Identity concepts today and in the future

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Since the appearance of Erik Erikson's book "Identity, Youth and Crisis", it has remained indisputable in developmental psychology that the establishment of an autonomous identity can be seen as the most important purpose of adolescence. In this respect, Erikson's insights are still valid today. However his idea that identity is something that is formed once in a human's lifetime, namely at the adolescent stage, and that it remains unchanged for the remainder of that life, has since been criticised. This is not the right place to discuss the academic criticism of Erikson's theories; those interested in this topic should refer to the thorough investigation by Barkhaus (1999) in the newly published textbook for remedial education by Dohrenbusch and Blickenstorfer. Nowadays there is general consensus that identity is not an emotional characteristic that is acquired once and never changes. It is assumed that an active construct process on behalf of the individual is necessary in order to create one's identity and for it to remain stable in spite of the changing contexts one encounters in the course of a lifetime.

In the days when Erikson wrote his books, people lived in comparatively leisurely conditions which enabled them to build up long-term perspectives. They could fall back on a generally accepted system of values and norms. Today however, and probably in the future, these stabilising factors are becoming more and more a thing of the past. The contexts over which the identity of a person has to be relatively balanced in order for this person to remain emotionally healthy, are changing so fast that former identity constructs are becoming redundant. Many books deal with this phenomenon and pose the question as to how long people will be able to function in a system that continues to demand more and more flexibility, both economical and political, from the individual (see Sennett 1998).

In the meantime, voices from the post-modern era have been raised suggesting that the term identity should no longer be defined using tradition methods of psychology and philosophy. One of the best known advocates of this position is Gergen (1996). Gergen talks about a multiphrenic personality and maintains that the obsession of ordering the many facets of modern life into one unit actually hinders rather than assists people in the development of their personal freedom. I investigate this theme in more detail in the textbook by Dohrenbusch and Blickenstorfer (Storch 1999).

We must test our educational concepts and see if they will function in the future. The most important developmental function of adolescence is that of establishing identity. As a consequence,

we have to ask ourselves how we define identity. It is only on the basis of a useful definition that we can plan and evaluate educational intervention.

Opinions concerning the question of identity oscillate between two poles. On one hand, every emotionally healthy person knows the feeling that he is unique, different from everyone else. Emotionally healthy people have a kind of personal core that belongs to them only and that accompanies them right throughout their lives. People who have lost their personal core suffer tremendously and are defined in our society as psychologically ill. The position of the personal core, to define the classic position by the definition of identity, is the same one supported by Erikson. This position underlines the lasting feeling of uniqueness that people can and should have to be able to lead a content life.

The post modern position, as Gergen sees it, stresses all the possible ways a person can experience something. This position is also worthy of some consideration. Do you know the feeling of having said or done something and afterwards thinking "Was that really me?" Where were your personal core and your feeling of identity at that moment? Another typically German example: a man works diligently the whole year round in the town hall and then goes on his two week holiday to Majorca and lets it all hang out? Who is this man really? Is he the hardworking civil servant or the promiscuous carouser? Where is his personal core? What is his identity? We all know less dramatic examples from our own lives. We behave differently in different situations.

I truly hope you have various patterns of behaviour at your disposal, depending on whether you are discussing a problem with your colleagues, or whether you are intervening in the education of one of your entrusted protégés, or whether you are approaching a member of the opposite sex with some kind of erotic intention. You act differently in each situation and feel very different each time. Where is your personal core in all this multiplicity to be found? Where has the one unit gone, which one of your behaviours is the real one? The inner dynamics of many novels and films is based on this tension a person encounters when he has to co-ordinate many experiences of his self. People who cannot do this become psychologically ill. Because our world is becoming increasingly diverse, people have more and more possibilities of experiencing themselves in various contexts and the task of co-ordinating all these different ways of experiencing continues to become more complex. The probability of co-ordinating these experiences successfully becomes less and less realistic as the diversity of the outer world increases, because the elements people have to co-ordinate constantly increase. This is the reason Gergen abandons the idea that the human should appear as one unit.

Very different educational strategies result from the various theoretical positions. When we choose to emphasise the position of the personal core, we try to help adolescents to create a lasting and stable definition of who they are and of what they wish to achieve in life. In the other case, i.e. highlighting the position of the diversity of experiences, we teach the adolescents exactly the opposite. They should not limit themselves to one definition of their self, as this could lead to

psychological instability, considering how fast the world is changing. They have to learn the very opposite, i.e. that changes are a part of life and they have to develop the ability to adapt to new contexts. Both educational strategies sound plausible, yet they are based on theoretical positions that seem to contradict each other.

In order to design a model of identity which can solve this contradiction, we need to establish some distinctions which will help us to understand the complex interaction of the various elements of the human psyche. Let us begin with the basic "furnishings" every human is equipped with when he enters this world, namely his body. When a child is born he does not yet have the ability of self contemplation and remains initially spared of all mental agony which can accompany the question of identity. He has a body consisting of a material basis of cells, flesh, bones, hormones and many other things. He can already perceive some rudimentary conditions of this body, for example, hunger, cold, wet, warmth or the feeling of being full. The cognitive development of this child however is not yet so advanced that he realises that these sensations belong to him himself, he just has them, as it were. The person and his experience make up one unit. This fact can also be observed in new born kittens when their eyes are not yet open. They exist and react to stimuli in their environment but they exist purely as creatures. It is as if their psyche is still asleep in their body. This situation is similar in the child's case, whose further development we will now pursue. Following Petzold (1982, p. 157) we will refer to the physical make-up of the child as the "body-self".

The body-self

As the child grows up, so too does its body grow. The brain grows along with the body. You have surely seen pictures of the enormous increase in neuronal cross-linking in the first years of a child's development. The brain develops at an extremely rapid pace, as do its capabilities. We are particularly interested in one aspect which is connected with the question of identity, i.e. that of cognitive development which has been thoroughly observed and investigated by Piaget (1976). In the course of cognitive development, which is related to the growth of the brain, something gradually develops in our creature-like child which we call the "ego". He suddenly has knowledge about his own person. Nowadays, thanks to developmental psychology, we have an abundance of investigations at our disposal as to how the ego develops in young children. We cannot go into more detail at this point, but those interested should refer to the corresponding chapter in the textbook on developmental psychology by Oerter and Montada (1987).

So our child, which has grown up a little in the meantime, now has two elements of his psyche at his disposal.


The I

The child has a body-self and an ego. These two elements must remain separate in order to apply our theory. There is one vital difference between the body-self and the ego. The body-self has a material basis; it consists of skin, bones, spleen and toenails among other things. The ego does not have a material basis. Every anatomist can tell you where your spleen is. No-one can tell you where your ego is. And at the same time you still are sure that you have an ego. You have an ego, but in a completely different way that you have a spleen. Your ego is a product of your brain's activity. To express it in computer terminology the ego is a virtual matter. Cyberspace does not exist in the same way that your apartment or the desk in your office does. At the same time it is a place where you can spend time (all Internet addicts know how long you can spend in virtual rooms). It is exactly the same with your ego. It exists, not materially like the body-self, but rather

virtually, like cyberspace. Just as virtual cyberspace is a product of the material computer, the virtual ego is similarly a product of the material brain.

Many misunderstandings regarding the nature of the human psyche are the results of ignoring the difference between virtual and material existence. The body-self is material and the ego is virtual. Strictly speaking, our ego is like a phantom inside our head, a ghost which tells more or less sensible ghost stories.

As soon as the ego can begin to work, when the brain is developed enough, a very specific activity begins. The ego looks for the answer to the question "Who am I?" It begins to ask this question because it realises at some point it has a body-self, and that this body-self is different to that of other people, and because it would like to clarify what is specific to his own body-self. In other words the ego begins to think about its body-self. Initially, the ego is not aware that he has embarked on this activity. The intestine digests, the lungs bring oxygen to the brain and the brain produces an ego which thinks about the owner of the brain and the body belonging to it. Quite easy really. So now we have our child with a functioning ego who begins to think about his surroundings.
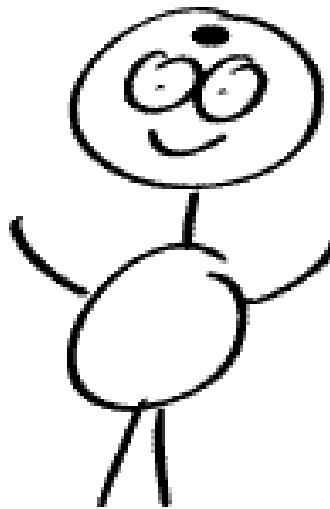
Who am I?

Now the ego starts his activity and begins thinking. Exactly how the ego carries out this activity has extremely important consequences for our model of identity. The ego's contemplation of the body-self happens in two ways. First, it registers information from the outside world and second, it has the possibility of reflecting upon this information.

2 ways to an answer

Figure 4 demonstrates this process visually. It shows a teacher (or some authoritative person), and how he influences the adolescent. The teacher is telling the adolescent who he is, what he should do, what he should not do etc. The adolescent is listening carefully and registers the information (1), but also takes the liberty to think about what he is being told (2). This freedom of being capable of thinking about what teachers and educators tell adolescents has caused many educational plans to fail. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon (2) as "Perturbations from the autopoietic systems", following the autopoiesis by Maturana and Varela. Kegan (1986) offers a plausible and sensitive analysis of the above phenomenon (1), i.e. how important the outer world is in constructing an idea of the self. I myself have also investigated this topic (Storch, 1994).

The ego's procedure of trying to answer the burning question as to who he is is a very sensible procedure. He observes other peoples' reactions to his behaviour, takes this information into account and thinks about it. This process may seem very reasonable and obvious but difficulties can arise very quickly. The problems arise from the fact that the adolescent who gathers information about himself is not entirely alone - that there are various other people involved. You probably all remember stories from your childhood about experiences with your dear old grandmother or your favourite uncle. I was always an angel in my grandmother's eyes, no matter what I got up to. And I realised quite early that one and the same action would produce a Maja-angel in my grandmother's eyes and a Maja-devil in my mother's eyes. I had to find a solution for this contradictory information by contemplating (2) how I could reconcile the information about Little Devil and Little Angel from the outer world (1). The solution to this problem is part of my private life which I shall not go into here. There are many different solutions to such contradictions,

as many solutions as there are functioning egos. The complete list of defence functions carefully compiled by Anna and Sigmund Freud are examples of solutions to this contradiction. Academic psychology has added the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance by Festinger (1957) and the Attribution Theory by Weiner (1976) to this list.
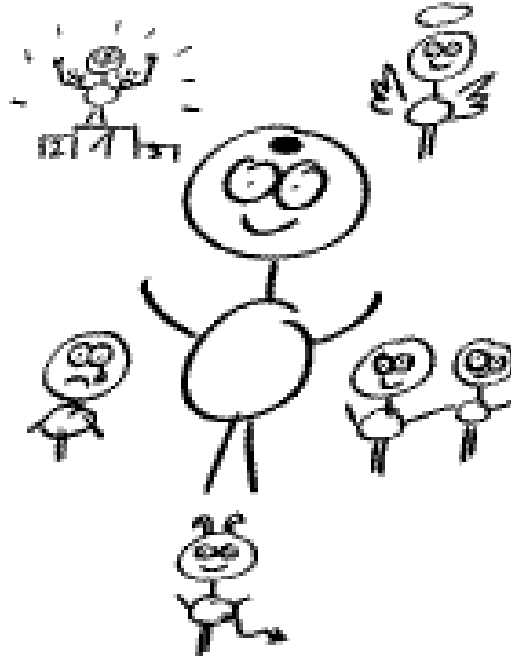
Information from the outer world is not usually straightforward; rather it is diverse and varied. The result is a myriad of mini theories the ego has developed concerning himself and his body-self. Following Mead (1983), who thought in detail about this process, we will call these mini theories the "me's". Mead called them "me's" in order to distinguish between the ego as a recognising subject and the ego as a recognised object. "I think about me": The me is the result of the contemplation of the ego, it is not the same as the I. Can you follow the development? We are getting more and more virtual and we are getting dizzier and dizzier. We agreed that the ego itself is a virtual matter. Now this virtual ghost in our head is thinking and creating more and more mini ghosts! Those interested in further reading concerning this theme should consult the recent publications on study on the brain and consciousness, for example Varela (1988), Roth (1996), Meier and Ploog (1997), and Schnabel and Sentker (1998).
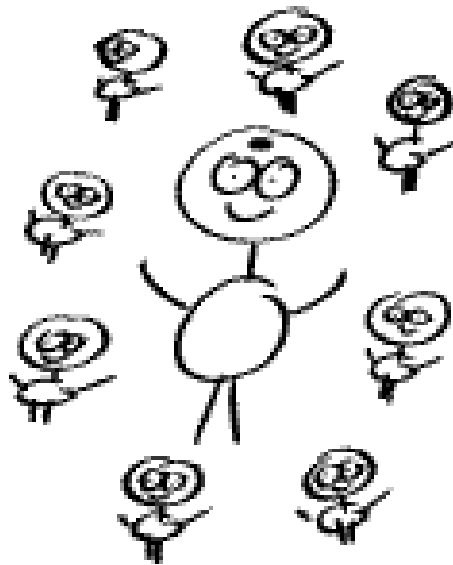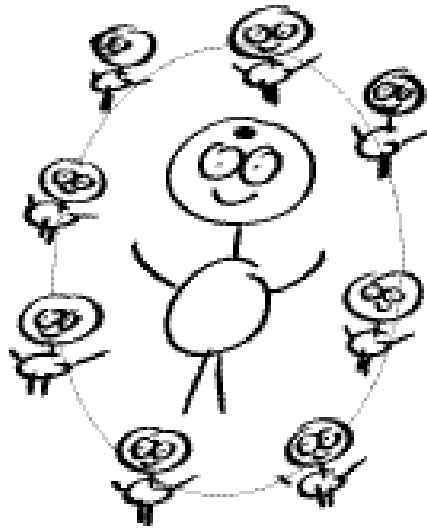

The me's

At this stage the adolescent has to deal with three different elements of his psyche, with his body-self, his ego and the me's the ego creates by registering and processing information from the outer world. As we have already seen from my own personal example of Maja-the-Little-Angel-and-Maja-the-Little-Devil, the various me's do not necessarily have to live in harmony with each other.

It is possible that they contradict each other. Fig. 6 shows the multiplicity of me's most people in the western world create in the course of their development from adolescence to adulthood.

The multiplicity of me's

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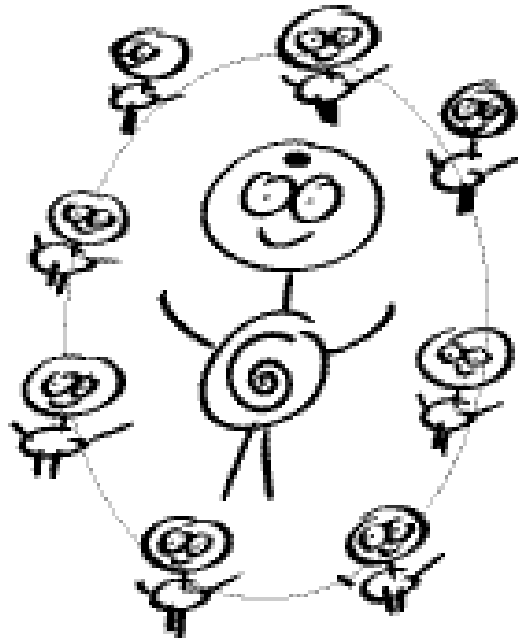
The identity

Psychotherapy has developed possibilities of organising the multiplicity of the me's. Moreno was one of the first to abandon the idea of the personal core of the individual and began to work therapeutically on the multiplicity of the inner roles (this is how he refers to the me's). He called the technique he developed within the framework of psychodrama the "cultural atom". Roesler (1991) has written a good introduction to this theme. Satir (1997) adopted Moreno's technique and slightly adapted it. She calls her approach the "Parts Party". Schulz von Thun (1998) has recently published a book in which he calls the multiplicity of me's the "inner team". He describes various methods which can assist the ego to create a harmonious unit from the inner multiplicity.

It is very important for people whose profession it is to help others organise their me's to have a diagnostic criterion by which they can decide whether the organisation has been successful or not. We would like to have something like a guide, particularly in our work with adolescents where it is possible to observe the search for identity step by step.

Such a guide does actually exist, and it draws its scientific basis from neurobiology. The guide to successful identity is a feeling, be it in the sense of an emotion or a physical sensation. Blasi (1988) was one of the first psychologists to claim that the theme of identity does not limit itself to pure brainwork. A summary of his theory can be found in Storch (1999).

The feeling of identity

If we want to know when our search for identity is going in the right direction, we have to search for a good feeling. The neurologist Damasio (1994) has developed a theory of human decision patterns and this theory can also be employed for our model of identity. To choose from all the multiplicity of me's is simply another way of saying to make a decision.

One has to take advantage of all the possibilities of freedom Gergen refers to and to make good decisions, otherwise one will drown in this sea of possibilities. Domasio developed his theory of somatic markers which he presumed to be in the prefrontal cortex. Somatic markers are acquired via experiencing and are vital for survival. Thanks to a very effective system of somatic markers, people are able to examine a huge diversity of information to see if certain scenarios are useful or damaging to themselves. These processes usually take place subconsciously. A very simple, but highly effective principle for survival. When a somatic marker appears, it says its name and expresses itself in the body. We can perceive the activity of the somatic markers by observing the people during our work: somatic markers manifest themselves through clearly visible physical signs, for example, the cheeks turn red, the pupils dilate, breathing rhythms and posture often change. In general the person begins to look happier and a smile often appears. In my seminars I call the appearance of the somatic markers which point in the direction of a successful search for

identity the "smile of blissful happiness". This smile of blissful happiness is of great assistance in order to be able to diagnose whether one is searching on the right track or whether one has to change the direction of one's quest for identity. If you continue to follow the direction the guide and the somatic markers map out for you, you can be sure that you are on the right path with the person you are working with. Gendlin (1998), the inventor of "Focussing", was already on the same track as Damasio thanks to his idea of the "felt sense" and to his precise observational talents. Today, Damasio can prove this theory with the newest research methods in neurology.

The smile of blissfull happiness

We still have not found an answer to our initial question: Who is right? The people who defend the theory of the personal core or those who speak of an endopsychic multiplicity? As we now know, they are both right. Because it is the ego itself that produces the multiplicity. And because the ego is virtual, all the its products are also virtual and extremely diverse. But because people have a system of somatic markers at their disposal within the physical make up of their bodies, they experience the virtual multiplicity incessantly created by the ego in the body-self either as a positive of a negative feeling. Hence, each person's personal core is a type of reference system, also called the body-self.

But what consequences does this have for people working in pedagogics? In the future our outer world will become more and more diverse and more and more new me's will be produced in young people's psyche accordingly. A young person today has to deal with a far greater multiplicity of me's compared to his grandparents' generation for example. In earlier days, the quantity and character of the possible me's was widely determined by where and when an individual was born, by his sex and by the social standing of his parents. Furthermore, the me's remained stable to a large extent throughout the life of the individual because the contexts did not change much. Thus, the individual had time to bring harmony into his inner team. Today, the inner

team is characterised by a high fluctuation in personnel, if we want to stick to his metaphor. As a result, young people will have to learn to become their own personnel manager, as it were.

What do people working in education have to teach young people in order to prepare them for the future? There are two things to be considered. First, young people have to realise that their identity will not be handed to them on a plate as it was in the case of their parents and grandparents. Because the outer world is becoming more diverse, so too are the possibilities people have to chose between. This has certain advantages for people, for example the freedom mentioned by Gergen. But it creates disadvantages also, loss of security for instance. Young people today have to learn that they have to work at their identity, it is an active process they have to bring about themselves. They also have to learn that they cannot presume the one identity they have worked out for themselves will remain appropriate for a lifetime.

They have to find out which personal guide is theirs in order to survive the sea of possibilities. That is the path to the blissful smile of happiness. It is that good feeling created by the somatic markers which signals to the owner of the body-self: this path is good for you.
Taking drugs is one way this good feeling can be produced chemically. If you can help young people to achieve the smile of blissful happiness by actively working on their identity, they will no longer need chemicals for this procedure.

You *feel* a successful identity, you do not *think* it. It is essential for people working in pedagogics to know this before they can convey it to their protégés. Young people must be trained to become experts of their own personal identity diagnosis, to express it scientifically. They must learn how it feels when something is good for them. Many young people will probably first of all have to learn how feelings feel in the first place. Many of them may never have experienced the smile of blissful happiness. Numerous directors and managers who take part in my seminars have not experienced this state very often either. The fact that we are free to plan their lives based on what makes us feel good is a novelty for the majority of people in the western world.

It is a fact that the world is changing. This change is accompanied by many worries, fears and uncertainties. But it is the only world we have. People working in education have always seen it as their task to look after the young people who have been placed in their care, voluntarily or otherwise. It is our duty to ensure that this world, the only one we have, will be the best possible world for all its inhabitants, now and it the future.

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