

# A Psychoanalytic Lens: Unmasked Layers of the Self among Post-Graduate Psychology Students in Surviving the COVID-19 Lockdown

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## Abstract

The World Health Organisation (WHO) classified the Sars-Cov-2, also identified as COVID-19, as a pandemic on the 12<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 (Qiu et al., 2020), with South Africa recording its first case on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. The rapidly spreading virus led the South African government to implement one of the strictest, nationwide lockdowns globally, resulting in the closing down of all institutions of higher learning effective March 18<sup>th</sup> 2020. Thus, this qualitative study primarily aimed to explore whether post-graduate psychology students were in a state of a depleted or cohesive self, post the psychological isolation of COVID-19 risk-adjusted level 5 lockdown. Semi-structured interviews from a qualitative interpretive approach comprising N = 6 psychology post-graduate students, facilitated a rich understanding of their intra-psychic experiences of the self. Thematic analysis of data gathered from the interviews illuminated how students were forced into the self by the emotional isolation of hard lockdown, with the emergence of core psychic conflict often defended against, through external self-object experiences. The findings also suggest that lockdown stripped off this sample of psychology post-graduate students' defensive escape from the inner self through external self-object distractions. The external self was stripped to the core of the internal self by the isolation of hard lockdown, thereby uncovering the psychic function of roles and defenses amalgamated throughout modern cultural consciousness that dictate self-functioning. The study suggests modelling reflexivity skills in the integration of internal and external self-experience dynamics as part of a training model for continued personal and professional development for psychology students.

## Keywords

COVID-19, Hard Lockdown, Isolation, Fragmentation, Self-Object Experience,

## 1. Introduction

Over the first quarter of 2020, the world was under the grip of the novel Coronavirus pandemic, which was later named Coronavirus Disease-19 or COVID-19 (Qiu et al., 2020). Though COVID-19 broke out in the city of Wuhan in the Hubei province of China, its rapid transmissibility across the world, left tremendous economic, educational, psycho-social, and emotional devastation in its wake. The unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic saw countries worldwide implementing varying degrees of lockdowns in attempt to curb the number of infections and the possible rise in death tolls. In Africa, South Africa confirmed the highest number of infections (Johns Hopkins University, 2020). The rapid spread of the virus in South Africa resulted in the government implementing one of the strictest, nationwide lockdowns globally. In March of 2020, the lockdown with resultant social distancing measures prohibited anyone barring essential workers from leaving home except for purposes of purchasing essential supplies (Dlamini-Zuma, 2020). According to UNESCO's statistics dated 26 March, more than 165 countries had implemented nationwide closures of schools and universities and had moved courses to online platforms by end of March 2020 (Yong, 2020), with some universities in South Africa following behind about a month later.

UNESCO reported that 9.8 million African students' studies were disrupted due to higher education institutions shutting down in mid-March of 2020. The danger of the high probability of contracting the virus impelled universities to migrate to online platforms. Migrating to online teaching and learning was not that simple in a continent where only 24% of the population have access to the internet, with serious challenges exacerbated by poor infrastructure as far as power supply and connectivity are concerned. To remedy the afore mentioned challenges, Rwandan, South African, and Tunisian universities in partnership with internet providers and governments negotiated zero-rated access to specific educational and information websites. This saw several universities in South Africa, as well as private universities in Ghana providing internet bundles to students and staff who were in need. Going digital required a coordinated effort between universities, national service providers, government entities, the private sector, and ICT providers to minimise costs and maximise access to new learning tools and platforms (Tamrat & Teferra, 2020). The impact the pandemic had on Africa's nearly 2000 universities cannot be overstated. This study is in response to a pressing need to explore the intrapsychic adaptations to the pandemic lockdown on the self-experience of post-graduate psychology students. This was achieved through thematic analysis of their core psychic defenses against temporal loss of valued externalised self-object experiences in the perceived internal function and valued emotional stability, and thus a sense of self that they provided (Baker &

Baker, 1987).

In compliance with social distancing, whilst South Africa was forced into a lockdown of all strata of economic, political, educational, and social activity, psychologically post-graduate psychology students can be said to have been locked down into the core of themselves, eliciting emotional conflicts of the self (Masterson, 2013). Faced with existential anxiety regarding their academic projections, with the only shared fear-driven certainty being either contracting the Coronavirus and possibly losing one's life or loved ones to the virus. Questions arise such as how much of this fear stemmed from fear of losing the self-dying to the self or in the old self? Our curiosity was impelled by how existent cultural consciousness dictating post-graduate psychology students functioning of the real self (Masterson, 2013), may have predisposed the self during the isolation of lockdown. Being faced with the reality of not being in control of one's immortality, and cut-off from sustaining external object-relational elements of the self would result in ego defense mechanisms towards either psychical integration or disintegration of the self.

Self-psychology equates the absence of external confirming responses to one's presence to an actual loss of self-structure. The inference is that one's continuous self-object needs, require responsive engagement from the surroundings of the social milieu for a feeling of well-being (Wolf, 2002). Accordingly, the self develops and is sustained into wholeness by self-object experiences from objects such as people, symbols, and other intra-and-interpersonal experiences vital for the completion and cohesion of the self-structure (Wolf, 2002). The broad question the current study cast is whether the self of post-graduate psychology students has been left living cohesively from the inside out or non-cohesively from the outside in, during hard lockdown's social distancing from self-object experiences? This question arose as a cohesive self cannot be, that is, one cannot experience a sense of well-being in the absence of socially embedded contextual surroundings of adequate self-object experiences.

As universities remained closed, lectures continued online through web-based applications throughout lockdown restrictions. As this mode of teaching is not as integratively interactive as contact sessions, it widened the cracks for psychologically distressed students to slip through. According to Mudiriza & Lannoy (2020), a level of tertiary education could be linked to a 9.9% increase in the presentation of depressive symptoms during the pandemic. These current studies are contradictory to previous studies conducted in South Africa that positively linked higher education with good mental health (Tomlinson et al., 2009). The elevation in the occurrence of symptoms of depression among persons with higher education was attributed to distress over their educational trajectory and career prospects impeded indefinitely. Thus, intimating that the pandemic had a much more overwhelming psychological effect on those pursuing a higher level of education, failing in the protective function it serves during "normal" times (Mudiriza & Lannoy, 2020). This state of being is referred to as *fragmentation* in

Kohutian terms, where aspects of one's self-experience seem to be incongruous. This feeling of the structure of the self disintegrating into its component parts ensues in response to an experience in the external environment (Wolf, 2002), as was the case with enforced lockdown social distancing from sustaining self-object experiences.

The influence hard-lockdown policies had on a continued cohesive self-experience and functioning is substantiated by studies globally indicating harm to public mental well-being. Emerging studies conducted abroad have attributed an impoverishment in mental health outcomes to the COVID-19 pandemic and its related social isolation and quarantine measures (Menec et al., 2020; Salari et al., 2020). Similarly results from the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) survey comprising 1214 participants revealed that of the participants 65% reported feeling stressed, 55% reported feelings of anxiety and panic, 46% reported financial stress and pressure, 40% reported feeling depressed and 12% reported suicidal ideation during the lockdown. These results are consistent with results from a study conducted by Mudiriza & Lannoy (2020) pointing to a high number among the youth with pointedly poor levels of emotional health during the hard lockdown. The root of the youth's behavioural and experiential responses to the isolation of lockdown point to reactive and adjustment patterns psychically organised over one's developmental trajectory into adulthood, imposed upon and integrated with the self (Wolf, 2002). Thus, this interpretive study endeavoured to understand the self-experience of post-graduate psychology students in the here and now of the pandemic during-and-post-hard lockdown.

As institutional mechanisms that drive economies re-opened to prevent a complete global economic collapse, young people may have been more vulnerable psychologically despite being physiologically/physically resistant to the Coronavirus. To this effect, this present study explored the question: How has the self-function of young people whom we expect to adapt to the "new normal" survived having been distanced from sustaining self-object experiences, as we resume life through the plateau of the COVID-19 pandemic? Many studies on mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic have been driven by a focus on countries in Asia, Western Europe, and the United States, with little research emerging focused on African countries, including South Africa. Moreover, the focus has been on impairment in mental well-being, and not so much on the continued development and well-being of the self (personality) wherein the psychodynamics of decompensation into mental health difficulties are rooted. Universities provide an aspect of sustaining self-object experiences, thus being cut off from these self-avowing communities and participation in their culture and values (Wolf, 2002), may have fragmented the self-structure. This is as universities migrated to online learning platforms thus cutting the students off from an aspect of their self-object experience wherein reparation and development of self-deficit structures occurs, in attempts at self-healing through others' responsive emotional availability (Terman & Fisch, 2010). Despite some participants having been locked down with family members, for post-graduate psychology

students especially, university coursework and clinical training may have provided an environment wherein adult intrapsychic functioning may belatedly have continued on an upward developmental trajectory (Terman & Fisch, 2010).

## 2. Self-Psychology Theoretical Framework

It was in America that Kohut talked of the self as a “psychic structure”, “a content of the mental apparatus” that is “psychically located” (Kohut, 1971: p. 15). Self-psychology maintains that complete reliance on others’ responses to regulate self-esteem is the basis for pathology of the self, with a fragmentary loss of self-esteem in the absence of mirroring reassurance (Baker & Baker, 1987). Through self-psychology as the theoretical framework grounding this study, we attempted to understand whether psychology students experienced internally reliable and congruous internal self-object structures, which were developed and sustained through external self-objects (Baker & Baker, 1987), before the hard lockdown. According to Kohut people do not outgrow the need for self-objects, what is critical to note is that self-object needs are altered, throughout people’s life. Healthy adult intrapsychic development is steeped in reliably and consistently satisfied child and adolescent developmental needs. Thus, facilitating a capacity for more internal aptness and flexibility in satisfying continued self-object needs, without the over-reliance on external sources to fulfill these needs (Baker & Baker, 1987). Without the outside world with which to fashion the self through performing as oneself, could a cohesive and thus authentic self be connected to during the lockdown? We know from seminal literature that earlier empathic mis-attunement leads to people being overly dependent upon their external environment to provide them with self-object functions (Baker & Baker, 1987). In the absence of these external self-object functions, psychic mobilisation would have either led to an unintegrated state with a gradual adaptive deeper connection to an authentic/true self or further disintegration through a flight from self and thus inner self-conflict.

In England, it was Winnicott who introduced the concept of a “true self” connecting it with the id psychic structure. In an aversion to psychoanalysis associated with Klein, Kohut, Gedo, and others the premise is that everyone possesses a psychic organisation or structure referred to as “the self”, which serves a psychic function of creativity, intentionality, and cohesiveness for the personality structure. Significant to the current study is cognisance of feasible deficiencies in this structure, closely observed through years of supervision, teaching and training of post-graduate student psychologists, thus impeding its functions of maintaining a person’s psychodynamic equilibrium and of its susceptibility to emotional vulnerability to others, on whom it depends and from whom it may defensively conceal itself in the guise of a false self (Kirshner, 1991). Mirroring self-object experiences, on the other hand, lead to significant self-sustaining psychic gains, including increased liberty to lower the false-self mask and not disavow one’s true wishes, and thus parts of the self, for enhanced self and self-

object relational experiences (Kirshner, 1991).

Kohut delved deeper by attributing the experience of interrelation to the development of a psychic structure he refers to as the core/nuclear self, whose psychic functioning during the hard lockdown of COVID 19, this study sought to explore. Subsequently, in his seminal work, Kohut (1971) conceded that the essence of this self and its functions can be modified, including its core value structure, thereby attributing the core of individuality to the relations of the constituents of the self to one another. A much more intersubjective psychoanalytic stance on how selfhood develops was proffered in the seminal work of Winnicott. In his paper on the mirror role of the mother, he deliberates on the infant's self-formation resultant from affective exchanges communicated by facial expressions in the mother-infant dyad (Winnicott, 1971). In an intellectually indulgent extension, the emotionally interactive context of university may be likened to the mother-infant dyad for post-graduate psychology students. Grossman (1982) expanded on this in that a "self", including a self-concept, is not inherent but is dictated by intersubjective experience, and is constantly shaped by it as revealed by the experiential reality of participants in this study.

The principal modification in perspective achieved by Winnicott's conceptualisation of how the self is formed has been recognised with most consistency by Modell (1984). He postulated that the complexity in the psychodynamics of the self is rooted in that the sense of self needs to be avowed by the other, and therefore a response from the other that is disavowing or lacks empathy can result at best in a depletion of the self or at worst in the shattering of the self (Modell, 1984). The self in adulthood may thereby exist in states of capricious degrees of coherence, from cohesion to fragmentation; or in states of fluctuating degrees of vitality, from vigour to enfeeblement; or even in states of intermittent degrees of functional harmony, from order to chaos. A marked inability to successfully attain cohesion, vigour, or harmony; or a significant loss of these qualities after they had been achieved, may be classified as a state of self-disorder (Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

### 3. Method

This qualitative study was conducted using an interpretive research design to facilitate exploration and reflexive meaning-making of the self during the COVID-19 pandemic hard lockdown, from the experience of post-graduate psychology students (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

#### *Sampling, participants, and data collection*

Purposive sampling was applied because the target of the research project was a specific sample representative of a population group of interest (Lune & Berg, 2016). Thus, participants were post-graduate psychology students, aged 21-27 years, currently enrolled at the University of Pretoria. Class representatives in psychology programmes were briefed about the study then emailed participant information sheets with the principal researcher's details and asked to distribute it amongst their classmates. Master's psychology degree programme students

were invited to express interest in voluntarily participation in the study via email (Tolley et al., 2016). The sample size comprised a total of N = 2 male and N = 4 female voluntary participants from the master's clinical and counselling psychology degree programmes. One male and one female participant lived alone during the lockdown. The other male participant and one female participant left their university residents and moved back home. Whilst the other two female participants lived at home with their husbands during the lockdown.

#### *Instrument of data collection*

In-depth semi-structured interviews facilitated rich exploration of intra-psycho experiences of the self of post-graduate psychology students. This method allowed for the collection of authentic and insightful data on post-graduate students' psycho survival of hard lockdown and the isolation from external (sustaining) self-object experiences (Silverman, 2001). Thus, enabling them to draw on some deep self-reflexive insight as they grappled with the implications of the pandemic on their academic and career prospects as rooted in how the self has been clarified, found and defined/re-defined as a result (Wolf, 2002). The principal researcher was the main data-gathering instrument, therefore the study foreground post-graduate students' subjectivity as a vital component of the intra-psycho dynamics under exploration.

COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing measures had changed the way data was collected in qualitative research (Teti et al., 2020). Therefore, as it was not possible to meet participants face-to-face, interviewing took place through the online Google Meet platform (Marhefka et al., 2020). It was preferable to have video contact to have participants' verbal and micro non-verbal cues noted to further facilitate interaction and add depth to the interview (Marhefka et al., 2020). The use of in-depth interviews allowed for direct and personal inquiry with each student participant (Almeida et al., 2017). The interviews were conducted during April and May of 2021. Each interview lasted no more than 45-minutes and was conducted in English. The principal researcher obtained permission from the participants to record each interview. A recording device was utilised in addition to noting down subtle nonverbal nuances in the participants' responses immediately after the interviews. Interviews took place on online platforms at a time and place convenient for participants. Interviews were transcribed by the researchers during the data analysis phase.

Conducting the interviews post the hard lockdown allowed participants deepened reflective thinking of their self-experience post lockdown, and the connection of internal and external experiences during and post lockdown shaping continued development of the self personally and professionally. The process began with a generic question, encouraging the participants to speak freely about the topic at hand (Almeida et al., 2017). In-depth interviews provided the researchers with rich information and afforded the immediacy of follow-up questions, probing further and establishing a connection between several emerging themes (Hashemnezhad, 2015). Interview questions, designed by the researchers

in their capacity as experienced clinical and research psychologists, were used as a guide, together with probing techniques, all designed to elicit discussions of internal and external self-representation during and after COVID-19 hard lockdown (Rapley, 2011).

Open-ended questions facilitated participants' critical self-insight in the exploration of the psychodynamics of the core self during hard lockdown without being led in a particular direction. The following questions were used as a guide so that the interview was directed by the experiences participants wanted to share: How did you cope with being cut off from the connection to the outside world? What has your response to the hard lockdown been in relation to yourself? How can you describe yourself before the lockdown and during the lockdown? What parts of yourself has the mask you have had to wear as a preventative measure against COVID-19 has the lockdown unmasked? Which aspects of yourself have you been most comfortable with and uncomfortable with during the time of hard lockdown? The interview guide was aligned with the aim and research questions guiding the study (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The questions were aimed at exploring post-graduate psychology students' self-experiences, understanding, and any meaning implied in having been forced within or further away from the self during the hard lockdown of the pandemic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

#### *Method of Analysis*

Methodological data analysis enabled the researchers to categorise, interpret, describe and report on various aspects of the research using Braun and Clarke's (2006) process of thematic analysis. The collection and interpretation of themes were not merely to obtain responses to the questions, but rather to unpack individual experiences, with a specific focus on the core intrapsychic self-experiences (Seidman, 2013). A five-step process of analysis as recommended by Braun & Clarke (2006) was thus followed: Familiarising oneself with the data, by immersing oneself in the data through the reading of interview transcripts multiple times by both researchers before commencing coding or analysis. This was followed by generating codes from the data, which were used to formulate themes and subthemes which had to be named and reviewed, as well as cross-checked by both researchers before finalisation. The final naming and reviewing of themes and subthemes entailed making alterations to already existing themes. Themes were then defined, followed by the writing-up of this research article, which includes data extracts to support the integrated discussion of findings in the form of themes.

## **4. Trustworthiness of the Study**

*Credibility.* Credibility is concerned with how true the research findings are (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure credibility, reflexivity and peer examination was employed. Reflexivity ensures that the researchers' biases and assumptions which may have had a possible influence on interpretations, are



made transparent to readers. A co-researcher who is knowledgeable in the topic of study could be relied upon to critically evaluate for purposes of peer examination.

*Transferability, dependability, confirmability.* To ensure transferability and dependability, thick description of the research process and methodology were provided, as well as an audit trail accounting for all steps and decisions taken during the research process. The audit trail, reflexivity, and triangulation of studies previously conducted on similar topics were used to ensure confirmability. The use of co-coding also contributed to intercoder reliability (Cho & MacArthur, 2010).

## 5. Ethical Considerations

Ethics are the foundation of the integrity of good research, and thus the following ethical issues, as advanced by Oltmann (2016); DeJonckheere & Vaughn (2019), were adhered to:

Before collecting data, permission was granted by the Head of Psychology, and thereafter the study was then approved by the Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee of the University (HUM037/0221).

Before commencing with interviews, participants were assured that they only needed to disclose what they felt comfortable with and that the interview would be conducted at their pace. Good rapport was established to ensure that participants felt safe to share their experiences of the impact of the isolation of lockdown on their continued self-object experiential needs. Furthermore, the recruitment process ascertained that all participants were briefed about the research process and what their participation in the study entailed.

Anonymity was maintained by making use of pseudonyms. Moreover, information that may have led to the identification of participants has been altered accordingly to maintain anonymity. To ensure confidentiality, all information collected from participants was kept in a password-protected computer to ensure that unauthorised persons would not gain access to the information. Owing to the intrapsychically sensitive nature of the area of research, through in-depth exploration of the self which could potentially cause participants distress (Gupta, 2013), the principal researcher attempted to avoid harm and prevent emotional distress by treating participants with the necessary respect and empathy. However, in a case wherein talking about intra-personal dynamics around the self may have led to psychological distress (Gupta, 2013), a referral would have been made to a toll-free 24-hour helpline on 0800 456 789 for counseling. As detailed on the participant information sheet, should participants have required assistance after hours, they would have contacted SADAG Careline on 0800 747 747, or the security services number on the back of their student cards. SADAG also offers peer support groups for students and could have been contacted by participants to benefit from peer support, as a result of emotional difficulties that may have been evoked. Moreover, participants were afforded space for debrief-

ing at the end of the interviews by the principal researcher in her capacity as a clinical psychologist.

## 6. Findings

The findings are presented as emergent themes from the self-experiential narratives of six post-graduate psychology students on their intrapsychic processes during the isolation of the hard lockdown. Common and uniquely expressed self-experiences have been analysed and interpreted into the following themes: isolation, defensive escape from self, facades/false self, painful healing of relational pattern of personality, impoverished sense of self, unfulfilling relationships and rejection. The discussion of these findings is grounded in psychoanalytic self-psychology. Five of the participants expressed isolation, four reflected on the defensive escape from self, all six participants identified with the theme of facades/false self, four of the participants struggled with painful healing of relational pattern of personality, an impoverished sense of self emerged among five of the participants, with all of six of expressing the theme of unfulfilling relationships and a fear of or direct experience of rejection.

## 7. Discussion

The following is a discussion of the emergent themes from participants' self-experiential reality of the risk-adjusted level 5 lockdown of the COVID-19 global pandemic, interrogated in relation to the literature and grounding theoretical framework. A psychoanalytic theoretical lens of the self allowed for deep interpretative exploration of the self-experience and possible states of self-disorder of post-graduate psychology students during and post level 5 hard lockdown.

### 7.1. Isolation

Participants were forced face-to-face with the *mirror-hungry* aspect of the “self” (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), as they found themselves locked down with self to really “see” the hidden parts of the self, in the absence of external self-object experiences. The isolation of hard lockdown forced participants to connect with repressed emotional conflicts subsequent to secondary disturbances of the self (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). As one participant asked herself as she found herself at home with nowhere to run from her inner self stirrings: “*But why do you feel like you are so dead to yourself at such a young age. It just doesn't feel right.*” She continued: “*So, it was for the first time that I had to focus on that inner world that I had been running away from for so long. But I had to step into the role of being my parent and nurture the inner child.*” The physical and psychic isolation felt deadening with the ensuing mourning of whom they thought they were. This fragmenting self had been founded on a deadened internal world, with its life supply being an escape into the external world and (social) roles occupied. The lockdown appears to have resulted in an erosion of a sense of consistency of self in time and in spatial cohesion—this psychic distress manifests in

profound anxiety. The emotional response being that different parts of the body are no longer held by a strong, healthy awareness of an integrated state of body-self, with resultant apprehensive brooding over fragments of the body (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), and thus the self. Temporarily stripped off their social role labels and masking defenses the self was depicted as a scary place to be in experientially. The following sentiment supports the finding:

“I was stripped naked, and I had to ask myself if every single thing can be taken away from you -what is permanent? If I don’t get that sense of inner home, I’m running away constantly looking for it anywhere and everywhere and never in myself.”

These narratives suggest that participants in this study experienced abandonment depression as the lockdown left them with a sense of alienation, finding themselves not only internally alone but externally alone too. As Orange (2009) surmised, there exists neither outside nor a place outside the experiential world, akin to there being no self-enclosed within, autonomous and self-sustaining. Human beings are intricately and rudimentary involved in the human systemic structures, even when they are suffering feelings of isolation, marginalisation, unworthiness, insignificance, and worthlessness. The isolating abandonment of lockdown forced participants to sit with the self, which was found not only to be difficult but alienating too. What was uncovered was how hard it was to hide from the self in the absence of the distraction from external extensions, with only a mirror to mirror the self and not external mirroring self-objects. There was a profound longing for those external sustaining self-object experiences on whose confirming responses a cohesive sense of self continues to develop (Wolf, 2002). As surfacing conflictual unmet needs could no longer be defended against through escapism into external reality, most participants were left with feelings of anger, loneliness, hurt and lacking a sense of belonging. *One participant described her process as: “It felt like I was entering into a depression.”* During the hard lockdown, these post-graduate psychology students had to reckon with the reality of their defensive psychic organisational structure comprising of two selves for the two worlds. The reality unmasked to them was that of the true self of the internal world and the false self of the external world. In essence, the extent to which cultural consciousness dictates post-graduate psychology students’ functioning of the real self (Masterson, 2013). For two of the participants, however, the hard lockdown was a welcome escape from interpersonal rejection and thus a deep loss into the false self to much psychic cost. One participant shared her relief at the escape from the external world to the internal world: *“So, for me lockdown, to be completely honest was the welcome break of 24 years of introjecting so much crap (sic) and introjecting so many voices in my life.”* However, if a self is securely organised, despondence over aspects of the vulnerability of the damaged self that has led to susceptibility to social isolation, does not indicate permanent damage to the self, due to ameliorative defensive structures (Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

## 7.2. Defensive Escape from Self

Defensive distancing against vulnerability with others where the true self has to be hidden through much-needed escape into the internal world has seen participants having to protect themselves through psychic masking protective layers. This attests to Winnicott's (1960) assertion that the false self is developed solely for the defensive purpose of hiding the true self. This is evidenced in this participant's reflection on the outer layers of the self:

"...you know that is your image of me, this is the real me and it's hard for me to come as both and be vulnerable at the same time. it's not easy, yeah there's a lot of pain there...there's a lot of fear, it's fear...it's fear."

It appears the lockdown isolation became an escapist defensive relief to hide painful and shameful experiences from others, which manifested in the false-self sustained by superficial self-object experiences before lockdown. As reflected in this sentiment: "...*shame for everything and shame is a very isolating thing. It then feeds into that drive for perfection which is empty really.*" This sustained false self, however, not only served to defensively distance participants from others but from themselves too. This defensive distancing from others and in essence from the self, served a protective function against the participants' relational pain and trauma. The participants began reckoning with the difficulty they found in relating to the self and others because of early relational traumas. A functional neurosis from this core relational conflict appears to manifest in compulsivity:

"And so what happened was, I pushed down those feelings but then last year it was like, I couldn't hide from them. So when I finally sat with myself, I felt so alienated...I thought Gosh, she's only focusing on her studies, she's only focusing on everything else but herself, I felt so alienated from myself it was meeting a stranger for the first time."

People have a self-need for a sense of belongingness, to confirm a feeling of being a part of others, to defend against intolerable feelings of loneliness and alienation (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Failure in achieving a sense of belonging was not only revealed during the lockdown, but also exposed participants to their inability to find a sense of belonging within from internal good object representations. The struggle to find a sense of belonging among others perpetuates the maintenance of superficial roles and relationships with others, which ultimately fails and only confirms deficiencies and faults within the self (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Participants in this study found themselves *locked down* in their isolating psychic organisation. This would be adaptively defended against through social roles occupied prior to the risk-adjusted level 5 hard lockdown. The defensive escape from their internal conflict would even be extended to applying oneself to working on others' presenting difficulties. This begs the question if studying psychology could be a part of this defense. The conscious awareness of this defense is candidly shared by this participant:

“It also became a clutch for me because then if I focus on everybody else I don’t need to focus on me. Because I’m so busy in the world helping everybody else and solving their problems. I don’t need to solve my problems.”

Defensive masking layers spanned over many years in service of protecting participants from core psychic wounds underlying the true self. As this participant mused: “*Ja, I feel like this false self of mine had become very static. It takes a lot of energy to maintain a false self. I thought that I had perfected it. I thought that it could become natural. It takes so much energy to begin with.*” This illuminates how the construction, clarification, defining and redefining of identity is a maze through flexible and inflexible defenses which define an individual, through intra-and-interpsychic battles of anguish, guilt and shame in the probing of the core self (Matei, 2017). The self-experience during the hard lockdown was an un-masking of defenses, leaving students feeling out of control and exposed to the self. As one of the participants shared: “*I had developed all of these layers of skin, all these layers of protection but thought I could hold on to me.*” In support of this experience, another student made this reflection: “*That was very scary for me because I had no idea who that person was. It was that inner child who was so lost, so confused, so lost in me.*” It appeared, however, that students found themselves still very cognitively defensive about the self and struggling with vulnerability in avowing their self-experience. This self was still very much new and thought about a lot to a state of fragmentation. This *cognitive lockdown*, void of an integrative *emotive lockdown* into a cohesive experience of self, perpetuated participants’ continued masking of core aspects of the self. This, despite façades having been somewhat uncovered by the COVID hard lockdown isolation to nudge them towards internal stirrings underlying outer layers of self.

### 7.3. Façades/False Self

Through roles the students identified themselves by, different façades had been cemented into disintegrated parts of the self. This sentiment resoundingly echoes what all participants in this study experienced in an isolating and shameful manner:

“I felt like an impostor to myself which was a very strange thing. Cause I also realised there were so many selves within me. There’s this true self, there’s this false self, there’s this parent self, there’s this wife self.”

The students had developed different psychic masks which meant being a different self with different people in different contexts. This is supported by Kohut’s (1971) postulation in that the experience of selfhood or its fragmentation is deeply engrained in interrelatedness (Stolorow & Atwood, 2016). This reliance on façades was driven by a fear of rejection which perpetuated an impoverished sense of self. Feelings of not being good enough from introjected badness prevented participants in this study from being more true to the self and others. Façades had become entrenched mechanisms of hiding emotional conflicts of

the self from oneself and not just others, as cited by this participant: *“I thought I was honest about what I wanted but I wasn’t completely honest. When people asked me how I’m feeling, I felt so ashamed to say I’m really struggling.”* One participant described the realisation that she is not her masking façade during the lockdown as follows: *“The irony for me (pause) that’s such a big irony for me because I worked so hard to get here, now that I’m here I’m realising that it’s not who I am.”*

The masking of the self, a psychic defense of trying to control others’ perception of oneself was understood by participants as seeking approval to be oneself from others.

Despite being relational beings at the core of their intrapsychic conflict, students conceded that they have been making face presentations in their relational spaces. This had become their manner of functioning at an almost unconscious level, which was illuminated by the lockdown of spaces wherein elements of false self-experience had been nurtured. Participants’ emotive reality was permeated by a merging adaptation in wanting to see and find the self in others, thereby losing oneself in others and thus being lost to oneself. This evinces an enactment of a need for merger with self-objects instead of self-structure, with limited frustration tolerance for separations and an expectation of a continuous presence of self-objects (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). It became evident in sharing their experiences that participants’ true self needs remained unsatisfied because of giving in to others’ needs.

During hard lockdown, façades left participants with vacuous psychic spaces as the true self’s emergence could no longer be denied. For one of the participants this meant a process of grieving the false self: *“So through all of this, through this grieving of this false self of mine, feeling that I was being emptied ...”* Kohut and Wolf (1978) remarked that an inability to successfully attain cohesion or vigour, or a significant loss of these qualities of self after they had been developed, is classified as a state of self-disorder. Societal roles occupied translate not only in a defensive definition of the self but manifest in playing the self rather than being oneself, as reflected by one student. *“So, when I was sitting with myself, I was asking myself but who are you? Underneath all of this, you want to be successful, you want to be a psychologist, a friend, an advisor for this person.”* The students in this study found themselves stripped off the roles they play, by the lockdown, thus uncovering the psychic function of projected self-objects used to mask the self. In having these defenses uncovered, and having to contend with what the function of these defenses has been, participants were plunged into the beginning of a painful healing process.

#### **7.4. Painful Healing of Relational Pattern of Personality**

Participants related an experience of beginning a painful process of healing internal self-object relational experiences of their fragmenting state of self in adulthood, that surfaced during the nationwide shutdown of externally sustain-

ing distractions. Isolated from external self-object experiences that defensively maintain maladaptive ways of being, participants discovered that their enfeebled relation to self and others was a psychic function of a core self-conflict. Reconnecting with the core of true self, though conflicting, was likened to peeling more layers of the self by one of the participants. A disconnected state of self was perceived as the cause of their core conflictual relational patterns, and thus healing would come not only with reconnecting with the self but also with an understanding and acceptance of disavowed parts of the self. Participants' emerging self-awareness forged a new internal authority (Miller, 1979) which instilled a fundamental sense of empathic connection with themselves. This shift saw a capacity to self-soothe among participants as they reported learning to do for themselves what early facilitating environments failed to provide, and that which they temporarily could not derive from the university as a continued sustaining self-object experience. This coaxed a development of internal competency, with reduced external neediness and more adaptability in meeting continuous remaining self-object needs (Baker & Baker, 1987). Something fragile of the ego and thus of the true self common among participants in this study was captured as follows by one of them:

“What are your core needs and core wounds that you’ve been hiding from yourself until now? That is my true self, that is that self-asking me for love. And I had to speak to myself in a very kind and loving way and I didn’t do that at first.”

Going through the processes of healing brought on by being forced to face the self during lockdown meant a turning away from the external world and into the internal world. This is how one student described it: “*I actually gave myself that permission to say it’s fine, it’s lockdown, go deeper into the true self that inner world that inner child world.*” This student continued poignantly echoing the other students’ self-experiential reality:

“I realised that was that true self that I’ve been running away from, the neglected and pained child. She really came to the surface during lockdown for the first time and I saw how she had filtered into every relationship, every choice of mine, my friendships everything. It was almost as if I was trying to hide away from her, but I could never run too far away from her. She will always be there”.

Another student likened this process of relational healing to the re-birth of self, the self being born to the self: “*Yes, because there has to be re-birth, so the sense of deadening within me I’m like something is growing, something has died—there’s growth at the same time. And I feel like something is still growing, but I’m not sure if I have a label for it yet.*” Change in relation to self-object needs and experience and thus working towards establishing a connection that participants truly want with people entailed removing shame around the pain that led to the erection of the false self. As this student reflected on her journey:

*“The false self was a completely different person and so the true self has been such a journey for me. I think I’m still journeying through it, every single day I’m still learning so much but if it wasn’t for COVID I don’t think I would have done it.”*

The growing pains of this healing process, however, demonstrate the acceptance of the *true* and thus cohesive self, integrated by being made sense of through labels by some participants, as though there remains something wrong with the self. Now, this ties in with the difficulty participants found in integrating their true self acquainted during the hard lockdown into their experiential spaces post lockdown. They all expressed difficulty in merging the *true* self with the external self-object reality and thus maintaining a continuously cohesive sense of self post hard lockdown:

*“I feel like it’s still very much in separate worlds for me. I think that’s my current struggle. I don’t know how to integrate the two selves. Life in the world of my inner child and external world, especially because I feel like I’m in my 20s and there’s this expectation now after lockdown to step back into the world, working, getting my life in order.”*

### **7.5. Impoverished Sense of Self**

Participants’ struggle with portraying their true selves outwardly and thus relinquishing seeking self-affirming permission from others to be themselves, was accounted for as lacking confidence in who they are and seeking validation from others. According to the Winnicottian theory, it is in operating in the false self wherein other’s expectations become of pressing significance, masking the original sense of self, the one rooted to the very core of one’s inner being (Aguayo, 2002). One of the participants attested: *“I shut down my creativity to be completely honest, especially my outward creativity, uhm because it did feel under attack.”* It was also uncovered how students confuse their thoughts with the essence of self. Their cognitive capacity is used psychically as a function of ‘being’ oneself or in the service of self, which the university as a continued self-object experience becomes an extension of. This is premised on the perception that *‘I think, therefore I am’* as gleaned from this participant: *“I think in a way I tried to reconnect with myself but then he (sic) was not accepted in a lot of spaces.”* As authors we ask, how can the self be accepted when thoughts shared are void of emotive and self-experiential reality and thus meaning making of whole parts of the self? This evokes core conflictual relational patterns of moulding oneself into a version one thinks people want in different spaces. The result is that students are lost to the self, to those according to whom they are trying to mould themselves, and thus the disconnect with self and others, and more of a rigid defensive false-self structure. This appears to further push participants into wanting a sense of belonging with others to escape from the internal isolation, exposed by the external isolation of hard lockdown:



“So, I was somewhere in the middle, waiting for somebody to permit me to say it’s okay that you had a tough childhood and also permit me to say, you are now an adult, but it’s okay that you don’t feel it. It’s okay that you are still struggling with what it means to be an adult. Because I think that for a while, I felt somewhere in between by now I should have figured it out, right. I mean lockdown, everyone is struggling but they are still capable because we are all adults.”

As participants continue to look for self-definition from society and others, the self remains impoverished, lacking in consistent growth-enhancing sustaining self-object experiences for genuine emotional connection. There was a re-sounding sense of shame, internalised as shame coming from others, which perpetuated a persecuted and fragmented sense of self.

### 7.6. Unfulfilling Relationships

This study uncovered that relating to others has been as conflicting as relating to self for these students, thus rendering relationships unfulfilling. There had not been a secure base for the development of a coherent self, which has been chronically emotionally isolating even before the physical isolation of the lockdown. Participants had a curious sense of awareness of this disintegrated inner self that had become an imprint from which to relate not only to others but to the self too. As this participant reflected: *“I didn’t have the words to describe how I can want to connect but also just loathe the pain that comes with being around people, you know.”* Participants found that for the first time, they had to relate and live from the internal to the external. This absence of external confirming responses to one’s presence may be equated to an actual loss of self-structure. This is as one’s continuous self-object needs, require responsive engagement from the surroundings of the social milieu for a feeling of well-being (Wolf, 2002).

According to Kohut people do not outgrow the need for self-objects, what is critical to note is that self-object needs are altered, throughout people’s life. With participants locked down into self, some connections could not be sustained during the lockdown and didn’t stand the test of distance, as they had fed into a false self. It became evident that through masquerading as the false self, participants built up a false set of intra-and-interpersonal relationships. Given that participants are high-functioning psychology students, this may result in a person whose potential aliveness and creativity gets stifled, whilst disguising an impoverished internal world, lost to the true self, behind a mask of independence (Aguayo, 2002). Participants reported that surface-level connections could not be sustained, as they lost touch with some people as everyone went in separate ways. This is how one participant captured his experience: *“It was such a superficial connection, it was such an ego dopamine rush that no longer serves my soul. And the self-loathing that would come after those superficial connections, I’d become so comfortable with for so long.”* Superficial connections could also

be traced back to the family system, by those participants who were locked down with their families. Family dynamics were described as having been built on superficial connections, with members not known to the self or to each other. Participants were brought face-to-face with root familial dynamics driven by relating through roles and not through relational connections with each other.

### 7.7. Rejection

These constricted family dynamics extend to a fear of sharing the self in shared spaces. Fear of being seen and thus a fear of intimacy. This manifests in the defensive hiding of true self for fear of rejection. Parts rejected by others are the very parts of the self that participants reject too, with the subsequent defensive use of personality structure to avoid connecting, understanding, and accepting component parts of the self-structure. Personality became a barrier between internal and external reality, accepting internal reality and thus the core of self-experience. For some participants doing the work of the self, meant personality diagnoses, further distancing them from working through the core of self-object conflicts. This state of an overburdened-self perpetuates the trauma of unshared and thus unregulated emotionality from failed self-soothing responsiveness of self-objects (Kohut & Wolf, 1978). Participants demonstrated a defensive identification of the self with knowledge rather than connection to self, hence when thoughts are rejected it feels like the rejection of the self. This perpetuates a sense of self-shame which feeds into relational patterns centred around fear of rejection, as illuminated in this quote:

“So much of shame, so much of shame. Last year I felt more than I’ve ever felt in my entire life. You know also shame for me for the age that I am and not having completed a master’s, shame for being raised in such a terrible household—for such a bad childhood. Shame for being...”

The vulnerability of the self in the isolation of hard lockdown was expressed and felt in internal monologues that had become existential solitude of shame and self-loathing. Unbeknownst to participants in this study, that only a deeply insightful integration of their vulnerability can facilitate psychic survival (Orange, 2009), and thus allow them to access and integrate the true self, much to the relief of a depleted false self-structure.

## 8. Conclusion

Through self-psychology as the theoretical framework grounding this study, we attempted to understand whether post-graduate psychology students had developed internally reliable and congruous or fragmentary internal self-object structures (Baker & Baker, 1987), during hard lockdown. Reported findings imply psychic isolation continues after lockdown though more consciously as these students continue to feel isolated within the self. It appears in their experiential reckoning with self during hard lockdown students had to face the psychic defensive function of the false self that they have become, as well as the roles and ex-

ternal extensions through which it was maintained. Though the true self was allowed to surface during the lockdown, the psychic cost of the vulnerability it required was too threatening to the fragile false self-structure to allow it into their reality post lockdown.

However, self-object experiences wherein an attempt at reparation and continued developmental building blocks of self-deficit structures occur, through others' responsive emotional availability can be risked are approached cautiously (Terman & Fisch, 2010). Despite some participants having been locked down with family members, for post-graduate psychology students especially, university coursework and clinical training may have provided an environment wherein adult intrapsychic functioning may belatedly have continued to develop (Terman & Fisch, 2010), albeit slowly. Importantly, to the current study is an appreciation of deficiencies in the self-structure, closely observed through years of supervision, teaching, and training of post-graduate student psychologists, thus impeding its functions of maintaining a person's psychodynamic equilibrium and of its susceptibility to emotional vulnerability to others, on whom it depends and thus defensively concealing itself in the guise of a false self (Kirshner, 1991). At this juncture, post the COVID 19 hard lockdown, participants in this study struggle with mirroring self-object experiences which lead to significant self-sustaining psychic gains, including increased liberty to lower the false-self mask and non-disavowal of one's true wishes, and thus parts of the self, for continued enhanced self and self-object relational experiences (Kirshner, 1991).

Our study suggests that a capacity for vulnerability through instilling a capacity for deep reflexivity throughout post-graduate psychology training should be integrated into the curriculum, with a continued focus on how their self-experience has been clarified, found or redefined by the pandemic. This reflexive self-insight facilitates a more adaptive acceptance of true self-experience which is required of students in their therapeutic work as psychologists. This may aid in integrating their personal and professional developmental experiences at less psychic cost to the self-structure.

## 9. Limitations of the Study

Although results from the present study provide profound premises for future research in the domain of intrapsychic dynamics of the self of psychology students during and post COVID 19 hard lockdown, there is a limitation that must be noted. The generalisability of this study is limited as participants were post-graduate psychology students selected from one university in South Africa. Therefore this may limit the generalisability of findings to other universities. However, it is our hope that it contributes insights into the importance of reimagining our postgraduate training programmes with an emphasis on a foundation of depth in critical self-reflective skills, personally and professionally through the avowing of self-experience. In this way, our psychology students would be able to insightfully trace self-experiences that have come to form their foundational ways

of being in the world, with themselves and with others, especially their patients.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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