

Large-Group Identity

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Vortrag, 16. April 2002, im Rahmen der
52. Lindauer Psychotherapiewochen 2002 (www.Lptw.de)

The term "identity" in psychoanalysis is relatively new; Sigmund Freud himself seldom used it, and those who took up the discipline he had established tended to follow his example. Among the psychoanalysts who first brought the term to general attention was Erik Erikson - who, in 1956, seminally described a person's identity as "a sustained feeling of inner sameness within oneself ... [and at the same time] a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others." Following Erikson, it is now generally agreed that "identity" refers to a person's subjective experience of himself or herself and therefore should be distinguished from other, related concepts such as "character" or "personality": these latter terms delineate the collected impressions that other people gather of an individual's emotional expressions, modes of speech, and habitual ways of thinking and behaving. Unlike character and personality, then, identity designates the individual's inner working model of himself or herself, an individual's integration of his or her past, present, and future into a smooth continuum of remembered, felt, and expected existence. An individual with a crystallized core identity therefore has a realistic body image, inner sense of physical solidity, subjective clarity about his or her gender, a well-internalized conscience, and, most importantly for this presentation, an inner solidarity with a particular large group's ideals. By large group, I am referring to an ethnic, national, religious, or ideological group with thousands or millions of members, most of whom will never know or meet each other throughout their lives.

Any adult can typically identify various aspects of what he or she perceives as his or her unique identity related to social or professional status - one may simultaneously perceive oneself as a physician and someone who plays handball, or as a carpenter and someone who enjoys reading. On

the surface, these elements of one's "identity" seem to fit within Erikson's definition, but I do not believe that such manifestations truly reflect the sustained sense of basic sameness within oneself that Erikson identified. If a person's social or career identity is threatened, he or she may or may not experience anxiety in response - though anxiety is more likely if the threat is connected (mostly unconsciously) to one or more of the four fundamental internal danger signals identified by Freud: losing a loved one, his or her love, a body part, or self-esteem.

By way of contrast, consider an adult decompensating into schizophrenia: his or her basic sense of self-identity over time is fragmenting; he or she may feel like a star exploding into a billion pieces. Such persons are certainly experiencing anxiety - anxiety so extreme that it is unspeakably terrifying. In order to escape this terror, they create, as soon as they are able, a new sense of identity, albeit a false (psychotic) one; such persons might "reinvent" themselves as Jesus Christ or Mother Theresa. The sense of identity that such individuals are terrified of losing and are driven to replace is what I call their "core identity." The loss of one's core identity is intolerable - it is psychological death.

For this presentation, it is crucial to differentiate core identity from less essential social or professional "identities" since, as I will detail, an individual's large-group identity is intimately connected to his or her personal core identity. As a result, serious threats to large-group identity, such as a shared massive trauma caused by an enemy group that causes helplessness and humiliation, are perceived by members of that large group as individually wounding and personally endangering. Such traumas are also perceived as a threat to large-group identity and may initiate large-group regression.

We need, I believe, to study the psychoanalytic conception of large group psychology in order to understand what makes a large-group identity specific in its underlying psychological processes. Freud had theorized that large-group psychology reflected each member's oedipal issues: an individual becomes loyal to the leader as an oedipal boy sublimates his aggression against his father and identifies with him; the group forms as individuals who do the same thing in their relationship with the same leader band together. Over years of observation of international relationships, however, I have shifted the study of large-group psychology from the individual's perception of what a large group means to him or her to the structure of large-group psychology in its own right. When I think of the classical Freudian theory, I visualize the people ranged around a great maypole, which represents the group's leader, as if in a May Dance of identification with each other and idealization and support of the leader. I have built upon this metaphor by imagining a canvas over the people, the "tent-canvas" of large-group identity; the people surrounding the pole are

determined to keep the pole upright so that the canvas itself remains taut, a protective cover to the individuals beneath. That is to say, large-group activities center around maintaining the integrity of the group's identity; follower-leader interactions are just one element of this effort. In my experience, leaders and followers' efforts to maintain, repair, and sometimes modify the large-group identity "contaminate," or accompany and affect, all "real world" issues, from legal to economic to military. Large-group rituals exist to maintain and/or to strengthen the fabric of large-group identity and to repair any wear and tear in it. Thus, I have begun to focus on the various efforts of the leader and his or her followers to keep their tent canvas upright, rather than on members' perceptions and expectations of the leader's role alone.

This presentation includes a description of large-group rituals and of 18 signs and symptoms that appear when a large group regresses.

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