Personality disorders and modern culture

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ABSTRACT: In this work, the relation between the modern social context and personality—as an essential psychological entity—and its disorders were analyzed from a dialectic perspective. Therefore, I have specified the bidirectional influences of social paradigmatic changes in modernity—and in the case of postmodernity—on the construction of personal identity. A historiography of the Self throughout the diverse eras and of the more relevant social changes was carried out, emphasizing the consequences in the development of character. The analysis includes a reflection on one of the pathologies of increasing incidence in modern societies: image disorders. In the discussion, the difficulties to organize the self in an extremely subjective world, which forces a person to self-realization as existential task, is criticized.

Key words: eating disorders, culture, personality disorders, theoretical study, postmodernism.

RESUMEN: En el presente trabajo se ha analizado críticamente la relación del contexto social moderno con la personalidad –como ítem psicológico por antonomasia- y sus trastornos desde una perspectiva dialéctica. Por tanto se han explicitado las influencias bidireccionales que los cambios sociales paradigmáticos de la modernidad –y en su caso de la posmodernidad- han tenido en la construcción de la identidad personal. Se ha realizado una historiografía del Yo a lo largo de distintas épocas y de los cambios sociales más relevantes, enfatizando las consecuencias sobre la formación del carácter. El análisis incluye una reflexión sobre una de las patologías con una incidencia creciente en las sociedades modernas: los trastornos de la imagen. En la discusión se denunciarán las dificultades existentes en la configuración del Yo en un mundo subjetivizado en extremo y que obliga a la autorrealización como tarea existencial.

Palabras clave: Trastornos de la conducta alimentaria, cultura, trastornos de la persona-lidad, estudio teórico, postmodernismo.

Despite the long theoretical tradition of the culture-personality pair (Linton, 1947; Blackburn, 1945; Horney 1937), it does not seem to have been granted the expected relevance in Psychology and still less in clinical settings (Fuentes & Quiroga, 2004). Kant already mentioned that character and temperament depend on education, the environment, and lifestyle, as well as on adopting sound acquired principles (Kant, 2004 orig. 1785, pp. 17 & 41). Intrapsychic emphasis—on either the psychoanalytic or the cognitive aspect—has not concealed the evidence of cultural factors in the development of the Self (as Ortega would have said) and, thus, the dialectic relationship between subject and society does not seem debatable. Nevertheless, although personal identity is the key element of subjective reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1968, p. 214) and it depends on the dialogical relationship with other human being (Taylor, 1994, p. 81), there are few works about personality and its disorders that analyze the emergence of the Self, taking into account the social fabric that shapes them. Nevertheless, as a social

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phenomenon, subjectivity has been a fruitful path towards the knowledge of psychopathological deficits (Stanghellini, 2004 p. 15). Despite Jasper's warning that psychological disorders originate in tensions with the community or society of reference, this may not have been studied in detail with due rigor (Jaspers, 1993 origin. 1913, p. 784). Currently, interesting approaches, such as that of Sass (1994) about the relation between the modern culture and madness, or of Stanghellini (2004, 2005), calling our attention to the need for new theories to explain the construction of personal identity in this era of change, are probably the precursors to the study of psychopathology and the social condition of the human being.

In the presentation, culture will be emphasized as a root variable to explain the genesis of personality, considered a behavior pattern selected by relevant bio-socio-familiar contingencies; the social environment will ultimately reveal who one is. In this work, I shall describe in three sections the relation between social changes and personality: the first section is about the historiography of the Self throughout diverse eras, the second one is related to the most outstanding social changes of modernity and their impact on the development of personality, and, lastly, I will present a paradigm of a modern psychological disorder.

Historiography of the Self

It could be said that personality has not always existed, in spite of having one (as Molière's character noted with surprise about the discovery of speaking in prose without knowing it). The commercial revolution and the Protestant Reformation were the main defenders of the concept of the Self. Before that landmark, the notion of the Self was integrated within the social role. Thus, for example, in the Middle Ages, the subject already had prescribed from birth a role related to his social status and working place, which provided a firm sense of group, and it was easier for him to feel sure about who he was and what was expected of him in life. Living conditions may have been hard but the psychological conditions were simple. The social order prevailed over the individual (Bruckner, 1996). The commercial revolution introduced the possibility of "transformation," that is, the possibility of being a different "self" and, therefore, the responsibility of being the agent of one's own destiny. This opened a new horizon and the need to focus one's attention on oneself in order to earn one's living, in which the need "to be somebody" emerged. Such omnipotence provided by freedom brought fear with it; the fear of freedom (Fromm, 1941). One could say that Man entered the "*era of perpetual torment*" (Bruckner, 1996). Like all social institutions, the Church reformed, adapting to the times, staking on the weakening of social links and emphasizing economic-spiritual individualism (Murphy, 1956, pp. 853-862). Sennet warned that the Protestant individual had to assume responsibility for his lifetime ethically (Sennet, 2000, p. 109). *Ora et Labora* implied a disciplined use of time and the function of work as a test of a subject's moral value. This philosophy of life would shape the Protestant's character.

The romantic period is acknowledged as the era in which the *internal world* expanded unprecedentedly, and Rousseau's "feeling of existence" was the way to feel *par excellence*. Personality traits, considered an internal *thing* that drives an individual

to act are underlined (Gergen, 1992, pp. 43-51). The ethics of authenticity emerged in which good and evil were linked to one's feelings, and morals had an inner voice (Taylor, 1994). Each person had his own measure and, therefore, felt the need to be faithful to himself. The bases of what would later be modern subjectivism were set.

Towards the end of the 19th and 20th century, the Zeitgeist strayed from the romantic enchantment (Gergen, 1992, p. 51), probably because the need for mercantile expansion and the preparation for war reinforced scientific work and instrumental reason. Scientific-like psychologies began to hatch out and the mechanicist version of the mind—with the metaphor of the cerebral machine and its circuits and associative networks—was paradigmatic. At last, mental processes could be measured and the end of the 20th century was a decade in which the discoveries about the human brain seemed to lead towards Nature's best kept secret. At last, the mysterious romantic Self gave way to a modern machine-like self, thereby, susceptible to being measured and controlled (Gergen, 1992, pp. 73-74). However, in the last few decades of the 20th century (a historical period frequently called postmodernism), the unprecedented speed and intensity of social changes have been particularly relevant for the rapid modification of character.

SOCIAL CHANGES
"The times they are a' changing" (Bob Dylan)

The concept of infancy and social-educational practices, linked both to the physical and meta-physical (values) conditions, should be mentioned first because of their undoubted impact on the development of the Person. Such practices initiate the configuration of emotions and, therefore, the sense of the Self and the world, from the early years of life, and the variability of emotions in diverse societies—both diachronically and synchronically—is extraordinary. As described by Nussbaum (2008), Chinese babies are encouraged to remain immobile, North American babies are flooded with stimuli and encouraged to move around, whereas Hindu babies' mothers carry them and suckle them on demand, but their face-to-face interactions are minimal. Likewise, educational patterns to assimilate the distinction between boys or girls are different depending on the society of reference.

Despite the importance of childhood in the development of the person, historically, it was not a relevant topic of study until well into the 20th century, as it was thought that children had no "personality," nor did they have the rank of "persons" as they could not *reason*. Before the 17th century, children were considered miniature adults (they were dressed like adults, their social behavior was identical to that demanded of adults in the work or customs setting), although they were denied adults' privileges. There were no games, activities, or literature targeting that stage of the life span. With the arrival of the industrial revolution, children's lives were drastically conditioned, and especially the less favored classes, with the massive incorporation of children to the work market and, therefore, with contingencies that hindered immaturity or having an infantile personality. The value of infancy was calculated—literally—in economic terms and, given the high child mortality, the number of children born was more important than each specific human being. At the same time, the upper classes—which had the

necessary time to observe and attend their children's behavior—probably valued their children as inheritors of their position, fortune, or knowledge, and therefore, dedicated more time to interact, instruct, and direct their development (undoubtedly influenced by Christian morals and Humanist thinkers). Children were considered beings undergoing development and transformation (who should mature until becoming adults). The importance of infantile education increased exponentially as of the Lockian theory of the "tabula rasa," although infantile plasticity had already been understood—and taken advantage of—by the clergy. Kant had already noted that the ultimate end of education was to learn to venerate the right of man and the dignity of the human being.

Therefore, the importance of education as a social issue has a long trajectory. Throughout the 20th century, childhood occupied a privileged place in the western world, both its study and the increase of social practices related to children (universal rights, protection, responsibility, education, psychological care). The Kantian intention was to install universal morals and to allow the development of a perfect society. The moral conscience would be a vicar of God on earth and would lead to solving social conflicts by appealing to these morals that transcend frontiers, without the need for wars.

However, although the globalization and universalization of the human being is morally accepted, reality has gone down another pathway. That lofty desire of the 18th century seems to be in crisis, just as much as the family. The incorporation of women to work, the unfolding of theories about how to educate, anxiety in the psychological scrutiny of minors, given the current confusion about what is good and bad for healthy psychological development, have relieved the family of its classical responsibilities, handing over to organizations and social institutions the control of important "family affairs" (Horney, 1937, pp. 70-71; Lasch, 1999, p. 286). In fact, it seems we have gone from blaming the family for children's psychological problems to blaming the brain, for example (González & Pérez Álvarez, 2007 p. 93); thus, a fearful and avoidant personality whose external expression could be tachycardia, sweating, cognitive blocking, feeling dizzy, etc., is the consequence of an alteration of the locus ceruleus instead of extremely overprotecting family dynamics and an exaggerated show of alarm in the face of "the drama of life," or children's aggressiveness at school is considered an alteration in the amygdala and not a behavior very much of our times, which rewards indiscriminately without the—necessary—existence of merit. No doubt, it is remarkably reinforcing to accept these new *causal loci*—whether the brain, school, or bad company—either to spread guilt or to completely dodge responsibility.

Genetics also seem to be a good excuse. In any case, one of the currently unsolved conflicts is related to the high position of infancy and the adult's need for self-realization; children need time and effort that is sometimes incompatible with, for example, personal growth, a professional career, or the parents' leisure time. One way to respond to conflict is to ignore such coercions and focus on the processes of "self-realization," especially in people with a fragile identity (Taylor, 1994 p. 90) and to look for agents to take on the responsibility for the child's psychological development in the above sense.

One of the big changes in our way of life in recent years is women's incorporation

into the working world, but other important changes in working conditions have had a large impact on the (de)formation of character (Sennet, 2000). Currently, industrial capitalism has given way to a system whose essential characteristics are the reinvention of bureaucracy (with very expensive and inefficient, but very popular bureaucratic systems), the flexibility of production, with factories moving to countries with cheap labor and subcontracts so that the worker "loses sight of" the product, and lastly, the movements of big businesses whose real assets only reach 25% of the operations carried out.

A devastating effect of these and other factors is the economic and social crisis that has been here since 2008. Despite experts' predictions, the system went on as if nothing were happening; banks gave credit without guarantees, states spent money left and right, smoke took the place of real money, the citizen was led to believe he had no limits, modeling his character to seek immediate reinforcement, and mortgage products were created that would be a trap for people's entire lives. It is easy to "grab" the disenchanted citizen, as the working identity has been in crisis for a long time: computerization (even to prescribe pharmacological treatments) and technology brought on by aseptic and comfortable working environments have distanced the workers from the product so that their working identity has become remarkably weak (Sennet, 2000, p. 73).

The lack of current work commitment is partially due to scant understanding of the job, which generates indifferent, detached, acritical, or burnt-out subjects. We have gone from carrying out works to making products. The only challenge is not to make an art of one's work, but to assume *risk*. In the late or current flexible capitalism, older workers lack the necessary energy to adapt to the demands which have emerged because of the fast changes in business, avoiding situations of uncertainty. Experience is no longer a value in the modern world (Sennet, 2000 pp. 97-101). The rule was to seize the moment without trusting future plans.

The other option was to avoid such uncertainty by working for the State, abandoning other work or intellectual options, perhaps more or stimulating for personal development, so that we have gone on wasting the gross national product on public offers of employment (convenient to tranquilize certain lobbies and to capture others), but increasing the machinery that generates corrupted characters that have often ended up learning to be lazy. Citizens turn toward the soft and paternalistic State, seeking impossible protection: rescue plans to save only some of the debts incurred because the new "spirit of the times" made us think "all is well." Within this frightening and hopeless context, new saviors are needed; drama has historically conspired with the return to Religion and/or Revolution, although recently, prayers are aimed at the Obama effect. Seeking the scapegoat and the savior has been generalized due to victimism and infantilism, two of the pathologies of modernity denounced by Bruckner (1996). On the one hand, blame for our suffering is projected onto the enemy and, therefore, the end justifies any means (war, terrorist attacks, corruption, prevarication, theft, etc.) and, on the other hand, generalized anesthesia of one's conscience; the adult becomes infantile and demands life benefits without any strong commitment.

Thus, work ethics as a right and moral and material responsibility has turned into

work as a means to gain freedom to consume; in other words, the equivalence relation of autonomy-consumption has been established. Thus, the old control that was traditionally exercised by the family is taken over by large companies that operate with the great publicity gear (Lasch, 1999, pp. 101-102). We have gone from the value of producing, doing, manufacturing, leaving an opus all through one's existence to mere consumption.

This has affected the human being not only in his *modus vivendi* but also in the modification of values, attitudes, feelings, and social relations. It could be stated that "I am reincarnated, to a great extent, in the products that are consumed" (Martín Murcia, 2006). Products for sale are not important because of issues of usefulness—in fact, they are not very useful—but because of their psychological properties. Such objects with subjective properties conform a fleeting Self, as ephemerous as fashions. Psychology itself is not removed from the forms and ways of fashion and from the same controlling agents (Fuentes & Quiroga, in press). But the poor psychological nutritious function due to the rapid obsolescence of consumable objects leaves the Self in a state of constant famine, so the need to consume increases exponentially, in view of the power of an intermittent reinforcement program. The Self no longer depends on the works carried out by human beings but on the result of a large-scale marketing project transmitted through communication technologies.

These technologies are a part of one of the most influential social changes in modern man's behavior. The emergence of an enormous comparative context, given the quantity of people with whom a person really or virtually contacts (in this case, it makes no difference) in a very short life-time, generates saturation of the Self. According to Gergen (1992, p. 211) "the autobiography becomes a sociobiography." If the Self takes on the form of significant models, and the mirror of possibilities to construct personal identity is enormous, the colonized Self (Gergen, 1992, p. 100) is split and dispersed, becoming more *contingent* than *consistent* (Pérez Álvarez, 2001). The Self is in an ongoing process, an unfinished Self, or rather, there are a plurality of Selves.

In fact, it is not surprising that personality has been defined as a work of art, as it is the ethical and esthetic style that each person lends to his or her life according to the corresponding circumstances and social values (Pérez Álvarez & García-Montes, 2004); to construct oneself is an arduous task in modern times.

Social relations and the expansion of subjective life have shaped an unstable personal identity, extremely dependent on volatile circumstances. As relative as the postmodern Truth; reality has ceased to be tangible and now depends on the observer's eye (Gergen, 1992, p. 127, Watzlawick, 1998, p. 11). The current constructivist perspective does not seem to seek man's responsibility for increasing his wisdom to intervene in the subjective reality, as a true value of existence (Ortega, 1981 orig. 1914, p. 147), but instead the subject is granted the power of having his own Truth, his own opinion, and therefore, he has been driven to the boldness that is so typical of ignorance.

An example of the distress of modernity is seen in the excess of individualism and in the "pitiful well-being" (Taylor, 1994); inner withdrawal, the result of modern freedom, and the dissolving of moral horizons has turned the subject into the "center of his attention." Current theologies refer to salvation/healing on earth, and the result is the withdrawal from therapeutic scenarios (Gergen, 1992, p. 34). It is not surprising

that psychological (self-esteem, psychoanalysis), pseudo-psychological (new age), and psychiatric (cosmetic psychopharmacology) culture is extending, in view of the value of health as the lack of distress (Lasch, 1999, pp. 27-32, Pérez Álvarez, 2003, pp. 40-41). At the beginning of the 20th century, Jaspers (1993, orig. 1913) denounced the onset of the Renting Neurosis because of the 1880 legislation on accidents and the specialists' eagerness to diagnose.

So, the strategy of generating treatments to cure or treat psychological disorders simultaneously prescribed (González & Pérez Álvarez, 2007; Blech, 2005) deserves special mention because of its particular impact on the generation of needs, expectations, and fears in people of the modern world, although evidently, it is not a recent phenomenon; remember the history of hysteria in which Jaspers (1993 orig. 1913, p. 810) denounced that hysteria in the times of Charcot had more to do with ignorant prescription than with a medical-biological entity. In fact, the World Health Organization already declared that health is not just the absence of disease; however, well-being is not a clear entity (Boixareu, 2008, pp.103-107). It depends on the needs created by certain social and economical institutions publicized through the social communication networks.

Health-related parameters are constantly modified, often because of commercial interests rather than true scientific progress (Langbein & Ehgartner, 2004). Thus, the Greek *pharmakós*, a ritual in which the disease was cast out, has grown exponentially. Health practices take up a good part of modern man's life: exercise, esthetic care, diet, balance, self-esteem, success, relaxation, biochemical (cholesterol, triglycerides), hormone (substitutive therapies in men and women during their climaterium) and viral control (Human papillomavirus vaccines for western societies, which, paradoxically, are the ones with the lowest prevalence of cervical cancer).

The current concern with health, ageing, and death has become a real obsession (Lasch, 1999, pp. 253-263); panic due to our pathologization of old age as something to cure or treat has increased exponentially in a vicious circle because of the exaggerated biotechnological optimism that suggestively invites us to believe we will win the war against old age (although many products with scientific forms are reduced to dietetics of the Hippocratic corpus). But prolonging life expectancy is not the same as avoiding old age and/or death (Fukuyama, 2002, pp.101-123). And therefore, the need to realize, to become aware of one's own body, of oneself, and of the finiteness of existence. But this level of pre-concern has a price: The human being became entangled in his subjectivity instead of in the important issues of life and this is the starting point of diverse psychological disorders, including devastating alterations like schizophrenia (Ensum & Morrison, 2003; Sass, 2003).

Image Psychopathology

One of the main pillars of the distress of modernity is relativism, the "scion of individualism" (Taylor, 1994 p. 49), which leads to the myth of self-realization.

The subject must decide which values should guide his life, but from ego-centrism. It is easy to fall into the temptation of self-indulgent goals and infantile demands, such as social acknowledgement, dependence on affection, and anxiety if one

does not receive the slice of cake one deserves. But this fear of the narcissistic wound makes it impossible for modern man to provide what is demanded (Horney, 1937, p. 91). In fact, he is highly hostile in the face of anticipated loss. Ortega distinguished trivial, envious, and self-complacent individualism from valuable individualism earned by achieving the greatest possible understanding of the world (Ortega, 1981 origin. 1914, p. 158).

But, as mentioned, wisdom does not seem to be the current way to deal with anxiety, but rather seeking affection, control, and acknowledgement. Such life goals have generated impatient, suspicious, irritable people, with a very low frustration threshold, and a constant fear of failure; we live within a perpetual examination and this prevents us from building fair relationships. The loss of transcendental referents and egocentric withdrawal are the pillars of the narcissistic development of personality, one of the distinct modern patterns (Lasch, 1999). Chronic adolescence and the need for acknowledgement in multiple selves make up unstable or borderline personalities.

Hyper-reflectiveness favors schizoid self-absorption. If dependence on one's image, the fear of failure, and the need to control are essentially modern psychological products, it is not surprising that the search for a valuable personal identity involves control over one's body, given the equivalence of success-thinness and the tools provided by society (diets, light products, pharmacological goods, exercise). Ontological uncertainty, adolescence as a critical stage in the development of personality, and the socio-familiar reinforcement of achieving perfection, thus avoiding the possible/probable failure through control of food, studies, social relations, thoughts, and emotions are a breeding ground for one of the psychological disorders with increasing incidence in the modern world: eating disorders (EAs).

Problems with body image are the pathognomic criteria, which is completely logical if we observe the hypertrophy of visual material in our iconographic society (Lasch, 1999, p. 71). EAs have been classified as culture-bound syndromes, although this can be taken loosely. The fact that the prevalence data in the western culture— or in those cultures, such as Iran or Fiji, where the values of modern body image were acquired (Abdohalli & Mann, 2001; Martínez, 2001, pp. 116-117)—do not cast any doubt on the cultural impact of this way of "getting sick," does not mean that the epidemic is just due to the predominant social models, but rather, it could involve the peculiar construction of identity in modern times.

Tracing the genealogy of EAs along the lines of García-Montes & Pérez-Álvarez (2003) on schizophrenia, we observe a similar phenomenology in the classic cases. The Self imprisoned in a body to be shaped in the image of the *exanime* Christ of Santa Liberata up to Catherine of Sienna (Toro, 1996, p. 17-19), within the moral context of flight from the coarser passions, unwanted marriages, or of reflecting until achieving ecstatic experiences is not far removed from the current anorexias (although the morals are different). This new morality of self-realization is found in the famous cases of the Empress Sissi and Lord Byron, in whom the reinforcement of being or remaining in a successful social position and the license of practical duties merge so that their lifetime becomes more subjective and their existence is dramatic.

Of course, once the pathway to controlling ingestion has begun, certain, perhaps

unexpected for the patients, maintenance effects are found, such as analgesia from the pain caused by cachexy or avoiding life's responsibilities, which could have a compensating function in depressive states and when faced with traumatic life events. Thus, in the modern world, there are more conditions to cause the Self's development task to involve eliciting body-related dysfunctional behaviors.

The most relevant personality characteristics found in clinical literature are perfectionism, rigidity, remoteness or extreme emotional instability, social avoidance, sexual inhibition or promiscuity, anhedonia, alexithymia, extreme family dependence, manipulation, lying, and difficulties to fantasize (Martín Murcia, 2006). It seems that restrictive Anorexia Nervosa has a distinctive pattern of being-in-the-world versus compulsive semiologies; an autistic format of the former could be established versus an open-to-others format in the latter. In any case, the extremely high prevalence of personality disorders found in patients with EAs shows that these psychological disorders must be reconsidered.

DISCUSSION

As noted, most of the studies confirm that the high prevalence of personality disorders means that the psychopathological analysis of such cases exceeds the mere description of eating behavior. There seems to be evidence that the construction of the Self in the postmodern era is a difficult task because of the enormous range of options, as one's choice is essentially reflective and introspective. In contrast, the search for well-being in many modern individuals involves modifying a body they do not accept. The task of constructing and reconstructing the Self means shaping one's body and there will be a cultural equivalent of changing one's body and changing one's life, so that the ethical and the aesthetic commitments will merge (Stanghellini, 2005).

Control over something in a frightening world can lend meaning to existence. However, time and image have split in modern times; conscious experience is a dizzy flow of sequences and moments in which the feeling of identity changes constantly. Each interaction with oneself or with others is an examination and a test of *my* identity. It is not surprising that a high proportion of patients with restrictive anorexia nervosa present a schizoid personality. Their relation with their bodies is split: they have the feeling of living "in prison." This is a remarkably subjective relation. This implies avoidance of others, given the amount of time one would have to invest in the relation with oneself. But the consequence of this is the difficulty to develop knowledge of the rules of the social game, leading to the loss of common sense (Stanghellini, 2004).

Thus, the enormous difficulties to address all of this. Therapeutic resistance and the habitual relapses are logical if we take into account the necessary nature of control over one's body during the construction of the Self in the modern world: a more subjective world than we could have imagined ever before in history, with a self-absorbed subject spending a large part of his life controlling his elusive and ubiquitous Selves.

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