

The Narrative Self as Shopping Cart

Mindfulness

 Metaphor

 5 min.

 Client

 No

What is the self? According to a constructivist approach on the self, people construct both a sense of who they think they are and of the “reality” within which they live. Or, to use Hayes (1999) words: “We humans do not merely live in the world, we live in the world as we interpret it, construct it, view it, or understand it.” (p.181).

According to the constructivist approach, the self can best be referred to as a mental construction. The self is the “me story.” It is a narrative people construct to define individuality for themselves and others. In short, the self is who I believe I am. It is an image that I create about myself. We will refer to the constructed self as the “narrative self” in this tool.

The narrative self-entails an important component of third wave therapies like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. The reason why the narrative self is addressed in these therapies is because it can become highly problematic. When people are unable to see through the constructed nature of the self-story, and thus fully believe the stories they have created about themselves, these stories can strongly influence thinking and behavior. The person who believes his self-story of “being a loser” to be true, may show a great amount of helplessness and take little initiative. Likewise, the narcissistic person who believes his self-story about superior intelligence to be true, may show little respect for people that are perceived as less intelligent. By cultivating mindfulness, third wave therapies aim to create an observing stance towards these self-stories, thereby reducing their negative impact on cognition and behavior. Consequently, people may learn that there is a difference between a story about the self, and the self that observes this story. That is, when the stories of the “Me” can be mindfully observed, then one is clearly not that Me.



Author

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Goal

For many, the concept of “a narrative self” is often difficult to understand. Attempts to explain it often result in a lot of resistance and confusion. This tool offers a relatively simply way to explain the process of identification that we take on as a part of the narrative self by using a shopping cart as a metaphor.



Perspectives and Insights

- This metaphor can also be used to clarify the distinct selves that are used in both ACT-based interventions and Mindfulness-Based Interventions. In both, we look at the narrative self which can be typically referred to as “self as content” or “self as concept”. The observing self, the self-awareness of self, is represented by the person pushing the shopping cart is called “self as context” or “self as story”.

- For a scientific exploration of the narrative self, it is highly recommended to read the book *Transcending self-interest: Psychological explorations of the quiet ego* (Wayment & Bauer, 2008).
- To deepen the understanding of self as a metaphor, reflect on the following questions:
 - What are possible things the I may have put in my “shopping cart”?
 - What are possible things other people in my life have put in my shopping cart?
 - Am I jealous of other people? If so, what am I jealous of? It is possible that my jealousy is connected to something in my shopping cart?
 - When I compare myself to others, what is the thing (attribute or personal characteristic) that I am mostly comparing myself to? Could it be that this is something that is part of my shopping cart?
 - What am I most afraid of losing in my life? It is possible that my fear is connected to something in my shopping cart?
 - What is my biggest takeaway from completing this exercise?”

Suggested Readings



Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (1999). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change*. Guilford Press.

Wayment, H. A., & Bauer, J. J. (2008). *Transcending self-interest: Psychological explorations of the quiet ego*. American Psychological Association.

Tool Description

Instructions

The main process that is responsible for the construction of a narrative self is identification. The word identification is derived from Latin. “Idem” means “the same” and “facere” means “make”. When we identify with something, we make it the same as “me”. In other words, as soon as we identify with something (I AM THAT), it becomes an inseparable part of us. For example, suppose you identify with your job. In that case, a part of your self-image is based on your job and it is believed to provide crucial information about who you are. Identification is a product of the mind (thinking). There are many things we can identify with and derive a sense of self from, ranging from abstract thoughts to concrete possessions.

Table 1. Some examples of typical objects of identification.

Beliefs	I know a lot, I am not somebody to mess with, I am not good at convincing people.
Rules	I should not show my weakness to others, I should help other people, I should always be on time.
Possessions	I am rich (I have a big house), I am fashionable (I wear designer clothes) etc.
Performance	I am successful (I perform well).
Job	I am a writer, I am a doctor, I am a social worker.
Opinion	I am right. My view on reality is the only right one.
Group memberships	I am a Chicago Bull's Fan.
Appearance	I am beautiful/ugly

The above-mentioned examples are just a small selection of things with which we can identify. Obviously, the range of things one identifies with differs greatly among people. Consequently, the nature of the narrative self is very personal. For one person, the content is mainly determined by one's status: “I am a psychologist” or one's role: “I am a victim.” For another person, the content of the narrative self is characterized by identification with possessions or with his body. Yet for another person the narrative self is mainly a social or societal role: the hard working one, the profiteer, the social person, etc.

The process of identification can be compared to putting things in a shopping cart: a shopping cart that we believe represents us (see fig 1).

Fig. 1 Identification can be compared to putting things in a shopping cart that we believe represents us



Imagine a person who derives his sense of self from his expensive car. This person thus identifies him/herself with his/her car. He/she believes that the car provides information about who he/she is. In terms of the shopping cart metaphor, this person puts the car into his/her shopping cart (see fig 2).

Fig. 2 Deriving a sense of identity from our car can be compared to putting the car in “our” shopping cart



Everything that is put in the shopping cart thus represents the content of the self-image that people create. While the person in this example put an expensive car in his shopping cart, another person may put his academic achievements or his appearance in his car.

Mistaking the content of the shopping cart for our true self has serious consequences. Imagine the person who identifies with his expensive car meets another person with a less expensive car. Perhaps this encounter will cause the person to experience feelings of superiority. After all, the content of his shopping cart is “better” than the content of the other person’s cart. For this person, this downward comparison confirms that he is better, more successful or worthy than the other person. Now imagine this person encounters another “shopping cart,” this time with a more expensive car than his own. Because the car entails an important aspect of his self-image (and thus his self-worth), this encounter may result in all kinds of negative thoughts and feelings. The confrontation with the more expensive car of the other person is experienced as a direct threat to one’s self. Indirectly, it means that the other person is better, more successful or worthy than he is. Consequently, feelings of jealousy or a reduction in self-esteem may occur. In turn, this may trigger all kinds of behavioral responses to deal with this threat, like devaluing other characteristics of the other person to boost one’s own self-image or starting to work harder to “beat” the other person and buy an even more expensive car.

Perhaps the biggest threat that emerges from mistaking our self with the content of our shopping cart involves the possibility that we may lose the content of our shopping cart. For the person in the earlier mentioned example, the mere thought of not being able to afford the expensive car anymore creates an intense feeling of fear, because it would mean that an important aspect of his self is being removed. Likewise, for a person who identifies with his job title, getting fired would mean losing a part of the self, and thus a reduction in self-worth. Perhaps the greatest fear emerges if we consider death: death means completely emptying our shopping cart. Everything that we believe we are will disappear. What a horrible thought!

One possible consequence of this realization can be an attempt to empty the content of the shopping cart. The person who identifies with his expensive car may strive to detach from this car and remove the car from his cart. Paradoxically, although emptying the cart may look like a solution, it is in fact the very same process as putting things in the cart. The person who becomes focused on emptying his cart can easily become identified with the “emptiness” his cart: “Look at me, I don’t need my expensive car anymore, I am using my bike to go to my work.” “My neighbor is not this far yet, he is still showing off his expensive car.” This process is very familiar under people who

seek “spiritual enlightenment.” The image of “me, the enlightened one” becomes very attractive and becomes the main content of the shopping cart. Without knowing it, a new self is created that operates in the exact same way as the former self that one seeks to avoid.

People put all kinds of things in their shopping carts. Both positive things (e.g., their salary, title, appearance and achievements) and negative things (e.g. a lack of education, failures, illness, and ugly body parts). Strange as it may sound, when the content of the shopping cart is highly negative (a victim identity), one may try to protect this image in the same way a positive image is trying to be maintained. For instance, a person whose sleeping problems have become an important part of his identity (“I am a disordered sleeping patient”), may react rather defensively when other people claim to have even more severe sleeping problems. This person may try to convince the other person that his problems are more severe, simply because the problems of the other person threaten his victim identity.

The idea is not to try to empty the shopping cart (after all, why should one not enjoy driving an expensive car?), but to become aware of the process of identification: the process of mistaking the content of the cart as the self. By becoming aware of this, one can realize that he is not the content of his shopping cart, but instead he is the person who is pushing the cart (see fig 3).

Fig. 3 Awareness of identification means that we realize that we are not the content of the shopping cart, but the one who is pushing the cart



In other words, we are not the stories we tell ourselves and others about us, but the awareness that is able to observe these stories. When we connect to this observing self, other people become less threatening. Our true identity is no longer mistaken by the content of our cart because we see through this created story about ourselves. Life becomes “lighter”, because we experience that we are more than the content of our cart, more than material possession, status, appearance and success. We become able to connect to a deeper sense of self that is beyond stories.