

## Self-Analysis: The Story of a Girl

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"You can do anything you set your mind to," he said as he tucked his little girl into bed that night. With stars in her eyes and dreams in her heart, she believed him and dreamed of one day conquering the world. The next day, the little girl went to the fair with her parents, and as she was being pushed in a wheelchair through the crowds of anxious parents, sticky children, and bright-eyed onlookers, they passed a funhouse. "Oh, daddy, can I go in and play in the funhouse and climb the net to the top?" she asked eagerly, watching the other kids wrestling to the top of the tower.

"No," he answered sternly. "You know you can't do that."

"Yes, I can," she protested.

This little girl had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy when she was one year old, and even though in her father's mind she could do anything she set her mind to, there were limits to her "power and control."

According to Anderson, Carter, and Lowe (1999) in the book *Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, "Since power is an energy function, it is finite; energy expended to influence the behavior of others may deplete the system's power potential" (p. 120). People represent a system within the suprasystem of society. We are molded and shaped by the culture, feedback, and boundaries we experience in our family lives.

The family in this example is a piece of a whole, also known as a subsystem within society, which is an example of a suprasystem. The father represented the little girl's authority, and she did not question it. She would pout and fight back the tears that started in the pit of her stomach, swearing that one day she would prove him wrong. Anderson et al. (1999) said, "In social systems thinking, feedback is the means by which systems accomplish adaptation and self-direction" (p. 37). Her father's feedback helped give the girl goals and expectations for her life.

"The family system is centrally important in defining social expectations and in providing resources necessary for growth, in every phase of the person's life cycle" (p. 186).

While the little girl's family's thoughts and opinions were important to how she viewed the world, she was also greatly influenced by her "society." According to Anderson et al. (1999), society can be defined as "a group of people who have learned to live and work together" (p. 44). When the girl was not at the fair, she walked on two canes, but no matter where she went, children would stop and stare at her. She would walk by children and their parents and hear the children demand at the top of their lungs, "What is wrong with the girl that walks funny?" The mothers would blush and whisper, "She needs them to help her walk." When she was small, this bothered her. "Why do they stare at me?" she would inquire of her mother. "Because you are different and special, and other kids just don't understand what is different from them. They don't mean to hurt your feelings," came the gentle reply. Her mother's comment gave her strength and encouraged her not to see things as the world saw them. After all, she could conquer the world. Anderson et al. said, "A person's growth and development is a pattern of expansion, a movement outward" (p. 198). She came to understand that people judged her based on her appearance.

For the girl, these interactions had been a kind of crisis in her life. A crisis "contains elements of both 'danger' and 'opportunity.' Crisis is not necessarily a negative state of affairs but rather an unavoidable occasion that requires some sort of coping" (Anderson et al., 1999, p. 204).

These interactions allowed the girl to see through a "looking-glass self" and see how others saw her. She did not like what she saw. She had always heard never to judge a book by its cover. "Isn't that what these kids were doing?" she thought. "Judging me based on what they see?" It was right then and there in the midst of encounters with others that she decided to prove them wrong. Appearances were not what made the person; it was the inside that counted.

"You can do it," she said with fire in her eyes. "Never give up." Her therapist was yelling encouragement down to the other end of the hall where the girl felt as if she was shaking like a leaf. As the little girl took her first steps across the cold hallway floor, her heart seemed to stop. This was the first time in her life she had ever taken steps unassisted. The hallway was long and intimidating. She took a deep breath as she inched one foot after another across the floor. The little girl was crossing a boundary—although she didn't know it at the time, she was changing her future.

A boundary is located "where the intensity of energy interchange is greater on one side of a certain point than it is on the other, or greater among certain units than among others" (Anderson et al., 1999, p. 28). This girl's boundary was located in between her walking unassisted and being in a wheelchair or on crutches. When she took her first steps in the "walking world," she had crossed a boundary. "Boundaries can be identified only by observation of the interaction of the parts of the system and the environment" (p. 29). It did not matter if her father or anyone else observed her crossing the boundary. What mattered was that she realized the importance of that moment in her life. She had proven to herself that she could overcome anything she set her mind to.

According to Anderson et al. (1999), the girl had experienced a morphogenesis or a structure-changing event, because she no longer saw herself as someone dependent on others. Instead, she saw she had just as much "power" to be independent as everyone else had.

"So what is wrong with you?" the girl with red hair and glasses asked as they were having gym class alone. The other students in the class were playing a sports game that she could not play, so the teacher had allowed her to take one friend in a room full of giant blue mats to "work out" instead. "I have cerebral palsy," she replied with some hesitation, because she feared what this strange girl would say next. "So will

you have to walk with canes for the rest of your life?" she shot back as she walked across a big blue mat that had been rolled up in the middle of the floor. The girl gulped. "No, I won't. My doctor said that if I exercise really hard and practice a lot, I could eventually walk without using canes." She said this in a quiet voice while looking at the floor. "Let's get started today then," the girl with glasses said as she started to pull the other girl to her feet.

"Autonomy is achieved and maintained by feedback cycles that are continually initiated by the system" (Anderson et al., 1999, p. 32). While this girl had crossed the earlier boundary of walking, that in no way means to imply she felt she had arrived. While the red haired girl's comments may have made the little girl uncomfortable because of the direct nature in which they were presented, "Mead stated that we do not respond to the acts of others; rather, we act on our interpretation of their intentions and judgments" (p. 61).

The girl who walked with canes had interpreted the other girl's comments as a gesture of friendship and helpfulness, and because of this, chose to believe again not only in herself, but also in her dreams for her future. In the illustration of this relationship, it was not the "walking" that mattered. It was the building of character. It helped to prove to the little girl that she could not be a "lone ranger." She had to be willing to depend on others for emotional and physical support. This friendship is an example of the formation of a growth group. Growth groups tend to use support, openness, and the powers of acceptance and validation to function.

Change is needed for growth to occur, and growth has to occur to stay at a steady state or a constantly changing state.

"You can't do that, and even if you could, how are you going to pay for it?" he asked in a demanding tone. She looked him straight in the eye and said, "Yes, I can. Just watch me. I am not sure how I am going to pay for it, but God will make a way for me, because this is what he has told me to do." The girl had learned through her experiences with herself and others that she could capture her dreams. True, she was scared and nervous, but she knew in her heart that she was capable of success in graduate school. She was going to prove her father wrong and climb this rope.

"The major means of control is energy applied to, or withheld from a member" (Anderson et al., 1999, p. 160). In this conversation between father and daughter, the balance of control has been changed. The small girl is now old enough to make up her own mind and have power in her life. She is no longer dominated by what her family thinks or feels she should do. So the means of control have been withheld from her father.

Anderson et al. (1999) said, "In fact, human systems tend to seek situations that are stressful as a means to achieve synthesis and wholeness" (p. 26). The girl wanted to challenge herself while her father wanted things to go the way he "thought" they should go and be very predictable in how he saw things. Maybe in his own way, he was trying to challenge his daughter to achieve her full potential, but only he knows for sure.

In this small girl's life, she has experienced many different types of feedback and power. She has also been a part of many different kinds of growth groups and others that have challenged how she sees the world. In fact, this journey will never end, because each day is a new day in that journey and a new challenge to face. Sometimes to overcome the "world," one has to overcome herself and her inner conflicts.

To be self-sufficient or independent, systems have to be continually challenged to go further to achieve a better understanding of self-development. Anderson et al. (1999) stated that "self development or development of the self connotes that a major ongoing task of the system is the establishment of its identity, its steady state, its character, and the traits that are characteristic of the system" (p. 33).

I see the "world" quite differently from when I was five, but I realize that as long as I stay open to change and know nothing is impossible, then I will conquer my world. Clients we work with as social workers also have this power--power to conquer their "world" if only they are equipped with the tools they need to see it--the tools of hope, encouragement, love, and patience. These tools cannot be instilled in individuals overnight. They have to be planted, watered, and given time to grow. With each tool we work to plant in others, we in turn build a stronger foundation within ourselves to better equip ourselves and those we work with. "The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order" (Anderson et al., 1999, p. 24).

#### Reference

Anderson, E. R., Carter, I., and Lowe, G. (1999). *Human behavior in the social environment* (5th ed.). Hawthorne, NY: Walter de Gruyter, Inc.

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