

# Use of Self in Social Work: Rhetoric or Reality

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## Abstract

In social work literature, use of self implies consciously utilizing knowledge, skills, and values in interventions. Self-awareness is a critical skill used to be aware of one's hidden personality traits for effective practice. This paper tries to delve deeper into the realms of the dynamic nature of self-differentiating between real Self and false selves. It is argued that knowing one's biases and prejudices is learning more about the image of the self that we create and not the true Self. The paper asserts that knowing the true self is a pre-requisite of using self to ameliorate human sufferings.

*Keywords:* the Self; self-awareness; use of self; real self; self-concept

## Social Workers' Use of "Self"

Social work, in many ways, is defined as the provision of a relationship to facilitate service-users in the handling or negotiation of personal, family or community conflicts, transitions, and tensions. This definition suggests that social work practice must have the "use of self" at its core (see Cooper, 2012). The phrase "Use of Self" in social work has always entrapped me with confusion and curiosity. Literature on social work practice indicates that social workers themselves are the instruments of the profession. The "use of self" in social work is analogous to tools/instruments used in other professions—stethoscope by physicians, paint brush by artists, guitar or drum by musicians, and the like.

The Licensed Independent Clinical Social Workers (LICSW) define "Use of Self" as "sharing myself with my clients through skillful self-disclosure and empathy and authentically bringing all I'm made of into the therapeutic relationship for use as a therapeutic tool" (Daley, 2013, p.3). The use of Self means efficiently and rationally using the knowledge, skills, and values of the social work profession to enhance the well-being of a client—whether individual, group, community, or society as a whole. The notion of self forms the base of therapeutic social work. Cooper (2012) claims that use of self in social work is to engage with questions about how we experience ourselves in the work we do with our clients, how our complex and disturbing experiences can be symbolized, verbalized, and put in use in the context of client-worker relationships that are central to practice. Let us explore further what is "use of self," which social workers utilize as a "tool" in their interventions.

Social work practitioners and educators claim the following about "Use of Self": Since human service professions including social work deal with subtle aspects of human behaviors, intangibility dimension of modalities, and outcomes of interventions has a dominant presence. Social workers often look for subtle cues, gestures, or indications in behaviors of clients to diagnose the problem areas and design interventions. The indicators of successes and failures of activities and actions, too, are not readily observable and so are the components of "use of self."

The term "conscious use of self" implies the skill of purposefully and intentionally using

motivation and capacity to communicate in ways that facilitate change (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2003). It means use of self is a skill. Dewane (2006) expands this definition by putting it as “the use of self in social work practice is the combining of knowledge, values, and skills gained in social work education with aspects of one’s personal self, including personality traits, belief systems, life experiences, and cultural heritage” (p. 545). On similar lines, Walters (2008) examines that successful students not only master the skill sets taught in social work practice courses, but also integrate these skills well with their authentic selves.

These definitions suggest there is a personal self. And since the need to qualify “self” as “personal” arose, it means there is “professional self” too. In addition, Walters mentions “authentic self.” The question arises, what is this “authentic self” and do we know “It”? As a logical corollary, this also implies that we have those parts of the self too that are not authentic...do we have only one “Self” with many shades or several “selves” [residing in one body]? Dewane (2006) propounds that to integrate social work skills into the authentic self-functioning of certain domains like personality, belief system, and relational dynamics are significant. These domains need further probing to understand the notion of “Self.”

**Personality** of a social worker plays critical role in use of self. Many scholars and educators (Edwards & Bess, 1998; Baldwin, 2000) assert that personality traits of a social worker have far more powerful impact on client satisfaction than his/her theoretical orientation and mastery of skills. They claim that exhibiting one’s “real self” in social work interventions is a potent therapeutic tool and “training” in social work comes second. This assertion raises certain queries—What is the relation between the self and personality? If we have a real-self, then, are there “false selves” too? Personality is also taken as a “mask” of the real (?) self. It also implies that this mask or personality is a “false self,” which seems to be integrated with true self.

**Belief System**, which comprises values, ideologies, attitudes, and perceptions, is the second

aspect of the self that has an impact on social work practice. This belief system, which is the outcome of our socialization process, makes our “functional reality or subjective reality.” It is the lens through which we see the world and interpret meanings from social situations and interactions with individuals. Rogers (1959) claims the only reality people can possibly know is the world they individually perceive and there are as many realities as there are people.

Moreover, Oscar Wilde argued “most people are other people.” If personality is the product of beliefs and attitudes that one acquires during socialization, what is the “self” that gets concealed with perceptions and ideologies? And beliefs and attitudes, whether akin or against the notions of morality of the society, are merely acquired and imposed thoughts.

The third aspect of use of self is **Relational Dynamics**. Rogers (1957) asserts that congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy are the necessary and sufficient conditions that form the foundation of all helping relationships. Can we technically (and mechanically) incorporate congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy among social work trainees? Or will these traits reflect the presence of that real or true self inside each one of us that often get veiled under our belief systems and personality dispositions?

Social workers “use self” in their interactions and interventions with clients. Empathy, genuine concern and communication skills are crucial aspects of “using self” by social workers. However, our socialization and socio-cultural environment play crucial roles in determining relational skills and empathy. This explains the differences among social workers in application of values and skills in social work practice despite uniform education and training. If socialization is the critical variable in inculcation of values like empathy and compassion amongst people, can a couple of years of training in social work bring substantial changes in the value system of an individual social worker? Can empathy and genuine concern be “inculcated and refined” among social work students? Is it possible

that a dexterous social worker uses “Self” in all the situations and conditions with the same ease, even when there is incongruence between his/her values and attitudes in contrast to those of the clients?

This entails that empathy is the function of commonness between subjective realities of social workers and their clients—empathizing with the other becomes tough if there are no shared meanings of subjective realities. Can we truly practice empathy as a skill, which forms the base of “using self” in social work?

### **Self-Awareness**

How do we learn to use self? Social workers are required to understand the subtle and hidden intra-psychic processes among clients reflected through their behaviors. This, indeed, is a tricky task, unless one is sensitive towards one’s own thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Schneider-Corey and Corey (2002) have rightly claimed that any therapeutic person needs to be aware of one’s own identity, limitations, feelings, and frustrations in order to know his/her clients better. They assert:

A central characteristic for any therapeutic person is an awareness of self including one’s identity, cultural perspective, goals, motivations, needs, limitations, strengths, values, feelings, and problems. If you have a limited understanding of who you are, you will surely not be able to facilitate this kind of awareness in clients (p.32).

Likewise, Cournoyer (2000) also stresses that since social workers themselves become the medium through which knowledge, attitudes, and skills are conveyed, without self-awareness, despite best intentions, social work professionals fail to help the clients. Thus, the skill of self-awareness is of significance and it refers to the ability to recognize our own thoughts, beliefs, emotions, personality traits, personal values, habits, biases, strengths, weaknesses, and the psychological needs that drive our behaviors.

Knowing “self” is a pre-condition to know “others.” If one observes oneself identifying virtues and vices, attitudes and perceptions, seeing how the mind plays tricks, and how defense mechanisms operate, he/she becomes capable of locating the hidden and manifested emotional blockages among the clients. Negi, Bender, Furman, Fowler, and Prickett (2010) also highlight the importance of engaging students and practitioners of social work in the process of self-discovery and self-awareness, with the goal of helping them recognize their own biases, develop empathy, and become better prepared for conscious and effective use of self. Identifying one’s own feelings and thinking patterns aid in understanding the interplay of socio-cultural factors and psychological underpinnings that frame the human personality. Self-awareness, thus, makes a social work professional more dexterous and efficient in identifying and resolving intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicting areas (also see Jacobson, 2001).

In 2000, The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) emphasized the critical importance of self-awareness in culturally competent social work practice. The second of the ten standards directly addresses self-awareness stating, “Social workers shall seek to develop an understanding of their own personal, cultural values and beliefs as one way of appreciating the importance of multicultural identities in the lives of people” (p. 4). In the interpretation discussion of this standard, cultural competence is further defined as “knowing and acknowledging how fears, ignorance, and the “isms” (racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, ageism, and classism) have influenced their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings” (NASW, 2001; p. 17). Thus, self-awareness becomes a vital tool in developing cultural competence, and also in effective “use of self.”

### **Enhancing Self-Awareness Skill**

How can we know the Self? There are certain aspects of self in the domain of experiential reality to which the concerned person can be the best authority. For instance, I can be the best judge

to tell whether I am feeling pain in my stomach or feeling hungry or thirsty. Yet, I may not be consciously aware of the defense mechanisms I am exhibiting in my behavior to hide my jealousy or hatred—the aspect of my “Self” that others may identify with relative ease. Nonetheless, conscious efforts to know about self through awareness and mindfulness go a long way in understanding the diverse realms of self. Social work practitioners and trainees employ several strategies and tools to enhance the vital skill of self-awareness. The prominent ones are introspecting—listing one’s salient personality traits and reflecting how these traits can act as facilitators or inhibitors in relating to clients, self administration of projective techniques and attitudinal scales, getting feedback from supervisors and peers, reviewing audio-video tapes, and/or process recordings to obtain feedback, rehearsing or role-playing problem-solving sessions, and the like.

External sources like attitudinal scales and feedback by others merely indicate the perceptions and traits we hold (or the Self holds). Then, how far self-knowledge can be gained through these tools and strategies? Can the skill of self awareness help us in knowing about our true or real self? What is our existence beyond our values, attitudes, and perceptions? Who are we beyond our personality dispositions and traits? What is the “Self” that is being used as a tool in social work interventions? And how feasible is it to “use self” without knowing what is this self?

### **What Is the Self?**

Quite ironically, defining the Self, which is the core of our existence or being, is not easily defined. It is the “I,” the “me,” the entity that exists... feels...experiences....Looking into the mirror, we see an image of our body, which we identify as ourselves. Self is defined as the representation or set of representations about oneself, parallel to the representations people have of other individuals (Swann & Bosson, 2008). It is the “me” “self-as-object,” about which James (1950) has written that it is the entire set of beliefs, evaluations, perceptions,

and thoughts that people have about themselves. These definitions invariably reflect self-concept rather than “Self.”

More often than not, we identify with our body. Physical attributes of our body constitute a significant part of our identity. I am beautiful or ugly, fat or slim, young or old—all these characteristics reflect our identifications with our body. Our notion of birth and death is also related to the body. At the time the heart in the body is beating and lungs are breathing in air, the person is alive. When the body’s vital functioning stops, he/she is considered clinically dead. Scientists have estimated that on an average, we are composed of nearly fifteen trillion cells, each being an independent living unit (Zimmer, 2013). Furthermore, life span of these cells is far shorter than the human body, which is composed of them. Every second, thousands of cells of the body keep dying and being replaced by new ones. So, technically, an individual at the time of death does not have the same body he/she was born with. But still, someone/something inside the body remembers (and sees) the body passing through phases of childhood, youth, old age...Who is this someone or something that remembers this continuity? Seemingly, physical body is not the Self.

Another crucial aspect of our identity is our “psychological self.” Scientists have claimed strong inter-linkage between body and mind. Experiments in neurosciences bring out that “brain” is the chief organ in the body that does all the thinking, feeling, visualizing, experiencing, and sensing and there are specific areas in the brain to experience and feel different sensations. In fact, feelings of empathy and compassion are also subject to certain hormonal reactions in the brain. Recent research studies claim that the feeling of “I” and “me” are illusionary as there is no single place in the brain that generates this sense of “Self.” There is no single leader or commander-in-chief in our brain to direct our behavior. There are only ever-changing thoughts, feelings, and memories in the brain. Philosophers too confirm that there is no “Cartesian ego” unifying the consciousness (see Dainton, 2014; Ouellette, 2014). There have been ample scientific

proofs against the Self. In psychopathology, cases of Cotard syndrome (where sufferers believe that they do not exist) and dissociative identity disorder (where a single body harbors multiple selves) claim against the sense of self. If the sense of Self is so fragile and fragmentary, where is the Self located and from where does this sense of “I” and “me” come from? It further entails questions basic to our existence—in essence, who am I? Where is the Self (or my identity) rooted—in the body or in the brain?

Akin to the cells of the physical body, thoughts are the building blocks of our psychological self. Repeated thoughts result in developing our core beliefs, which form our perceptions, attitudes, biases, value systems. Our thoughts also develop our “image of self”—our identity. This identity (rather, multiple identities) includes our name, family, religion, belongings, etc. This image of ourselves is developed to cover up our ignorance of who we actually are. This image, termed as “ego” by psychologists, gives rise to personality with competing core beliefs. Identification with the ego and the physical body creates a false identity, which is dependent on the views of “others” about us. The Self constitutes the central notion of an individual’s identity. Mead (1934) notes that meanings derived through social interactions shape an individual’s identity. Stryker (2000) reiterates this assumption as, among others, a person’s sense of self depends on the social environment to which he/she belongs. So, quite ironically, others define our “Self.”

The thought of “I am” is based on social constructs like gender, religion, nationality, personal achievements, and so on, which we learn from our social surroundings. It gives rise to a false self with which we create an attachment. This false identity or the ego always compares and competes with others and thrives on approval and appreciation of others. Thus, the false identity created moves between extremes of feelings of inferiority and superiority depending upon circumstances and people. We learn to defend our ego and create a false moral self, which is our “desired self.” This egoistic moral self, views everyone with conditioned perception. And so long as people behave in consonance with

our core beliefs, they are good people. We believe that people like us are good, because we are good. In addition, any critical remarks or undesirable behaviors by others frequently hurt our ego. We desperately want to protect our ego and try to cover up our inferiority with defense mechanisms like rationalization and projection.

Much research attention has been paid to the “self” and its dimensions in recent decades. However, sociologists and psychologists are still struggling to articulate the presence of “Self” in the identity construction. James (1950), who pioneered the conception of the Self into the mainstream of social-psychology, asserted that “Self” is a source of continuity that gives the individual a sense of “connectedness and unbrokenness.” Aristotle (Barnes, 1984) asserts that the soul is an immaterial entity that unites the person’s various perceptions and sensations, which forms the nature of “I” or the Self. He demonstrated the conception of this abstract form of Self/Soul by distinguishing between the substance of an object and its form. For instance, the substance of a bronze statue is the element bronze, and the form is the statue. When melted, the form changes, though the substance remains the same. This view of identity is known as dualism as it postulates the existence of two entities: the body (the material) and the mind or soul (the immaterial). Furthering Aristotle’s line of thought, the British philosopher John Locke made a distinction between man and person. To him, man is a substance and person is the form, while criterion for personhood is the ability to remember our perceptions in the prior situations of our lives and is a function of memory (Strawson, 2011).

Based on the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902) postulate that knowledge about “Self” is rooted in reactions of others and the roles people play. So, the roles we play become the foundation of our self-knowledge. But, we perform numerous roles in our life time and many of them at the same time. Then, how is continuity maintained between these roles/selves? This assertion is not in tune with the notion of enduring self as demonstrated

by James. This fallacy was addressed by Goffman (1959) who propounded that “people are like actors in a play who perform for different audiences. As people take on various identities, the Self is merely a consequence, rather than a cause of the performance” (p. 252).

Psychologists and social scientists have shown considerable interest in developing strategies and techniques to unveil the dynamic notion of self. Delving into the self as a mental representation, researchers have categorized self-knowledge as “active” or “phenomenal self” (Jones & Gerard, 1967), which includes information about oneself that is held in consciousness as against the “stored self knowledge” that comprises of the information about the self held in memory but not being attended to. However, people with cognitive impairments fail to recall their “identities.” Indeed, the Self, which is the core of our existence, cannot be dependent on the fragility of the memory.

All human beings, potentially, have co-existence of opposite traits—of vices and virtues—hate and love, anger and calm, violence and compassion, dominance and congeniality, apathy and empathy—seeds of these contrasting feelings and emotions are inside us. However, we accept only selective portions of “me” having virtues only as “desired self” and deny the “undesired self” with vices (see Ogilvie, 1987). The self with vices is pushed below to the realms of unconsciousness. And whenever characteristics of the “undesired self” such as hate, jealousy, surge to the surface we project these onto “others.” In fact, among others, Chopra (2012) has maintained that we “project” beliefs, motives, feelings, that we have disowned in ourselves onto another person. For instance, to avoid feeling that we are not good enough, we judge others as inadequate. Projection is destructive for two major reasons: First, it prevents us from truly knowing and accepting ourselves. Second, it prevents us from truly knowing and accepting others.

We are ignorant about our true “Self” and convincingly believe that we know ourselves. This false notion of knowing is extended to our clientele and their social situations too. Our pretention that

we know prevents us from knowing our real “Self.” Current literature in psychology and sociology highlight plenty theories on self but almost all of them are confined to the images/roles of self rather than exploring the true nature of self (see also Snyder, 1974; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Tajfel, 1981; Tulving, 1983; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; Klein & Loftus, 1993; and Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

The conception of self soon becomes the social identities that are socially constructed meaningful categories accepted by individuals as descriptive of themselves or their groups (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997). Undeniably, these are the images or illusions of the Self or the false self. It suggests that when social workers employ skill of self-awareness, they tend to know more about the “image” of the Self, and not the true self. Attempts to know our Self by learning about our hidden attitudes and perceptions or employing strategies to increase our self-awareness may not lead us to our real Self. Knowing about our strengths and weaknesses, values and attitudes, does not equate to knowing the Self. Whether favorable or unfavorable, attitudes are the function of our unreal self. Only by knowing our true nature can we come out of the polarity of paradoxical traits (vices and virtues) that has fragmented our “Self.” And the skill of self-awareness we discussed largely limits itself to knowing our perceptions and traits as we hardly turn our focus to “who is bearing all the attitudes, values and perceptions.” The story below explains the case-point:

A lady had a beautiful garden blooming with beautiful flowers. She had spent years to nurture that garden and people from faraway places used to come to see it. She fell ill and was bed-ridden. Seeing the worry of his mother about the garden, that lady’s ten-year-old son promised to take care of plants and trees till she is recovered. The boy sincerely did his job—he would

daily remove dust from each leaf, caress and kiss the flowers, sprinkle water over leaves and flowers. After three months the lady returned back, only to see that her cherished garden had withered away—leaves had dried up, flowers had faded and wilted. Shocked and dismayed, she yelled at her son. With tears in his eyes, he asserted that he really cared for each and every flower and leaf. The mother, then said, “life of a plant is in its roots who are invisible, you forgot to water the roots and the result is visible in this devastation.

Are we not doing the same mistake that little boy did—ignoring the real “self” and paying attention to the images of self that we create and believe in (professional self, personal self)? Our training to inculcate professional expertise, values and skills among social work students can be equated with the boy’s efforts of caring for the garden (removing dust, weeding, tendering flowers, etc.). The hidden roots are comparable with our “real self,” which we forget to nurture. The values like compassion and empathy that form the base of the social work profession are the natural fallout of unveiling our true nature or real self.

An egg when broken from outside loses life. But the same egg when it breaks open from inside, life comes out. Likewise, till the time our notion of self (or selves) is taught or created by the outside actors, the society, we cannot get rid of pains and sufferings. Contrarily, when the true knowledge about self comes from within, outside chaos remains the same but one achieves an unflinching calm and peace. Human service professionals “trained” to be empathetic and compassionate may not exhibit these skills/values every time, which is reflected in occasional instances of burnouts and frustration. Life of the individuals, who have known their true self, shows that their compassion and love for all beings remains unwavering in all circumstances.

Our claim to use self in social work interventions is futile in the absence of true

knowledge of the Self. What is the knowing of the “Self”? It is doing away with the conditioning of mind and dis-identifying ourselves with our physical body and thoughts. It is going beyond the constant chattering of mind. It is breaking away the attachment with the false self, the image we create of ourselves. Religious views mainly entail two types of Self—the “unreal self” that is the ego, also called the learned, superficial self of mind and body, and the “real self,” the “observing self,” or the “witness” or the soul. Spiritually, the real self or the witness is the pure consciousness, inside each one of us. The basic characteristic of being Self-aware is knowing that “I have a mind” instead of believing “I am a mind,” thereby distinguishing “being” from “thinking.” The process of knowing self includes dis-identifying from the mind and mental images of identity.

Dalai Lama (2006) has asserted that self-knowledge is the key to personal development and positive relationships. He states that in the absence of true self knowledge, we hurt ourselves through misguided, exaggerated notions of self, others, external events, and physical things. Without knowing our real self, we may pretend, but cannot truly feel compassion and love for our fellow beings. Pretention that we know our Self (as we use self-awareness skill and “know” our attitudes and belief systems) has not only stopped our search for exploring the true self but also aided in hiding our negative emotions and vices. Pain, despair, and suffering equally affect us as they do to the clients we serve. We fail to heal ourselves. How can, we, the service providers, claim to help our clients deal with their suffering if we cannot ameliorate our pain? Just as a drowning person cannot save other drowning people, we the social workers cannot heal others unless we heal ourselves. And any intention to heal ourselves keeping intact the false self or unreal identity would be in vain.

## **Conclusions**

The core of our being, the pure consciousness is present in all of us as the real self. Identification with false notions and pretenses veil the true self and create an image of the Self which is named in

many forms—such as ego, personality, roles, self-concept—which we defend and protect throughout our life. Social work practitioners use “Self” in their interventions. Self-awareness is often directed to know the characteristics of the false self. Knowing the true self is our birthright as well as our prime duty. Knowing the real self is the pre-condition to using the self in social work. Lastly, acceptance of ignorance about our true nature would pave way to authentic knowledge. Searching for the “self,” which is to be used in social work, would set the foundation of a vibrant, loving, and caring society and facilitate realizing the goals of social work profession.

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