

The mind-body relationship in the development of the sense of self: reflections starting from Daniel Stern's thought

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Abstract: The article starts from Daniel Stern's theoretical and clinical reflections and explores the development of the sense of self. The focus is on the evolution of the psychic experience as an experience learned in the relationship between mind and body, since birth, supported by vital affects and by the attunement that exists between the child and the caregiver.

Keywords: Daniel Stern, Sense of Self, mind-body relationship, corporeality

If the psyche is born in the body and from the body, it is true that in an evolutionary perspective the mind can be considered as a theory: from birth we build, think and tell stories. We renegotiate them, adapt them day by day, and feed them with knowledge and relational exchanges.

In the post-Freudian era, Danile Stern has one of the most interesting psychodynamic approaches to understanding psychic development. Starting from a critical analysis of the psychoanalytic paradigm, the theoretical and clinical perspective developed by Stern has contributed to a rethinking of the traditional psychodynamic models of child development. Among the most interesting aspects of his theory is the reference to a hierarchical organization of the intrapsychic world that would allow to overcome the theoretical / technical problems related to the psychoanalytic "reading" of the experimental results of the Infant Research. These problems, also analyzed by JDLichtenberg (1983), R.Emde (1988) and P.Fonagy (1989), refer mainly to the study of the very first years of life, a period in which the psyche-body relationship is fundamental and the techniques adopted in psychoanalysis to perceive and decode the mental state of the child can demonstrate their limits of use.

The biggest obstacles emerge when the psychoanalytic technique confronts the different and "unfocused" mental organization of the young child. Up to the middle of the second year of life it is not possible to find a sufficient development of the symbolic processing capacity, which is necessary for an analysis of the experience based on free associations and interpretation.

Unlike other authors linked to an interpretation of experimental data on the basis of the Io-Es-Super Io model, Stern says that one cannot know the subjective world of the young child and therefore psychodynamic theories are forced to "invent" it. It means to provide a hypothesis on the subjective experience that young children make of their social life. Stern highlights how, starting from the Infant Research data, it is possible to hypothesize that some forms of the sense of self exist long before self-awareness and language, starting from the very first representations created by body experience and the relationship with the caregiver.

Among these, the sense of being people who act and have an intention, the sense of physical cohesion, of temporal continuity, which can be experienced from birth. Based on this consideration, Stern highlights that in the course of clinical practice (especially with adult patients), psychoanalytic theories have observed a "different" child compared to what emerges from Infant Research. In the traditional clinical situation that starts from the psychoanalytic model, the child becomes the "creature" produced jointly by two adult individuals: that adult who has come to be a patient, and the therapist, who technically works on the basis of a theory, more or less rigid, of childhood experience. The clinical and metapsychological result defines this child as the set of memories, current reissues, in the transference, past experiences, and interpretations inspired by a specific reference theory.

From such a perspective, Stern talks about the "clinical child", which does not coincide with "the real child", whose behavior is examined at the very moment in which it is produced, through direct observation in the first years of life.

Starting from Freud, the development theories that refer to the classical psychoanalytic model operated through a "looking at the past" perspective. It arises from the therapeutic need to understand the etiopathogenesis of mental disorders, which means the evolutionary process as an articulated succession of stages (which constitute specific phases for the development of the "ego" and the "es" and for the fixing of some protoclinic aspects).

According to this theoretical approach, the oral, anal, phallic and genital phases (in which the intrapsychic development of the mind is articulated) are not only stages of drive development but also potential periods of fixation - that is, specific points of origin of the pathology - that can give place to different kind of psychopathological entities. Stern's point of view appears more focused on the norm rather than on the pathology. And is based on an "antegrade" rather than "retrograde" perspective.

If any breaks in the development of what Stern calls sense of the self may prove to be warning signs of a subsequent pathology, the different senses of the self are primarily intended to describe normal psychic evolution and not to explain the ontogenesis of pathological forms (which means that they cannot, ultimately, prove useful also for this purpose). The following theoretical imprint does not deny the existence of developmental phases, but considers them in relation to current adaptive tasks, which come out with the maturation of the child's bodily and mental abilities rather than in view of future clinical aspects. As a result, there is a progression of evolutionary problems that the mother-child couple must resolve through an international reciprocity that is sufficiently adequate for the adaptation to "physiologically" proceed.

The senses of the Self

Stern addresses in detail the problem of the origin and evolution of the Self starting from 1982, in "The early development of schemas of Self, of other, and of various experiences of 'Self with other'".

This article outlines a full description of the development of the sense of self in young children from the very first days of life.

With the concept of sense of self, Stern refers to a global and complex psychic organization that develops in the psyche-body relationship and not to a structure or function exclusively linked to perception, sensation, knowledge or awareness. At the age of three, the child is able to tell his story, to describe his experience with consistency. Before this evolutionary stage, the development of its internal world is influenced by the representations of experiences that originate from the body and on the body. If we start from the theoretical assumption that a child can have a sense of himself only when he is able to communicate to someone else his thoughts, his reflections and, in general, what it means for him to be what he is, it would be obvious that then that intrapsychic and interpersonal structure identifiable as a sense of self cannot exist before the age of three. However, a child of about a year and a half is quite capable of symbolization, of self-reflection, and can objectify himself in such a way that he can look at himself "from the outside"; he can also symbolically refer to himself through the use of pronouns ("me", "I", "mine") and can show himself in the mirror and distinguish the reflected image of his body.

the question is: what is the entity on which, almost suddenly, one becomes able to reflect? Stern does not agree with the assumptions of those theories of psychological development that identify the emergence of a complex representation of the Self only when it becomes possible to communicate coherently through language.

This could be confirmed by the experimental results of the Infant Research on children under the age of three, which highlight how they already possess "skills" and functions properly referable to a psychic organization that can be defined as a sense of self. Using a speculative approach, it is possible to think of an interpersonal model of the mind aimed at "building" the probable experiences of the child and focusing attention on the existential senses of the Self. Cognitive differentiation between the Self and the "other" takes place very early during development. Specifically, Stern says that the child can have experiences and schemes of the Self and the "other" that have been clearly separated since the sixth month of life, when some theories of development of a psychoanalytic matrix instead consider the "normal" phase of symbiosis. This image of the child clearly calls into question the idea of an initial phase (or a few months) of indifferentiation between the Self and the maternal "other" and replaces it with that of a child who, at least on a perceptual / discriminative basis, begins to structure distinct relationships of the Self and the other. Stern refers in fact to those clinical observations from which it emerges that since the sixth month of life it is possible to hypothesize that there is no systematic or generalized confusion between the Self and the other stimuli of the external world, nor between the other and the external world in general. This consideration therefore defines an early stage of development, in which it is possible to observe a good ability to perceive, discriminate and recognize the world as it is on the basis of bodily experience and between bodies (his body and that of the caregiver).

In 1985, in "The interpersonal world of the infant", Stern clearly describes four senses of the self, each of which defines a field of subjective experience and social relationship: **Sense of an emerging self** (from birth / 2 months); **Sense of a nuclear Self** (2 months / 6 months); **Sense of a subjective Self** (7 months / 15 months); **Sense of a verbal Self** (from the 16th month). Later, in 1989, with "Developmental prerequisites for the sense of the narrated Self", he proposed the concept of **narrative sense of self** (3 years) that extends that of **verbal self-sense**.

Referring to this model of organization and development of the mind, Stern says that "once formed, every sense of the Self remains fully functional and active throughout life [...] All the senses of the Self continue to develop and coexist".

The sense of an emerging Self

Stern believes that the period between birth and two months of life is characterized by a pre-social, precognitive and pre-organized psychic model, which having the body as its central model is used in the formation of the perception of the external world through the experience of the sense of self . Young children actively apply themselves in relating different experiences and their social skills operate in order to ensure those interactions that produce affects, perceptions, sensorimotor events, memories and other cognitions.

Very quickly, based on a preferred model, they select "relevant" stimuli and seek their repetition through primary processes of abstraction and generalization.

The innate potentials are outlined as an emerging ability to experience the sense of a process and its products, which develops early starting from an "attribution" of order to significant stimuli of the body and from an "having" awareness of the characteristics of form, intensity and temporal modality. If a certain degree of integration between these different elements is possible on the basis of pre-structured capacities, then, as Stern (1985) suggests, it can be consistently hypothesized that the young child experiences from the first moments of life "... the emergency process of an organization as well as its result ". The resulting image is that of an "active" child who, already in the first months of life, is dynamically committed to building the sense of an emerging Self. In this period, mutual "social" interaction between the baby and the mother is essential: the mother spends most of her time regulating and stabilizing the main bodily functions, the sleep / wake, day / night and hunger / satiety cycles of the child, implementing a series of social behaviors aimed at guaranteeing a general homeostasis; in parallel, these caring actions are a response to the mutually "social" behaviors of the child (crying, screaming, smiling and looking). If in this sense, much of this primary interaction is at the service of body and physiological regulation, at the same time the parents immediately attribute intentions and motivations to their children: on the one hand, they see the child as a physiological system that needs to be regulated on the other hand, they have a representation of a "psychic" person capable of having subjective experiences, social sensitivity and a sense of self in the process of formation. Young children therefore

have a very active subjective bodily and psychic life, full of changing passions, and experience a state of indifference by confronting dark social events that presumably appear disconnected and unintegrated. On an experiential level, Stern argues, it is possible to hypothesize that the period immediately following birth is characterized by separate, unrelated experiences, which still need to be integrated into a non-undifferentiated organizing perspective.

When, in the first weeks of life, these different experiences are assimilated, associated or otherwise connected, the child experiences the "emergence of an organization". In order for the child to have any sense of self-formation, the existence of some potentially viable organization as a reference point is necessary. If the first of these organizations concerns the body, its unity, its actions, its internal states and the memory related to it, the second point of reference is the process related to the perception of what Stern calls "vital affects". Starting from the body, the "vital affects" are related to the possibility of experiencing the affective and syntonic responses of the caregiver, with which the child is engaged in a frequent dynamics of tuning which, although it implies a strong sense of intimacy and attachment, promotes an experience of action, volition, continuity and consistency rather than fusion and indifferentiation. The quality of these affects describes the child's ability to experience sensations that have no place in existing terminology but rather tend to emerge as "elusive" qualities, which are best expressed in dynamic, kinetic terms (such as "float", "vanish", "Spend", "explode", "crescendo", "decrescendo", "swollen", "exhausted") and which become forms of "feeling" with an almost continuous impact on the organism. The third point to which Stern refers is the capacity indicated as constructivism. The functionality referable to it allows the perception of the human form - initially experienced as one of the many series of bodily and physical stimuli - through those processes of assimilation, accommodation, identification of constants and associative learning that define it. All creative acts and all forms of learning originate, in the very first period of life, within the field of the emerging relationship with the caregiver. This relationship is invariably experienced as an affective exchange, sometimes characterized by categorical affects, such as joy, anger, sadness or fear, sometimes by vital affects that accompany the interactions, sometimes in both ways. As an experiential field, it remains active during the training period of each of the following fields of relationship of the sense of self and accompanies the emergence of the sense of "other". Therefore, the evolutionary paradigm identified by Stern predicts that the other senses of the Self, which will develop following the sense of the emerging Self, will only emerge thanks to this initial organization.

The sense of a nuclear Self

In Stern's model, the sense of a nuclear self would develop between the second and seventh month of life, when the previous experience of an emerging sense of self guarantees children that they can actually experience themselves as separate entities

from others. Starting from such a hypothesis, it is possible to think of a new experiential potentiality, which is essentially that of a Self that is with others and not that of a "merged with" Self, connected in a symbiotic or undifferentiated way. The experimental results highlighted by Stern help to provide the image of a child capable of bringing into play all his bodily abilities - actions, programs, affects, perceptions and cognitions - and concentrating them, for a time, in the interpersonal psychic situation. From Stern's point of view, in order to identify - clinically and metapsychologically - a sense of nuclear self, at least four elements are necessary: the sense of an acting self, that is capable of autonomous action and volition; the sense of a cohesive self having its own boundaries; the sense of continuity which, by adopting a Winnicottian language, qualitatively becomes a "continuity to exist"; the sense of owning one's own affectivity. The evolutionary quality of these four components, associated with the quality of interpersonal relationships with the significant "other", can have very important clinical consequences. A more or less serious damage to the sense of acting Self favors a structural vulnerability, potentially such as to influence the emergence of paranoid thoughts about the control of one's mental contents and actions. A lack of sense of cohesion will presumably lead to pathological forms of self fragmentation, depersonalization and dissociation, which are characteristic of both psychotic disorders and borderline personality structures. A defect in the sense of continuity, on the other hand, will define a pathological nucleus related to future episodes of dissociative flight and split of the personality. Finally, the lack of a solid sense of one's affectivity can expose you to affective disorders as well as to some forms of schizophrenia. In order for a well-organized sense of the nuclear self to be formed, it is therefore necessary for the child to have available a series of possible experiences, such as those relating to the possibility of feeling the author of one's own actions and not being the author of the actions of others. In other words, one must affirm the possibility of having the will, the control of self-generated acts and making predictions about the consequences of one's actions. According to Stern, the sentiment of action and specific volition of an "autonomous" Self includes three possible "constants" of experience, which define a very important source of information and which refer to the sense of volition that precedes the motor act, to proprioceptive and sensory feedback on the body and the predictability of the consequences following the act. In addition to the "agent" component of the Self, a further experience necessary to form an organized sense of the nuclear Self is that related to a cohesive Self, which allows the child to "feel" as a whole, not fragmented body and physical entity, provided with boundaries and the seat of an integrated action, both when it moves (behaves) and when it stands still. To satisfy these characteristics, the Self must develop as an "existential entity" that begins to define itself through actions promoted starting from its own body, both in relation to the coordinates of space and time of the external world, and in relation to the movements of the other who it moves in relation to the other elements of the background. Parallel to the emergence of the sense of one's own boundaries and cohesion, the "historical"

component of the Self is outlined as an experiential capacity that contributes to organizing one's nuclear Self and to representing it as an entity no longer confused with the Self of the "other" . This "historical" self and this sense of continuity require a sufficiently developed memory capacity, which relies on a memory of recognition (by means of which one is able to remember stimuli), on an evocative memory and on a motor memory, through to remember the experience of action, coherence and affection, which make possible the formation of what Stern defines as "generalized internal representations". The last component of the sense of nuclear self is the sense of an affective self. At the age of two months, the experiences of joy, interest, anguish, surprise and anger, already lived, are manifested with precise patterns of reactions, movements and expressions, indicated by Stern as a series of "constellations of constants that belong to the Self "And which define specific emotional categories. Consequently, this perspective naturally places the emphasis on the concrete experience of substance, action, sensation, affection and time. Such an experiential background, therefore, guarantees that the sense of the nuclear self can constitute the basis on which the other more elaborate senses of the self will be built later. In order for a sense of a nuclear Self to emerge from the integration of the four components mentioned above, it is necessary that the child has adequate interactional opportunities, through which to identify the necessary constants of the Self in daily social life and develop the ability to integrate these characteristics in a single organizing perspective. In this sense, therefore, the affective reference figure assumes the function of "other self-regulator", "registered" by the child in the form of subjective experience. By overestimating the experiential concreteness with respect to its phantasmatic representation, the potential of the first relationships with the caregiver therefore does not determine a loss of boundaries, but rather an intrapsychic dynamic in which the sense of nuclear self is integrated through the subjective perception of an "other", mutually nuclear, based on a relational scenario that is not a fusion or distortion of reality.

The sense of a subjective self

At nine months of age, the child makes an evolutionary leap that makes it possible to experience a sense of subjective self. The change effectively affects almost all the previous bodily and psychic parameters (motor skills, perception, memory), to the point that, coherently with this general transformation, the child seems to discover what "philosophically" is describable as " theory of separate minds ". On this "theoretical" basis, the child is able to found the awareness of a mind whose contents, simple or relatively complex, can potentially be shareable with others. In order for this experience to take place, relational dynamics must necessarily be based on a common grid of meanings and through a relatively adequate communication medium that passes through the body (gestures, postures, facial expressions). When this happens, interpersonal actions have moved from the stage of manifest actions and responses to that of the internal subjective states that lie behind them. This

evolutionary stage is indicated by Stern as the crossroads that gives the child the possibility of a qualitatively different social "presence" and "sensitivity", which, "agitates" in the interpersonal world, pushes the caregivers to implement a different social recognition. When the child is able to imagine that the other person can focus attention on a "shared" point of the social field, using the terminology indicated by Piaget, a significant "decentralization" occurs. Following this logic, the point of the relational field on which both can focus attention becomes a content of the mind potentially shareable with the other. In this phase, therefore, it is possible to attribute to the child the ability to experience psychic intimacy, seen both as a new and more creative possibility of social dynamics, and as a structured desire or motivation towards knowing and being recognized through a mutual revelation of experiential subjectivity (on the other hand, the refusal to be known psychically can also be experienced with great intensity). This ability is accompanied by that of "inter-intentionality", through which it is possible to clearly manifest one's intentions. Stern states that only with the advent of inter-subjectivity can something that is similar to the full union of subjective psychic experiences really occur: this dynamic is made possible by the transition to a sense of intersubjective Self (and "other"). The consequent theoretical reference therefore maintains that the experience of inter-subjectivity is at the origin of both the dynamic of separation / individuation, as well as of new ways of experiencing the union, through new potential ways of living "being with the other". By accepting the definition of intersubjectivity proposed by Trevarthan and Hubley (1978), Stern identifies it as "a deliberately sought participation of experiences concerning events and objects".

The sense of a verbal Self

The experimental findings to which Stern refers indicate that between 15 and 18 months the child develops that discreet "self-reflection" ability that allows the emergence of a verbal sense of the Self. This attitude is revealed through the use of language and symbols and the possibility of "objectifying" oneself with respect to the other elements of the external world (for example when, looking in the mirror, the child points his finger at his own reflected image, when he uses pronouns "me" and "me" and when accessing the symbolic game). The emergence of an organizing perspective based on a verbal Self creates a new field of relationship, which dramatically increases the potential ways of "being with the other". Language, in fact, brings new and important advantages to the expansion of interpersonal experience, allowing a more active involvement in the social relationship, a social exchange that allows the development of previously unknown meanings and a narrative construction of one's own story qualitatively and quantitatively better. In this phase, children are able to perceive themselves as external and objective entities, to refer to these entities and to communicate about objects and people who are not necessarily present in the current field of experience. Specifically, for the completeness of an intrapsychic and interpersonal sense of the verbal Self, it is necessary that the child

has acquired a series of skills, referable to: a discreet and precise representation of things and events that are not yet part of his repertoire of schemes action; the competence to create a representational prototype of what he saw others do; to a physical and bodily repertoire that defines the possibility of performing increasingly complex actions. Furthermore, in parallel with the emergence of the sense of a verbal Self, the ability to codify new representations is developed which, transferred to long-term memory, can be recovered with a minimum of external indications and which increase the possibility of operating a causal psychological relationship between the act and the model originally underlying it. In the development model developed by Stern, the set of these functional processes requires a representation of the Self as an objective entity that can be seen from the outside, as well as subjectively felt from the inside. Following this perspective, as well as being a subjective experience, the verbal Self is therefore defined as a "category" and an "objective" and "objectible" mental state. When he begins to speak, the child has already acquired a remarkable ability to know the world, not only with regard to inanimate objects and his own body, but also with reference to increasingly complex social interactions. Language provides a new way of being in relationship with others (who may be absent or present), because, within the field of the verbal relationship, it is with the "other" that it is now possible to share personal knowledge and subjective of the world. The verbal modality allows to reach a level of relationship in which all the existential problems of life will be addressed and matures the ability to narrate one's own story, which implies the possibility to think and modify the self-image. Of important clinical importance is the fact that, with the advent of language and symbolic ability, children come to possess the tools to know and expand interpersonal reality, to the point that they can at the same time transcend and therefore distort. In fact, if the emergence of these new social capacities lays the foundations for a "physiological" development of the Self, it is simultaneously significant that, at this stage, expectations may develop in contrast to past experiences or desires inconsistent with the present situation. If the mental state that precedes the linguistic ability limits the thought to an "imprint" of reality, with the emergence of a sense of the subjective Self, children can therefore "transcend", and consequently "re-interpret" and "re- to build "(for better or for worse), the aspects of the concrete and experiential field within which the characteristics of their interpersonal world are structured.

The sense of a narrative self

In 1989 Stern extended the sense of a verbal self to the sense of a narrative self. Around the age of three, the child is able to tell his life story and tell who he is, what happens to him, what he does and why he does it. Attention to this psychic organization is justified, according to Stern, by the fact that adult therapists derive their knowledge to a large extent from the narrative sense of Self that emerges from the patient in the analytic situation. If in this context the previous senses of the self represent the matter on which the narrative sense of self operates, it is important to

note that, as global organizations of experience, they are never totally absorbed and never cease to be operative. All the senses of the Self remain dynamically active throughout a person's life, as separate but interdependent existential and experiential fields, and as such, they are progressively expanded and reworked. From an evolutionary point of view, the sense of a narrative self is necessary for the child to tell his own story or a narration about himself on the basis of a rich range of experiences, referring to the past as much as to the present. The ability to transform experiences into a socially functional narrative later emerges from the sense of self that lies at the center of the narrative itself. In Stern's hypothesis, it would be precisely this time lag to emerge as an "object" of clinical reflection.

Final considerations

When in 2006 I had the privilege of meeting him in supervision, my way of thinking about psychotherapy theory and technique changed definitively. Stern, with his elegant way of re-reading the clinical history that I had brought to his attention with a little awe and with a different formative attitude from all my other supervisors, led me to think of the patient's narrative in a substantially new way compared to the model that until then I had learned in 4 years of specialization. By transforming clinical problems, tasks and evolutionary crises (such as attachment, independence and security) into lines of development (life problems rather than specific stages) and replacing them with a sense of self that addressed the issue so well of the mind-body relationship in the early stages of psychic development, the therapeutic dimension that I had learned to report from the meeting with Professor Stern became freer in the analysis of the locus of historical and narrative origin of the neurosis. Based on his clinical perspective, the therapeutic response could not be known in advance, and in this way it would have been possible to put oneself in a listening attitude without necessarily having a theory that indicated a priori exactly what was important or which experiential core should be considered with more attention than other aspects of the patient. The theoretical / technical approach identified by Stern pushed me, ultimately, to build shared and more effective therapeutic narratives, freer and therefore more creative than the reference theory, while respecting it, which could become "co-constructions" of stories, aimed at promoting the patient's hypseity (that is, the possibility of being) rather than his sameness (the a priori being). Today, this thought influences my clinical approach more than I could have imagined then. It is an integral part of my technique, and of my way of being a psychotherapist.

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