
A RETURN JOURNEY TO THE CONCEPT OF TOP-DOG/UNDER-DOG: TRAVELLING WITH WINNICOTT AND OTHERS

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The concept of Top-dog/Under-dog is referred to in textbooks, but is less frequently taught due to a perception that it lacks clinical usefulness. This article sets out to revitalise the concept, changing the language used, and to re-integrate the term with its analytical/object relational roots.

Introduction

When Perls (1972) wrote of the 'Top-dog' and 'Under-dog', he used these terms to describe what was for him a polarity. Polarities are opposite aspects of the self. For example, characteristics such as kindness and cruelty are ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, which are experienced along a continuum, with the poles being the extreme of each and opposite aspect. The self may experience I am at a point along this continuum, usually to the introjected, value-laden end of the continuum. In this case this would probably be towards the pole of kindness. Perls' point was that the other pole is always there as well, but tucked out of awareness and not owned or valued for its contribution to the richness of existence, being ignored and judged because of an introjected value system. The work therefore would be to explore the polarity, extending the continuum into awareness, reaching intra-psychic contact with an expanded I boundary, and acceptance, and hence re-framing and re-labelling of the denied aspect. Who would want to be touched by a surgeon who was not aware of his kindness? And would he be able to cut, if he could not reach into his so-called cruelty?

So far, so good. Turning to Top-dog, Under-dog, here we find a strict sub-personality, a controlling Top-dog, trying to organise the self according to certain rules and/or standards, usually based on firmly held introjects. The Under-dog says 'yes, I absolutely agree with you, but ...' and proceeds to stalemate or sabotage the efforts of the Top-dog in creative and often subtle ways. The Under-dog always wins, much to the chagrin and frustration of the Top-dog. This would be amusing for those who champion the Under-dog were it not for the fact that when a more overall view is taken, this shows the Self stuck, internally embattled, and unable to proceed towards health or longed-for (and not necessarily introjected) goals.

A colleague of mine was writing her PhD. She found herself in much conflict with her supervisor, who had persuaded her to research and present her thesis in a way that she did not totally agree with. Her thesis was due for the last drafting, having to be handed over in the next week, when inexplicably she misplaced it. There

was, of course, only one copy. I laughed when she told me, and said: 'My compliments to your unconscious!' She was taken a back, and asked for an explanation, which I gave her. The next day she 'found' her work, scheduled an emergency meeting with her supervisor, and arranged an extension for the deadline. The thesis was rewritten and accepted. It was never misplaced again.

All this seems therefore easy to understand. Let us then work this as a polarity with our clients, for example arranging a classic experiment with two chairs and encourage dialogue. Then the thoughts and feelings of the denied Under-dog polarity can emerge into awareness, the unconscious can be made conscious, the continuum of the Self expanded and a personal choice now can be made as to where on the continuum the client wishes to be in each separate 'here and now' moment as it emerges. This, after all, is psychotherapy; making aware or conscious what is unaware, resolving conflict, in this case by showing that there is no conflict, merely stations along the continuum railroad. If this occurs with affect or liveliness, the client now experiences that there are more choices in life.

Sometimes this kind of approach is experienced as helpful. In my experience, most often the work loses either energy or direction if a polarity approach in a Top-dog/Under-dog situation is taken. For example, I become aware that the client is 'going through the motions' now, whereas a minute before there was liveliness. Am I being too directive? Is the client now confluent? And the work often changes to what may be happening between us, in the transference, the projection of the client's unfinished business on to the therapist. Here you can see how a focus may be lost, and an important focus, too. The client has brought to therapy a process that has a stranglehold on his or her life. It will emerge again in the therapy, as the Gestalt presses for resolution and closure, but for the moment it is lost.

I believe that to bring this to resolution requires a conceptual shift in the therapist. More is happening here than a manifestation of polarity. An awareness of the inadequacy of the polarity approach appears to be present in the Gestalt community as well. Few texts give Top-dog/Under-dog more than a cursory mention, and personal communications with Gestalt trainers reveal that many of them do not find it a useful concept to teach.

Introducing Winnicott and others

Let us now turn to the world of analysis and object-relations. This is not a betrayal of Gestalt – these are our roots, too. Perls came from these origins, and those who later read and watched his work did not always recognise how the strong threads of these roots permeated his work. His cry of 'lose your mind, come to your senses', many introjected and followed, without appreciating the intellectual depth and richness Fritz and Laura Perls possessed. One must first have a mind, before one can lose it.

Winnicott wrote an extraordinarily lucid article in 1960: *Ego Distortion in Terms of the True and False Self*. He acknowledged that the concept was not new, occurring descriptively elsewhere, including in certain religions and philosophies. He stated that the idea for this arose clinically, from working with clients. What he saw emerging in adult work was a process that had its origins in infancy or early childhood.

The child experiences fundamentally in the early parental relationship that she or he is not perceived for her/himself. This causes great distress and anxiety. If the child is not acceptable, then the parent may abandon the child, and the child knows abandonment means death. Alternatively, the child, say a girl feels if she is unacceptable, she will be destroyed or exploited. (All this is very primitive and hence held unconsciously or unaware, and held intensely).

Thus creatively, and adaptively, the child creates a False Self which she hopes will be more acceptable and will also protect the True Self which is now hidden. This is often a child's version of what she believes an adult is, made up and organised from introjects and impressions from adults in her environment. This is often very successful, especially if the child is intelligent. The child grows up to be externally admired for her status and success, while feeling subjectively phoney on the inside. Academic departments are full of such Fabergé eggs, enamelled on the outside, hollow within. Alice Miller (1981) wrote extensively and poignantly in *The Drama of the Gifted Child* of her own experience and the drama that occurs for such gifted children. Winnicott maintained "... spontaneity is not a feature in the infant's living experience. Compliance is then the main feature, with imitation as a speciality".

When I was 35 years old, a doctor and psychiatrist, married with three children, I discovered that my life was being run by a frightened, but very intelligent and extremely wily 9 year old, posing as my adult False Self. Fifteen years later, I am more comfortable, having journeyed on from there, (and still travelling). Interestingly, one of the first pieces of Gestalt work I did myself was a Top-dog/Under-dog polarity work. I remember closing down and resisting half-way through the work.

Winnicott writes of the importance of the False Self, how it caretakes and protects the true self, even unto death: 'When suicide is the only defence left against betrayal of the True Self, then it becomes the lot of the False Self to organise the suicide. This, of course, involves its own destruction, but at the same time eliminates the need for its continued existence, since its function is the protection of the True Self from insult'. (Winnicott 1965). If this view seems extreme, recourse to statistics will show that successful suicide occurs more frequently in the professional groups. Women psychiatrists, for example, have one of the highest rates.

I would like to suggest that if we conceptualise Top-dog/Under-dog as a version

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of False Self/True Self, and not as a polarity, we can restore vitality to this term.

Part of the problem in doing that is that many value-laden terms are used: e.g. False Self/True Self, which suggest that there is something inherently less than satisfactory about the False Self. If Top-dog is used for False Self and Under-dog for the True Self we get away a little from this, but find ourselves historically still linked to the concept of polarities, which is not clinically useful. Therefore I will use the term Operational Self for False Self/Top-dog, and Core Self for True Self/Under-dog.

There are many terms that touch on this idea as well, coming from various paradigms. For example, Freud wrote of the instinctive drives from the id which were central, and another part, the ego, which dealt operationally with the world. Here, for our purposes, the struggle is between the id and the superego, with the ego presenting the results of the struggle to the world. The id would therefore roughly be Core Self and the ego/superego, the Operational Self. When working with clients who are stuck in this process, I am struck by the words used by the Operational Self. This Self sounds harsh and primitive, like the child's superego, about which Erikson wrote. The Operational Self represents a child's view of what it believes an adult would believe, say, and do. Here there is psychological double-bookkeeping. The client behaves towards his/her self in the way he/she would never dream of treating anyone else, let alone a child he or she encountered in the external world. This is a harsh, primitive child-superego. We therefore have not one but two children in the therapy room.

This leads to another term for the Core Self, namely the 'Inner Child', with the Operational Self being the rather parental adult. Whole workshops are held for the celebration of the Inner Child, for expression of energy, playfulness, intense emotional feeling and creativity, which are the birthright of all children and hence of the Core Self. Again we have a value-laden term which predicates our therapeutic approach, namely, 'let us spring off the shackles of the stifling Adult and ally ourselves with the Inner Child, that life may be experienced more abundantly'. But the Operational Self knows better. The Inner Child may also be an Inner Brat, insatiably needy, exquisitely vulnerable, full of primary egocentricity (Piaget wrote of that pre-conceptual stage), and full of limitless destructiveness (as described by Klein). The Inner Child is a Pandora's Box, and must be forbidden emergence by the Operational Self, to the frustration and puzzlement of the therapist.

Jung, with the concept of the Shadow, recognised the process of concealing that which was unacceptable to civilisation. He wrote of a dream he had, walking with his hands cupped around a bright small light, with a huge shadow following him. He recognised the Shadow as part of the psyche at which the self does not want to look, as it contains all that is perceived as unacceptable. Freud would have recognised that the untempered drives and urges of the id belong there, with its

aggression and frank sexuality. Here too go all those aspects of ourselves perceived as being unacceptable to our parents or our community, characteristics labelled with pejorative terms, such as cheekiness instead of lively self-expression, laziness instead of the ability to know and pace oneself. Alice Miller would recognise this. Eventually the Shadow may contain more than the 'Illuminated Self', the light shining on lifeless conventionalism, as only that which is acceptable is allowed the light of day. That part was in the small bright light of Jung's dream.

There is gold in the Shadow, Jung knew, if we only have courage to turn and look into the dark. It contains great energy, and even our murderous impulses can be mined, and then wrought into something useful. It is this gold that we need the Operational Self to recognise and permit to emerge from the Core Self.

The healing approach

Gestalt is more than a psychotherapy, it is a philosophy for living and being in the world; mind, body and soul, present-centred, available, contactful, responsive and responsible. The client with the Top-dog (Operational Self) and under-dog (Core Self) needs his/her therapist to be all these things. The client has already met too much withholding and non-responsiveness, projection, falseness and grudging and non-personal meeting. Working with this core split requires us to call out the best of our truest Gestalt approaches.

Here is where the truism, that therapy occurs between the client and the therapist, holds.

This is not polarity work, done in one session with empty chairs or lots of cushions. The split has occurred early in life, often in infancy. It is deep, and defended with great anxiety. Unrecognised primitive fears such as annihilation, or one of Winnicott's unthinkable anxieties, such as being lost in the world with no way of communicating with others, may emerge.

The principles of the approach require that the following be kept in mind.

- 1 There are two sub-personalities in the therapy room at the same time; one obscure, both children.
- 2 The alliance must be first and primarily with the Operational Self.
- 3 This is slow careful work; not a place for boom – boom – boom Gestalt Therapy (Yontef, 1991). The resistance of the Operational Self, who knows that its cover as an adult is about to be blown, must be carefully managed and worked through.

The client usually begins in the cognitive mode. I will have assessed her over a few sessions and know I am dealing with an Operational Self/Core Self situation. I join her in this mode. This is not confluence – I do this deliberately, in full

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awareness. Confluence is an unconscious process. We 'talk about' for some sessions.

I watch for the Core Self to 'leak'; a brief tear here, a catch in the voice there, an impassioned phrase here, a gesture there. This moment is the most critical. I must not miss this moment, nor must I psychologically **grab** it. This is the moment all my Gestalt training has prepared me for. I respond from my heart and soul, as contactfully as I can, in the here and now. If my timing and my intensity, and also my response is just right, I may be rewarded with a brief touch with the Core Self. The moment is usually swiftly gone. I let this be. Another opportunity will emerge again.

Slowly the Operational Self sees that I can tolerate, and not only tolerate but **hold** (psychologically) the Core Self. The Core Self is experienced as emerging gradually, not overwhelming the Operational Self. I contract quite openly that if strong affect emerges fully, I will contain the intensity of this to the middle of the session (as in John Briere's technique, with adults molested as children),¹ and will ensure that the client leaves the room robed in the Operational Self again. This is usually achieved by the much maligned 'talking about' or analysing what has happened. The Operational Self is reassured, and will unconsciously allow the Core Self to leak again. Safety and trust has been established.

This safety is important. Many Operational Selves talk about their Core Selves in murderous terms, wanting to kill or get rid of this part. The experience of the Operational Self to date has been that this part does nothing for the Self but discombobulate it, 'unmanning' the Self with voiceless emotion, having unacceptable urges, being insatiably needy, causing exquisite pain. It is important for the therapist not to panic in the face of this primitive emotional response.

The Core Self gradually emerges in the presence of the Operational Self and the potentially contactful presence of the therapist, to be touched and responded to from the heart. Interpersonal contact, by definition, is a 50–50 experience but therapists can hold themselves ready, present, responsive; with their toes on their contact boundary, as it were. The Operational Self learns from this that this Core Self may not be as unacceptable as it came to believe it was in infancy and childhood. The Operational Self starts to relax and to modify responses, using the self-capacities (ego strengths) of the therapist as a lattice up which to grow. Analysts would call this 'working the transference neurosis'.

Once this has started to occur the work can be surprisingly quick. The slow part

(1) *Child Abuse Trauma: Theory and Treatment of the Lasting Effects*. John Briere (1992) has written extensively on the need to modulate the intensity of affect to a 'window' in the middle of the therapy hour. This technique I find useful wherever there is developmentally early difficulty, and there is risk of uncovering intense, primitive, and poorly integrated affect. I mainly use cognitive integration and hence a lessening of the intensity of contact to achieve this. The client leaves 'cloaked' in his or her Operational Self again, which has provided adaptive protection after all until now.

is obtaining trust and establishing safety. Dialogue now begins between the parts, later, maybe even the empty chair technique will be tolerated. The burden of being the Operational Self can start to be relinquished.

The work of therapy becomes more contactful, for longer periods of time. The client is lively, in touch with emotions, better able to express and receive from the other. In the first instance, this is usually the therapist. Later, if healing has occurred, this generalises to include the important others in the client's ground.

This is not like a butterfly emerging from a constricting chrysalis. Rather, another sub-personality has emerged, a compassionate, mature parent who takes both frightened children into embrace. This work is not about discarding or despising parts of oneself, this is about integration without loss. The skills of the Operational Self are very useful, when used with full awareness.

The client is more spontaneous and starts to report increasing here-and-now awareness; how she saw a cat sniffing a flower and laughed, how a sparrow cocked its head quizzically.

This is slow, careful work, demanding all the therapist can deliver, and ongoing awareness on the part of the client.

Conclusion

The concept of Top-dog/Under-dog has value. To appreciate this it is necessary to return to the historical analytical/object-relational roots of Gestalt therapy to appreciate the usefulness and depth here. The depth of understanding needed for the clinical work comes from appreciating that the early, almost atavistic, split in the self is held with a desperate life-and-death intensity, arising as it does from a need to placate the powerful parent. Both sides of this split are essentially child-selves, although one has a better 'cover' than the other. To batter at this split without respecting its survival value, is not only risking the therapeutic relationship (and maybe even survival) but also recapitulates the parental insensitivity and lack of empathy that contributed to the split in the first place.

Some of the usefulness has been obscured in the past by the language used, and also by the injunction to 'do and feel' and not 'think', which students attributed to Fritz Perls, missing his point entirely, which was to be more feeling and existential, but certainly not to throw all intellectual wisdom out with the bath water of intellectual deflection and retroflection.

The concept comes to life as we integrate the term with our Gestalt roots, and may help us to change our clinical approach to the benefit of our clients.

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