are shown diagrammatically in Figure 4.
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1. Question about origin and basis of the self
   "Why am I me?"; "Why am I here and now?"; "Why was I born as me, not as another person?"; "Am I really me?"

2. Separation of I and me
   "Am I really the same person who has a certain name and appearance?"; "No, ‘real I’ is what is inside myself, invisible to others!"; "The second I faced to the first ‘I’ inside me!

3. Awareness of original uniqueness of the self
   "I am really me!"; "I am nothing but me!"

4. Solipsistic skepticism
   "There might be no other ‘selves’ than my ‘self’ in the world!"

Fig. 4 Four subsaspects of "I-experience", their typical expressions, and their hypothetrical relationship to each other. The arrow from 1 to 4 is drawn dotted because this route is doubtful and will not be discussed.

Discussions

It is to be emphasized that the study of I-experience might create a promising field for the psychology of self. Since the famous distinction of the “I” and the “me” made by James (1892), study of the “I”, the subjective component of the self, has received considerably less attention than that of the “me”, the objective self. This historical course might be natural because it is logically difficult (or impossible?) to make an object of the empirical investigation out of the subjective self. The self, “objectively” observed and investigated, is not the “subjective”, but the “objective” self! However, the study of I-experience may be opening the door to the empirical study of “I”, the subjective self, by means of focusing on the various kinds of psychological experiences among young people when not only the “me” but also the “I” matters for the first time in their life.

Why do the expressions of I-experience have such expressions as: "Why am I me?", "Why am I here and now?" and "Am I really me?" I observe my self and know that I have “a certain name and get a certain mark in school”; I know that I live in a particular “here and now”. This is the self-evident knowledge of my self. But, “suddenly”, I question to myself as Rudi Derius did: "Am I really me? Am I really the person who has a certain name and gets a certain mark in school?" This question might take another form as: "Why am I the person who has a certain name and gets a certain mark in school, that is, the person who lives in a particular "here and now"?" In these expressions, "I" refers to the subjective self, and "me" or "the person who..." to the objective self. Therefore, the self-evident identity between “I” and
"me" has not been self-evident any more in these questions. Here may be the first step toward searching for the self, not the objective, but the subjective.

In the second step, the search for the self may diverge into two courses, as suggested in Figure 4 (The third course drawn with a dotted arrow is doubtful, as pointed out in our recent work (Watanabe, 2002), so that we do not discuss about it). We may observe the process of one course (from 1 to 2) just in the description of Rudi Delius. In this experience, he proposed a bewildering question: "Am I really me?" And at the end of his description, he found by himself an answer: "Inside myself, a second "I" faced the first "I". In other words, he found the "I-as-subject", self-as-subject, totally distinct from "I-as-object", self-as-object.

In fact, in our collection of the case of I-experience, we found many examples of this kind of "self-discovery", where self-as-subject faced the self-as-object. In these examples, the former is sometimes called "my real self", "something like a soul", etc.

Another course is from 1 to 3 in the Figure 4. Here are examples:

[Example 5]. One day, in the upper grade of primary school, I questioned to myself why I was me, just one of many persons in the world. Afterwards, I answered to my self that I was me, I was distinct from other persons, and I would never become another person. [female, age 20]

[Example 6] (Case: psychoanalyst Doi (1972)) I remember my first experience of I-consciousness at the age of 8. One day, on the way home from school, I suddenly realized that I was a being distinct from anyone else. This sudden awakening struck me, a young child, like a flash of lightning. At that moment, I got a serious consciousness that, try as I might do, I would never become another person, and that I could never cease to be me!

In the example 5, we can observe the process of the course 1→3. She proposed a question: "Why am I me?". And at the end of this description, she found by herself an answer: "I am me." Logically speaking, this answer is not an answer to the question "Why am I me?". But psychologically, it may be an answer, or more exactly speaking, a resolution. Before this experience, she was, without any consciousness, what she was. But afterwards, she accepted, with consciousness, what she was. We might find this type of self-acceptance in the identity-formation of some minority people: To accept what they are may have psychological significance to them.

It is true that in both courses, we can observe the processes that might refer to some kind of identity-formation. But we are not able to discuss in detail the relationship between the I-experience and the formation of ego-identity, because we have not yet enough empirical data.
On the basis of these studies, the unknown real features of this experience are now becoming clear: the "I-experience" is the experience of incongruity and uncertainty over the self-evident knowledge of self. Its typical expressions are "Why am I me?, "Why am I here and now?" and "Am I really me?" About 25% of undergraduates and 60% of junior highschool students have had this experience at least once. The peak of their first occurrences is situated in childhood, but their memory may be apt to fade away before adulthood. They may occur most frequently when alone. They may occur frequently when thinking about death, observing oneself, contemplating on the cosmos, gazing vaguely at other persons or animals, or being troubled with conflicts in human relations. As for the relation between this experience and the developmental course of ego-identity, we have not yet obtained sufficient evidence. But we hope that we will obtain such evidence for the foreseeable future, since several research projects aimed at throwing light on this relationship have already started.

Studying I-experience is studying the "I", self-as-subject, through empirically studying the experience in which the difficulty of objectively knowing the "I" is experienced tacitly with the sense of wonder or other confusing feelings.

References


1 As for the detailed discussion on the methodological problem of this study, see Watanabe (2003, 2004), and on the philosophical connotations, see Watanabe (2001).