

Drawbacks and Significance of Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory

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Abstract

In the present research paper, the researcher has first explained what the Lacanian Mirror Stage theory is about. Then, it is exposed what objections have been raised against Lacan's Mirror stage theory. Finally, the researcher has advocated how this theory is still significant. Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French Psychoanalyst and Psychiatrist. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage is actually the theory of the identity formation. In the 1930s, Lacan noticed during a mirror test that almost a six months old child just got tempted by its reflected image in the mirror. Later on, the psychiatrist observed that eighteen months old child could recognize the reflected image as his/her own image and he/she could also distinguish itself from the 'Other'. In this case, the 'Other' could be his/her mother, father, brother, sister, aunt, uncle or anybody from the society. This process of differentiation is called the self-distinction or self-realization. Gradually, Lacan also started to deliver his lectures based on the Mirror Stage theory along with the mirror tests to confirm the

identity formation in children. The primary paper on the Mirror Stage was presented at the 14th International Psychoanalytical Congress at Marienbad in 1936. Lacan also discussed the development of the 'I' and the 'Other' within a child, in his paper on 'Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis' that was delivered in Brussels in 1948. Lacan delivered another modified paper on Mirror Stage theory at International Psychoanalytical Association in Zurich in 1949. Lacan's Mirror Stage theory entitled, 'The Mirror Stage as the Formative of the 'I' Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' was published in the French publication, 'Ecritis' in 1966. It is observed that the Psychoanalyst continued to develop his theory of the Mirror Stage from 1936 to 1975 for the period of thirty nine years (Lacan 1977). But some critics such as Raudinesco and Mikkel Bosch Jacobsen found some limitations in the Lacanian Mirror Stage theory.

Drawbacks in Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory:-

The critic, Mikkel Bosch Jacobsen raises the first objection against Lacan's Mirror Stage theory. The critic advocates that the Lacanian Mirror Stage theory isn't the original theory because it is based on the ideas proposed by the previous theorists and sociologists such as Charles Darwin, James Baldwin and others. For instance, Charles Darwin wrote a paper entitled, 'A Biographical Sketch of an Infant' in 1877. In this paper, Mr. Darwin proved that his eight months old son, when he was called by name, turned towards his reflected image in the mirror. Additionally, Charles Darwin also made experiments on apes to confirm whether they turn towards their reflected images. But the results from the apes were dissimilar. The apes were not interested to see their reflected images for a long time. Moreover, they got frustrated if they had looked in the mirror for a long time. They often went back of the mirror to catch their images assuming that the images were the other species of their class. Secondly, James Mark Baldwin published a paper entitled, 'Imitation: A Chapter in the Natural History of Consciousness' in a journal called, 'Mind', in 1894. Like Darwin, J.M. Baldwin also observed that an infant recognized his care-giver as an object. The object could be regarded as the Other. It wasn't an integral part of the body of an infant. This was also the confirmation of the emergence of the 'Self' and the 'Other' or the 'I' and the 'Other'. Thirdly, the sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley also conducted a test called 'Looking Glass-Self' which was published

in his book entitled 'Human Nature and the Social Order' in 1902. The sociologist conducted the identity formation test on infants who were interested to see their face, figure and dress in the mirror. Mr. Cooley also proved that human beings were interested to listen about their manners, deeds, character and appearance from other people in society. That means there was a link between the 'I' and the mirror or 'Self' and the 'Other'. Notably, it would be seen later on in the justification by Lacan that mirror is not the actual-mirror but it could be anybody from the society. Fourthly, it is also noticed that Lacan's mirror stage theory is based on Roger Caillois's ideas contained in his paper entitled, 'Legendary Psychasthenia'. The theorist advocates when he placed an animal in front of a mirror, the animal started to imitate its image in the mirror. The theorist termed the animal as the 'I' and its image as the 'Other' because the sociologist confirmed a relation between the animal and its image. Lacan's views in the published paper, 'Ecritis' regarding Caillois's theory are controversial. On the one side, Lacan dismisses Caillois's theory saying that it a "ridiculous theory" because animal can undergo an imitation to assimilate the environment. But on the other hand, Lacan has used the concept of the relationship between the 'I' and the 'Other' developed by Roger Caillois. Further, it is observed that Lacan's initial Mirror Stage theory when a six months old infant gets tempted by its reflected image, is also based on Louis Bolk's idea of 'incomplete physical co-ordination' and that of 'anatomical incompleteness of pyramidal

system in kids'. Lacan didn't mention Bolk's name in any of his papers. But the psychiatrist has implemented the ideas of Bolk in his Mirror Stage theory. Actually, the 'incomplete physical co-ordination' in the early months in the infants underlines that infants can't recognize their reflected images in the mirror until they attain the age of 15-18 months. This is because of the lack of inner intellectual maturity that an infant can't recognize its image in the mirror and it can't distinguish itself from the others in society. Critically, it is seen that Lacan has used the ideas proposed by Louis Bolk but the psychoanalyst hasn't given any credit to Louis Bolk.

Furthermore, it is also traced that Lacan's Mirror Stage theory is based on the psychological ideas of William Preyer. Mr. Preyer in his 1882 paper, 'The Mind of the Child', observed the interest of an infant at the various stages of the development of his life. For example, the child didn't show any interest in the mirror in the eleventh week. The kid enjoyed seeing his image in the mirror in the seventeenth week. The infant started to catch his image in the 35th week. The child hit at his image in the 66th week and in the following week, the child frowned in front of the mirror. All these ceaseless experiments by William Preyer, indicate that there is a development of the 'Self' within the human beings in the early months. This embryonic maturity differentiates

the human beings from the 'Other'. The identical idea is conveyed by Lacan in his Mirror Stage theory.

A French academic historian and psychoanalyst, Elisabeth Roudinesco also objected while analyzing Jean-Michel's paper, 'The Mirror Stage: An Obliterated Archive' that the psychologist, Henri Wallon had already conducted a mirror test in 1931. In this test, a child was made to stand in front of the mirror and the child could distinguish itself from its reflected image in the mirror. Roudinesco's main objection was that Lacan didn't mention Henri's name neither in his 1938 article, '*Encyclopedie Francaise*' nor in his 1949 paper presented at the International Psychoanalytical Association in Zurich. Lacan mentioned Henri Wallon's name in his 1948 paper, 'Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis' but it was not in the context of Mirror Stage theory. The critic, Mikkel Borch Jacobsen writes in his work, '*Lacan: The Absolute Master*', "Lacan's description of the mirror stage is far from being truly original" (47). Jacobsen clarifies that Henri Wallon's ideas on identity formation, rely on the proposals by the previous sociologists such as Charles Darwin, James Mark Baldwin, Charles Horton Cooley, Roger Caillois, Louis Bolk and William Preyer. Therefore, it is discovered that Jacobsen gives credit to these theorists including Henri Wallon but Jacobsen doesn't

consider Lacan as the true originator of the Mirror Stage theory. Jacobsen also commented on Lacan saying that the later's non-acknowledgement of Wallon and the other above mentioned sociologists excepting James Baldwin, brought all the criticism to the Lacanian Mirror Stage theory. Lacan wanted to credit only himself when he declared under a passage entitled, 'On My Antecedents' in his book, *'Ecrits'* writing, "... If I presented the 'mirror stage' in 1936, when I had yet to be granted the customary title of analyst, at the first International Congress at which I had my first taste of an association that was to give me plenty of others, I was not lacking in merit for doing so" (67). Lacan repeatedly claims that he isn't lacked in intelligence and invention but the psychologist ignores the contribution by his predecessors (Borch-Jacobsen, 248-249).

Dependence of the Lacanian Mirror Stage Theory on the Gestalt Theory:

Lacan has given some references to the gestalt theory in his 1949 paper delivered in Zurich and confesses that the reflected image is the gestalt itself. This confession makes it clear that Lacan's Mirror Stage theory is indebted to the gestalt theory. Notably, "Gestalt" is a German word and it stands for "form" or "shape". Actually, gestalt is the total form of a body. It's the 'unified whole' which can't be further divided. The word was primarily introduced in psychology and philosophy in 1890 by

Christian Von Ehrenfels. The term was also used in the theories by David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Joann Wolfgang Von Goethe, Ernst Mach and David Hartley.

The psychologist, Barlow has called gestalt, the mental permanence of the 'I'. Gestalt is more constitutive than constituted. Actually, gestalt gives intellectual power to the 'I' to recognize its image in the mirror and to separate itself from the 'Other'. Lacan fails to explain what recognizes the reflected image as our own image if the ego is formed by the mirror. But the gestalt theory clarifies that this identification is because of the "automatic cognitive recognition". It means the gestalt within the human body creates the intellectual maturity in the body and thus it makes the 'Self' to recognize its image in the mirror and to distinguish itself from the 'Other' (Borch-Jacobsen, 1991).

The critic, Borch-Jacobsen also objects that Lacanian Mirror Stage theory is based on Sigmund Freud's theory of identification. Freud had also given theory of identity formation in 1922. Freud also states that Identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object. In this definition, the object is the 'Other' and the individual who seek the emotional tie with this object is called the 'I'. Thus, Freud's theory of identification also gives rise to the 'I' and 'Other' which is the main axial around which the Lacanian Mirror Stage theory revolves directly and indirectly.

Lacan also fails to respond when Borch-Jacobsen asks him inquiring, "Can the 'I' recognize its image before identification?" Borch-Jacobsen clarifies this dilemma referring to Freud's theory of identification

that the 'I' can't recognize its image before identification because first the 'Ego' is formed through the process of identification. So, once the 'Ego' or the 'Self' is formulated, then, the 'I' recognizes its image in the mirror. Lacan is also criticized by Borch-Jacobsen, for not explaining the difference between an infant's automatic assumption of gestalt and identification. The gestalt theory itself is the answer to above question because gestalt is the unifying whole body having intellectual power in itself that gives the thinking capacity to the 'I' to recognize its image in the mirror and to distinguish itself from the 'Other' (Borch-Jacobsen 1991).

The critic, Dany Nobus, in his article, 'Life and Death in the Glass – A New Look at the Mirror Stage', also criticizes Lacan's Mirror Stage theory saying that it not universal. Nobus quotes, "Lacan had stripped the mirror stage of its psychological dimensions" (119). For instance, Lacan's theory isn't applicable to the blind children. Nobus argues that a blind child never looks into a mirror but he/she is always aware of himself/herself and he/she can distinguish itself from society. Therefore, Lacan's Mirror Stage theory is visionary and confined. It can't be implemented even to all the human beings (Nobus 1998).

Significance of Lacan's Mirror Stage Theory:

Though there is much criticism of Lacan's Mirror Stage theory by the critics such as Elisabeth Roudinesco. Mikkel Borch Jacobsen, Dany Nobus and Raymond Tallis but it is still not outdated. The reasons for

the validity of the Lacanian theory, are that Lacan contributed thirty nine years of his life from 1936 to 1975 for the development of his identity formation theory. The psychologist continued to modify his theory whenever the objections were levied against Mirror Stage theory. Lacan defends himself adding that his predecessors such as Charles Darwin, James Mark Baldwin, Charles Horton Cooley, Roger Caillois, Louis Bolt, William Preyer and Henri Wallon have given just the basic ideas for the relationship between the 'Self' and the 'Other'. But Lacan further connects the 'I' with the concept of biological needs, demands and desires. Lacan advocates that a child in the early months, develops a biological connection with his/her mother. Whenever a baby feels hungry, he/she cries and searches for his/her mother. Thus, an infant fulfills his/her biological needs from his/her mother. It is often observed that the needs are real and they can be often satiated. Gradually, this biological need of a child, changes into the basic human need of food, cloth and shelter in the later years of life. Secondly, Lacan connects the 'Self' with the demands which are conscious. Man's demands could be for love and sex. They could be satiated or unsatisfied. But if the demands remain unfulfilled, they lead to frustration, violence and loneliness in life. A child also learns about the social laws, taboos, rituals and ethics. Therefore, demands give rise to language, consciousness, unconsciousness, self-realization, verbalization, insatiation and exasperation. Thirdly, the 'Self' is also associated with desires. They are mostly unfulfilled and can be equated with Freud's

the 'Id'. Like desire, the 'Id' also resides below the conscious mind. It's mostly imaginative and lustful. Both Lacan's concept desires and Freud's concept of the 'Id' remain insatiable. Thus, Lacan isn't confined to the concept of the 'Self' and the 'Other' but the psychologist associates this perception further with the concept of needs, demands and desires (Lacan 1977).

Secondly, Lacan clears all the objections by Elisabeth Roudinesco, Borch Jacobsen and Dany Nobus when he writes in 'Ecrits' that the mirror in his mirror stage test isn't the actual mirror but it could be any body from the society. The charges against Lacan were that the previous sociologists had already conducted the tests by putting infants and animals in front of the mirror to observe if there was any relationship between the 'I' and 'Other'. But Lacan removes the levied objections when he declares that his mirror could be anyone from society. For example, when a child goes outside from his/her residence, he/she faces other people. Automatically, the child develops a sense of the 'Self' and the 'Other'. The child recognizes who he/she is and he/she also distinguishes himself/herself from the other people in society (Lacan 1977).

Thirdly, if the critics assume that the mirror in the Lacanian theory is the real mirror, even then, there is a difference between Henri Wallon's Mirror Test and Lacan's Mirror Test. In Wallon's Mirror Test, a child distinguishes itself from its reflected image in the mirror. On the other hand, in Lacan's Mirror Test, an infant recognizes the reflected image as its own image and then,

the child distinguishes itself from the 'Other' (Lacan 1981).

Fourthly, the Lacan Mirror Stage theory is also used in the field of modern psychology, philosophy and anthropology to analyze the issues related with human behavior and mental functions. Therefore, the Lacanian Mirror Stage theory is still significant. Whenever, there is a question of identity formation, relationship between the 'Self' and the 'Other', the 'I' and the 'Other', the 'Ego' and the 'Other' and the 'Id' and the 'Ego', researchers return to Lacan and his psychoanalytical theory to resolve their issues.

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