

# THE C43 NONPARTICIPANT OBSERVATION INTROSPECTION TECHNIQUE

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**Abstract:** The article contains considerations on one of the criticisms usually voiced against introspection as a psychological knowledge method, namely that some mental states lose their consistency or undergo extreme changes under the influence of self-observation, as well as a new approach and, presented in detail for the first time, a new technique by which this obstacle in the way of knowledge could be used to support people who went through traumatic events, with a view to desensitizing said individuals to the effects of the events in question, so that their health status and their psychological and physical working conditions can improve.

**Key words:** introspection, observation, trauma, technique, support, emotions, psihic.

## **Introductory considerations:**

The C43 nonparticipant observation introspection technique is a support technique for people who went through particularly difficult events in their lives, especially traumatic events that had a strong impact on the affective component of their psychological life. This technique stems from the phenomenon of self-observing one's psychological processes, also known as introspection or meditation.

The term “introspection” comes from the Latin words “introspectio”, “introspectare”, meaning “to look inward”, more specifically to have one’s gaze oriented toward the interior, i.e. toward one’s own subjective states, using self-observation, self-examination, and self-analysis.

Despite the fact that introspection has long been used as a method of gaining knowledge in philosophy (as meditation and speculative contemplation, highly appreciated by Socrates and many other classical philosophers), it has generally known limitations, as specified by psychology. Some of them pertain to the requirement of special training for the researcher, while others pertain to the fact that substantiating scientific knowledge on introspection is deemed risky, as self-reflection is influenced by one’s own hypotheses. However, the attraction exercised by self-observation on people can be traced to the very beginnings of psychology. Among the many researchers who studied it are Gustav Theodor Fechner, Wilhelm Wundt, Franz Brentano, Carl Stumpf, Karl Marbe, Oswald Külpe, William James, Edward Bradford Titchener, Alfred Binet and others. Although some of them generally held in high regard the value of introspection, nonetheless they nuanced their stance over time, believing that it was necessary to combine it with the experimental method.

The interest in introspection in psychology decreased largely due to the emergence of John B. Watson’s behaviorism. However, under various other names and forms, introspection remained of interest for some psychologists.

Currently, introspection or self-observation can be found in various forms, being used in various wider or niche fields of psychology, such as cognitive-behavioral theories, certain personality tests and attitude scales, mental imagery techniques, relaxation techniques, hypnosis techniques, the provision of verbal reports based on experience, clinical reports received from patients, introspective reports of employees concerning their interactions with industrial computer terminals, various psychoanalysis applications etc.

Hereinafter a new approach and a potential new method of exploiting an impediment known as a limitation of introspection will be discussed, namely that some mental states lose their consistency or undergo extreme changes under the influence of self-observation. Therefore, by using a form of therapy, this special effect of self-observation will be used to one’s advantage.

First of all, we will refer to Wundt’s research, ascertaining that “Wundt did not make any essential distinction between imagination and what ends up being reflected in words. This is the field in which the method of introspection demonstrates its investigational significance. Nonetheless, aside from imagination, there are other things that can be reflected, whose mechanisms may elude research. For instance, alongside sensations, emotions can also be deemed elements of conscious reflection. Reference was being made to the profoundly subjective dimension of sensations, to their being experienced

subjectively. They can often mean more than simply pleasant or unpleasant emotions. Initially, emotions only revealed relaxation or tension, peacefulness or agitation . . . which were deemed physiological states. Wundt included these in his research program as proprietary to the field of knowledge of psychology and having the potential of being investigated using introspection.” (Mihai, 2008, p. 124). Furthermore, “when explaining psychological processes, experience, sensations, and affectivity, Wundt refrained from merely evoking their sculptural nature or their fixed geometry. On the contrary, he accentuated their phenomenally variable dynamics, emphasizing the description of the diversity of unrepeatable forms in which they can manifest. He emphasized that a psychological process can vanish without a trace just the same as it can scar for life in other cases. The image reflection process is a function of what is similarly found in the imagination.” (Mihai, 2008, p. 124).

The following observations must be further noted as relevant to the argumentation of the topic of interest: those of David Hume, who stated that “self-observing a mental state tends to modify the state itself”, those of Immanuel Kant, who wrote that “any attempt at introspection necessarily altered the conscious experience being studied because it introduced an observing variable into the content of the conscious experience” (Schultz, Schultz, 2012, p. 152), those of Auguste Comte, who vehemently criticized introspection, arguing that “psychological life changes when it is subject to investigation”, as well as the criticisms of André Lalande, who discredited introspection because “the observed fact is altered through the very act of observation.” One must also note the criticism frequently made against structuralism itself, that “introspection is inappropriate mostly due to the inductive effect it has when it is aimed at a psychological experience, with the most striking case being that of emotional states. Nonetheless, cognitive experiences can also be drastically modified.” (Nicola, 2007, p. 108).

Continuing in the same vein, hereinafter Titchener’s observations will also be cited. Titchener, “just as Külpe, made detailed qualitative and subjective reports on mental activities during the act of introspection” (Schultz, Schultz, 2012, p. 148). In this context, one must note that for Titchener, the founder of structuralism, sensations and images are characterized by four traits: quality, intensity, duration and clarity, while affective states only have three traits: quality, intensity and duration, as affective states lack clarity. “Titchener believed it was impossible to focus our attention directly on an element of feeling or emotion. When we try to do so, the affective quality, such as the sadness or the pleasantness, disappears.” (Schultz, Schultz, 2012, p. 151). Moreover, in the same paper, authors Duane P. Schultz and Sydney Ellen Schultz ascertain that “the very act of examining an experience in an introspective manner may in some way alter it. For example, consider the

difficulty of introspecting the conscious state of anger. In the process of rationally paying attention to and trying to dissect the experience into its elementary components, our anger is likely to subside or disappear.” (Schultz, Schultz, 2012, p. 154).

Starting from the common finding of Hume, Kant, Comte, Lalande, Wundt and Titchener, we will try to present, using the vocabulary of psychology, insofar as our current knowledge allows us, as second-year students at the Faculty of Psychology of the Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, a potential technique with a significant positive effect of desensitizing the individual to the effects of past traumatic events, technique which uses these known characteristics of self-observation. To this end, we will use introspection as the main technique and, to initiate the action in question, we will use suggestion as the triggering element. Throughout the technique, directed questions will be asked by the researcher/specialist and, simultaneously to the subject’s self-observation, the researcher/specialist will attentively listen to the subject’s answers to the directed questions and the direct report of their experience.

From the research we carried out lately with a view to supplementing the theoretical component of our report, we discovered a technique that is somewhat similar in terms of the concept concerning the mode of action of the human psyche, although different in a few essential points. More specifically, the technique in question is the Focusing technique generally used in person-centered psychotherapy, initiated by American philosopher and psychologist Eugene T. Gendlin in collaboration with psychologist Carl Rogers. Said technique is also characterized by the process of focusing one’s attention inward and becoming aware of one’s interior physical sensations or, simply put, “listening to what your body wants to tell you.”

Essentially, the Focusing technique means attempting to clarify through introspection some unclarified and/or disturbing sensations that are currently troubling the subject and of whose nature the subject is unaware. This technique has the following common points with our technique:

1. aiming one’s attention to the bodily sensation,
2. attempting to describe the sensation, and
3. the subject remaining inwardly focused on what they are feeling.

The technique has the following points that differ from our technique:

4. in Focusing, the subject is prompted to act by creating an empty interior space using mental imagery; our technique involves non-intervention (the absence of this requirement);
5. in Focusing, the focus falls on one of the unclear sensations currently experienced by the subject, while our technique brings under express attention a past trauma that is clearly known by the subject, followed, as a

determining triggering element, by the express repeated suggestion addressed to the subject, that an image will emerge in the field of their consciousness. The subject must focus on and observe said image without intervening in any way and must repeatedly describe the image's characteristics in terms of shape, color, size and structure. Moreover, our technique also offers some important practical guidelines concerning the evolution of the images in question, their general dynamics with regard to colors, dimensions and structure, which can point out with fair approximation the best moment to conclude the procedure;

6. Focusing requires the subject's effort of comparing their experience with the words and phrases they use to describe their state, so as to align them, as well as the subject's habit of asking the specialist questions on the significance of the problem and the experienced sensations even during introspection, whereas our technique does not require the effort of making a comparison and even trains the subject not to ask any questions during the introspection stage, but only to recount the process of introspection with detachment, so as not to alter the act of observation, which has an intrinsic direct connection to the image processing. However, the subject receives support if they have any difficulties, as further discussed;

- in the sixth and final stage of Focusing, the subject must "receive" the answers provided by their own body with a peaceful and open attitude, avoiding any criticism, reasoning that judgments and criticism interrupt communication with the self, whereas our technique aims and obtains the subject's relaxation and desensitization to the effects of past trauma, without the subject having to make any effort to accept a certain aspect;

- Focusing is performed with eyes closed, whereas with our technique the subject may keep them closed or open; when the subject keeps their eyes open, it must be done "as if they were being deep in thought, gazing aimlessly" , "as if they were blankly staring", "as if they were looking at something but with their thoughts far away, without a clear aim";

- in Focusing, through the very algorithm of the method, the specialist gets to know the problem that "vaguely disturbed" the subject, whereas in our technique the subject is not required to disclose the past trauma. In our method, only the subject is required to know the nature of the trauma, not the specialist. This aspect is very significant for traumas that the subject is not ready to share with the specialist, that the subject

deems intimate or that the subject is too embarrassed to disclose. Our technique works even under these conditions. It is enough for the subject to know the nature of the trauma, even if they do not have the courage or trust required to “open up” to the specialist at this point.

Essentially, as a conclusion of this comparison of the two techniques, despite the fact that the human psyche acts through the same process, the two techniques have both common and distinctive characteristics.

Before outlining the work method for this technique, it must be added that every event that is potentially traumatic to one individual, after occurring as a fact of life, leaves in the interior (psychological) structure of the individual an area of tension that has specific characteristics, which are generally measurable by psychological measurements. The aim of this technique is to access the area of these tensions in a brief timeframe, using an ethically acceptable procedure. The access to these tensions is, therefore, followed by their detached analysis and processing by guided self-observation performed by the very subject that experienced them, in the presence and under the necessary guidance of a specialist. The effects of such actions to penetrate these areas of tension are total stress relief or, at the very least, a relevant partial stress relief with the purpose of improving the individual’s health status and their psychological and physical operating condition. Our findings up to this point are that this technique is efficient, highly performant, and time- and effort-saving.

#### **Work method:**

The psychotherapy session in which this technique (that we will sometimes refer to as “exercise”) is used must be carried out in a quiet environment, in a place where the subject and specialist are not disturbed by other people. The subject should sit on a chair, an armchair or another comfortable seating option. The subject is directed to gaze “as if they were being deep in thought, gazing aimlessly” , “as if they were blankly staring”, “as if they were looking at something but with their thoughts far away, without a clear aim”, or with their eyes closed, if this is more comfortable. Subsequently, the subject is asked to remember a past traumatizing event that particularly troubles them, that sometimes puts them on edge even now, when they recall it, some personal life event that resulted in intense trauma (acute pain). The subject is asked to associate this pain with an image.

*Now think of one of your greatest sorrows... One of the hardest moments in your life, one that made an impression on you... Think of it and somehow look in front of you “with a blank stare” to the place we’re in, as if you were far away or, if it’s easier for you, you can even close your eyes...*

*Focus on that pain... The pain of having been through that experience... Look, for this to be easier and more comfortable for you, you don't even have to tell me what it is, you just have to think about it...*

*Think of that pain that you lived through then and that made an impression on you... As you can see, your body already feels it and you are as tense as if you were experiencing it now... Observe what you feel, but also pay attention to what I'm saying...*

*An image will appear in your mind... This pain has a shape, a color, a structure, it looks in a certain way, it is somehow like an object or something similar... So, pay attention to that pain because an image of it will appear...*

*There... Has it appeared?... Perfect... Look at it... I know this is very difficult for you because it is unpleasant, it has colors or shapes or a behavior that you dislike... All you need to do from now on, until the end of the session, is to look at it as a researcher would and to examine it... It is a structure that should be observed. You shouldn't do anything else with it... Just look at it and observe it...*

When remembering that trauma, the subject will experience discomfort manifested by changes of the features. Sometimes the subject may have a tense countenance, other times the subject may present somatic symptoms of variable intensity, according to the intensity of the trauma itself, its importance as a life event for the subject, and the subject's processing idiosyncrasies. The specialist insists on the fact that an image which represents that pain will appear in the subject's mind, that the pain of having lived through that event will emerge as an image in the field of their consciousness. Under repeated suggestion, this image whose features were not specified in any way by the specialist will appear to the subject. We currently do not have all information on how this image is produced or what are all of the psychological processes involved in its creation.

When the image emerges, the subject may feel increased tension since the tension within the subject is accessed in that moment and the image carries in it the intensity of the tension associated with the event in question. Dark images may appear, such as a black cloud that seems to encompass the entire horizon, a repulsive face, a threatening animal or other types of images that may particularly impress the subject. The subject is encouraged verbally to look at that image in a detached manner, getting involved in any way, without performing any action in relation to the object in the image and without attempting to evade observing that image or object (without abandoning the procedure). If the subject is extremely tense, it is recommended that they are spoken to so as to understand that nothing bad can happen to them, that this is just an image they are seeing while they are with the therapist. Interrupting the session is not recommended unless the tension of the moment becomes



unbearable to the subject. The subject will be directed to start describing the image as seen and according to the subject's expression abilities, as follows:

*Now, please tell me what shape it has... What color... What size and what it is made of... Please describe its structure to me, what kind of material you think it is made of... It can be a hard material, like wood, rock, plastic or metal, or maybe it is soft like canvas, cardboard or gelatin, you tell me... Look at its contour carefully and then inside it, in its very structure, to see what the shape is composed of... And if you can't get close enough yet to examine it, just look at it... Don't be afraid, it can't harm you, even if you are experiencing tension... Therefore, you just pay attention to it, its colors, its shape, all that defines it...*

*Now please tell me again what color it is and what dimensions... In time, you will see that both its color and, likely, its size change... After you look at it and see its structure (inside, what it is composed of), even its consistency will change... You have to remain attentive and focused on it at all times, you must observe it...*

The subject is asked to verbalize their experience, to describe in as much detail as possible all of the characteristics of that object/image on whose detailed observation they are focusing mentally. Thus, the subject is specifically guided to describe the color of the object in the image that appeared, its shape and dimensions, what it comprises, what material could be associated with it in terms of structure/texture (what it is made of: wood, iron, plastic, paper, cardboard, rock, rubber etc.). Any developments in describing the object in question are very important and useful, as they mean that the subject is getting used to analyzing that image in a detached manner and that they are starting to process it. The profound effect will be that the subject will become accustomed with that tension inside them, they will be able to bear it in a more detached manner, it will no longer hold that much significance to them, they will not run away from it any longer etc.

Subsequently, under the effect of this focused observation, the subject will be asked to resume the description, insisting again on the observable features of the object in the image that appeared to them, particularly insisting on looking at it closely and observing the contour of the object, even if initially it may be out of the visual field (for instance, "I see a black cloud that covers the entire sky"). Throughout the process of focused nonparticipant observation, the object that appeared in the field of consciousness as an image will change its shape, color, structure, size, with the following general tendencies: dark objects will become clearer and brighter, tending to go from dark colors to light colors, often yellow or white; size will decrease as if the object were "melting away"; objects made from a hard structure (for example, those initially designated by the subject as being made of rock, metal, wood etc.) will become



objects with a soft structure (for instance, as if they were made of cardboard, paper, canvas, liquid etc.). Simultaneously, the subject's feelings in relation to the traumatizing event itself will gradually go from strong initial feelings, such as fear, dread, somatic symptoms, acute inner tension, to feelings of peacefulness, acceptance, calm, and relief. Although this phenomenon will occur gradually, the tendency is noticeable after the few minutes necessary to overcome the shock of confronting the pain in question (in general, between 1 and 10 minutes). We reiterate the recommendation that, in the event the subject presents strong tension in these initial minutes (the most important moments of the entire procedure), they are spoken to so as to reassure them that nothing bad can happen to them, that this is just a procedure they are performing while they are together with the therapist. It is not recommended to interrupt the session unless the tension of the moment becomes unbearable to the subject.

*Very good... How is it? Can you handle it? Is it easier to look at it now? Have you become accustomed to it? What you does the shape you're seeing look like now? Has it changed its consistency, color or size compared to what it was like when you started noticing it?*

After the appearance of the first changes in the characteristics of the object located in the field of consciousness, changes noticed and recounted by the subject, the latter is encouraged to keep describing what they are seeing and "what happens to the object/image" by questions asked on a calm and peaceful tone. The subject must be allowed to answer, to take the time necessary for observing the object/image and formulating their answers, time which must be comfortable for the subject. Pauses necessary for coming up with the answers will inevitably occur due to the subject's focus on what they are observing in the field of consciousness. It is not recommendable for the specialist to excessively insist on a quick answer. The questions will very likely be repeated often, and some of them will not be answered at all. Nevertheless, it is important for the process in question to "flow", namely for the procedure to keep moving forward. The subject may be encouraged as follows:

*I am glad that you say it's changing color and that this is easier for you and more pleasant than before... I'm glad you're not as afraid of it anymore, that it doesn't hurt so bad anymore and that you don't feel that tension as intensely as at the beginning of the exercise... Keep looking at with detachment... Look at how it's shrinking, if that's what happening, how it's changing its structure and color, but don't anticipate and don't force it... Don't force your will on it in any way, don't strain to change it in any way, just look at it, examine it and observe it with detachment...*

*By now you may be seeing some changes in the thing you're looking at... You see it changing... You see how that shape is different now than it was before, you may be seeing that what you felt before has changed and that you're*

*feeling better... Your detached gaze changed everything, your observer's gaze made it quiet down...*

*I'm glad you're feeling better now, I'm glad you're peaceful and doing much better than when we started... I'm glad you're ok, dear...*

The subject is periodically asked how they are feeling in general and what emotions they are feeling when they are looking at that image.

In general, from our findings so far, the image/object in question (the thing observed by the subject in the field of the consciousness) will subsequently take one of the following two paths of transformation:

1. It will change its size, decreasing, dissipating or diluting gradually until total disappearance. This change that simultaneously or immediately follows its change to a lighter color, and it is generally simultaneous with the subject's relief and the occurrence of a state of wellbeing. When the image dissipates entirely, the exercise ends as its aim is achieved, i.e. the psychological tension caused by the trauma decreased significantly. It must be noted that at no point must the subject act in any way so as to change or strain to change that image through their will. The subject will merely observe with detachment (as an objective scientific researcher) the changes that take place without their will or intervention, only under their focused observation. This aspect of non-intervention is of maximum importance. The detachment from the object is mandatory and results in the maximum efficiency of the intervention.

2. It will decrease in size approximately down to a human-sized object, as if it were observed from an approximate distance of 10-20 meters and will change its colors from generally dark colors to light colors; the subject will recount that they cannot accurately tell the composition of the object in the image. Sometimes it is possible for the subject to state that they feel the image is alive, as if it were living. The process will continue in the aforementioned manner, using the same questions regarding the image characteristics, but after the subject starts to calm down in relation to that image (a sort of sensation of being comfortable in its presence, with the subject using phrases such as "it's fine", "I'm not afraid anymore", "we're friends") and after seeing that the characteristics of the image do not change for a few minutes, the exercise ends even if the image has not dissolved yet, as the aim of significantly desensitizing the subject to that trauma, of helping the subject become much more comfortable with that internal trauma, was achieved.

The subject will be informed that the exercise is coming to an end and will be directed to look toward the specialist or to open their eyes if they were closed during the exercise, in conclusion to return consciously, with all their senses, to their current location:

*Now please stop all that and look toward me... Now please return here, in this place, where it's you and me... Please look at me and around you, at the place we're in... Good job, we're here and we're fine...*

The subject will be provided with a few explanations on what is likely to happen next in their life as a natural consequence of the performed exercise, concerning their processing of future experiences that have a sensitive connection to the formerly traumatizing experience:

*You see, in time, even starting today, you're likely to see something interesting happening to you... When you encounter situations that remind you of events similar to that which provoked the past pain you've worked on today, you will notice that you are far more detached, calm, peaceful... You won't be as tense as you were in the past, you will be more relaxed, you'll be better... Because that tension, that bundle of emotions trapped inside you has dissolved and has become much more harmonious... Your very gaze on it made it change... And the consequence is that you feel much better, you are much more at peace, more relaxed... In time, by performing more exercises such as this one with your other emotional pains, you will set them free, you will weaken their power to put you on edge, you will be much more harmonious and calmer in your behavior, you will be better...*

Furthermore, in the end, the subject will move on to another activity (preferably one that has a component of physical movement, such as taking a walk) that can help completely remove the subject from the memories connected to the exercise. For instance:

*Now, dear, let's go take a walk through the park, let's observe nature... It's spring and the trees are in bloom, the sun's warming up everything...*

**Final considerations:**

- it is necessary for the entire procedure to be carried out in a room where the subject is not disturbed or interrupted;
- the location must be well lit, as light is a very powerful favorable factor. Furthermore, it is particularly important that the location has an appropriate temperature, as cold is a factor that works against the technique;
- the procedure must be carried out only after obtaining an approval based on the subject's informed consent;
- the procedure must not be carried out on minors younger than 14 years old, even with parental approval;
- the procedure must not be carried out on persons on psychotropic medication, under the influence of alcohol or drugs or on persons lacking in mental capacity;

- the procedure must not be carried out by specialists who have not applied it on themselves for a reasonable number of times so that they are very familiar with its characteristics;

- the procedure is presently known only at an empirical level, with all advantages and disadvantages resulting from this state of affairs; the procedure requires deeper research to clarify all relevant aspects.

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