

“Not Self”

by Steve Andreas

When people speak of a “negative self-concept,” what they usually mean is that someone has a self-concept that is negatively valued. An example would be if someone said, “I’m clumsy,” since people seldom value clumsiness. However, even if the person doesn’t value being clumsy, “clumsy” is a name for a set of behaviors that can be represented positively, without any negation. That is, I can make images of what it means to be clumsy—pictures of myself stumbling, or spilling things, breaking things, etc.

In this seminar I want to explore a very different kind of negative self-concept, in which the representation of self-concept is negated. Fairly often you hear some people say, “I’m not the kind of person who—” or “I’m not—” rather than “I am—” If you say to yourself, “I’m not cruel,” that usually elicits a very different set of representations than if you say to yourself, “I’m kind.” I can imagine some readers saying, “Well, ‘not cruel’ means the same thing as ‘kind’.” But while those two phrases might mean the same thing, the experiences underlying them are usually very different, and the consequences of using one instead of the other can be profound and far-reaching.

“Not self” (negatively valued)

I want you to think of something that you’re not, some quality that you don’t like. I like to use kindness and cruelty as an example, because I would like there to be more kindness in the world, but you can use any other quality or attribute if you prefer. If you say to yourself, “I’m not cruel,” how do you know this? How do you represent this internally? Take a few minutes to experience what it is like for

you to define a quality in yourself by what you are not. It may help to contrast your experience of the same quality defined positively and negatively. What is the difference between your experience of “I’m not cruel” compared with “I’m kind”? In a previous *Anchor Point* article, (“Building Self-concept” July, 2001), I pointed out the difference between what I call a summary representation that serves as a “quick reference” for a quality of self-concept, and the more extensive database of examples that provide a foundation of evidence for that quality. What is your database like for “not cruel,” and what impact do you think this database will have on your behavior? . . .

Now I’d like to gather several examples of how you experience a negatively-defined, and negatively-valued, quality. Because of the difficulty of talking about negations, it is helpful to use a little bit of content. To preserve your privacy, I suggest that whatever disliked quality you chose to experience, we talk about it using the word “cruel,” as a kind of code word for it.

Fred: I see the name “cruel” much more boldly and clearly than the name “kind.” The database of cruel is what you would expect—lots of examples of people being mean, and enjoying someone else’s suffering. I don’t like seeing all those images, and I want to push them away from me.

Rene: I see images of other people being cruel, but I stay dissociated. I usually step into my images, because even if I don’t want to actually do something, I want to have a sense of what it would be like. So I begin to step in, and then a voice says “No,” and I back away from it.

Lois: I do much the same as Rene, but when I step in, I feel scared, and then I think, "Well, if I'm not that, what am I?"

Al: I see indistinct, almost stick figure images, of someone being cruel, and then I have a feeling of recoiling, and curling up, wanting to defend myself.

Steve: Great. Those are all pretty similar, although each of you have noticed somewhat different aspects of the experience. Words are clumsy things, and often people find creative ways to understand them. Did any of you do something different?

Ann: I made images of a number of times when I could have been cruel, but wasn't.

Bill: I sort of flipped the words in my mind, and made images of all the things that don't fit the definition of being cruel—which is a lot of different things! My mind got pretty crowded with all that stuff.

Steve: Yes, a lot of people think in digital "either/or" categories, completely ignoring the fact that there are a lot of things or events in the world that are neither kind nor cruel—the carpet on this floor, for instance. You each did something a little different, but you both saw counterexamples to being cruel. You did something that is different from what most people do, and in this case it's a very good choice, for reasons that will become clear as we explore this further. However, right now

I want you to make images of being cruel, and then negate them in some way, in order to have an experience of what that is like.

Next I want you all to take this to the extreme. What would your life be like if not just one of your qualities, but all your qualities were defined as negations? Take a minute or two to experience what it is like for you to imagine that whenever you think of yourself, it is always in terms of what you're not. All your qualities are experienced in this way. What is that like? . . .

Alice: I'm very aware of seeing all these things around me that I don't like, and I'm pulling back from all of it. All my attention is directed to all this unpleasant stuff around me.

Steve: Yes, it's definitely an experience of going away from unpleasantness, with no possibility to go toward anything. With no positive options to go toward, you naturally feel very limited and stuck. Most people who come for therapy do much the same, at least with a problem situation. They are so focused on what they don't want, that they don't have much attention left for what they do want.

Sam: It's very dark; I feel very alone and scared, separate and powerless, hemmed in by all these things that I don't like.

Lois: I can't see any distinctions. I have this sense of emptiness in my belly and chest, of not

knowing who I am, only who I'm not.

Steve: Yes, by focusing on the negation, there is no way to think about what you are, and there are no positive criteria for making distinctions. You can even take this negation a step further and say, "I'm not the kind of person who—" The phrase "kind of person" describes a category of people, which dissociates the person even further from the negated behavior. Someone could also say, "I'm not dishonest." Since "dishonest" is already a negation, they are negating a negation! There may be some interesting and useful consequences of these variations, but the main point is that the person is defining themselves by negation, and that gives them nothing positive to identify with.

This happened in the US on a national scale during the cold war. Our government became so focused on anti-communism, that we allied ourselves with many very corrupt, tyrannical, and undemocratic governments as long as they were "anti-communist." We didn't notice what they were, because we were only interested in what they were not, and we had only one negative defining criterion for that. The kinds of images that we make in regard to ourselves will tend to generate the behavior that is in the images, exactly like a future-pace. What kinds of behaviors would likely be generated by these images and your responses to them?

Alice: I have a tendency to feel like doing what is in all those images, and then I pull back from doing it. I feel as if I am all those awful things, but at the same time I wouldn't want to think that.

Rich: I feel an awful emptiness inside, since I don't know who I am, and I'm preoccupied with what others think of me, as a way of having some sense of who I am.

Steve: Another way of describing this is that a "not self" representation acts in much the same way as a negative command. Remember negative commands? "Don't think of purple bunnies. Especially not dancing. And certainly not turning somersaults." Anything stated in the negative makes us think of exactly what we don't want to think of. Thinking of yourself as "not cruel" results in your thinking of being cruel. A very simple example of this is those "no right turn" signs—a bent arrow with the superimposed red circle with a slash across it. First your mind makes a representation of what a right turn is, which prepares you to do it, and then you have to negate it and do something else.

Since the unconscious doesn't respond to negation, it will identify with what is negated, while the conscious mind will identify with the opposite, creating an inherent conflict between the conscious and unconscious aspects of self-concept.

Consciously someone could feel good about thinking of themselves

as "not cruel," while unconsciously they will identify with being cruel. That disparity alone will have a lot of consequences. One of them is that when the unconscious side is expressed, the person's conscious mind will ignore it, and if someone else comments on it, this will be completely puzzling and incomprehensible to them, and they are likely to interpret the comment as malicious and unfounded.

Fred: I'd tend to notice cruelty, and all these other things everywhere. I'd see it all around me, and probably miss all the positive stuff. I'd also feel superior to all

those people around me who are doing these bad things.

Steve: Yes, there is an implicit comparison between myself and others. Other people do these terrible things, and I don't, so I can feel superior to them. And that comparison and superiority will also result in my feeling very separate from them, different and alone. If you lived your whole life like this, what would a psychiatrist call it?

Fred: "Paranoid" is the word that comes to my mind. Imagining and noticing bad things all around you, being scared and

vigilant, ideas of self-importance and superiority, feeling alone and threatened, and fighting back.

Steve: Yes, exactly. Paranoia is the extreme of a process that nearly everyone does to some extent, and that was described over a hundred years ago as “projection.” I “project” my unpleasant thoughts into the world, and see them all around me, rather than in myself. But although projection was described in some detail long ago, no one has ever proposed a mechanism for how it actually works, or how to change it. It was always just, “This is what happens, and everyone does at least a little of it, and paranoids do a lot of it, and this is how to recognize it.” Paranoids are usually understood as being very angry people who repress it, so it has to be expressed in retaliation against their persecutors, but I am not at all sure this is true. I think it may be simply the result of self-definition represented as negation, and paranoia is the natural consequence.

When I was in high school, living in a very small community on a ranch, I knew a truly sweet and gentle man, from a Quaker background, who cared a lot for other people. He repaired cars, but then found it very difficult to sell them. When someone would come and be interested in a car, he would ask them what they would use the car for. Then he’d usually tell them, “You don’t want this car,” and then tell them what kind of car would serve them better. Even after fifty years, I can see his

face clearly, and hear his voice. When talking about himself, he nearly always said, “I’m not the kind of person who—” When I last saw him about fifteen years ago, he had gone all the way to full-blown paranoia—he knew that the FBI, the CIA, and the Mafia were all out after him. Paranoia is a really cruel dead end, and I think it traps a lot of very sweet and gentle people.

Here’s another example, not quite so extreme, though headed in the same direction. Recently I was driving four 9th graders on a field trip. Two of them were in the “cool” group, and talked almost non-stop on the one-hour trip. Much of their talk was reenactment of some bits of TV programs and movies, some was about the field trip and other current events. I gradually realized that what was common to all their comments was their attitude of scorn, derision, and disgust. Their whole conversation revolved around what they weren’t, and their laughter expressed their superiority to the objects of their scorn. In short, they considered themselves “cool” because they scorned nearly everything. There was nothing in their statements about what they were, only about what they weren’t. That has got to result in their feeling empty inside, and being with the “cool” group is a refuge that provides at least a little bit of identity and connection with others.

Discovering the process underlying projection was a completely

unexpected result of modeling how our self-concept functions. Knowing how this process works points the way toward how to change it. Projection begins with these negative images of what I’m not, and the rest is our natural response to these negated images. Now that you have an understanding of this process, you will be sensitized to it and start noticing it in what other people say and do. Assuming that negated images cause projection, how would you go about changing it, so that someone would project less?

Sally: Well, this sounds too easy, but couldn’t you just ask someone to make positive images of what they have been negating? “OK, you’re not cruel; what are you?” That would get them to make positive images of being kind or whatever the positive quality is.

Steve: Exactly. When you change a negated representation to a positive example, you are only changing the representation, not the meaning, so that makes it very easy to do.

“Tell me one of the ways in which you are not cruel.”

“I don’t torture cats.”

“OK, great. What do you do with cats?”

“I pet them and feed them.”

“Great, put an image of feeding and petting them in the place of the image of not torturing them.”

The self-concept is a feed-forward system that is oriented toward future outcomes, so all the positive criteria for what has been called a "well-formed outcome" apply. "What exactly do you want? Where, when, and with whom do you want it?" etc. You first change the "quick reference" summary label for the database from "not cruel" to "kind," and then have them go through their entire database and change each of the representations to positive ones of kindness. That may seem a bit tedious, but it actually goes very quickly, especially if you group similar examples. And usually the person's unconscious

mind gets the idea pretty fast and does the rest on its own.

Of course this process is a lot more difficult if someone has progressed all the way to full-blown paranoia, because you are part of his threatening surroundings, so he can't trust you. So if you suggest changing negated representations to positive representations, he will likely think that is part of the plot against him, and he'll refuse to do it.

Dan: What if you told them in great detail what not to do? "Don't change any of your images of what you're not into images of

what you are?" It seems to me that if you are not trusted, and you tell him not to do something, that could be taken as a good indication that he ought to do it.

Steve: That could work, but I think you might have to build in some rationale for doing it that paced his belief system—perhaps something, just casually mentioned in passing, about the great danger in making negative images, because they tend to blind you to what is really going on around you, and of course that makes you vulnerable to people who want to harm you.

Another way to go about it is to pace the mistrust by saying, "Don't trust me." That paradoxically makes you at least somewhat trustworthy, because you are agreeing with their belief system. "I want you to carefully scrutinize everything I say and do, to be sure that there is nothing harmful in it." That simply paces what s/he is going to do anyway, while presupposing that "There is nothing harmful in it." Then you could go on to say something like, "Even if I'm acting with the best of intentions, I might do something to harm you inadvertently."

That sentence may seem like a pretty innocuous pace, but it introduces two very important and closely-related presupposed distinctions: One is the difference between intention and behavior, and the other is the difference between intention and accident. A paranoid takes perceived harm as proof of bad intentions, so thinking about the possibility of harm resulting from good intentions, or accidental harm completely separate from any intention, introduces two different possible counterexamples to his belief system in one sentence.

Just as very few people understand the consequences of negative commands, most people have no idea how important it is to have positive representations of their qualities (even if they don't like them) rather than negations. They don't realize how a self-concept that is defined negatively can get them into serious trouble. There are plenty of

people who can benefit from learning how to think of themselves without negations, simply by changing their negated representations into positive ones, and this is a change that is very easy to accomplish, once you know what to do.

"Not self" (positively valued)

We have been exploring the experience of not being something that you don't value. Now let's explore the other possibility, thinking of yourself as not being something that you do value. Again think of something that you are not, but this time make it something that you value. "I'm not tenacious," "I'm not graceful," "I'm not patient," or any other quality that you value. Take a couple of minutes to explore how you represent this, and what that experience is like...

Amy: I see a lot of pictures of what it would be like for me to have that quality, and I can sort of step into them to feel what it would be like, but the feeling is only partial, and I know I'm not there yet.

Steve: "Not there yet." So this is a quality that you hope or expect to have in the future. What is your response to those pictures, and the feeling that you get from them?

Amy: It draws me toward them, it's motivating. I think about it a lot.

Steve: It sounds like you might have future-paced examples of this quality, but you don't have present or past examples of it.

Amy: Yes, I think that's how I know I don't have it yet.

Sam: I thought about a quality that I have, but I want to have more strongly, so I know I don't have that additional strength yet. Like Amy, I feel drawn forward, and I like it.

Steve: Yes, examples of something that you expect to have in the future are pretty direct and useful; they set a goal that is positively motivating. Each of us did a great deal of this while we were growing up and developing our skills and abilities. However, thinking of a quality that you don't have and don't expect to have in the future is quite different. Does anyone have an example of that?

Sue: Yes, I see others with the quality that I don't have. I feel vulnerable because I don't have it. I'm envious of them, and I feel different and inferior in relation to them.

Steve: Now I want to ask you all to do what Sue did, and to take this process to the extreme. Imagine that all your focus was on valued qualities that you are not, and that you expect that you will never have them. Take a couple of minutes to experience what that is like...

Alice: I feel like a Martian. I don't like that everyone else has all these wonderful qualities, and I don't. I feel really inferior to everyone else, and I don't like them for being so different from me.

Dan: I feel an emptiness inside, because again all I notice is what I'm not, and I don't have any sense of who I am. I also feel a lot of distance, and the word "unfair" comes to mind.

Steve: Yes, thinking of yourself as not having a quality usually involves thinking of others as having it, so again there is an implicit comparison and noticing the differences between yourself and others. One of my criteria for an effective self-concept is that it not have comparisons, but only contain positive representations of your own qualities. Another criterion is that a useful self-concept would join people and not separate them into up/down, superior/inferior, etc.

When we compare ourselves with others, we usually think of only one quality at a time; we usually don't think of all the other differences

between us. When we compare ourselves with others, we can always find others who are better or worse than we are, depending on what we choose to compare. This comparing makes our self-concept dependent on others, rather than being something that we have internally, independent of others. Comparing with others also draws our attention away from the qualities that we value in ourselves, and is likely to result in judgement of our shortcomings, bad feelings, and other unuseful consequences.

Steve: Sue and Dan, what is it like if you think of having that quality someday?

Dan: I feel a lovely release, like energy and attention flowing outward toward what I now think I could become.

Sue: It never occurred to me that I could have it.

Steve: Well, it is occurring to you now. Play the "As if" game.

What would it be like if you think about expecting that you could have that quality someday?

Sue: If I think about having that quality someday, it's a bit unreal to me, but I start wondering how it would feel to have it, and how that could happen, so I feel better about not having it. I'm more interested in how those other people have it, instead of feeling bad because I don't have it.

Steve: Our expectation of the future makes a huge difference in how we respond to an experience of not having a quality. If you expect to have a quality in the future, it can provide a wonderful experience of being motivated to develop the quality. Seeing someone else who expresses a valued quality can be a rich resource for finding out how much is possible for you, and for finding out how you can also have it.

However, if you don't expect to have something in the future, it results in dissatisfaction, envy of others, feeling inferior, etc. So if

someone is thinking about a valuable quality that they don't expect to have in the future, and you work with them to change this negative expectation, that can make a huge difference to them. They can go from envy, inferiority, and unhappiness to eager motivation.

"What experiences and beliefs underlie your expectation of not having the quality in the future? What is your evidence for this belief, and what evidence is there for the opposite belief that you can hope to achieve this quality at some time in the future? When did you experience even a small degree of the quality, perhaps in an unusual situation, or perhaps long ago, or in a dream?"

Fred: But at a certain stage of life, some things may no longer be possible for a person, especially when there are physical limitations.

Steve: Well, all of us always have physical limitations. Remember that we are dealing with personal qualities. A quality affects what we do, but it primarily affects the ways in which we do something. Even if there are major limitations in what we can do, we always have some range of choice in how we do what we can do. A quality like physical grace can be expressed in pole-vaulting or with offering someone else a slice of toast, and that is true of most qualities.

Negated representations of valued qualities can be very useful

and valuable motivators, as long as we think it is possible to develop that quality at some future time. But if we really don't think that we can achieve something, it is better to simply focus our attention on all the valued qualities that we do have, and to admire and take pleasure in the unique and exceptional qualities that others have, dispensing with any comparisons and negated representations.

This article is adapted from a chapter of the forthcoming book, *Recreating Yourself: becoming who you want to be*, scheduled for spring, 2002 (Real People Press)



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