

Peer reviewed:

No Separation: Community and Non-Dual Psychology

David Reid

Lethbridge University

daveireid@gmail.com

Trent Leighton

Lethbridge University

Abstract This article looks at the importance of non-dual psychology and its integration into the community. The hypothesis of this paper states that addiction to a separate self-identity creates conflict in community. This type of dualism is first explored through modern history and then how it continues to impact society today. The authors discuss how addiction to a separate self can cause immense suffering by establishing a firm “I” and “Other” relationship. Secondly, the destructive impact of separateness is discussed, and is highlighted through the relationship between narcissism and the fear of death. Lastly, case studies of non-dual communities are explored to illustrate their importance in bringing about no-self or present-moment awareness. Each community expresses itself differently; however, their foundations are based on the understanding of a separate self-identity, and emphasizes the importance of non-dual awareness in each moment. They underline the significant themes of a psychological death, narcissistic patterns, and the importance of experiencing present-moment awareness in community.

Keywords: Separate-Self, Addiction, Non-dual psychology, Community, Individual, Narcissism, Death, Present-moment awareness

Community and Non-Dual Psychology

There is a mysterious force that controls us, yet as individuals, we assume that we can defect from this force (Baumeister & Masicampo 2010; Harris, 2012). Demarcation through our distinct material forms seems to maintain a pervading feeling that we are separate beings. We look differently, talk differently, think differently, act differently, believe differently, and express ourselves in so many unique ways that only bolsters the fact that you are you, and I am me. Consequently, we feed off of these lived experiences as proof of our duality, and attach to a self that is actually in constant flux throughout our entire lives (Cortright, 1997; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011).

However, despite these differences, an individual cannot seem to avoid their profound relationship to other people and their environment. As the sociologist, Allan G. Johnson (2013) has stated, “we are always participating in something larger than ourselves” (p. 13). Johnson (2013) also affirms that it is crucial to understand this fused relationship between individual and community:

If we want to understand social life and what happens to people in it, we have to understand what it is that we’re participating in and how we participate in it. In other words, the key to understanding social life is neither just the forest nor just the trees. It’s the forest and the trees and how they’re related to one another (p. 13).

Therefore, key insight into the relationship between the individual and the community unlocks the true significance behind this pervading ideology of separateness.

Most importantly, this collective, pathological attachment to a separate self-identity may be the cornerstone of addiction and its negative impact (Alexander, 2010; Maté, 2012; Tzu, 2012b).

This concept relates to the well-known psychologist, Bruce Alexander’s (2010) argument against

“individualism” which maintains that when society treats addiction as separate causal events, addiction becomes the status quo. Notwithstanding, where individual choice ends and social determinants begin is not the purpose of this article, rather, it will not only explore the social influences of a separate-self addiction, but also the individual’s influence through one’s relationship to community.

Community has a variety of definitions that, for the purpose of this article, will be generalized to encompass all conventional forms. A community can be a small or large group of people, an entire nation, or just the experience of fellowship. The authors’ intended meaning of community comes from the latin origin *communitas*, and the Old French word *comunete* which means “reinforced by its source” (“Community”, n.d.). This is suggested to mean that when individuals source or base their understanding as separate beings, then this sense of separateness is inevitably reinforced by their communities. In other words, when individuals attach to a separate self-identity it will naturally cause conflict within themselves and their community. As later exemplified, this attachment may be linked to genocide and mass murder. To reinforce our interconnected existence and eliminate these disastrous consequences, the authors posit that individuals should help sever the attachment to a separate self-identity by establishing non-dual communities.

The Violence of the Separate Self

The history of humanity is inextricably connected to violence. Warfare, in the smallest factions, to large systemic destruction continue to manifest to this day. Despite the notion that humans are the most intelligent beings on this planet, we cause the most devastation to the world and ourselves (Antony, 2016; World Health Organization, 2010). Historically, one's addiction to a separate self-identity strengthens their violent proclivities, or as Dockett, Dudley-Grant, and Bankart (2004) state, "it is this sense of one's self as separate and isolated from others that gives rise to discrimination against others, to destructive arrogance and acquisitiveness" (p. 279). This pathological attachment to identity may be the central barrier to peace, within and without (Tzu, 2014a).

Specifically, the authors assert this addiction and its destructive impacts result because humans filter perceptions through the limitations of "conscious thought" (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2011; Harris, 2012). Often, through use of military, economic, or political power, does the failure of our perceptions come to light (Phythian, 2006). Several different approaches describe the psychological roots of the failure of intelligence: cognitive psychology, discourse analysis, as well as insights from the medical profession (Citation needed). On the nature of intelligence and reasoning, the social psychologist, Roy Baumeister (2011), made similar comments stating that, "reasoning is generally seen as a means to improve knowledge and make better decisions. However, much evidence shows [it] leads to epistemic distortions and poor decisions" (p. 57). Phythian (2006) also asserts this "reasoning" is mirrored on the global level, like the pre-Iraq War, where perceptions were narrowed and the ability to reflect was constrained. The belief that disasters like this can be avoided by perfecting norms and procedures is an illusion. Intelligence can be improved slightly but not fundamentally by altering the way we

analyze. This illusion is dangerous because we become overconfident in reforms that do not work (Citation needed).

Non-dual psychology asserts that the solution to this illusion lies beyond our limited minds. For non-dual psychology, the self is an illusion and the addiction to its reality only causes suffering (Cortright, 1997; Tzu, 2014a; Tzu, 2014b). Explained through the spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle (2006), it is understanding that any “solution” we can individually, or collectively think-up will cause more suffering. He states that “the greatest achievement of humanity is not its works of art, science, or technology, but the recognition of its own dysfunction, its own madness” (p. 14). Through non-dual psychology, understanding this dysfunction comes from understanding a separate self-identity.

The Separate Self

To understand the separate self, the authors use the description from transpersonal psychologist, Brant Cortright (1997), who presents it through the standpoint of object relations and Buddhist psychology. The separate self can be viewed as a rapid series of distinct images that are constantly being constructed. The images move through the mind so fast that there is an impression of a stable self, but it is merely a mirage that is created by the speed of the images going by. In addition, as the neuroscientist Sam Harris (2012) states, these images that “we are conscious of [are] only a tiny fraction of the information that our brains process in each moment...we are utterly unaware of the neurophysiological events that produce them” (p. 25). Furthermore, recent research states that we are not actually the author of our thoughts (Custers & Aarts, 2010). The true author remains a mystery (Harris, 2012).

Therefore, the depths of our “chosen” separate identities are reduced to surface layer expressions of a mysterious, underlying, collective experience (Cortright, 1997; Harris, 2012). The experience is this moment. In other words, if the separate self-identity is made up of a movement of thoughts, and most of which one has no conscious control over, then identity can be viewed as an unbridled, temporary manifestation that occurs through each moment.

Per non-dual psychology, an addiction to a separate self-identity is no more than pathological attachment to form and primarily thought forms (Cortright, 1997; Tolle, 2006). For example, we identify with gender, possessions, physical and emotional energy, nationality, race, religion, roles, likes and dislikes, memories, and moral codes, all which define your sense of self as “me and my story” (Tolle, 2006). Addiction to this story causes suffering because it separates a person from the intrinsic interconnectedness with every “other” human being. While thought forms are a part of this reality, it is through pathological attachment to them that we resist our essential connection to others. Instead of just noticing the present experience and witnessing thoughts without judgment, a person attaches and identifies with them, and identification becomes the central barrier to “the experience of oneness” (Blackstone, 2006). To betray this “oneness” is the source of all our suffering.

The Other

According to non-dual psychology, while there is the appearance of boundaries between individuals, permeable boundaries or those that are not fixed, are essential for peace. As author Douwe Tiemersma (2012) has pointed out, “when there are no more boundaries between yourself and others, there can be no more war. War is always about borders, but when all borders disappear, war disappears along with it” (p. 15). The foundation of these destructive boundaries is attachment. When a person believes that they are their thoughts, this “I” automatically creates an “other” (Osho, 2010). The sense of “I” can only exist because the “other” exists. They are never separate. These illusory fixed boundaries exist only through the addiction to a separate-self.

Furthermore, as psychodynamic theory asserts, once a sense of “I” is created, a natural separation of the “good” and “bad” happens (Huprich, 2009). You unconsciously separate it within yourself and you start separating it outside yourself. You befriend those aligned with notions of “good” and shield yourself from those who represent “bad”. As controversial non-dual teacher Osho (2010) affirms, “you are fighting with your own source. With whom are you fighting? With yourself” (p. 139). If you cannot accept this apparent dichotomy within yourself, then you cannot accept it in anyone else.

Furthermore, this resistance may be bolstered by a human being’s incessant need to fit in (Brown, 2015). It is a need that neuroscience has demonstrated as so powerful that social disconnection causes genuine pain. A separate self-identity becomes strengthened through a community, as group identities reify through an “in-group” and “out-group” dynamic (Monroe, 2008). This is where the addiction to a separate self could become increasingly destructive.

Research has shown that by making each group the enemy of the other, they limit individual choice by dictating what is proper behavior. Genocide erupts when these identities become crystallized and boundaries harden into politically opposing cultural identities.

Moreover, through her research on the three types of participants involved in the Holocaust, the political scientist Kristen Monroe (2008) studied a relevant link between the perpetrators, the bystanders, and rescuers of Jewish genocide. On the surface, these types appear different from one another based on their actions. They each claim certain beliefs that directly correspond to their behavior, but it is precisely because they attach to any belief that pathological behavior erupts. Monroe (2008) states, “the striking fact [is] that identity constrains choice for all people” (p. 716). She elaborates:

Despite their different self-images, for all the individuals... identity constrained choice. Identity set a cognitive menu of options available... Acts not on the cognitive menu are not considered, just as sushi is not an option in an Italian restaurant. For the Nazis, their victim self-image meant they felt compelled to strike preemptively, to protect themselves because they genuinely felt like a people under attacks from vile, base elements in society...in contrast, bystanders saw themselves as people who were weak, low on efficacy. For rescuers, their lack of choice emanated from their view of themselves as connected to all humankind (p. 713).

Also, rescuers cannot necessarily claim the moral high ground as countless sacrificed themselves leaving their children and family behind for complete strangers (Monroe, 2008). From a non-dual perspective, Osho (2010) described how “the holy mind and the evil mind are not two minds, they are two aspects of the same coin” (p. 118). If there is an addiction to identity, “the saint can turn into a sinner any moment and the sinner can turn into a saint any moment” (p. 188). For non-dual psychology, without the on-going experience of present-centered awareness, individuals are limited within the scope of their self-identity.

For non-dual psychology, there is a difference in believing humans are all connected and genuinely experiencing that reality. Osho (2010) affirms this by saying “truth is through experience” (p. 26). Although identities express themselves differently through beliefs, the mechanism is the same no matter what the person believes in. It is addiction to belief and to thought forms that is limiting and creates the boundaries, even if an individual were to believe that we are all one (Monroe, 2008). Without this understanding, there is unnecessary suffering.

In contrast, non-dual psychology replaces the limited choices of identity with what is called *non-dual action*. The transpersonal psychologist, Judith Blackstone (2006), describes non-dual action as the “spontaneous, un-self conscious responsiveness to life” (p. 27). Instead of limiting choice, present moment awareness gives access to a wider range of possibilities. When a person is present, without the filter of their identity, they can accurately respond to the needs of the situation. They act without interference.

Narcissism and the Fear of Death

In non-dual psychology, a significant aspect of separate self-addiction, and a central barrier to present-centered awareness is fear of death. In separating the “bad” or “the other”, a person attempts to distance themselves from the reality of death. Existential psychology has captured this fear of death through successful paradigm of terror management theory (Strenger, 2011). This theory has accurately established how human beings spend vast amounts of energy to deny death. We cannot accept that we will die, and this denial is one of our most powerful motivators.

The authors posit that the fear of death and the desire for a permanent, separate, special, and unchanging-self are linked to pathological behaviors used to keep this identity in place.

However, from a non-dual perspective, a person can accept this fear. One must be open to death, and not attached to life (Osho, 1977). If a person tries to stand against these two, they will inevitably suffer. The spiritual teacher Gangaji (2005) also affirms that when you are open to fear it cannot be found anywhere: it only exists when you constantly resist its existence. When you slow down, and become open to what you have always resisted, the discovery is that fear is not really fear. Fear is actually just energy.

Narcissism

For non-dual psychology, a human being's obsessive yearning for acceptance and admiration magnifies and unveils our fear of death (Loy, 1996). Narcissism can be considered a core protective barrier to this fear, and manifests in our many "gigs" of specialness (Tzu, 2014a). One type of narcissist is defined "in the everyday sense of being preoccupied with self-esteem, the need for my specialness and uniqueness to be recognized" (Tzu, 2014b, p. 59). The second type is the DSM-5 version in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The only discernable difference between the two is the lack of empathy for others. Consider for a moment that, instead of these two definitions being separate, perhaps narcissism exists on a continuum, where the narcissistic behaviors of individuals on the most extreme end of the spectrum are just more and more pathological and destructive (Livesley, 2007). In other words, the more special you think you are, the more separate you feel from the "others", and the more suffering you create.

This is a central component of non-dual psychology. To feel special, a person must consistently defend it, which can cause suffering for the individual and their relations. If a person is addicted

to feeling special, then it acts as a safeguard of the reality of death and the ordinariness of being human (Tzu, personal communication, 2016; Loy, 1996). Narcissism can be viewed as a defense against one's own feelings of worthlessness. A sense of worthlessness becomes apparent when one's specialness is evaluated through the reality of death (Strenger, 2011).

Alternatively, non-dual psychology proposes accepting our ordinariness (Tzu, 2014a). It is concerned with a "psychological death", a moment-to-moment process of letting go of thoughts forms that are not assumed to be you. This happens in the present moment as the attachment to a separate self is constantly broken. Only by accepting ordinariness through present-moment awareness can one avoid the suffering connected to narcissism.

No More Heroes

Previously exemplified, violence can be a product of the separate self-addiction, as evidenced by the exponential increase in gun violence in the United States and across the globe (Citation needed). Per non-dual psychology, a separate self-identity connects to the notion of one being a hero, as it provides one with a defense against meaninglessness (Tzu, 2014b). This is related to the concept of *discursive construction*, where the way that individuals tell stories, and how they position themselves within those stories, connects to their understanding and relationship to their communities (Myketiak, 2016). Again, it is the authors' assertion that the strength of one's attachment to a separate self-identity is connected to the amount of suffering for the individual and society at large. As predicated, an individual can become deeply attached to their position as "I" the hero and the "Other" as the villain, which may result in disastrous consequences. This may be its apogee.

A recent study debunking myths around mass shootings states that one of the central solutions to “eliminate the risk of mass murder” was “restoring our sense of community”, correlating with the authors’ proposal (Fox & DeLateur, 2014, p. 141).

For non-dual psychology, there is no fundamental difference between these narcissistic “hero” addictions. Whether it is the perpetrators of the Holocaust, or the most recent mass shooters, these individuals can be understood as stemming from the vehement belief in specialness and the addiction to an illusory self. According to the philosopher David Loy (1996), this reality is bolstered through western culture, where society acts as a hero-system whose roles and rules serve as media for narcissism. Tolle (2006) affirms that when an individual’s narcissism is threatened the individual “needs the drama in order to assert its identity as the victorious character within that theatrical production” (p. 77). This is an addiction that serves to protect from worthlessness, ordinariness, and the reality of death.

From a non-dual perspective, in some form we are all addicts (Maté, 2012). We are addicted to a false self-image through the misguided effort to supply ourselves with a sense of meaning. Unfortunately, this special “self” cannot fully protect a person from ordinary feelings of worthlessness. Eventually, the pursuit of specialness reveals an addict, obsessively chasing behaviors to solidify this identity, creating more pain for themselves and possibly others.

Non-Dual Community

Alternatively, the authors propose that one can deepen their awareness, attention, and conscious participation with the present moment, creating a positive influence on society (Lipton & Bhaerman, 2009). This leads to the importance of non-dual communities. As predicated, while

communities can strengthen a separate self-addiction, the authors assert that communities that provide insight into its detrimental effects and advocate present-centered awareness can lessen this negative impact. On the significance of community, Baurmeister (2010) correlates this point stating, “individuals make mistakes, but the [community] can converge on a correct and useful understanding” (p. 966). The well-known physician Gabor Maté (2012) conveys this through “the ecology of gardening” and states that “...it is not enough to pull up the weeds. If we want something beautiful to grow, we have to create the conditions that will allow it to develop” (p. 376). Non-dual communities can provide these conditions.

Comparatively, a large part of what keeps any addiction alive is the environment, or as 12-step programs proclaim, “people, places, things” (Laudet, 2003). Research by Bruce Alexander (2010), now dubbed *Rat Park*, supports this theory, but argues that it is the entire cause of addiction. Similarly, when people live in an environment or community that reinforces the attachment to a separate self-identity, narcissism becomes conditioned. Non-dual communities could provide a way beyond this conditioning.

Large Non-Dual Communities

Non-dual communities can be small groups or large gatherings. Communities use different mediums to provide invitations towards present-moment awareness like music, dance, yoga, meditation, books, videos, etc. Currently, there are many case examples of different types of non-dual communities in North America: The Center of Non-Dual Awareness, Open Gate Sangha, The Science and Non-Duality Conference, The Society of Souls, Nonduality.com, and countless groups that meet all over the globe (“Gatherings”, n.d.).

For example, Neti Neti Media “is a conscious conglomerate of filmmakers, scientists, philosophers and explorers committed to expand the potential of humanity” (Science and Nonduality, 2016a, p. 1). Their mission is to “create media and public gatherings to inspire, connect, and facilitate the emergence of a new spiritual paradigm which is based on the timeless wisdom traditions of the world, informed by science, and grounded in direct experience” (p. 1). Taking place each year in San Jose, California, they founded the Science and Non-Duality conference, which “aims at fostering a new relationship to spirituality, free from religious dogma, based on timeless wisdom traditions, informed by cutting-edge science, and grounded in direct experience” (Science and Nonduality, 2016b, p. 1). The conference is a “celebration of the core truth of existence – that in our distinct and individualistic arisings and turnings, we are truly not limited, bound, or separate” (p. 12).

Another example is Open Gate Sangha, which was founded by the spiritual teacher Adyashanti in 1996 (“Open Gate Sangha”, n.d.). *Sangha* is a term used in several Sanskrit-derived languages of India to refer to a spiritual assembly or community. The organization runs by a small staff, as well as many volunteers. It also produces audio, visual and written material for publication. A few times a year, the organization also holds retreats, including a six-day silent meditation retreat.

Small Groups and Leaders

Small groups can provide a more direct learning experience of present-moment awareness through processing issues and coming to insights as to how we block present awareness (Tzu personal communication, 2016). Attachments to a separate self-identity is continually recognized as an intra-psychic defense where interpersonal blocks are worked through, psychological

wounds are reintegrated, illusions of the ego are challenged, and spontaneous vulnerability is steadfast (Cortright, 1997; Tzu, personal communication, 2016). From here, members can begin to understand their fundamental connection to others through vulnerable, present-moment experiences (Tzu, 2014b). Without the block of a separate self-identity, members can recognize that taking care of each other is spontaneous and open, sharing through this moment that we can bring into the network of family, friends, enemies, and relationships in our careers and institutions. Being present becomes ordinary, and something we can naturally share with the world.

The small group aids this process as narcissistic patterns are discussed with fellow group members and a facilitator. The authors support the notion of communities that are lead, not by conventional authoritative figures, but by facilitators who approach leadership from a “non-expert” stance. This leadership is related to the approach of collaborative therapy in that therapeutic change happens through dialogue and present-centered experience (Sutherland, 2007). Facilitators provide the group with stable, non-judgmental, yet authentic mirroring.

General Discussion

There are numerous hermeneutic and phenomenological case studies on the therapeutic value of non-dual psychology and transpersonal psychology (Almaas, 2008; Washburn, 1994; Wilber, 2000; Tzu & Bannerman, 2016; Tzu, Bannerman, & McCallum, 2015). There is also a significant research base for Mindfulness Based Interventions or MBIs (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2016; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). However, while:

the practice of mindfulness itself is very much linked to directly abiding in non-dual, non-conceptual awareness...there is a tendency in the West to use meditation and mindfulness as merely a ‘technique’...mindfulness is so much

more than an approach to relaxation or emotional wellbeing. It can include those things, but its most profound value is in its ability to awaken us to...the true nature of ourselves (Gill, Waltz, Suhrbier, & Robert, Meta-Theme: Non-duality section, 2015).

This “true nature” is the experience of the present moment without attachment to thought forms. The community helps create an understanding of non-duality on a visceral, experiential level, through “...the unfolding, illumination, and transformation of the [person’s] subjective world” (Cortright, 1997, p. 107). This is a process that is strengthened through the influence of a community.

Research Implications

The authors recommend further research into the diversity of non-dual communities. To compare and contrast these communities would produce beneficial insight into how they apply to no-self awareness. Furthermore, what about these applications create a more direct (or indirect) understanding of one’s non-dual nature? How do they correspond to treatment of addictions, and issues in mental health? A more specified study into existing communities could produce further understanding of how to best cultivate non-dual awareness on the societal level.

Conclusion

Through non-dual psychology, the authors’ put forward the notion of addiction to a “self” separate and isolated from others which gives rise to discrimination, destruction and suffering (Dockett, Dudley-Grant, & Bankart, 2004; Monroe, 2008). From this perspective, it is not enough to merely “believe” we are all fundamentally connected, but to existentially experience it viscerally, radically, in moment-to-moment awareness. This points to the significance of non-dual communities, where the negative impacts and patterns of self-attachment are recognized,

and this awareness is strengthened and maintained. As shown through several case studies, individuals within these communities “become key actors in bringing about social change...[where] transformed societies or social groups enable and nurture more conscious, sensitive and empowered individuals” (Kapoor, 2007, p. 16). Communities are either reinforced by an addiction to our thoughts, or reinforced by the fundamental interconnectedness of the present moment.

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