

Parapsychology and the Ecological Self

This short article draws together threads linking three fields of inquiry – anthropology, deep ecology, and parapsychology – and their respective perspectives on the nature of the self. Research in these areas may have a practical application in elucidating the processes that lead to a sense of connection to the natural world, which in turn often result in pro-environmental behavior (Restall & Conrad, 2015).

Anthropology – Porous and Plural Selves

Anthropologists have long suggested that there are widely diverging cultural differences when it comes to conceptualizing the nature of the self. Despite the fantastic diversity of self-concepts across

cultures, however, anthropologists have argued for the existence of two broad categories among them. On the one hand we have what has come to be known as the individual self – a conceptualization of the self as independent, autonomous, and bounded by the limits of the physical body. This model of the self is often referred to as Western. By contrast, there is the dividual self, considered to be made up of several constituent parts, or porous with permeable boundaries through which other selves or entities might come and go (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This model is often called non-Western, though this does not mean that dividual models of the self are absent in Western contexts; there are many sub-cultural groups that embrace and deliberately foster dividual selfhood. Mediumship development circles are one example (Hunter, 2018), as is the growing Hearing Voices Network (HVN,



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2020). An interesting recent development is the emergence of people who self-identify as plural systems. Christopher Laursen recently discussed plural systems in the context of online tulpa commu-

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nities, where individuals generate autonomous tulpas (thoughtforms) through concentrated intention and interaction. Laursen explains that “the term plurality or plural system is actively used in the community to normalise how one body can hold multiple identities - host and tulpa(s), the system-mates” (Laursen, 2019, p. 168).

Laursen also documents the rise of plural advocacy, which seeks to de-pathologize mainstream perspectives on plural identities, which are often associated with conditions such as dissociative identity disorder (DID) and schizophrenia. Plural identities, especial-

ly when deliberately induced, are instead seen by self-designated plural systems as healthy ways of being in the world, leading to an improved sense of well-being (Laursen, 2019, pp. 172-173). My own research on trance mediumship development in the UK, and the “spirit teams” associated with developing mediums, similarly suggests that mediumship development circles provide a safe space for behaviors that would otherwise be interpreted as pathological or abnormal (Hunter, 2018, p. 83). Non-pathological modes of being that incorporate plural identities, or that extend beyond the usually assumed limits of the individual, are worthy of much greater attention. In particular, they may improve our understanding of how a sense of connection to the natural world is formed.

Deep Ecology: The Ecological Self

The concept of the ecological self derives from the writings of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009), founder of the deep ecology movement. It is another example of an expanded or dividual model of the self. Naess suggested that, through the process of what he called self-realization, we will ultimately move away from egoic (bounded, individual) conceptions of the self towards an ecological self. Naess does not give an explicit definition of the ecological self,

but does offer a brief sentence: “The ecological self of a person is that with which this person identifies.” He further explains, “This key sentence (rather than a definition) about the self shifts the burden of clarification from the term ‘self’ to that of ‘identification,’ or rather ‘process of identification’” (Naess, 1995, p. 227).

Thus, the ecological self emerges when we come to identify the environment with ourselves to the extent that we realize that conservation of the natural world is simultaneously an act of self-preservation. In essence, it is a realization that there is no solid, impermeable boundary between the self and the ecosystem; the self is deeply embedded within, and part of, the

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wider ecological system, and is connected to all other aspects of it. Indeed, the science of ecology specifically highlights the complex connections between phenomena in the natural world, from interactions between species within an ecosystem, to interactions between ecosystems in the wider global system. The ecological perspective is an interconnected one.

Parapsychology

If we take the parapsychological data seriously, the image of the self that emerges is quite different from the bounded, egoic notion of the individual that dominates our culture (which perhaps helps to explain some of the antagonism towards parapsychology in Western culture). In an unpublished essay titled *Toward more subtle awareness*, which explores possible future directions for psi research, William Braud (2000) suggests that psi research indicates that “[o]ur identities may extend beyond their customarily assumed limits.” He goes on to explain:

...psi events suggest that these limited identities may be quirks of an unnecessarily limited and habituated attention, self-perception, and self-conception. Such an individual self concept may be, to a large extent, culturally conditioned, because—even without considering psi events—we can find, in other cultures, greater identifications with oth-

ers (with one’s extended family, one’s community, one’s ancestors; with aspects of the natural world). Even within a Western, Eurocentric culture, we experience expansions of self-identity, beyond their usual bounds, in certain non-ordinary conditions of consciousness. Psi experiences suggest even further, and more profound, extensions of identity (p. 1)

Such extensions of identity, as Naess suggested with his concept of the ecological self, may go as far as identification with the natural world as a component of the self: “The psi phenomena that we observe appear to require and to reveal this interconnectedness. This connectedness seems more subtle, more extensive, and more profound than are the more famil-

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iar, conventional forms.” (Braud, 2000, p. 3).

Other forms of extraordinary experience are also associated with the emergence of a sense of connectedness. David Luke’s research, for instance, suggests that the altered states of consciousness associated with psychedelic states, induced through the ingestion of various psychoactive substances, are conducive to psi experiences (Luke & Kittenis, 2005). Lifetime experience with psychedelics has also been found to be associated with an enhanced sense of nature connectedness (Forstmann & Saggioglou, 2017). Meeting these two strands in the middle is an apparent renewed connection to nature associated with out-of-body experiences (OBE), near-death experiences (NDE), and alien abduction experiences (Ring & Valarino, 2006, p. 125). Is it a coincidence that psi and other extraordinary experiences are associated with both expanded notions of the self and enhanced sense of nature connectedness?

Applications and New Directions

A full exploration of the ecological dimensions of psi and the paranormal exceeds the limitations of this short article. For those who want to delve a little deeper, the chapter contributors in my recent edited volume *Greening the Paranormal* (2019) do an excellent job of

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mapping out and exploring some of this territory. For the purposes of this issue on applications, though, I will conclude with a couple of suggested directions for future research. First, the ecological context for psi experiments could be taken into consideration. In previous publications I have suggested the importance of researching psi phenomena in their social and cultural context. Perhaps this context could also be expanded to include the ecological context. Are there particular landscapes, sites, locations, or ecosystems that are more

or less conducive to psi phenomena and experiences? The work of pioneering researchers in this area, such as Paul Devereux (1996), deserves further exploration, especially at a time when the re-establishment of a sense of connection to nature is needed more than ever before. Second, further research should go into understanding the relationship of dividual forms of consciousness, such as the ecological self and plural systems, to psi research. Are practices that develop the ecological self, such as gardening, hiking, and other outdoor activities also psi conducive? How might this research be used to promote pro-environmental behaviors?

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