

# **My Dissertation: A Journey Towards Self-Awareness and Beyond**

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**Abstract:** This narrative portrays my personal struggles towards meeting my “self.” It is a story of resistance, fear, openness, acceptance, experiencing personal and professional growth, and witnessing the unexpected results of this journey.

**Keywords:** self-awareness, resistance, self-observation, mindfulness

Self-awareness is not a new concept and has close ties to spirituality and religiosity. Almost all systematic religions and spiritual traditions encourage individuals to increase their knowledge and awareness of “self.” However, in this article, I aim to focus only on the psychology perspective. The concept of self in this article refers to human consciousness. Self-awareness is a professional skill that includes observing and reflecting on personal feelings, thoughts, and biases (Hamilton, 1951). According to self-awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972), the self can operate as a subject or an object. When one’s “self” pays attention to external stimuli, the “self” plays the role of subjective self; when the direction of attention is towards inward and internal stimuli, the “self” plays the role of objective self (De Silva, 2004; Whiteside & Barclay, 2016). Subjective self is known as public self-consciousness and objective self as private self-consciousness (Harrington & Loffredo, 2010; Minsun, Min Ju, & Sang Hee, 2008; Scheier & Carver, 1985) or true self (Schlegel, Hirsch, & Smith, 2013). Duval and Wicklund (1972) indicated that objective and subjective selves are “mutually exclusive.” However, Silvia and Duval (2001) elaborated May’s (1967) views on self-awareness and the human capacity of experiencing both objective and subjective selves simultaneously. Research on self-awareness is generally outdated (Richards, Campenni, & Muse-Burke, 2010) and contemporary researchers have changed their focus from self-awareness to mindfulness. Though there are numerous definitions for mindfulness, the observation of one’s feelings, thoughts, and behaviors is a commonality in all. The concept of mindfulness is taken from Buddhist tradition and has recently been integrated into cognitive behavioral therapy (Tirch, Silberstein, & Kolts, 2016). Harrington and Loffredo (2010) and Richards, et al. (2010) introduced mindfulness as a prerequisite and a path to self-awareness.

This is the story of my personal journey of self-awareness: the exploration of inward data while I was working on my dissertation collecting outward data. It is also an appreciation of doubt as the first step to discovery and commencement as a way to overcome fear and inadequacy. I divided this personal journey into three stages. In the first stage, I explore my dissertation subject, which triggered my inner self to practice mindfulness. The second stage is an elaboration on my struggles to practice mindfulness. The third stage is about the process of reaching self-awareness as a result of a continuous and habitual practice of mindfulness.

## **Permission to Explore Self**

As a middle-aged woman, I finished my PhD courses in the field of social work, passed the qualifying exam, and was ready to start writing my dissertation. I aimed to explore, discover, and develop insights to better connect with and understand people from different cultures. I was deeply aware that understanding others is the most difficult and significant step towards any interventions or treatments, so I decided to focus on cultural competency and explore cultural competency in relation to self-awareness. At first, it started like any other dissertation; I searched for articles and started to write the literature review. One day as I was immersed in writing, my eyes came upon the word “self-awareness.” For the first time, I asked myself: “What is my relationship with this topic?” My immediate response was: “It is just a dissertation topic. Do not overcomplicate it.” Suddenly, I became resistant. I did not want to think about self-awareness. My inner opposition was akin to a three-year-old child’s tantrum. I pondered why I reacted that way for a while, decided to let it go, and continued to write the literature review. However, from then on, I was not my usual self; I felt disconnected from my “self.” I might have had a feeling of fear, fear of questioning the “self,” fear of confrontation with the “self,” and most likely, a fear of the unknown consequences of the confrontation. I could not escape these fears. It is said that if you see the light, you cannot keep living in darkness. Deep inside, I knew I had to be open and explore my inner self.

I, as a Middle Eastern woman, grew up in the tussle of revolution and war. It was 1980; politically, all government institutions had changed. It was an end to thousands of years of monarchy and a beginning of an unknown republic government. Before people had a chance to become oriented with the new situation, a few months after the revolution, a long-term, destructive war began. The economy became unstable, the inflation rate rose, people struggled, and the society’s nationalist values were replaced with religious values. People were divided in many groups with different ideologies, but the main division was between religious and non-religious groups. As a pre-teen, I was confused with this sudden division and the chaotic situation. I was in the process of adjusting to the reality of post-revolution. Later as a teenager, I faced the bitter reality of male dominancy in society and started to explore my social and historical identity, re-visited and re-lived the long history of national and international oppression, and learned that male dominancy in society had been a byproduct of (this) historical oppression. I started to reject male supremacy and whatever norms enforced oppression by speaking up and defending women’s equality and rights whenever I had a chance. Perhaps my identity formed based on protecting my “self” and focusing on environmental forces more than inner forces.

When I immigrated to the US many years later, I noticed first the huge cultural differences. Gradually, as a woman, I started to see more cultural similarities in terms of oppression and realized that I had to fight against oppression all over again, this time against implicit male dominancy and both explicit and implicit parts of the mainstream culture: discrimination, prejudice, and racism. I was like an exhausted soldier returning from a desperate battle, who did not have time to take off her boots and put her bare feet on the ground before heading into another fight. As a lifelong survivor and fighter against social injustice, I did not have time to look inward. My attention was preoccupied with my harsh environment and finding creative

ways to develop resiliency as a means to survive. Although, in my early adulthood, as a professional practitioner, I learned to reflect on my relationships with my clients, my use of reflection was compartmentalized; it did not embrace my personal life.

While I was working on my dissertation and taking notes on self-awareness, I concentrated on the two dimensions of self-awareness and the process itself, in which the “objective self” evaluates the “subjective self.” I read about self-awareness over and over again and the concepts continued to catch my attention. Probably, subconsciously, I knew I was not deeply in touch with my “self,” and part of me pretended that as a professional, undoubtedly, I knew the functions of the subjective and objective selves. I continued to write; self-observation leads to self-reflection and increases self-awareness (Axelrod, 2012). I was eager to better understand or perhaps experience the concepts of self-observation/mindfulness, self-reflection, and self-awareness firsthand. But what was the root of my resistance and fear? Why was confronting my own “self” so scary?

While I was dealing with my dilemma, I still had my busy and ordinary life as a PhD candidate and a part time therapist. I designed the research method for my dissertation and selected my participants. I received University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, arranged an interview room, and acquired a phone and a recorder. I was ready to start but found I could not. I put everything aside for a while and tried to determine how I could regain my inner peace. I finally concluded that I could not move forward with my dissertation unless I was willing to explore my “self.” At that point, I had to cooperate with the “self” for the sake of the research.

### **Struggling with Self-Observation and Evaluation**

I accepted the challenge to, at least, try to observe my “self” as an object and practice mindfulness as a path to self-awareness (Harrington & Loffredo, 2010; Richards et al., 2010). After I made the decision to practice mindfulness, I was no longer at war with my “self.” But I was not at peace either. I have never forgotten my first day of self-observation. It was an early morning on a sunny day in May. I was excited and anxious at the same time; I was not sure how to practice and did not know what to expect. I started my daily life with morning exercise, making breakfast, preparing the children for school, and leaving the house. However, in all those moments, my inner self was watching and monitoring whatever I felt, thought, and did—as if a camera with a strong zoom lens was filming all the details—not only my behaviors, but my feelings and thoughts. I was able to see that the chilly morning weather was pleasant. Interacting with my children was also pleasant. But hurrying up to get ready was frustrating. That morning, I was aware that a cluster of thoughts passed through my mind. Some of them were directly related to preparing to leave the house and some were about my near and far past and the rest were my plans and dreams. When I was thinking, “Today I am going to meet the dissertation chair and discuss my progress,” I felt more energized and used more positive and lively words in the kitchen table conversation. This observation was awakening but also draining. I felt so uncomfortable that I could not continue the observation after some minutes. The observation did not seem to be a normal effort. I was exhausted. I felt that I used too much energy during those minutes.

The ability of seeing the “self” objectively was frightening, more so than looking at my potentially unpleasant behaviors. I felt helpless and surprised that my true self had been a stranger to me for so long and wondered if all these years, I had lived without realizing this capacity, without seeing this inner light. It was an “aha” moment, but in a different way. My previous experiences of “aha” moments were in relation to the external world, like when I solved a difficult problem or understood someone thoroughly.

The second day, I observed my “self” for a few more minutes than before. At the end of the first week, I was able to observe the “self” for hours, and at the end of the month, I did not count the hours of observation; I just tried to practice mindfulness every day. At the end of the third month, observing the “self” became second nature. I became used to the presence of the “objective self.” It was with me all the time and not just for some minutes or hours. I liked and enjoyed having it and its presence required little or no effort. It was not a guest but the host. I felt that I was conscious almost all the time. I experienced having a clear and organized mind. I was still surprised but satisfied at developing this ability.

Living in the present moment was a new experience; I felt that I was moving into a deeper level of consciousness, and it scared me. During these times, whenever I started to evaluate my “self” after observing a behavior, I became overwhelmed and stopped the observation. For example, when the “objective self” observed engaging in a behavior that was inconsistent with my value system, the realization was painful. I was in the clinic’s monthly meeting and witnessed that the clinical director minimized and even, somehow, devalued a therapist’s appropriate and ethical way of approaching an angry client. I, in the role of “subjective self,” just looked at the director in surprise but did not support the therapist who was treated unfairly by the supervisor. Observing this behavior was accompanied by immediate analyzation and criticism by the “objective self.” At this point, the “subjective self” preferred not to be observed by showing distress and anxiety. The “objective self” intervened prematurely when the “subjective self” was not accustomed to and ready for its presence. In that level of my self-development, the objective and subjective selves had been acquaintances, but not friends. I learned from the experience that before the habituation of self-observation, reflection and self-evaluation can cause confusion and put an end to the process of self-observation. Therefore, the first step of self-awareness is self-observation and mindfulness.

Gradually, the process became easier because I grew accustomed to myself as an observer in the same way that one becomes accustomed to having someone in one’s physical presence. Also, I was just a simple observer; observing was not as threatening as analyzing a behavior. The observation occurred simultaneously with the action that was being observed without judgment, analysis, or worry. Slowly, I became used to fully perceiving the present moment experience and became accustomed to observing my “self” objectively. At this point, I became ready to utilize objective self, to self-reflect and self-analyze. Self-analyzing was no longer threatening. It was bearable and tolerable when the “objective self” imposed criticism and compassionate when the “objective self” incorporated praise on me. Self-reflection, or evaluating my feelings and thoughts, was a gradual process as well. The acceptance of present experiences was a gateway to analyzing my feelings and thoughts. It helped with letting my inner guard down. Protecting the “self” became unnecessary and irrelevant.

## **Attaining Fulfilment and Inner Peace**

Becoming aware of the role of subjective and objective self requires a conscious willingness to do so. Self-reflection cannot occur without awareness of these two different roles of the self, but as long as one becomes habitual in using this capability of the “self,” I learned that self-reflection is inevitable.

In my case, especially at the beginning, self-reflection was not easy. It was a lot easier to be ignorant and to just live, act, and assume “I always act based on my personal values, I certainly have full control of my thoughts and feelings, and I completely understand my feelings.” But instead I reflected on my behaviors by asking myself whether each behavior was consistent with my values. What are the evidences? What do I think about the behavior? How do I feel about that? Am I satisfied? Irritated? Frightened? What internal factors triggered and led to my behavior? What external factors were involved? Is there any way I can improve this behavior? How did others perceive my behavior? And so on. Sometimes, I started to analyze the feelings first, other times the thoughts or behaviors; but I knew, somehow, I should eventually address all three angles of the triangle of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. For instance, I did not attend a required meeting in the clinic I worked at. This behavior was consistent with my personal values but inconsistent with my professional values. On a personal level, I did not want to waste my precious time. On a professional level, I had a responsibility to exchange and share knowledge and insights with other colleagues. I felt nervous and vulnerable to some degree and I thought the meeting would have been a waste of time and boring. But, I did not want to be recognized as an irresponsible colleague, either. The internal trigger was my tiredness with the daily work, and the external was my frustration with having an authoritative and inflexible supervisor. I could have improved this behavior by attending a future meeting and redirecting it into a meaningful, beneficial, and flexible discussion. Whenever I felt emotionally overwhelmed in paying attention to my feelings, thoughts, and behaviors fully and analyzing them, I stopped the process. However, I felt compelled to return to those thoughts/feelings again.

It was astonishing to me how I was able to see my “self” from both roles of the subjective and objective self. When I activated the objective self by self-observation and accepted the objective “self” as a mirror of my value system, I felt free and enlightened. It did not mean that I stopped having behaviors inconsistent with my personal values completely. It means my “subjective self” was more aware of value-based behaviors, and my “objective self” played its role of evaluation more often and was not a stranger. They were comfortable with one another, which made self-reflection smoother.

Each self-reflection drove me towards an organized, peaceful, and enlightened state of mind and as a consequence, all fears washed away and were replaced with acceptance and openness. It appears that self-reflection increased my self-awareness and self-awareness in turn increased my self-reflection (Furman, Coyne, & Negi, 2008). Without noticing at the time, I was experiencing the cycle of self-reflection and self-awareness. I felt that I was getting closer to my true self. Living with self-awareness does not mean that I can change all my undesirable feelings, thoughts, and behaviors easily. It means that I am aware of my limited knowledge but infinite capacity. It means that I do not try to pretend to be knowledgeable and wise when I am not. It

means moving towards becoming a real person. It is a spiritual journey in terms of increasing self-consciousness.

I was a wanderer in my own self-awareness journey when I started to interview the participants in my dissertation study. I was eager to listen to them and understand their experiences and inner worlds. When I interviewed my participants, 35 university professors across the United States, I embraced their experiences of self-reflection and understood them intuitively because they resonated with my own journey towards self-awareness. During the process of the interviews, the interviewees became emotionally engaged. Some of them cried and one participant said: “I am telling you a story that I have never told anybody before.” They lived their experiences, but it was hard for them to describe and explain their journeys to self-awareness. Each of these 35 participants had followed a specific path, but all were satisfied with the result of the process. They indicated that practicing self-awareness gradually became part of their way of life. Although the interview was designed to be 30–45 minutes long, some described their experiences so vividly and expansively that I just could not stop them at the end of the allotted time. I felt that I experienced those moments of understanding and enlightenment with them.

Interactions with my participants and listening to their stories has also enriched my knowledge and has driven me to do more self-reflection. During the two years of the dissertation process, I learned to proceed from self-observation to self-reflection and later self-awareness. When I was ready to defend my dissertation, I was able to “move freely from subject-self to object-self” (Feize, 2015). I was aware of my conscious self as an “I” and was able to observe my “self” as an objective or “me” easily.

### **Integrating the Three Stages**

I learned from my dissertation literature review that the stimulus to practice mindfulness could be external or internal: coming from outward events and circumstances or from one’s mental states (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). The process of obtaining self-awareness includes the acknowledgement of self-observation, the engagement of the “self” in the roles of subjective or objective and self-reflection. When one is exposed to an internal or external stimulation, s/he observes the stimuli and related feeling and behaviors. This is a process of observing the “self” objectively. After this stage, one becomes ready to evaluate his/her own behaviors and raise awareness of the “self.”

It seems that all individuals are exposed to circumstances that can prompt or stimulate the process of gaining self-awareness (Garcia & Soest, 2000; Lyke, 2009). Various factors determine the readiness and willingness of individuals to engage in the process that will result in raised self-awareness. Often the circumstances or stimuli that prompt a journey into self-awareness involve encounters with perspectives that are inconsistent with our current view of the “self” or the world. Frequent or intense encounters with this type of “otherness” may increase the likelihood that an individual will begin to observe and reflect seriously on the self. However, readiness to engage in the process that leads to self-awareness varies and is not easily predictable. In my case, I was ready to connect to my true self and the dissertation topic was an opportunity to direct me to the right track.

## **Practical Implications**

Currently as a social work educator, I encourage and guide my students to move towards self-awareness through assignments and class activities. I begin by exploring students' understanding of the concept. In lower level courses, I encourage and emphasize critical thinking strategies as a gateway to explore the "self." Students learn to analyze the outer world in order to get ready to analyze their inner world. In upper level courses, the goal of the assignments is to stimulate students' self-awareness. I make it clear to students that without connecting to their own inner worlds, they will not be able to connect to their clients' inner worlds. The final step is inviting students to observe their "self."

For example, at the beginning of the semester, I ask graduate students to choose one of their behaviors that they do not like and wish to change (target behavior). They are asked to observe the frequency and intensity of the target behavior and any attempts they make to change it. The students make charts to demonstrate their efforts during the semester. At the end of the semester, they are graded on the process, not the result. I am not interested in exploring their methods of changing their behaviors. My role is to stimulate self-observation; it is up to the students to decide whether or not to change the target behavior.

It is difficult for some students to understand what is meant by self-awareness, while others are eager to learn about it. However, students who are resistant at first are better equipped and more suitable candidates for exploring "self" than those who are indifferent. It is possible that the resistance is an indicator of fear but also of a latent interest in exploring and overcoming their fears. They most likely have some degree of self-consciousness and fear of the unknown and on the unconscious level would like to explore and overcome their fears.

In my practice as a mental health therapist, I try to stimulate my clients' self-awareness by asking them to observe particular behaviors. Resistance to exploring the "self" is common in this stage, and I employ my own resistance experiences to better understand my clients' disinclinations. If they decide to put the resistance aside and engage in the process of self-observation and mindfulness, they are likely to be able to move toward changing their lives.

For example, with clients who are in denial about their objectionable behaviors, I raise their awareness so they see the discrepancy between their assertions and actions. I simply show them that what they say is different from what they do. Clients might say, "I care about my health." I might then ask these clients to make a chart of each time they eat healthy food or exercise each week.

These clients might be resistant to this exercise, and I accept this and help them explore the roots of their resistance. Those who succeed in dealing with the resistance are more likely to increase their self-awareness and advance in the process of recovery.

## **Summary**

In this narrative, I reflected on my own dissertation and the way it affected my life and as a

result changed not only my own life, but also my students' and clients' lives. It is my journey of intertwining personal and professional worlds. This journey had a starting point but will continue as a life-long process, with no particular destination in sight.

I do not assert that self-awareness is a panacea and will solve every individual's problems. However, self-awareness is perhaps a catalyst and facilitates the process of change. It is empowering that everyone has the capacity and potential to go through the process of self-awareness, overcome associated fears, and manage and change their life.

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