

The building blocks of the social world

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1.1 Personifications like you and me

This book is about a number of challenging questions. For instance, how do I think about you and how do you think about me? More generally, how do people create the thoughts they have about one another? Or more academically, what are the recurring patterns within the structure of unconscious social cognition?

In this book we explore these patterns not only for the sake of increasing our knowledge but, each time we gain some insight, we will also look for its practical use. The demands for practical applications are enormous because, as you might have discovered yourself, the world is full of social-emotional misery. The primary reason for writing a book like this is that its content can add to the quality of human life in the broadest sense.

In this chapter we try to reconstruct the building blocks of unconscious social thinking. Many child psychologists are working on related questions. At the beginning of this quest we focus on the fundamental difference between social and non-social cognition. So, if it exists at all, what does ‘non-social’ mean?

You don’t need to search for the answer to this question in the psychological literature.¹¹ ‘Non-social’ cannot be found within science, at most you might find ‘antisocial’. Most of my colleagues find it ‘quite common’ that there are many theories dealing with social cognition without anybody knowing what non-social means. Many assume ‘non-social’ to be the same as the never-used expression ‘physical cognition’. But what is ‘quite common’? In psychology the greatest miracles hide behind what is considered to be ‘just ordinary’.¹²

1.2 One must recognise one’s own kind

So, what may commonly be meant by ‘social’? In nature, we observe a strong inclination to treat one’s own species differently from other organisms. To make this possible, plants and animals must be able to recognise other members of their species. Lions know how other lions smell, look and sound; they hunt together, mate together and socialise with one another, but they don’t do those things with leopards, crocodiles or hyenas.

So, at first glance, this ability to recognise one’s own species is essential for reproduction and this might help to define what we call ‘social reality’ – in the first place it is the world of human gene carriers. The difference between social and non-

social seems to be a reflection of a biological necessity, coupled with the unconscious ability to differentiate between people and non-people; most humans can do so, thanks to our unique vertical stature. That is why we don't generally fall prey to a careless hunter during a walk in the forest. People see people as fundamentally different from all other animals; even most cannibals believe that human flesh is an unusual dish.

However, if we look a little longer at the animal kingdom, we see that the mental programs designed to recognise other members of the same sort don't always function faultlessly. Butterflies sometimes flit around each other, wondering 'can we do business?' Dogs sometime see people as super-dogs and follow their owners as if they were pack leaders. Ask yourself, is that because dogs cannot hear or smell the difference? No! Are they stupid then? Dogs might offer the excuse that the wide variety of dog breeds makes matters very difficult for them. If a St. Bernhard and a Chihuahua are both members of the same sort, isn't it understandable that some dogs find more similarity between themselves and their owners? In debates like this, dogs might defend themselves by saying that their owner is a 'leader' rather than a 'mate', and they might argue that many people, like shepherds, avalanche rescuers, explosives experts and blind people, in their turn often give the lead to a dog – without having to copulate with it. Now let us get serious again.¹³

1.3 How we turn 'objects' into people

The fact that humans can breed with each other means that we are genetically one species, but that does not automatically mean that we encode each other as equals in our minds. Once upon a time in the state of Massachusetts (remember this), a law was brought into force forbidding the shooting of wildlife in the streets, with the exception of wolves and Indians. At that time Indians were not generally regarded as people. To become part of another person's model of the social world, to be human is not enough. To make that happen, the other person needs to perform a cognitive operation called *personification*.

Ötsch (2002) states that to think of a 'thing', is only possible if we know how to 'objectify' something. For a 'thing' to be an object in our mind, we need to ascribe a number of properties to it. A thing needs to be somewhere. A thing needs to have volume. A thing must be thought of as having a surface. A thing needs weight, size and colour. A baby will only be able to deal effectively with things when it has mastered the skill of 'objectification' – assuming all these properties to be present in any object. Luckily, most children have no problems on this level. The properties

that must be in place to make something into a thing can be called: ‘objectification factors’. If one of these factors is missing, for instance if a thing has no surface, then it cannot be a thing. Or if the thing is without a location, if it is nowhere, it cannot be thought of as something that really exists at all.

Since every person is a thing but not everything is a person, we may conclude that the cognitive operation of creating a person takes more steps than that of creating a thing. This brings us back to the process of personification.

The verb ‘to personify’ is defined in the dictionary as: “Thinking and speaking of a non-human object as if it had human qualities.” In other words, treating a non-person or a thing as a person.¹⁴

However, in order to construct a useful map of our social reality, we need to represent humans as people, and not things. What this implies is the following: The process of personification only attracts our attention when we do it, erroneously, with non-human things. The thought pattern used in creating a person in our minds was disregarded in social psychology. The activity of personification was only noticed by a few linguists in cases where it was falsely applied to objects, animals, mountains, abstractions, etc. Social cognition as a science starts with the recognition that the same cognitive process of personification is commonly used to represent real people in exactly the same way. Up until recently this seemed much too normal for social science to take any notice of.

Maybe you wonder why you never noticed personification? I would say, for the simple reason that the personification of a real person is so obvious, common and habitual that it takes place fully automatically. Personification is a dramatic example of unconscious social cognition. Without thinking about it we create thought structures that represent objects and because of the special way in which we have constructed them, they become people to us.

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The number of dogs personified by people is without doubt equal to the number of people accepted by dogs as their own kind. As stated before, all things, like abstract ideas, cars, money, plants, symbols, organisations, rocks, nations and political parties can be personified. But more than anything, the animals of the species Homo Sapiens are cognitively treated in this fashion. As soon as people learn

the art of personification, in their first years of life, they can personify everything with the greatest of ease.

The result of all this ‘personifying’ is the existence of ‘personifications’. Translated into the brain-computer metaphor¹⁵, we can regard a personification as a memory file in which all our information about a person is retained according to a specific structure.

1.4 A personification awakens

When I see my colleague, Frits, in the office, the personification that I created of him (the one that to me is him) is activated. More generally stated, as soon as I see a real person, my personification of that person is awakened. A passive element of my memory is stimulated and becomes active through perception and recognition. The neural activity involved can vary greatly in intensity, and generally remains below the threshold of consciousness. But no matter how weak the mental activity, my inner visual image of the person is still called into action. To illustrate: to me it’s as if Frits were a figure made of thin neon tubes that are switched on as soon as I meet him. But the switch has a dimmer and it is almost always set to a very low level. That is why Frits radiates very weakly in my inner field of vision. He may just be visible, but the light is usually so dim that I’m not conscious of him. The information that my external senses register – for example, Jane, the secretary from the acquisitions department, drowns out my inner Frits like a Boeing taking off overwhelms the chirping of a grasshopper along the runway. As I go about my daily activities the image of Frits is completely forgotten, but still this almost invisible image determines everything that I feel about Frits.

If I relax, close my eyes and direct my attention inwards, I can sometimes see this dim light which is Frits; I can just make out what the image is made of. Under certain emotional conditions however, this image can appear to me to be as clear as day. This morning Frits was appointed my new boss!

1.5 Organising personifications

The unavoidable consequence of all this personification in our brains is that more and more of these cognitive structures become stored in memory. How to handle this overload? For instance, can I ever get Frits out of my mind? Because today I would rather like to ‘delete’ him from my social panorama! No, what a pity, I can’t get rid of him. Why not? The answer will be given in chapter six. Once they are formed,

personifications cannot be removed; they can only be transformed or moved around in the social panorama. So Frits will stay in my mind forever.

Because our brain cannot process millions of individual personifications, it turns to the process of generalisation for assistance. By sorting personifications into categories we arrange our social reality. We bundle similar sorts of people together to store them in the same place; melting them together into a 'type'. Today Frits is clustered with 'bosses'.

Besides the bundling of personifications into categories, most people also make use of 'distance'. They create an intimate circle around themselves that is exclusively reserved for lovers, children, parents and the personifications of exceptionally important entities like spirits, gods or angels. The larger space around this intimate circle is filled with less significant people, like friends, neighbours and colleagues. The images of people in this area are generally grouped together, although they are all recognisable as individuals. On the outer spheres of the social panorama one finds the group-personifications like 'the party', 'the factory' and 'the government'. This morning my unconscious mind has moved Frits from the close zone of 'colleagues' to the distant domain of 'directors'.¹⁶

By listening to his parents' conversations, for example, a small boy can discover that the difference between rich and poor plays a very important role in life. Possibly he will also learn some of the external signs with which to distinguish the rich from the poor. But what he needs to find out for himself is how to give shape to such a difference in his own mental software.

In the operating system of his mind the difference between 'here and there', 'high and low' and 'close and far' will already be solidly engraved. On the base of this type of primary cognitive distinction, the boy will start to create his own new mental program that deals with the rich and the poor. This then becomes an 'idealised cognitive model' (Lakoff, 1987); an abstract prototype.

In such a prototype the distinction between the categories 'rich' and 'poor' can be made by means of putting them in different corners of mental space. For example, the boy may put poor people low and rich ones high. In the same way someone may encode trustworthy people nearby and untrustworthy people far away, fortunate people on the left and unfortunate on the right or his own folks all around him and his enemies far away.

1.6 Five types of personification

We use the noun ‘personification’ to indicate the mental representation of a ‘somebody’¹⁷. In this book, we differentiate between five types of personifications:

1. Self-personification – the representation of the self.
2. Other-personifications – the representations of other individuals.
3. Group personifications – the representations of groups and large social complexes that are bundled together into single cognitive units, like parties, nations, factions, clubs and organisations.
4. Spiritual personifications – the representations of dead and non-human social entities like ghosts, spirits and gods.
5. Metaphorical personifications – physical objects, abstractions, animals, plants, symbols, processes and non-human-non-spiritual entities to which are ascribed human-like qualities.

We invent all these different types of personification. We create an image; put it in a particular place, attribute feelings, drives and a wealth of other features to it and then save the whole thing in our memory. After that we start to behave as if the thing in our mind is a real flesh and blood person. From that moment on we believe that this person really exists in the way that we have created him or her.

1.7 Assumption 1: Personifications are parts

Bandler and Grinder (1979) do therapy by communicating with mental functions, called ‘parts’. For instance, they may work with the part that makes the person happy or the part that protects the person against disappointment, etc. In Bandler and Grinder’s practical psychology, the human personality is regarded as a collection of goal-directed units; a set of personality parts. Any relevant unit of neural activity can be defined as such a part if it needs therapy. The therapeutic effect of this approach stems largely from the act of personifying these parts. By having the client visualise the part in the shape of a version of himself or in another human-like form, things in therapy become more alive. As soon as abstractions, problems or mental functions become personified, something very important starts to happen – a huge quantity of extra mental software will be mobilised for assistance. Everything the person has learned about how to deal with people can now be applied to what is, in fact, a non-social problem. The power of the unconsciously working ‘social operating system’ will add tremendously to the capacity to solve problems of any kind.

Conclusion: personifying non-humans can be very useful.

A totally different relationship between parts and personifications has to do with the demarcation between self and other – who is who in the social panorama model?

Personifications consist, by definition, of activity in neural tissue. They are stored in someone's memory. They are owned by the person in whose brain they are represented.

The logical implication of this is that our personifications of others (the knowledge we have about them that is neurologically laid down in our minds) are also parts of ourselves. Although other human beings exist as real physical objects in the world, we know only as much about them as our own neurology can represent. So the real flesh and blood others are in fact only occasions for us to compose our personifications. Although we know only our self-constructed representations of other people, we (mistakenly) tend to presume that it is the real ones we know – ignoring the fact that the person we 'know' is no more than an activity in our own brain.

Conclusion: All the people, organisations, gods, groups and creatures that we know are parts of ourselves. Thus people surround themselves with a circle of self-created personifications that are, to them, the only knowable social world. That means that a change in their social panorama is a change in their social reality.

1.8 People, animals and personifications

During the social development of their children parents may have to interfere once in a while, "No, Johnny, don't bite that boy, you'll hurt him!" So now Johnny will learn that other children do also feel. "Don't do that, Johnny, kittens have feelings, too!" However, the fact that animals can feel doesn't make them equal to us. So what does?

Do you still remember the people in Massachusetts who were forbidden to shoot wildlife in the streets? They considered Indians not to be human because they did not believe in God. These people thought that only the right spiritual connections made people into humans. In that respect many things have changed over the last century. These days even the opinions of Westerners about other primates have turned completely around. Nowadays primatologists like the famous Jane Goodall see no categorical difference between humans and the great apes. What category of competence should we look for?

Research shows that orang-utangs are conscious of self and can recognise themselves in a mirror. They can make their own feelings and motivations known to

each other and to their human carers and are able to imagine situations from other creatures' point of view. Chimpanzees seem to communicate with each other with a beep-like language, while gorillas can learn to understand spoken language and logical reasoning and have demonstrated a sense for past, present and future. Bonobos have made flint tools and can operate computers and telephones. Some primates even outperform intelligent humans on number recognition tests and computer games that require fast reflexes. These days no one needs to have any doubt that great apes possess complex emotional lives, so a child might well include them in their own species. Do apes believe in God? Do all humans? In other words, the borderline between people and non-people is not easy to draw on the basis of what they can do. Still this theme has kept scientist busy for ages. Science-fiction books and movies are also illustrative. Star trek is full of debates about the status of robots, humanoids and aliens. How to deal with these? Is it ethical for a human to throw an old but still operating super-intelligent robot away, if there is a better one? What if this robot says he loves you, weeps and promises always to be your slave? Personification has been and always will be a subject for ethics.

1.9 Personification factors

In the wake of William James (1890) most psychologists call the closest and most continuous stream of perceptions, the self-experience. This experience forms the non-stop background to all else that is going on inside us. As soon as the brain is able to record data, the self-experience will be laid down in our neural connections. Habituated to it as we all become, we only notice our self-experience if there is something different happening to it, like inner conflicts, emotional breakdowns or fundamental shifts in our personality.

Many scientists believe that in the course of human development this experience of self must precede the experience of others. The latter starts off when, after birth, we are dropped into the middle of the social world. For multiple births this is a little different, they have already met the other(s) before birth. But still their lives may start around a core of kinaesthetic self-awareness. As soon as we arrive in the world of others we are confronted with the fact that they provide a far more variable pattern of stimulation than we are to ourselves.¹⁸

In this text I will call the generalisation that is derived from this ongoing self-perception the 'self-concept' and more often 'self-personification'. This self-personification constitutes a dramatic example of unconscious cognition. We know

who we are and we know that we know. We often know only vaguely what the content of our self-knowledge is. When someone asks us, ‘Who are you?’ it may take minutes before we finally become aware of a clear impulse that enables us to answer. Often people who are asked this question just stare silently in front of them, trying to grasp their inner signals.

The unconsciously functioning self-personification is very crucial in social life. It consists of a complex of images and feelings that tell the person who he or she is. It is their identity. You need to know who you are in order to play the appropriate roles in society. Your self-image helps you to compare yourself with others. Your self-feeling lets you know what your position is in the crowd.

When people grow up, they collect more and more content for their self-personifications; they learn to know themselves ever better. But the acquisition of self-knowledge is not the only function of the self-personification; it is also the primary example for how to conceive of others. When we believe that others are similar to the kind of creatures we are, we may use our knowledge about ourselves to come to understand them.

That is how the self-personification becomes the template for all other sorts of personification; it is the prototype for all social constructions. In the terminology of Lakoff and Johnson we can call the self-personification ‘the model’ for other-personifications, group-personifications, spiritual-personifications and metaphoric-personifications. When we believe that others, groups, spirits or objects are similar to us, in the sense that they house the same categories of subjective experience as we do, we are ready to construct them in the same way as we have previously done with ourselves. Thus, we will project on others what we see in ourselves.

In the experience of the self, people tend to use a number of natural categories, which I will call ‘the personification factors’. These categories are the building blocks of personifications. All techniques of therapeutic intervention in this book are based on influencing one or more personification factors. These factors are the key to the changing of personifications and to the changing of social systems in general. The following list of personification factors first names the factor, and then tells us what this factor means for the self.

Nine personification factors – and what they mean in self-personification

1. Location – my awareness that I am here and others are there.
2. Abilities – my awareness that I can do things, like moving, talking, reasoning.

3. Drives and motivation – my awareness that I want something.
4. Feelings – my awareness of emotions, bodily sensations and pain.
5. Self-awareness – my knowledge of who I am among others.
6. Perspective – my awareness that I see things my way; my beliefs.
7. Spiritual connection – my awareness of my connection with the whole.
8. Perceivability – my awareness that I can be seen, heard and felt.
9. Name – I know what I am called.

Thus, when I create a personification of another person, I unconsciously assume that they have the same categories of awareness as I do. Following the above list of nine, I have an idea of what needs to be there in a personification in order to turn it into a representation of a human like me. This list will suffice for the purpose of therapy and working for change but can, of course, be extended to include a great number of other factors that, to many scientists, are also typical for humans, like language, creativity, reason, logic, use of symbols, use of analogy, art, consciousness, use of tools, rituals, etc. It would be a pity if the discussion about what should or shouldn't be on this list were to occupy readers too much.

As social scientists we must assume that people create personifications with great ease and speed without even thinking about it. In general, we automatically assume all nine factors to be present in a single process but that does not mean that we will have content in every category, some may still be empty. For instance, we may have no clue about the other person's self-awareness but we still assume that this person does have some experience of self. In the same way, we may know that the other person must have his or her own perspective, but we may have no idea about what his/ her view on reality is like.

But what happens when one or more of these factors fails in the concept of another person? What about when this person is thought of as having no name? No feelings? Or no abilities whatsoever? In such cases the person is seen as less than us; as strange, weird, ill, inferior or alien.

Consciousness comes into play only if something unusual is noticed, it is attracted to any rarity and will ring an alarm bell if one or more personification factors is missing.

What missing personification factors mean to our concept of another person:

<i>Factors</i>	<i>What I believe about the other if this is missing.</i>
No location:	The other is non-existent, is nowhere.
No abilities:	The other is powerless and incapable.
No motivation:	The other has no will of her/his own.
No feelings:	The other is unfeeling or unemotional.
No self-concept:	The other is socially incapable; plays inappropriate social roles.
No perspective:	The other has no opinions.
No spirituality:	The other has no spiritual connection.
No perceivability:	The other is a ghost, spirit or god.
No name:	The other is an anonymous number.

Some violent sociopaths assert that they are unable to see other people as part of their own kind (Greenspan 1997). Often they see themselves as very superior to their victims. Soldiers in wartime are often drilled to see the enemy as a lower kind of creature; as invertebrates or the excrements of invertebrates. When in a social concept one or more personification factors is omitted, we may call this ‘de-personification’. The non-persons who have been created in this way will be located outside the social panorama (where they will meet wolves and Indians). In cases of ethnic conflict, we see that, when the feelings, motivations and perspectives of the members of the other group are ignored, it becomes much easier to be violent and abusive to them.

Children who are bullied at school often react by pretending not to feel hurt, by ignoring name-calling. Mol (1998) believes that this strengthens the idea, in the minds of the bullies, that their victim has no feelings and is weird in that way. Bullied children can be taught to react with their emotions to break this cycle of bullying.

Diener’s (1980) experiments with objective self-awareness show that the quality and intensity of someone’s self-image can be influenced by, for example, looking in a mirror. A look in the mirror prevented experimental subjects from aggressive behaviour towards others. This implies that knowing who you are may prevent you from forgetting who the others are, making impersonal attitudes unlikely. The social psychologist Zimbardo (1970) was fascinated by the way in which some people can treat others as identity-less numbers. He manipulated the perception of experimental group members by dressing them up with paper bags with peepholes on their heads. He discovered that maltreatment only happened if the victim was perceived as being non-unique and having no self-awareness.

In our reconstruction of the unconscious building blocks of social cognition, we may conclude that personifications do have a structure. The information content about the person is sorted out in a number of ‘normal’ categories that don’t surprise us. As personifications are, however, very dynamic cognitive structures, adding or omitting personification factors is a normal unconscious faculty. Because of the fact that most social cognition stems from self-generated software (or, in other words, the person has made it all up by himself without the guidance of parents or teachers), it is logical that great varieties do occur. The more complex a level of social development we look at, the more diverse the individual repertoires will be.

1.10 Why the personification factor location comes first

Most developmental psychologists agree with Piaget (1965) that in the beginning the embryo must be completely self-oriented, without knowing the difference between itself and the rest of the world. But already in the womb a child touches on the first border and will begin to develop self-experience. It will discover the fact that some aspects of its experience can be manipulated and felt from the inside, while other parts are seemingly out there and uncontrollable.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1999) this process leads to the realisation that the self is ‘here’ and everything else is ‘there’. The bodily experience in the womb will turn location into the foundation of thought in general. That is why Fauconnier (1997; 2002) stresses ‘mental space’ and Lawley and Tompkins (2000) ‘mind-space’. But it was Julian Jaynes (1976) who pioneered the spatial dimension. He demonstrated its relevance with the aid of the concept ‘cat’:

“Where do you see it? In front of you? To one side or the other? Above or below eye level? What is your emotional response to this cat? Where are you experiencing the sensations of that feeling? If you have an inner dialogue about the value of owning a cat, where do the words appear to come from? Do they seem to be spoken from the inside or the outside of your head?”

Coming to understand that I am in a different location from everything else that exists seems to be the most fundamental cognitive task. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) say this concept will be generalised into ‘being is location’. Everything that exists has its own place in the universe and anything without a place does not exist at all. Everyone seems to learn this very early in life. Piaget’s (1965) theory about ‘object-permanence’ points to the same phenomenon; when a child is aware of the fact that things continue to exist when they are out of sight, it will search for objects it

has lost. Piaget also notes that, for that to happen, the object must be represented in the child's memory.

However, for social cognition to start, a child needs to grasp the concept of 'other people', too. 'I am here and the rest of the world is there' is probably learned long before a child understands that 'the others are there as part of the rest of the world'.

Some developmental psychologists (Greenspan, 1997) believe that children stay unaware of the difference between themselves and their mothers for several months. Embryos, in fact, share their location with their mothers. It is after birth that individuals are ready to discover their own unique position in the cosmos.

Schaffer (1996) has performed experiments that suggest that children learn to regard themselves as humans among other humans after the first few months of life. So, as well as learning the position of the self in regards to the others, the notion of belonging to a group of a similar kind is an even higher level of basic social knowledge. My findings show that most individuals finally represent this understanding in the shape of a sphere of personifications around the self located in its centre - their social panorama.

1.11 Learning to personify

Social cognition is learned in stages. One way to determine the developmental phase of a child is to look at the way it plays with a doll. For example, does your daughter use her doll to hammer on the ground while she bites its legs? If so, she probably has not yet personified the doll. If she begins to talk to the doll, giving it its own 'voice', then personification – Piaget (1965) calls this '*animation*' – has almost certainly taken place. I know a baby of eighteen months who already does this.

Learning to create personifications is not an 'all in one go' process, but will be mastered step by step. It starts with slowly coming to the conclusion that others are similar beings to oneself. At the same time the personification factors will get clearer outlines. These categories are neither transferred genetically nor are they learned from other people. They will primarily be extracted from spontaneous individual discoveries. A person develops his own 'theory of mind', as many scientists today call the unconscious knowledge about one's own and others thinking. As Lakoff and Johnson see it, the personification factors are derived from bodily experience and other confrontations with the world. Maybe some additional parental reinforcement is useful in learning to discriminate and name them. Finally they will be generalised

into basic concepts that live their lives under the surface of awareness. Research by Markus, Smith and Moreland (1985) shows a general tendency for people to apply to others the concepts they apply to themselves. The personification factors form the foundation of this social cognitive pattern.

For the personification factor ‘feelings and emotions’ to occur, the ongoing stream of kinaesthetic information that reaches the child’s brain from its body must be noticed. Without ever having given it the slightest thought, a child may assume that every person has this inner experience too. Hunger, thirst, pain and comfort seem to have already existed in the womb; no wonder that a child, without any contemplation, will assume that this will be the case for everyone.

Baldwin (1987) believes that children develop the idea that others have feelings within their first year of life. According to Greenspan (1997) children will at first believe that their mothers feel identical emotions to their own, but to their surprise they find out that this is only occasionally the case. It is enchanting to imagine a child lying drowsily on its mother’s lap, smelling her odour, feeling her warmth, sensing her breathing, feeling her movements and also sharing her emotional state. Then, after this sense of being unified, it suddenly feels discomfort and begins to cry, while its mother goes on reading a novel. Instantly this turns into a confrontation between mother and child in which a great divide in emotions, motivation and perspective may become apparent.

The reconstruction of the basic building blocks of unconscious social cognition takes us from the generalisation that ‘we are the same but on another spot’ to its very opposite. In a later phase of social development the child learns (if everything goes well) that ‘everyone is different but shares the same planet’. This lesson comes naturally in the confrontation with others with different abilities, motives, emotions, self-concepts, perspectives, spiritual connections and names.

1.12 Learning who we are

Was George H. Mead (1934) right when he said that interaction with others is a necessary condition for the development of ‘the self’? Does, indeed, the confrontation with others create the stimulus for the self to bloom? Greenspan (1997) suggests that the affective quality of relationships with others (the parents) is crucial for the coming into being of a stable and positive self-concept. So is it true that at first you are nothing, until the others make ‘someone’ out of you?

In doing this study I had to conclude that when everything works out the way it should, a child in the womb will form a strong kinaesthetic core of self. Later, and especially in puberty, complex knowledge about roles and positions will be organised into the 'self imagery'.

Working with clients who have problems with their self-concepts has shed light on the structure of the self-experience. Endless experimentation resulted in the point of view that a 'feeling of self' on the one hand must be distinguished from an 'image of self' on the other. In one's 'self-image' a person sees him or her self in the way they can see others, as if seen from the outside at some distance. It is a generalised picture showing how others may see us. But such a self-image is a fantasy by necessity because a person cannot see himself that way. Even a view in the mirror, or photograph or video will not show our selves objectively. To create a self-image we must compose something new in our mind's eye. The question that will be central in chapter three is: If the self-image is a fantasy, what fantasy works best for a person? This is an important question indeed, because a self-image makes it possible to compare oneself with others, and by so doing it enables us to value our abilities in relation to others: are we good, mediocre or hopeless in the things that we do? By orienting ourselves with the aid of a self-image, we can find our place in hierarchical structures. It dictates our position, status and social roles.

The critical function of the self-concept within the social panorama model (as its core) resulted in a chapter (three) that is entirely devoted to its implications. There we will see how a therapist can influence these unconscious elements. How one can treat clients who complain about a lack of self-esteem; or who are confused about who they are or who fail to play their role in life.

1.13 Acquiring higher social skills

The deeper we dig into the structure of unconscious social cognition the greater the gap between the theoretical complexity we encounter and the great ease with which we practise these mental activities ourselves in our daily routines. What I mean by that will be clear to you if you follow me into a cinema. Someone watching a film creates countless personifications without raising an eyebrow. You see a man with a poker face on the screen for no more than two seconds, he does nothing but stare and you say, "that is a serial killer looking for a victim". Modern cinema forces the spectator to assemble entire personifications out of a few frames of film and a word or two. Film directors often work their hardest to get their actors to do nothing

at all. On the big screen and in close-up any sign of emotion seems to be too much and is called overacting.

Only if the actor shows no emotion will the audience be amused. When the actor does not show his feelings, it is the spectator who must supply them. The audience must guess what goes on inside the personage, and that keeps boredom away.

Most people watch a film in a sort of trance, far less conscious of themselves than usual. This condition is ideal for identification. Without even noticing it, the audience creates new personifications into which, a minute later, they will step. The viewer becomes that personage, and will be feeling the feelings he projects on the image of the actor. An artfully shot and edited film will mobilise most of someone's social cognitive abilities.

On the Internet we see personification skills demonstrated in another way; people have chatting relations with individuals who are completely 'virtual'.

On the level of social cognition there is no difference between a relationship with a virtual lover and a real flesh and blood idol. However, an intelligent individual will ensure that a virtual lover is sufficiently differently represented in his social panorama from the real thing (smaller, farther away and dimmer), to ensure that reality and fantasy do not mix. Are you that intelligent?

My friend Theo recently said. "I'm very close to my Mac". Most people are able to personify surprisingly well, and most people would also immediately understand what Theo means. For those who don't, try following the instructions below for personifying your computer, as I modelled them from Theo.

Technique 1: The personification of your computer¹⁹

Indication: If you feel lonely at work.

1. Give your PC a name (Theo's secret name for his Mac is Maggie).
2. Visualise your computer somewhere in mental space. If you want a tight relationship, put her close to you; so close that no one else can come between the two of you (no partners, no children and no pets).
3. Think about all the things that your computer can do – unlimited possibilities.
4. Step into the shoes of your machine. Begin to imagine that for a moment you are her and think about what she wants, how she feels, what she thinks of herself, visualise her perspective on the world and notice to what spiritual entities she feels connected (she is connected to the world wide web).

5. Stay within your computer and also experience her social emotions. Enjoy some warm sensual feelings. That is what she feels for you!

In the literature on social intelligence, we often encounter the themes of assertiveness and empathy. Merlevede, Bridoux and Van Damme (2001) believe that both abilities are based on being able to notice very slight differences in one's own inner experience and to notice the signs of the same in others. Being able to recognise one's own emotions (Cameron Bandler 1986) and to define one's own position (Goleman, 1996) are both necessary in order to be assertive. To be empathetic, it is necessary to put oneself into the experiences of another and understand his feelings and perspectives. In other words, to be empathetic is to take the position of the other for a moment.

By studying the spatial aspects of the experience of empathy, it became apparent that we need to take the expression 'stepping into another's shoes' quite literally. To accomplish this one must indeed imagine being in the position of the other. The location in the social panorama where the other is projected marks the spot to move to. Our mind can easily travel through mental space and take any position. The identification with another individual means to move one's own centre of self to where one believes the other's self-feeling is located. The translocation does not need to last long. When somebody identifies, a small portion of his mind moves over and returns, before you know it, with the required emotional information. In psychodrama, Gestalt, and hypnotherapy people are asked to hop from one seat to the other. This literal change of position is used to reinforce the identification process when the person cannot do it on his own. This also makes the discovered feelings more intense. Most people can do this without any assistance, incredibly quickly and purely within the world of imagination.

I assume that most socially intelligent people can make these mental moves, but they are generally only aware of the emotions that they unleash in this way. For example, my mother may say, "My neighbour is afraid that her in-laws are ashamed of her". When I ask my mother how she arrives at this insight she replies, "I just feel it". After 88 years of social training she can *just feel it*. To be able to stand successfully in the shoes of other people one must have full access to one's own archive of emotional experience.

Some researchers (Schaffer, 1996) suggest that a child who has experienced intensive physical contact with its parents is better able to move 'into another' later in

life. Lack of physical contact is thought by many developmental psychologists to be the cause of an inability to empathise (Greenspan, 1997).

1.14 Limited social skills

Research seems to indicate that genetic factors are responsible for the fact that women are generally more socially able than men. Is that a result of the similarity and dissimilarity of the sex hormones in the womb? I wonder who will test this hypothesis in an experiment. Most of us will have to conclude from our own experience that social abilities are graduated, and women do better than men. At the furthest male end of the spectrum we find people diagnosed with autism. Autistic people find insight into the thoughts and feelings of others extremely difficult (Baron-Cohen, 1991). The latter author, when looking at the dramatic (1% female and 99% male) gender difference in autism, points at ‘the female superiority in folk psychology and the male superiority in folk physics’.

The question is, are autistic problems unchangeable? Greenspan (1997) assumes that a child with biological problems only requires the right social training in order ensure successful social development. He is of the opinion that vital additional socio-emotional experience should be offered – gentle conversation, touching, stroking and cuddling – to support existing basis experiences. He has written about a number of cases where this approach has been successful.²⁰

A logical question within the framework of this study is; can slow social development of autistic children be related to shortcomings in their self-personification? Do they fail to notice their own emotions, for example, or their own perspectives or feelings of self? If you cannot recognise drives in yourself, it’s not so likely that you will easily recognise motivations in others. Lacking personification factors in the self-personification must result in systematic omission of these in other-personifications. If that is the case, then autistic children must first train themselves to differentiate and personify themselves in order to be able to learn to do so with others. There is some evidence that autistic children can improve their ability in this respect with sufficient support (Lamers 2000, Mol 2001). Furthermore we see currently a differentiation in the diagnosis of autism and Asperger’s syndrome; on the one hand there are autistic people who are mentally retarded, while on the other hand there are creative geniuses amongst them. Fitzgerald (2004) names Wittgenstein, Valera and Ramanujan as examples of the latter: great objectifiers with little interest in personification.

1.15 Concluding remarks

The social panorama model is a tool for analysing and solving problems in social life. The model has the images of people, called personifications, as its elements. Change in a personification will be brought about on the level of its components, the 'personification factors'. Location is defined as the primary personification factor; a change in location will necessarily change the relationship involved. Quite often a therapist needs to change one of the other personification factors first in order to make a personification move in someone's social panorama. The personification theory, as discussed in this chapter, describes the basic elements which compose unconscious social cognition. This chapter also sheds some light on the implications of this theory for day-to-day social life and its use in therapy.

In a way this chapter has been rather philosophical. The ensuing chapters will be, in contrast, very practical indeed.