

## **The inner critic's influence over our lives**

### **- Letting go of destructive thought processes**

“I could never do it!” or “Why would she fall in love with me?” The critical inner voice, or anti-self, influences our thought processes and prevents us from enjoying deeper loving relationships, creative expressions and professional achievements. According to psychologist Robert Firestone's theory of “the fantasy bond,” destructive thoughts fulfill the function of maintaining fantasies of fusion with idealized parental images. The theory is presented here by psychologist Tor Wennerberg.

When do we live a full life, in harmony with our own deepest motivations, and what tends to stop us from doing that? The psychodynamic tradition stresses the central importance of emotions for our mental well being, and how various types of defenses that inhibit, distort or blunt our emotional experiencing can result in mental suffering. Cognitive therapy, for its part, has drawn attention to maladaptive cognitive processes in the form of negative and painful automatic thoughts and core beliefs, as a source of loss of life adjustment. The self-critical inner dialogue that these thoughts produce constitutes the direct opposite of the key construct of self-compassion, compassion for one's own self, which has been shown to be strongly related to mental health by researchers and clinicians such as Kristin Neff (2011) and Paul Gilbert (2009).

A theoretical model that seeks to explain how these different phenomena – defenses against feelings and negative thoughts about the self – may be related is psychologist Robert Firestone's theory of the fantasy bond. According to Firestone's theory, self-critical or self-attacking thoughts fulfill the function of maintaining fantasies of fusion with idealized parental figures. With his therapeutic method, called voice therapy, he has made the “inner critic” – the inner voice that criticizes or condemns us when we do something that the voice believes to be wrong – the focal point for therapeutic intervention.

Firestone's description of the neurotic process integrates psychodynamic, cognitive, and existential psychological perspectives in a fruitful way. The reader can find similarities with other theoretical perspectives and directions, such as psychodynamic interpretations of superego difficulties and sufferings, cognitive therapy's emphasis on reality testing of negative cognitions, or mindfulness inspired concepts such as cognitive defusion. This article presents the main features of Firestone's theory, which in its description of the fantasy bond contributes to deepening our understanding of why we humans often hold on to, or find it difficult to let go of, negative self-images.

Perhaps the most basic fact that characterizes human psychology is that we are born as nomadic primates, with a 40,000-year-old brain that “expects” a life on the African savannah, filled with predators and other imminent dangers. The sole ticket to survival for a primate young is to stay in close contact with someone who is stronger and wiser than the child himself, as John Bowlby stressed. There is no alternative refuge. As attachment theorist Erik Hesse put it at a seminar in Gothenburg a few years ago: if a child loses contact with his attachment figures and gets lost in what was mankind's environment of evolutionary adaptedness, the nomadic life on the African

savannah: “He's toast within an hour.”

This is the level of hazard that we all, instinctively, react to when during childhood we seek to maintain proximity to protective caregivers. Predators took children who did not, at the slightest sign of danger, hastily seek out a protective caregiver. This basic drama – an ever-present threat from predators and other dangers, and the proximity of protective adults as the only survival tool – was played out from generation to generation for millions of years throughout our distant primate evolutionary past, crafting, in our ancestors, an extremely strong proximity-promoting motivational system, the attachment system.

Another important factor in human psychology is our advanced imaginative capabilities, our capacity for cognitive perspective-taking and mentalizing, which generates an understanding of our own and others' inner psychological states. This deepened interpersonal cognition, itself a result of the human neocortical expansion, enables us to look at ourselves from the outside, as objects; we are in a position to think about and relate to ourselves as we perceive that someone else has related to us, and we can incorporate in ourselves the emotional attitude that others have had toward us. The price we pay for this advanced cognitive and emotional capacity is that our psychological development, during childhood, takes place largely from the outside in, as we internalize other people's ways of looking at and emotionally relating to us.

When these two basic conditions of human existence – the fatal, terrifying meaning of separations and our gradually acquired ability to view our own self from the outside, as an object – are combined, we have what could be described as a recipe for neurotic development. Add to this the fact that the brain has a built-in, evolutionarily inherited negativity bias, that makes us experience negative emotions stronger than positive emotions and that causes painful, unpleasant memories to become more strongly imprinted in us than positively charged memories. The result, as psychoanalyst Paul Wachtel (2008) notes, is that “virtually none of us escape completely unscathed from the prolonged dependence that is the state of childhood for our species” (p. 218).

Taken together these features of human psychology entail that children, in situations when they experience emotional abandonment that they are unable to redress by protesting, have a strong incentive to defend against unbearable emotional states by resorting to what Firestone describes as humans' “primary defense” against emotional pain, the fantasy bond. To protect him or herself from painful relational experiences – of abandonment, rejection, or lack of mentalizing understanding, something that all children experience but in widely varying degrees – the child creates a pain-alleviating fantasy of fusion with the parent, who also becomes an object of idealization. The need for, and the strength of, this fantasy bond is proportional to the degree of emotional abandonment the child experiences in primary relationships. To create this imagined closeness, the child must simultaneously incorporate into him or herself the parent's negative, critical or even hostile attitudes, and direct them against the self. “In effect, children simultaneously develop a feeling of being the strong, good parent and the weak, bad child,” as Firestone and his coauthors (2003, p. 46) put it.

At the most basic level, the fantasy bond is formed when the child – when he or she experiences rejection, abandonment or hostility on the part of the parent, whom the child is also dependent

upon for his or her physical and emotional survival – is forced to let go of or weaken his or her identification with him or herself, his or her *own* emotional reality, and instead identifies with the parent's dismissive or hostile attitude. The introjection of the parent's dismissive attitude creates an alien element in the personality, the "anti-self" as Firestone calls it, that rejects and counteracts the actual development of the self.

With the help of the fantasy bond, the child tries to compensate for deficiencies in the caregiving environment, and uses imaginative processes to create an illusion of being emotionally self-sufficient. This inward, fantasy-based self-care comes, however, at the expense of realistic gratification: it is based on a loss of feeling for the self, and identification with the anti-self.

This primary defense, the fantasy bond, is maintained and preserved in its turn by a secondary defense, which Firestone terms *the voice*. The concept of the voice captures the destructive thought processes by which the individual criticizes, rejects and condemns himself, thus maintaining his or her identification with the rejecting parent. To be able to alleviate his or her loneliness through the use of imaginative processes, the child *must* create an idealized inner image of the parent, and direct the blame for any deficiencies in the parent's caregiving on him or herself; if not, the feelings of loneliness become overwhelming and the fantasy defense cannot work. The introjected, idealized image of the parent (i.e., the fantasy bond), thus takes on the function of a psychological survival mechanism. The price the individual pays for this security-creating fantasy is that it is inextricably linked with negative self-images. The self-critical or self-attacking thoughts serve to uphold the negative self-image, and in this way they also maintain the primary defense, fantasy bond. This is why the negative self-image may, paradoxically, be experienced as reassuring and stabilizing – on a deeper, unconscious level. It needs to be understood in context, as related to the imagined proximity to an idealized parental figure.

The defensive process is cemented, as Firestone and his colleagues (2013) point out, when the child, from about four years of age, becomes aware of the basic existential fact of mortality, first his or her parents' mortality and subsequently his or her own. The realization that we will once be separated from everything we have ever loved, that nothing is permanent, hits the child with implacable force. This sudden realization, in itself an expression of our cognitive maturation, stirs up anew the early abandonment feelings and separation anxiety, which in turn reinforces the fantasy defense.

The fantasy bond results in a defensive retreat from life, across the life cycle. To the extent that we are governed by the destructive thought processes that maintain the fantasy bond, we tend to reduce our commitment, our emotional investment in life, and to give up goal-directed action in favor of an inward lifestyle characterized by fantasy-based gratification. This means also that any experience that interferes with the imaginative processes of the fantasy bond will threaten our psychological equilibrium, the internal balance that we have managed to establish between the self and the anti-self. Priority will unconsciously be given to trying to preserve the identity, the core self-image, that was associated with the original experience of being attached and safe from danger. Experiences that implicitly imply a more positive evaluation of the self, such as deeper loving intimacy, creative expressions, or professional successes, threaten the individual's inner experience of fantasized closeness and sense of security because they contradict the negative

self-image that is an integral part of the fantasy bond. Such experiences can therefore result in self-sabotaging behaviors and trigger intense voice attacks, which restore the symbolic proximity to rejecting parental introjects.

This tends, as Firestone and his coauthors emphasize in the book *Fear of Intimacy* (1999), to cause particular difficulties in romantic relationships: “The average person is unaware that he or she is living out a negative destiny according to his or her past programming, preserving his or her familiar identity, and, in the process, pushing love away. On an unconscious level, many people sense that if they did not push love away, the whole world, as they have experienced it, would be shattered and they would not know who they were” (p. 3). To be regarded with more love and warmth than we feel for ourselves can stir up pain and anxiety, and both parties in a relationship tend, as a result of destructive thought processes, to recreate their early relationship experiences with the partner and reduce intimacy to a level that they recognize and that is therefore bearable. Deeper intimacy is experienced, on an unconscious level, as dangerous and threatening, in that it contradicts and disrupts the image of the self that maintains the fantasy bond.

The destructive thought processes, the critical inner voice or anti-self, thus take on the characteristics of an inner shackle or barrier, which prevents us from seeking the realization of realistic goals. As Firestone points out, we all have within us more or less of these negative thought processes, depending on our early learning experiences combined with constitutional factors. They exist along a continuum, from milder self-critical thoughts in people who mainly have experiences of secure attachment relationships and therefore are more identified with their self, to stronger self-attacks and self-destructive thought processes in people who have more of insecure or traumatic experiences, and therefore a stronger defensive identification with the anti-self.

The destructive thought processes that Firestone describes can be understood as a cognitive overlay, an internal-dialogue superstructure on an insecure internal working model of attachment. In other words, the self-critical or self-attacking thoughts create and maintain an internalized insecure attachment relationship, such that the individual relates to him or herself in the same way as an abandoning or rejecting caregiver. The self-attacking thoughts thus constitute a cognitive elaboration of deeper emotional experiences, imprinted in implicit memory systems early in life. Firestone’s assumption that we all find ourselves somewhere along a spectrum of negative thought processes directed toward the self accords well with research findings on attachment patterns in adulthood. Even though people tend to have *one* dominant attachment patterns as adults, either secure or insecure, most of us tend to have access to both secure and insecure internal working models, but in varying proportions (Mikulincer & Shaver 2007). In other words: as a rule we tend to have both security and insecurity within us, based on implicit memories of relationship experiences which were characterized either by trust and emotional openness (secure working models) or by mistrust and defenses against feelings (insecure working models). These different internal working models, secure and insecure, correspond to Firestone's description of the conflict and balance between the self system and anti-self system.

The therapeutic process in Firestone's voice therapy focuses on helping clients to strengthen their autonomy by freeing themselves from the fantasy bond and challenging the destructive thought

processes. It occurs in five stages, as described by Lisa Firestone (2012):

(1) The first step consists of increasing one's awareness of self-critical or self-attacking thoughts, which often operate wholly or partly on a unconscious level, and of externalizing them by reformulating them in second person statements ("You are completely worthless and nobody likes you!"). In this first step it is also essential to release and process the emotions that are evoked as the client begins to separate his or her own self from the anti-self (voice attacks), emotions that the fantasy bond has kept in a deactivated, split off state.

(2) The second step consists of deepening the understanding of the origin of the voice attacks, which are often derived from relational interactions in the family of origin – in particular, strongly negative emotional situations which, partly as a result of the brain's innate negativity bias, tend to become most strongly encoded in implicit and explicit memory systems. In this phase, the client is helped to discover that these are *other people's* voices or attitudes, which have been incorporated into the self-image as part of the fantasy bond.

(3) The third step involves the client responding to the voice of the attacks from his or her *own* point of view, from a perspective characterized by rationality. This realistic stance contradicts the internalized negative self-image, and taking this self-asserting stance is more difficult and challenging the more the person has been identified with the anti-self.

(4) The fourth step is raising the awareness of the connection between voice attacks and various forms of self-limiting or self-destructive behaviors that adversely affect the client's life.

(5) And the fifth step, finally, has to do with changing these behaviors, to start acting in ways that go against and challenge the anti-self.

It is important to remember, however – as Lisa Firestone (2012) emphasizes – that such steps towards greater autonomy and individuation strengthen the self, but they also go against defenses against emotional pain that were established early in life, and they therefore often produce an increased sense of vulnerability and risk. That is why it may initially "feel wrong" to look at and treat yourself with more compassion and acceptance.

While the child's psychological development largely takes place from the outside in, adults' continued psychological development needs – to a much larger extent – to take place from the inside out. This lifelong process of differentiation, the gradual development, in the adult, of a strong self capable of deeper intimacy with others, is – from the perspective of Firestone's theory – predominantly a matter of becoming aware of and emancipating oneself from the destructive thought processes that maintain the fantasy bond. "These self-attacks and hostile attitudes toward other people are part of a self-destructive process that exists to varying degrees in each person," Firestone and colleagues (2003) observe. "By exposing negative thoughts and their antecedents, people can disrupt the idealization of the family and alter their self-image in a positive direction" (p. 76).

Psychological change, in this perspective, involves a gradual letting go of the identification with the anti-self and the destructive thought processes, coupled with the facing of the anxiety this

inevitably entails. An equally important element is the continuous process of identifying and coming to know *one's own* needs, feelings, desires and values, as distinct and separate from the priorities of the critical inner voice. An important first step in any such emancipation process consists of the self-compassionate realization and awareness that these destructive thought patterns exist, and of the paradoxically reassuring and originally self-protective function they have had, having once been experienced as critical for the child's emotional survival.

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