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# How Far is your Shadow Cast?

## A Journey into the Unconscious Mind

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**H**ow far is your shadow cast? Many people like to believe that they know themselves very well. Quite often, despite this belief, it is not the case. In Jungian psychology, the 'shadow' forms part of the unconscious mind and represents those parts of the personality we find too difficult to uphold in our own view of ourselves. While these aspects of the self we deny could be any trait or emotion, commonly it is those behaviours that we perceive (accurately or inaccurately) are going to be frowned upon by others and not welcomed.

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After all, who likes to admit that at times they can be short or rude to others? Who finds it easy to say that they have it within them to be selfish at times? It is also worth pointing out that sometimes people also deny the existence of traits that are often well received such as kindness and compassion – it is not just the less 'well received' traits which are kept in the shadow.

It is important to identify the paradox within all of this. Many people make the mistake of believing that the identification of certain aspects of ourselves will give those traits free reign and control over how we behave. If I admit freely that I have a part of myself I am not comfortable with or that others might not like, won't that mean I give it more power? It actually works in reverse to this. The deeper in the shadow a particular part of me exists, the more likely I am to act out of it in a number of ways. I might vehemently criticise and

identify it in others without owning it for myself (in psychology speak this is known as 'projection'). Perhaps I may seek to express it by doing to another what I would actually like to do for myself or be supported to do (retroflexion). Lets use gender as a way of illustrating this.

The individual whose gender is kept in the shadow, that is to say, their need to express their gender is denied, is much more likely to be under the control of that unmet need.

An example might be the married biological male whose inner sense of gender is resoundingly that of a female, who keeps this in the shadow and thus out of awareness. Unable to acknowledge that she is female, this need is projected onto another person by seeking to control how her wife dresses, acts and behaves. Her gender seeks to express itself by getting another person to dress as she would if it was brought into the 'light' of self-awareness. Her shadow has an enormous amount of control over her behaviours and relationship without her being aware. It goes without saying the relational difficulties that might ensue from such a controlling pattern.

The counselling process involves supporting an individual to become aware of all their parts and the connection between them. By coming to acknowledge the traits and behaviours that were once denied we start to accept and know who we really are.

More importantly, we have more conscious choice as to whether we act out of them.

In the above example, the acceptance that "I am a woman" may well result in an expression of gender for herself rather than trying to get others to do it for her. She now has the option of expressing her true gender for herself since it has come into her awareness. It is also likely this will have benefits for her relationship as well.

So I challenge you, the reader, to ask yourself, "What parts of me are out of my awareness and form part of my shadow?" This may seem contradictory in the sense that how can I be aware of something which is supposedly out of my awareness? A good place to start is to think of those traits or emotions that we might either admire or loathe in others particularly strongly.

As an example, sometimes when I hear a statement during sessions along the lines of "Oh I admire that person so much because they are so courageous/strong/self-assured", what I am being told is that these are the traits in the shadows. The ensuing exploration can be both a challenging and rewarding experience for those willing to acknowledge those things that can be difficult to accept about ourselves. Perhaps more importantly, it affords someone the chance to be more self-aware and in turn have more choice with how they want to relate to others in the world. That people become more comfortable with who they are is another wonderful impact of this exploration.

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