

Phenomenological approach to the developmental study of the self: The “I-am-me experience” in Europe and Japan

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1. Introduction

Among the five kinds of self, including perceived, interpersonal, conceptual, temporal, and private, distinguished by the cognitive scientist Neisser (1988), the private self has been completely neglected in developmental psychology. Neisser (1997) himself later neglected the private self in his effort to incorporate a narrative approach into his theory of selves. Originally, he wrote: “The *private self* appears when children first notice that some of their experiences are not directly shared with other people” (Neisser, 1988, p. 36). “Perceiving and doing – ‘being in the world’ – are typically associated with particular subjective experiences, and one can take those experiences themselves as objects of attention. In addition to seeing a pencil and picking it up (say), one can attend to the *experience* of seeing it and picking it up.” (ibid, p. 51) It seems obvious that investigating such “subjective experiences” as the private self through cognitive and narrative approaches is difficult. Phenomenology can be adapted to study the private self because it has traditionally focused on the subjective experience since Husserl (1960 [1950]). It was the phenomenological philosopher Herbert Spiegelberg (1964) who began the phenomenological study of the development of self with a study entitled, “‘I-am-me experience’ in adolescence and childhood.” Unfortunately, his work has largely been forgotten. Studies of the “I-am-me experience” have been revived recently in Japan and the Netherlands. In this presentation, these studies will be reviewed to present how studies of the I-am-me experience contribute to elucidate the enigma of private self. This presentation will conclude by facilitating the phenomenological approach to the developmental study of the self, which is based only on first-person recollections of childhood and adolescence and is particularly adapted to investigating “the subjective self”.

2. The philosopher Spiegelberg investigates the “I-am-me experience” using the

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questionnaire method

Example 1² One day when I was about 5 years old, I was just sitting around, doing nothing, when I realized I was me, and began to wonder why I wasn't somebody else. It bothered me for about a week afterwards and since then. The thought has come up from time to time, though less often recently (Spiegelberg, 1964, p. 18).

This is a recollection of an American senior high school girl. Spiegelberg found it in his study after administering a questionnaire to about 100 college and high school students. Why did the *philosopher* make such a *psychological* research as using a questionnaire method? Spiegelberg's opening statement sets the tone for his study: "The present study owes its origin to a long-standing interest in a personal experience which I have founded strangely neglected by both philosophy and psychology. Its most spontaneous expression is the seemingly trivial sentence 'I am me'" (ibid, p. 3). His article begins with these sentences. He concluded the Introduction by describing: "This is not the place for a phenomenological elucidation of this experience. The main purpose of the present study is to establish its existence empirically and to make it available for fuller investigation both psychologically and philosophically" (ibid, p. 3). In the next section, he quoted four examples that he had encountered in European literature. I quote only one of them, an autobiographical fragment written by the German Romanticist Jean Paul Richter (1763–1825)³:

[**Example 2**] (Jean Paul) One morning, as a very young child, I was standing in our front door and was looking over to the wood pile on the left, when suddenly the inner vision 'I am a me' (Ich bin ein Ich) shot down before me like a flash of lightening from the sky, and ever since it has remained with me luminously: at that moment my ego (Ich) had seen itself for the first time, and forever.... (Spiegelberg, 1964, pp. 3–4).

In the following sections, Spiegelberg conducted several questionnaire surveys with the aid of psychologists and high-school teachers. These surveys yielded many interesting "I-am-me experiences" among American college and high school students. "Example 1" is one of them. He concluded that more studies, including "a careful phenomenological investigation of the experience behind the puzzling expression" (p. 20), should be conducted in the future to

² The numbering of "Example" is only for this article. The same applies hereafter.

³ This example was requoted by the analytic philosopher Chisholm (1981) as an example for supporting his theory of transcendental self. As far as I know, this had been the only reference from this article of Spiegelberg until Kohnstamm (2004) wrote about it.

elucidate such experiences.

Afterwards, he discussed this experience in relation to his philosophical considerations of the self several times. For example: “Most children and adolescents are affected by sudden seizures of an experience in which they sometimes express such seemingly tautological sentences as ‘I am me’. And nearly all of them seem to be bothered by persistent questions such as ‘Why am I me?’” (Spiegelberg, 1986, p. 57). However, despite his hope for the future “phenomenological investigation of the experience”, his studies on the I-am-me experience did not attract the attention of researchers in Western countries for a long time⁴. Since the 21st century the study of the I-am-me experience has been revived in at least two countries.

3. Revival of the study of “I-am-me experiences” in the Netherlands

The Dutch developmental psychologist Dolph Kohnstamm (2004, 2007) is the first and presumably the only researcher from a western country who investigated the I-am-me experience after the death of Spiegelberg in 1990. He was greatly inspired by Spiegelberg’s work, but did not use the questionnaire method. Instead, he wrote columns for a Dutch newspaper and a German magazine about his interest in this experience. In these articles, he mentioned a few autobiographical fragments quoted by Spiegelberg (1964, p. 4). At the end of these columns, he asked readers who had similar memories from their own childhood to write to him about their memories. He received about 250 reactions, primarily from the Netherlands, Germany, and several other European countries. He selected 95 examples according to several criteria⁵. The reported ages in which the “I-am-me experience” occurred ranged from 3 to 14 years. He classified these examples into nine categories mainly according to their content or the situations of those experiences: “I am I”, “This is my body”, “mirrors”, “sudden awareness of the relativity of one’s perceptions”, etc. The example below is one out of the category “I am I”, and has certain common features with that of “Example 2”.

⁴ “Spiegelberg’s article has not received mention in any of the other works I have consulted thus far.” Kohnstamm, the rediscoverer of Spiegelberg’s works, wrote in 2007. “Clearly, there was not much interest in it in his own time, and remained entirely unnoticed outside the small circle of phenomenological philosophers. Even in the books by American psychologists devoted entirely to the development of self-awareness, such as those mentioned in the previous chapter, Spiegelberg’s name doesn’t appear in the index” (Kohnstamm, 2007, p. 182).

⁵ “One of these criteria refers to how detailed the situation in which the questionable actions took place is described. Above all, details that are perfectly irrelevant to the situation itself contribute to the plausibility” (Kohnstamm, 2007, p. 194).

Example 3 (A German man, 62 years old) On this particular day, I had just gone to bed and my thoughts were rambling. Then I suddenly became aware of this: *There is a me (dass es mich gibt), and now I feel and experience that there is a me in an entirely different way, since I perceive myself as I exist.* I marveled that I had only now become aware of myself for the first time, and knew for sure that this must have been a very special step in my development. ‘I am I (*Ich bin ich*)’ describes it very well. It was so vivid that I was conscious of myself entirely at the time and it remained fixed in my memory that I was eight years old when I had these kinds of thoughts for the first time. I thought to myself that I absolutely had to remember when I first became conscious of myself (pp. 42–43).

After examining all 95 examples, Kohnstamm reviewed main psychological works on the development of self-awareness⁶. However, he did not find anything useful for understanding the I-am-me experiences.

Despite the significance and realistic details of many of the examples in this book, Kohnstamm’s work failed to attract much attention from researchers in Western countries⁷. However, he received a significant response in Japan. His German book (Kohnstamm, 2004) was translated into Japanese by Watanabe and Takaishi, because these Japanese psychologists had already started studying the I-am-me experience, beginning at the end of the 20th century.

4. Revival of the study of “I-am-me experiences” in Japan

Japanese researchers have investigated the ‘I-experience’ since the 1980s. They did not adopt the term, “I-am-me experience”, because they were unaware of Spiegelberg’s research. Instead, they built on C. Bühler’s (1923) *Ich-Erlebnis*, whose book had been translated into Japanese from the original German and was familiar. The following is one of Bühler’s typical examples.

Example 4 (Case of “Rudi Derius”)

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 everything 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 Derius? 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) (ibid, pp. 44–45)⁸.

⁶ His review included W. James, J. M. Baldwin, G. H. Mead, M. Lewis, K. Nelson, W. Damon & D. Hart, etc.

⁷ Personal communication.

⁸ I owe Dr. Th. Teo, at York University in Canada, for the perfect translation from German.

After analyzing the case of “Rudi Derius”, Takaishi (1988, cited by Watanabe, 2011a) developed the “I-experience scale”, which contains seven dimensions. She administered a questionnaire using this scale to junior high school and high school students. Watanabe (1992, cited by Watanabe, 2011a) distributed a questionnaire with several examples to illustrate the “I-experience” to undergraduate students. Amaya (1997, 2002, 2003, cited by Watanabe, 2011a) used a semi-structured interview in addition to a questionnaire for junior high school students. These studies clarified the previously unknown features of the “I-experience”. It is an experience of incongruity and uncertainty over the self-evident knowledge of one’s own self. Its typical expressions include such questions as: “Am I really me?”, “Why am I me?” or “Why am I here at this time?” Approximately 30% of undergraduates and 60% of junior high school students report having had this experience at least once. Although the first occurrence tends to be in childhood, the memory is apt to fade by adulthood.

Remarkable progress has been made regarding research methodology. An assessment manual for the I-experience was developed. In Watanabe and Komatsu (1999, cited by Watanabe, 2011a), two judges independently examined all documented descriptions and classified them into “I-experiences” and other experiences based on this manual⁹. Finally, it was confirmed by Watanabe (2012) that Spiegelberg’s I-am-me experience was exactly equal to the I-experience in Japanese studies based on this assessment manual.

5. Cognitive connotations of the I-am-me experience

What are the cognitive connotations of these studies about the I-am-me experience? Watanabe, quoting Spiegelberg¹⁰, writes: “By comparing the private self [of Neisser] and “I-am-me”

⁹ Table 1 shows how the manual could be applied to the case of Rudi Derius; the right-hand column lists the phrases in the example that correspond to the criteria.

Table 1. Assessment Manual for the I-experience (abbreviated version). If an experience involves Criteria 1 and at least another one of the criteria listed below, it can be classified as an “I-experience.” (Watanabe, 2011a, p. 98)

Criteria	Phrases taken from the case of Rudi Derius
1. In the text, what matters is the self.	Whole text
2. Suddenness, unexpectedness	“ <u>In this moment</u> I had ...and I was <u>suddenly</u> isolated.”
3. Feeling of strangeness, or being out of place	“A <u>strange</u> floating feeling. ...I proposed the <u>bewildering</u> question.”
4. Separation of two selves	“... a <u>second ‘I’</u> confronted the <u>first ‘I’</u> ”
5. Feeling of being unique and isolated	“It was as if everything broke away from me and I was <u>suddenly</u> <u>isolated</u> .”

¹⁰ “Perhaps one of the most poignant features of the ‘I-am-me’ experience is the strange dissociation of the ‘me’

experience, it was concluded that the latter experience might originate from a conflict between the conceptual self and the private self” (Watanabe, 2011 b, p. 417). It would be better if we consider another historically more deeply rooted conflict in the psychology of self before beginning to discuss his conclusion. That is, the conflict, or more generally the dichotomy, between “me” and “I” (James, 1895). It survives even now “in terms of dichotomies such as ‘self as object and self as subject’, ‘self as known and self as knower’, ‘self as experienced and self as experiencer’, ‘the self of science and the self of experience’, etc” (Klein, 2013, p. 803). This dichotomy has been used in studies of the I-am-me experience. After phenomenologically defining the I-am-me experience as “disruption in the self-evidence of one’s own self” (p. 103), Watanabe (2011a) wrote: “An ‘I-am-me’ experience may occur when an individual becomes aware of the conflict between ‘I’, the center of a subjective reality, and ‘me’, one of many selves [as human beings] in the objective world” (p. 109)¹¹.

How is it possible to confirm that Neisser’s “private self” corresponds to James’ “I” and his “conceptual self to “me”? As is well known, Neisser’s classification of the kinds of self depends on forms of information. He writes: “I am reluctant to call private conscious experience a ‘form of information’ (like stimulus structure, or the stored contents of memory) because it does not specify anything beyond itself in the way that optical information (say) specifies the layout of the environment” (Neisser, 1988, p. 50). As cited at the beginning of this presentation, “In addition to seeing a pencil and picking it up (say), one can attend to the *experience* of seeing it and picking it up” (Neisser, 1988, p. 51). These sentences indicate that the kind of information on which the private self depends is information on information; that is, reflexive information. It

from the body with which it used to identify” (Spiegelberg, 1964, p. 8). Therefore, this experience “differs even more basically from Erik H. Erikson’s significant and fruitful concept of self-identity. . . . From Erikson’s concrete development of this concept I receive the impression that this ‘Identity’ almost coincides with what is usually called personal character or social role. . . .” (ibid., p. 9).

¹¹ Taking an example, “I am Rudi Derius” had been self-evident self-knowledge up to the time when the I-am-me experience occurs. However, it was not self-evident anymore, because “a second ‘I’ faced the first ‘I’ (the one that worked here entirely objectively as a name)”. Rudi Derius became aware of the conflict of two ‘I’s. It is obvious that “a second ‘I’” means “‘I, the center of a subjective reality”, and that “the first ‘I’” corresponds to “‘me’, one of many selves as human beings in the objective world”. Watanabe (2010) described in another work that studies of I-am-me experience might make it possible to investigate psychologically James’ “I”, the subjective self. James himself considered, seems to me, it impossible to empirically or psychologically investigate “I”. It is because the “I”, scientifically investigated, is no more “subjective” but “objective” self. However, studies of I-am-me experience may make it possible to access to James’ “I” *indirectly*, that is, through the experience of conflict between “I” and “me”. And as Watanabe (2011b) wrote above, this conflict corresponds to “the conflict between the conceptual self and the private self”.

goes without saying that this kind of information is not directly shared with other people.

James wrote: “Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of *myself*, of my *personal existence*. At the same time it is *I* who am aware; so that the total self of me, being as it were duplex, partly known and partly knower, partly object and partly subject, must have two aspects discriminated in it, of which for shortness we may call one the *Me*, and the other the *I*” (James, 1961/1892, p. 43).

Taking the “Case of Rudi Derius” as an example, Rudi Derius is aware of his personal experience. He has acquired this conceptual self (“Me”) through certain stored memory contents; that is, through a certain form of information. At the same time, he is aware of “I” who is aware that he is aware of his “Me”. He has acquired this “second I” through information on information, that is, through reflexive information. It is obvious that James’ “I” corresponds to Neisser’s private self, and his “Me” to the latter’s conceptual self. As for the other three kinds of self, such as perceived, interpersonal, and temporal, they are *prerequisites* for the conceptual self and the private self.

It has been hypothesized that the I-am-me experience originates from a conflict between the conceptual self and the private self. First, this may explain the fact that not all participants can report having had this experience (cf. Japanese studies), and that the supposed age of occurrence ranges widely from 3 to 14 years (cf. Kohnstamm, 2006). These observations suggest that formation of the private self is necessary, but not sufficient, for the occurrence of the I-am-me experience. In addition to the private self, a certain relationship between it and other kinds of self, mainly the conceptual self, may be determinative for this experience. Figure 1 (see next page) illustrates this possible relationship.

In “Case 1”, the trajectory representing the “intensity” of private self crosses over the line representing the “stability” of conceptual self. In “Case 2”, there is no such cross-point. If this cross-point diagrammatically represents the time when the conflict between the conceptual self and the private self occurs during development of one’s self, this diagram could explain why not all participants have reported having had the I-am-me experience. In cases where one’s private self is too gradually formatted or the conceptual self is too “stable”, there would be no crossover between these two trajectories, and there would be no overt conflict between the two kinds of self.

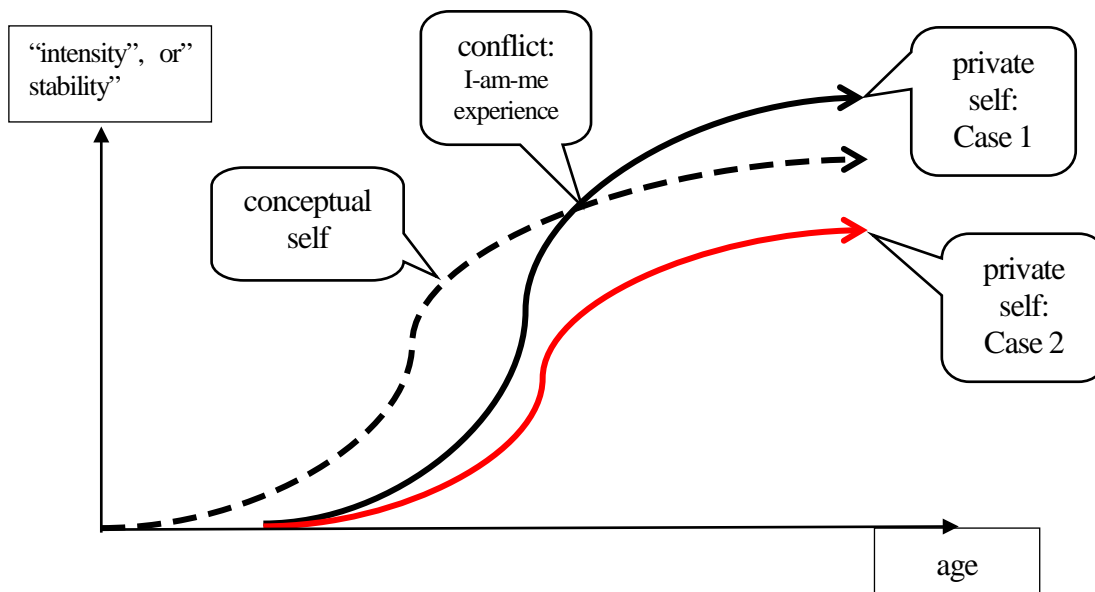


Figure 1 Diagram illustrating the supposed relationship between the conceptual self and the private self

This illustration can also explain the observation that the supposed age of occurrence of the I-am-me experience ranges widely. The time when two “trajectories” cross over each other does not depend on the “intensity” of one’s private self, but on the complex relationship between the two kinds of self.

6. Conclusions

It is now clear that the phenomenological approach is the most adapted to investigate the private self. In his discussions about this self, Neisser did not refer to any influential research that supported his discussion “empirically”, much less “scientifically”. This would be natural because his private self corresponds to James’ “I”, that is, the subjective self. “For the subjective self to become part of the scientific world, it would have to forfeit its subjectivity” (Klein, 2013, p. 803).

It is true that Damon and Heart (1988) studied James’ “I” empirically and achieved a certain success. According to this study, “I” is composed of four components or dimensions: (a) agency, (b) individuality or distinctiveness, (c) continuity, and (d) self-reflection. Those authors asked a particular question to children and youths for each of these dimensions and, according to their answers, they distinguished four developmental levels¹². However, they stated for

¹² (1) early childhood (identification through classification), (2) middle and late childhood (estimation based on comparison), (3) early adolescence (interpersonal significance), (4) late adolescence (systematic belief and plan).

dimension (d): “A fourth possible component, reflection, was omitted from the model because of methodological difficulties in studying children’s understanding of self-reflection” (p. 139).

Now we find that the phenomenological approach, which was invented by Spiegelberg and has been developed in studies of the I-am-me experience, may be able to overcome this difficulty. In “Example 3”, a German man reported his experience in his childhood as: “I suddenly became aware of this: *There is a me, and now I feel and experience that there is a me in an entirely different way, since I perceive myself as I exist*”. This is a vivid memory from which his self-reflection emerged. As described above, the supposed age of occurrence of the I-am-me experience ranges widely. This may well be explained by supposing that neither the formation of the private self nor the appearance of the ability of self-reflection are sufficient for the occurrence of this experience. What is necessary is conflict between the conceptual self and the private self, or self-reflection¹³.

Only the phenomenological method, based on first-person recollections of childhood and adolescence, could access the mysterious Neisser’s private self or James’ ‘I’. It is not surprising that 50 years ago Spiegelberg did not attract any attention from researchers. In those days, few researchers were developing the systematic method of phenomenological psychology, which is sufficient for sampling and analyzing first person descriptive data. Currently, Amedeo Giorgi (2009) is a representative phenomenological psychologist who offers techniques available for the phenomenological approach to the study of self. In fact, studies by Watanabe (2011a, 2012) about the I-am-me experience are partially due to Giorgi’s technique. A phenomenological approach to the development not only of the subjective self but also the total self and personality is promising.

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¹³ This conflict may not be so obvious in Example 3 (and Example 2 of Jean Paul Richter) as in Example 4 (Case of “Rudi Delius”). However, “these seemingly tautological sentences as ‘I am me’” (Spiegelberg, 1986, p. 57), “I am I” (Example 3) and “I am a me” (Example 2), became “so vivid” (Example 3), “a flash of lightening from the sky”(Example 2), only when they engendered a conflict with their known knowledge such as: “I am Paul.”

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