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IDENTITY OR IDENTIFICATION? WHY THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THESE CONCEPTS MATTERS

BY MICHAEL RUSTIN

This paper examines two major issues related to the concept of identity. The first of these concerns the place of this concept in psychoanalytic theory and practice, particularly taking note of its limited presence in the psychoanalytic literature of the British School of psychoanalysis. My argument is that the concept and phenomena of identification has been preferred to that of identity in the discourse of British Object Relations and considers why that might be the case. The second issue concerns the salience of the concept of identity in contemporary political and cultural debate, as this has come to denote differences of a socially-constructed kind such as those of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion. In this context, the idea of identity has become an important point of reference in much recent psychoanalytic thinking. The significance of

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this development will be considered in its relevance for psycho-analytic and wider social practices.

Keywords: Identity, identification, British Object Relations theory, race, ethnicity, difference.

QUESTIONS OF DEFINITION

I will begin by citing the two principal versions of the idea of Identity provided in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

1. The quality or condition of being the same: absolute or essential sameness; oneness.
2. Individuality, personality; individual existence.

It seems clear that these two formulations are virtually contrary to each other in their meaning. The first of them defines identity in terms of qualities which individuals have in common, as members of a social category or kind. The second focuses on attributes that are distinctive and unique to each individual. Which of these two conceptions of identity is most to be valued and what relation each of them has to the other is a choice of considerable significance in psychoanalysis and in other contexts.

In earlier discussions of identity in psychoanalytic thought, it is the more *individualizing* of these two perspectives which has had most prominence. The idea of identity was primarily synonymous with the idea of self-hood, and its primary meaning was concerned with the integration of personalities and characters as this took place through processes of development in infancy and childhood. This was a preoccupation shared, within their different theoretical idioms, by analysts in the United States such as Phyllis Greenacre, Margaret Mahler, and Hans Loewald (and later, Heinz Kohut in his theory of Self and Self-Objects) as well as by analysts in Britain, whether or not the idea of identity as such was central to their work.

The integration of the personality (or its failure) has been a central theme of psychoanalytic theory and practice in Britain, following Freud's and his successors' focus on the necessary encounter with the oedipal situation and its consequences, and in the Kleinian and post-Kleinian attention to the transitions from paranoid-schizoid to depressive states of mind and capability, and their vicissitudes. Until recent times, social and cultural impingements upon these developments figured little in *classical* (or *orthodox*) psychoanalytic literature. A significant exception lay in Erik

Erikson's (1950) theory of identity as it evolves through the life-cycle with its particular focus on crises of identity in adolescence. This did open a path to the consideration of broader, sociocultural dimensions of identity, which he pursued in his initiation of a psycho-biographical approach through his studies of Martin Luther (1958) and Mahatma Gandhi (1959). Robert Wallerstein (2014) described the ways in which Erikson's interest in the dilemmas of social identity had been shaped by his own mixed national and religious heritage.

A recent collection of papers by British psychoanalysts on the subject of identity (Numa 2022) demonstrates the primary focus of this tradition on processes of personality development and integration. Although the book's title *Clinical Studies in Identity* seems to evoke the interest in racialized and gendered conceptions of identity that have such influence in contemporary academic discourses, sociocultural issues are not its main focus. These studies have emerged from a clinical workshop conducted by the eminent British post-Kleinian analyst John Steiner, and their main psychoanalytic purpose is to explore the difficulties experienced by patients in arriving at a coherent and integrated sense of self. The interdisciplinary connection of most significance to this work lies not with the large amount of contemporary work in the social sciences and humanities on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, but with the English and American tradition of the philosophy of mind, in which the nature of personal identity has been central topic since its beginnings in the work of Locke and Hume. An important point of reference is the work of Richard Wollheim, in particular his book *The Thread of Life* (1984). In this text, Wollheim attempts to develop an idea of integrated and creative self-hood in which Kleinian psychoanalytic ideas played a central part.

A KLEINIAN OBJECT-RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE ON IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

Within the Kleinian theoretical literature and, indeed, in the writings of Freud, the concept of identity has figured only to a small extent, compared with that of identification. Considering the attention being given to issues of identity today, this is striking. The term does not appear at all in the indexes to the collective volumes of Klein's own writings, nor in

Hinshelwood's valuable *Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (1989), or in the updated *New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought,* edited by Milton, Garvey, Couve, and Steiner (2011). In this regard, Klein was following the precedent of Freud's work—the concept of identity is largely absent from his writings, being present only in his early *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895). The concept of identity is also absent from Laplanche and Pontalis's *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1973).

However, an idea related to that of identity is that of identification, which in contrast to the former term has a strong presence in Kleinian and Freudian thought and in their literatures. I will be exploring the implications of the differences in the use of these concepts. *Identification,* it is relevant to say, refers to a process. *Identity,* by contrast, refers to a condition, perhaps to be described as the configuration of a personality at a given time. Why were Freud and Klein, and later Kleinian analysts, interested in understanding the process they named as identification, but not, it seems, in characterizing or naming what one might see as its *objectified* outcome as states of being—as *identity* or *identities*?

Within British object-relations theory (which needs to be differentiated from the American Relational Analysis version of object relations), personalities are believed to be formed as identifications take place through processes of projection and internalization. The primary location of these processes is in the earliest months and years of a child's life. Freud thought of this primarily in terms of the working out of the male or female identities of the infant in relation to what he called its libidinal and anaclitic relationship to its same-sex and opposite-sex parents. His theory was that in normal development a child's libidinal attachments to opposite sex parent had to be renounced and replaced by identification (an idea of *becoming the same as*) with its same-sex parent. Thus, for the male child, as libidinal desire for the mother became repressed and father's relationship to him changed from sexual rival to one to be emulated, the father becomes, so to speak, friend and ally. Freud thought that something similar took place in the experience of the female child, except that the continuing attachment to mother could more easily retain both its libidinal and anaclitic (identificatory) aspects. Klein (1952) believed that the dynamics of love, hate, and identification were worked out much earlier in the life of the infant than Freud had suggested, but processes of identification were central in both their

accounts. (Freud 1910, 1914, 1917a, 1921; 1923; Klein 1935, 1940, 1946).

Klein also believed that processes of identification with what she called *objects* continued throughout childhood and later life. The intensity and prevalence of anxiety in a child's life would affect how far identifications took place in an emotional context in which feelings of love and trust, rather than of hatred and fear, were predominant. It was important in Klein's account whether what emerged in a personality was a prevailing *depressive* or *paranoid-schizoid* state of mind, although in her view both of these were always unavoidably present or latent in everyone's disposition at some time. This configuration of mind is relevant to whether mainly positive or negative relations with objects (which usually means persons) emerge as dominant traits of personalities. A later post-Kleinian development in the work of Rosenfeld (1987), Steiner (1993), Britton (1998), and O'Shaughnessy (2014) was to see narcissistic personality organizations as a borderline state of mind that was increasingly found in modern times and was understood as a mental refuge both from depressive pain and from the fear of paranoid-schizoid disintegration.

One can readily see how the kinds of identifications that take place in a family where parents are locked in violent conflict or in which parents are unable to care sufficiently for their children are liable to affect children's relationships with their objects. The Kleinians are committed to the idea of an unconscious *internal world* and of relations with objects that may be suffused with different balances of positive and negative feeling. Parental objects on which a child both depends and with whom it identifies, may for different children—and at different times—be primarily objects to be trusted or distrusted. The intensity of rivalry with siblings (some rivalry is unavoidable) may depend on how far insufficiency of love and care compels them to be rivals, how far they are pushed in this direction by their unequal treatment by parents, or even perhaps by their being unconsciously *set up* to compete with one another in seeking scarce or discriminatory parental love.

Many of the problems of mental pain and mental illness that psychoanalysts of children encounter can be traced back to dysfunctions within families of the kinds referred to above. A disproportionately large part of the caseload of those working with children's mental health is made up of children whose families have been seriously disrupted, for example

leading to circumstances of fostering or State care. It is well-established that the life chances of children who have found themselves in the State care system are on average (of course this does not mean in every case) considerably worse than those who have remained in the care of their families.[1] In Britain, most psychoanalytic work with children is done by those belonging to the State-recognized profession of psychoanalytic child psychotherapists, which is now much larger than that of psychoanalysts accredited with the British Psychoanalytic Societies who are trained to work with children.[2] But I have heard and observed in reports of psychoanalytic work with adult patients a frequent inclination by analysts to find explanatory causes for their patients' difficulties in their early life circumstances. This is often the case even when analysts are strongly committed to undertaking their analytic work in the *here and now* of the transference and the counter-transference, for example following the influential psychoanalytic technique of analysts such as Betty Joseph (1989).

DIFFERENT KINDS OF OBJECT RELATIONS

The idea of unconscious identification with *objects* in the Kleinian tradition has had its main focus on the objects of early life that are within the family situation. In this respect, Freud's precedent was largely followed. This approach has its strong justification in the belief that the unconscious foundations of personalities are laid down in the interactions of early life. The psychoanalytic process gives priority to uncovering and exploring the unconscious residues of those experiences and to

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[1] UK data on the life-chances of children in care can be obtained from these sources: UK Parliament : *Educational poverty: how children in residential care have been let down and what to do about it* https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmeduc/57/summary.html; NSPCC March 2021: *Looked after children: statistics briefing* https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/looked-after-children; University College London: *Children in care suffer poor health for decades.* https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology-health-care/news/2020/jul/children-care-suffer-poor-health-decadesate; Child Poverty Action Group: *Improving Children's Life-Chances* https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/cpag_book_summary.pdf

[2] The Association of Child Psychotherapists, whose six-year training (beginning with a two-year pre-clinical Infant Observation course) is in intensive as well as extensive psychoanalytic practice, has over a thousand members who are widely employed in the National Health Service.

reconfiguring them to some degree through understanding—as well as through experiences of *containment* (Bion 1973) and the possibility of new identifications being formed within a sustained analytic relationship.

But there has remained a limitation with this approach, focusing as it does on early experiences. Are the *only* objects with which identifications take place those that arise within family relationships? Such identifications may of course have consequences extending across generations. They not only influence the ways in which an individual grows to maturity but also affect their relationships in childhood and adolescence to parents, siblings, teachers, friends, etc. Such identifications may also be shaping influences on the formation and sustaining of adult sexual and emotional relationships and on the fulfillment of parental roles. These primary relationships are usually central to the personality and thus the particular identity of an individual.

However, identifications do continue to take place and be made throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Early life continues to cast its shadows (and its inspiring images) throughout a lifetime and shapes to a degree all the choices individuals make. But intra-family relationships are not the only source of influence on personality development, nor are they the only forms of identification that take place through life. It can become a kind of psychoanalytic reductionism to suppose that they are.

THE PHENOMENA OF GROUP IDENTIFICATIONS

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud found it necessary to take account of processes of identification in adult life as he came to consider some of the more alarming aspects of group identification. In these inquiries, Freud was concerned about the pathologies of mass behavior, arising in the circumstances of war and, later, in the rise of mass movements such as that of fascism. Freud saw these group identifications as largely regressive processes, giving rise to a loss of individual autonomy and rationality. In *The Future of Religion* (1927), Freud's understanding of religious affiliations also focuses on psychologically regressive processes, that is on the projection of

infantile desires and anxieties onto Gods whom Freud saw as fantasied paren-
tal figures. Each of these accounts seem to look back to the early formation of
the unconscious mind and see its more elemental aspects as liable to reassert
their power in times of anxiety and stress. The *rational ego* or self seems to be
something of a blank or neutral element in this scheme of things, having no
need for being elaborated in all its myriad particularities and differences.
Freud's rational ego seems to be curiously empty of positive content—rather
like that of Kant's rational self—as if the substantive content of the fullness of
being that may follow from a sufficient integration of the mind's different lev-
els can just be taken as given. Freud's theory of sublimation and what he saw
as the highest achievements of human beings in the fields of the arts and sci-
ences is of course important in his thinking, but these rich dimensions of
human existence are little present in his accounts of everyday life. One rea-
son for this may be the clinical origin and continuing focus of the psychoana-
lytic field, whose primary interest has always been to understand the sources
of mental pain in patients' experience. It is after all to understand difficulties
and impasses in their personal lives that cause most patients seek psycho-
analysis, with the partial exception of those who undertake analysis as part of
training to become analysts themselves. The medical origins of psychoanaly-
sis thus have had a lasting influence on its practice.

    Wilfred Bion's (1961) theory of group life took up and developed
Freud's own interest in collective behaviors. Bion contrasted three varieties
of *basic assumption* behaviors—fight-flight, dependency, and pairing—
which he thought were driven by unconscious phantasies, with what he
saw as the rational functioning of the *Work Group*. Bion's group theory pre-
ceded his full training and development as a psychoanalyst, and it is unfor-
tunate that his concepts of unconscious group behavior do not articulate
fully with the larger body of psychoanalytic theories, including his own.
But it seems that the elemental nature of his basic assumptions (called
basic for good reason) refers back to infantile phantasies and states of
mind conjured up by the deliberately enigmatic and anxiety-inducing role
of the group analyst. Most group therapeutic work, and that of Group
Relations Conferences, focuses on identifying irrational or fantasied states
of mind and enabling participants to understand and recognize these
when they take place. David Armstrong (2005, pp. 10-28) has valuably
pointed out that contrary to a common focus of interest on the basic
assumptions of Bion's model, in his writing he showed that Work Group

(that is, rational) capabilities usually survive the unconscious storms to which they are subject, so that groups are able to stick to their task of trying to understand what is happening within them.

But again, there is the question: What does the substantive *work* that the group is doing consist of? How are relations to the *good objects* that a Work Group might share to be recognized and cultivated in this theory and practice? Because the work set for the therapeutic or group-relations group is primarily to understand itself and its own irrational states of mind, ideas of more substantive work and the relations with objects on which it depends are in this practice liable to be pushed to the margins.

The practice of Balint groups (Balint 1957) and of Work Discussion (Rustin, M. E. & Bradley J. 2008) is a form of exploration of relationships that allows a greater amount of attention to be given to varieties of identifications by individuals outside the setting of a group-relations practice. Its purpose is to explore emotional and unconscious aspects of experiences within workplaces. Balint groups explore the doctor/patient relationship. The initial context for Work Discussion was work with children and families. It developed from the seminars on Infant and Young Child Observation, which have long been foundational elements of the training courses for child psychotherapists and others at the Tavistock. Members of a weekly Work Discussion seminar bring reports of experiences at work that have had some emotionally intense aspects for discussion with the seminar leader and its members.

The dynamics of relationships within the seminar group are one potential topic to be explored in these seminars. But the principal focus of interest lies outside the seminar group itself—in the work setting or institution some of whose activity is being presented for discussion. In the child and family context, this might be school or day-nursery classroom, a children's ward in a hospital, or a therapeutic hostel for adolescents. Where Work Discussion seminars are concerned with adult-related settings—for example hospital wards, offices, theatres, or factories—the workplace relationships being explored will be different. One common context for the practice of Work Discussion in adult settings is that of training in Organizational Consultancy to facilitate learning about the unconscious dynamics of different organizational environments. [3]

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[3] On the work of psychoanalytic organizational consultants in the Tavistock tradition see Obholzer and Vega Roberts (1994) and Huffington et al. (2004).

The relevance of the practice of Work Discussion from the perspective of identities and identifications is that the inner-worldly dimensions of many roles outside family environments are presented in its seminars as material for discussion. These roles will include those of the various participants in a work setting and seminar members who in this context have the role of a *participant observer* whose own engagement in the work situation is an essential element of what is to be explored. Participants in Work Discussion are not expected to take on the role of an invisible fly-on-the-wall in a work setting or to go around as scientific researchers with questionnaires, spreadsheets, or boxes to be ticked. The aim is for them to learn to recall and present accounts of their experience that try to take account of their own as well as other participants' involvement in it.

What this practice enables is reflection on what it means to engage with specific roles in a social institution. For example: that of teacher in a school, whether experienced, inexperienced, or even its head teacher; or the role of a nurse, a doctor, or a patient; or that of an actor, director, or front-of-house staff member in a theatre. Many of the common familial dimensions of relationships—parental, filial, or sibling-like—and their unconscious dispositions are likely to be one element in such understandings. But also likely to be evident are commitments that are specific to a vocation, to someone's work in their society, and the identifications which may have given rise to these.[4] Sometimes identification with parent-figures or parent-substitutes may be very important in individuals' choice of vocations, in the sense that a choice of cared-for-objects in one generation (a family's farm, a mother's musicality, a father's skill with tools) may lead to a choice of related objects of attachment or commitment in the next generation. In supervising doctoral research studies of those in care sector professions, I have observed how often such individuals have been influenced by adults important to them when they were young.[5] But plainly, conscious or unconscious parental

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[4] In a symposium on the phenomena unconscious social defenses against anxiety, arising from the work of Elliot Jaques and Isabel Menzies Lyth, the practice of work discussion was reported to be valuable in understanding and mitigating the effects of such defenses (Armstrong & Rustin 2015).

[5] Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus has been valuable in understanding such patterns of influence.

influence is not the only factor shaping occupational choices and the objects of attachment this involves.

The psychoanalytic understanding of what is involved in the creation of works of art and literature similarly invites consideration of identifications with objects and their nature. Hanna Segal (1952) in her valuable theory of the unconscious sources of works of art, especially regarding those of the highest quality, focused on the extent to which artists have been able to bear the pain of confronting conflicted and hitherto unconscious aspects of themselves and of finding means of giving these symbolic expression. She has written for example about Proust's *À la recheche du temps perdu* in these terms. Other psychoanalysts have written in related terms about other great artists, such as Ronald Britton (1999) on the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. In writings like these, great literature is assigned a function which seems in some respects to be parallel to that of psychoanalysis itself. The mental work it does and the deep and conflicted identifications it is seen to explore are described as focusing intensely on the unconscious residues of writers' or artists' earliest experiences. Freud (1910) set a precedent for this approach in his essay on the art of Leonardo da Vinci, but his work has had many successors. Wordsworth's autobiographical poem *The Prelude* is remarkable (among other respects) for its evocations of the experiences of infancy and childhood.

But it seems clear that there are kinds of identifications that preoccupy artists other than those which they form in their early lives. Specifically, writers and artists (indeed sometimes scientists) become intensely preoccupied, especially early in their careers, with the example and achievements of their predecessors. They sometimes actively seek to find their own place within the tradition to which their forerunners belong. Many great painters describe themselves as spending countless hours in major art galleries, studying and even copying the work of admired forerunners. Identifications within a field take many different forms. Harold Bloom's (1973) version of this identification by poets, *The Anxiety of Influence,* understood it as primarily taking the form of oedipal struggles with father-figure predecessors, aiming to overthrow and supplant their patriarchal domination of their field. Many examples can be given of revolutionary movements in the arts—impressionism in 19th-century France, abstract expressionism in 20th-century America, modernism

in 20th-century English and American poetry for example—in which the overthrow of a previously dominant orthodoxy of forms has been a collective purpose. But identifications may be based on the admiration and love for a predecessor's work and a desire to restate and renew its essence in contemporary times, rather than to compete with it. The history of jazz is often told as one of generational succession in which musicians first learn to play capably in the manner of an older contemporary and then in due time develop a distinctive and recognizable style of their own. Eduard Manet described the enormous impact on him of seeing and studying the paintings of his seventeenth century Spanish predecessor, Diego Velasquez. This seemed not at all to be about overthrowing or supplanting the achievement of the great master, but about Manet transposing the dignity with which Velasquez treated his human subjects in the Spanish court to the ordinary people on the streets of Paris in Manet's own time. But there were precedents in Velasquez's work, of non-noble figures around the court, which may have inspired Manet to make this transition.[6] And even where artists and writers have a rivalrous or even revolutionary purpose, the preoccupation with the legacy of predecessors and how they are to establish a necessary distance from them may remain central. What an intense effort seemed to be called for by Jackson Pollock and the other American abstract expressionists to *forget* the representational traditions of old European art (in Pollock's "drip" paintings it is a shock to see no recognizable images) and strike out for a new American dominance.

My argument is that the crucial psychoanalytical concept of identification, as a fundamental building block of the self and of personality—of a person's individual identity—needs to be understood in broader terms than those of the internalization of *objects* experienced in early family life. Crucial as such primary identifications almost invariably are, they are invariably followed by other identifications taking place throughout life. These may be both with persons and with various forms and traditions of work and expression. It is from such innumerably different identifications, and the individual creativity and particularity that arises from these, that the diversity of individual human characters, communities, and cultures arises. This is the essence of *identity* in the unique individualizing sense that I quoted as one of the two central dictionary

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[6] Metropolitan Museum of Art (2003).

definitions at the start of this paper. As I have said, psychoanalysis has contributed immeasurably to this understanding but nevertheless needs to extend its descriptive and explanatory range of reference. It has been a limitation of this perspective that its understanding of the processes of identification has been too confined to the sphere of primary relations within families. The effect of this has been to inhibit the psychoanalytic understanding of broader social processes.

THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF IDENTITY

Identity, in its reference to shared or identical attributes, has become an extremely widely diffused concept in recent years. Forms of political action and affiliation based on shared identities have become widespread. The relations between earlier forms of class-based politics and contemporary *identity politics* are often discussed and now are a matter of strong contention. *Culture wars* rage in the United States and Britain. The identities which are most often referred to in this discussion are those based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual difference. Substantial campaigns and mobilization have taken place in recent years around each of these points of affiliation. These include the movements for the rights of gay people; the #MeToo movement, which has protested the mistreatment of women; the Black-Lives Matter movement, which has campaigned to end systemic violence against and negative treatment—including murder—of Black individuals; and an active social movement advocating the rights of transgender people.

None of these movements have had their origin or central existence within the field of psychoanalysis, which however has found itself responding to the agendas and claims they have set out, although in different ways within different psychoanalytic traditions. Identity has become a significant field of study that is located in many academic disciplines, including most of the humanities and social sciences. A substantial Routledge *Handbook of Identity* Studies (2011), edited by Anthony Elliott, has explored many of these fields. In the book, only Stephen Frosh's chapter directly focuses on psychoanalytic contributions; although Frosh's persuasive argument is that the psychoanalytic idea of the complexity and unconscious dimensions of the self suffuses this entire field of debate. A more recent *Cambridge Handbook of Identity*

(Bamberg, Demluth & Watzlawik 2021) is also only concerned with psychoanalytic approaches to a limited extent.

The enhancement of interest in identity in recent times seems to be concerned with both of the dimensions of the concept which I referred to at the start of this paper. One major strand of thought has concerned the idea of individual identity and the self as a complex autonomous entity and source of value. Charles Taylor's *The Sources of the Self* (1989) is one of the major works that has provided a philosophical archaeology and defense of this idea, tracing its development through an immense tradition of thought which includes Augustine, Montaigne, Hume, and Rousseau. The historical emergence of the idea of the individual and of subjectivity has been a major theme of work in many disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, and psychology. For example the mainstream tradition of sociological theory from Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel among others sought to explain how individual subjects emerged from social structures which formerly gave little scope for autonomy, with many formulations characterizing this transition from one form of society to another. One classical sociological version of this was from ascription to achievement, another was from status to contract, and more recent has been the theory of a process of *individualization* as characteristic of modernity.

A major theme of modernism in the arts and humanities at the turn of the 19th- and 20th-centuries was the increasingly *inward* turn in the understanding of individual subjects, for example in the work of novelists such as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust. This was seen by many as a positive development in regard to the complexities of character and feeling it represented and thus made possible as life-choices. But it was also viewed by some critics of modernism such as Georg Lukacs as an indication of the crisis and decline of bourgeois society, whose active and self-confident individuals had been represented in the genre of the 19th-century realist novel.

Freud's psychoanalysis made a crucial contribution to the understanding of complex individuality with its central concept of unconscious mental life. In explaining differences between different kinds of individuals and how these were to be explained, social scientists until recently would more often use terms such personality and social character than the idea of identity. A problem for social scientists—such as Herbert

Mead (2011) with his concepts of the *I* and the *Me*, Anthony Giddens (1986) with his theory of *structuration* (which aimed to resolve the autonomy of *structure* and *agency*), and Pierre Bourdieu (1977) with his concepts of *habitus* and *practice*—was how to encompass within a single theoretical frame the idea that individuals were shaped and constrained by the social structures and cultures within which they were formed but could also possess freedom and indeed exercise influence within the social structures in which they were embedded. The idea of *reflexivity* in the work of Giddens and Beck proposed a *modern* or indeed *post-modern* basis for what they saw as the strengthened source of autonomy which lay in individual self-understanding and its promotion as a value in contemporary culture. This took place for example in the widespread availability of therapies and practices of self-improvement and self-fashioning.

What I have referred to above has been an essentially individualizing and liberal concept of selfhood that is focused on self-making and self-realizing and on the developmental struggles inherent in this. In this context, identity can be an aspiration to evolve a coherent and satisfying sense of self. Erik Erikson's location of this quest within the life-cycle, with adolescence as a key crux in development, has been influential in giving centrality to this idea. The idea of *identity crises* explored in his own work on key historical figures such as Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi as well as the mid-life crisis in the writing of the (then) Kleinian psychoanalyst Elliot Jaques (1965) are two influential presentations of this kind.

A more problematic meaning of the idea of identity was however recognized by the sociologist Erving Goffman in his many writings. He understood identity to have become a concept and a sociocultural phenomenon of great instrumental potency in contemporary society. He saw identity not so much as the search of authentic selves or personalities but rather in terms of the *presentation of the self*, which is involved in maintaining or achieving a person's recognition or status in the eyes of others or defending the self against its threatened loss. Charles Lemert (2011) observed that this reflected a broader change of preoccupation in American society in the 1950s, as was described for example in David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (2001) and in William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956). Riesman described a transition from *inner*

directed to *other directed* social characters, as corporate institutions and cultures exerted their grip on society. The description by Robert D. Putnam (2000) of contemporary society as a condition of *bowling alone* or declining *social capital* and weakening social bonds is a later version of this diagnosis. Goffman (1956) provided a brilliant micro-sociology of many forms of *other-directedness* in his descriptions of the innumerable forms of purposeful presentation of self to others which are demanded of individuals in modern societies. *Identities* are perceived in these accounts to be more-or-less conscious constructions of the self. Goffman showed for example how an organization's employees are obliged to take on different identities or presented selves as they cross between the *back-stage* and *front-stage* locations of their work, perhaps many times in a day. For example, if they are actors on a stage, sportspeople on a pitch, waiters in a restaurant, or school teachers moving between staffroom and classroom in a school. His work on the experiences of *stigma* (Goffman 1963) and on the nature of *total institutions* (Goffman 1961) described social attacks on and insults to individuals' identities and defenses against and resistances to these. Arlie Russell Hochschild's description in *The Managed Heart* (1983) of the work of flight attendants in producing a required appearance and demeanor of self for their passengers additionally drew attention to the emotional labor involved in this compulsory production of identities. The entire cult of celebrity in contemporary societies is an extreme aspect of the construction and management of identities, which can become a full-time career for some individuals.[7] The idea of *performative* identities elaborated by Judith Butler (2006) in her account of the construction of gendered identities has been another contribution to the understanding of the socially-constructed meaning of identity in contemporary societies.

We can thus see two aspects of the currency of the idea of individual identity in contemporary society. One of these relates to the idea of personal development or fulfilment and continues a liberal and rational tradition of enlightenment. Freud's belief that human beings' rational capabilities could be extended to the understanding of the unconscious,

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[7] Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby*, is a prescient representation of what has become a widespread kind of performance of identity by people who become public figures, brilliantly performed by Leonardo DiCaprio in Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film from the novel.

and therefore to the enhancement of individual freedom and choice, was an essential enlargement of this way of thinking. The processes of identification are in this view constituent elements in the making of distinctive selves or identities. This relates to the first of the two dictionary definitions of identity with which this paper began.

But, as I have discussed above, a more problematic idea of identity has also emerged. In this cultural and social context, identities can be become fashioned and instrumentalized as resources for carrying on in what is experienced as a fiercely competitive and unforgiving world. I have argued elsewhere (Rustin & Rustin 2010; Rustin 2014) that part of the evidence for the impact of neoliberalism (a hyper-capitalist social climate) on social life is the pressure on individuals to adopt self-seeking or narcissistic forms of adaptation to institutional environments, including those of universities in the UK and elsewhere. Self-promotion becomes an obligatory task and the cultivation of the *curriculum vitae* or *resumé* becomes a vital necessity in any career, even taking precedence in the mind over the substantive objects of the work which these records describe. It becomes a problem to differentiate between those kinds of narcissistic self-regard, which are foundational for any personality (regardless of whether or not one subscribes to Freud's theory of original or primary narcissism), and those kinds of narcissism that deny generative relationships with others and refuses dependence upon them.

Now we must turn to the social and collective definition of identity which has become prominent both within contemporary political and cultural discourse and in some influential approaches to psychoanalysis.[8] It is evident that assertions of identities that are based on such biologically or socially defined categories as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and nationality (among others) have become central to many individuals' and groups' understanding of themselves. Often, the function of such assertions is to redress experiences of oppression and disadvantage. Such common or collective identities have become major issues of debate and conflict in contemporary society, although it is to be noted that they were accorded little attention (with the exception of Jewish

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[8] See for example Kimberley Leary (1997), Neil Altman (2000), Celia Brickman (2003), Lynne Layton (2006), Donald Moss (2021), Helen Morgan (2021).

identity for Freud and his circle) in the classical literature of psycho-
analysis. Freud and his colleagues defined their project of understanding
and emancipation in universalist terms, relevant to what they saw as the
human race rather than to biologically or culturally, still less racially
defined, sub-species of it. This universalist aspiration was an indication
of Freud's great ambition for psychoanalysis to become the equal of the
great discoveries of Copernicus and Darwin in its significance (Freud
1917b).

Some more conservative psychoanalytic traditions, including the
British, have long-remained committed to the universalistic approach of
their founders, which is why I believe the concept of *identity*, with its
implication of cultural specificity and difference, has remained so long
absent from its theoretical lexicon. Analysts may have thought that an
understanding of processes of identification as central to personality and
character development can sufficiently take account of the cultural and
social differences in the lives of their subjects. On this basis, they may
believe they can remain committed to the crucial psychoanalytic task of
enabling the self-understanding, integration of the self, and enhanced
life choices of their analysands and patients. There is reason to believe
that many analysts succeed in this aim in their clinical practice, even
while they take account of experiences of cultural and social difference
in doing so.

But in recent years and even decades, this classical psychoanalytic
approach has been subject to serious challenge, parallel to the question-
ing of universalistic liberal human conventions of thought in wider
spheres of life. It has been argued with reason that people who are sub-
jected to systematic disadvantage, disregard, and oppression in society
cannot enjoy opportunities for individual development and self-fulfill-
ment until and unless systemic political, social, and cultural obstacles to
their development are recognized and addressed. Not only is this the
case in many spheres of life such as education, work, and citizenship
(including people's physical security and everyday respect), but it also
has relevance to the sphere of mental health and its treatment, and psy-
choanalysis in particular. One of the texts which most contributed to this
realization was Franz Fanon's *Black Skin White Mask*s (1952), and in par-
ticular its author's description of his traumatizing experience on arriving
in Paris as an educated and trained psychiatrist from France's colony of

Martinique, discovering that he was perceived primarily as a person of color—even by a little white girl and her mother in the street ("Look, a Negro! … ."Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!"⁹).

It is the case that forms of oppression and discrimination that have born down on many categories of people—defined for example by gender, sexuality, and race, and by social class—have had to be addressed and fought in terms of the common identities of the oppressed in order for them to be lessened or overthrown. Solidarities and *collective consciousnesses* have needed to be generated in all these spheres to successfully oppose obstacles to the full human recognition of oppressed and disadvantaged individuals. Thus, the discovery and assertion of the common identity of, for example, women, LGBTQ+ people, and those with black or brown skin (i.e., BIPOC) was and is essential in bringing about a condition of respect and freedom for all human beings.

It seems possible that the principal reason why the significance of such commonly experienced differences seems to have been little recognized in the formative days of psychoanalysis was because most psychoanalytic practice was conducted in predominantly white—and indeed white middle-class—social milieus. *Other* populations, for example people of color, were mostly located *somewhere else*, mainly in the territories of the European empires, and only small numbers of their members came within the purview of psychoanalytic practice. But of course, with the collapse of the European empires and widespread migrations from their former territories into Europe, this has ceased to be the situation. Whether all of its citizens like it or not, much of Europe, including of course Britain, is now widely multi-cultural and multi-racial. Even in the United States, where differences of racial identity have always been strongly present and impossible to ignore, it has taken time—until now when they have become matters for intense debate—for there to be a full engagement within the psychoanalytic field with these crucial issues of inequality and difference.

Given that individuals in modern societies are marked strongly by identity differences among them, what account should psychoanalysis take of these? Should the project of evolving or clarifying a distinct identity, taking account of its racial, ethnic, or religious dimensions, become

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⁹ From Chapter 5 in *The Fact of Blackness*.

a central goal of psychoanalytic work? Returning to the contrast of dictionary definitions of identity with which I began this paper, should a psychoanalytic view of identity emphasize the *sameness* of those who share common attributes and identities, or should it be concerned primarily with people's individual and unique natures whose understanding and development it has surely always been the central purpose of psychoanalytic work to cultivate. Can these contrasting meanings and their implications be reconciled, since they are both significant for human well-being?

While the question of Identity or Identification, and its implications of sameness and difference, arises in wider social and cultural contexts, it is particularly relevant for psychoanalysis. How, after all, are personal identities defined by the attribute of whiteness or Blackness, or maleness, or femaleness? What degrees of homogeneity within these categories do these concepts of identity presuppose, support, or indeed sometimes enforce? In his writings about race and ethnicity, Stuart Hall (2021) made an important distinction between these ideas. His argument was that ethnicities are social constructions of cultures and societies, even though they are based on or falsely explained by differences of biological characteristics and even though such differences—such as those of color or facial features—are superficial. He argued that migration, for example from the Caribbean to Britain and indeed earlier from Africa to different slave-owning colonies in the Caribbean, gives rise to substantial differences in the social identities of these migrant populations. For example, the descendants of slaves in French Martinique have a different cultural heritage from those in formerly British Jamaica, and each generation of those who have migrated from the British Caribbean to Britain, since the arrival of the Empire Windrush (a passenger ship) in 1948, has evolved a socio-cultural identity distinct from that of their parents. Migrant peoples' identities (like those of others) are made of many identifications, arising from their own actual experiences and generationally-transmitted memories. Hall wrote forcefully against the idea of *race* (Blackness or whiteness) as an identity in itself, holding this to be a form of unhelpful *essentialism*. "Remember: identification, not identities," he wrote (Hall 2021, p. 331). However, Hall (2017) also asserted in *The Fateful Triangle* (lectures he gave at Harvard University in 1994) that even though biological race in itself determines nothing, it has been and

remains a continuously destructive organizer of human relationships. It must also be noted that assertions of shared identity are not necessarily wholly beneficial in their effects—think of the collective antagonisms to which they can give rise and the ways in which these may repress differences within conflicting groups. Freud and Bion each described the irrationalities of group psychology.

IDENTITY IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

What account should then be taken in psychoanalysis for these two different versions of the idea of identity, those concerning sameness and difference? Attention to these questions is now a vital matter; but it is more in doubt whether this requires psychoanalysts to share their own examination of their personal identities with their patients, or whether these questions can be addressed even while analysts hold to a clinical practice of abstinence from self-disclosure. The purpose of that withholding practice has been to focus analytic attention on unconscious processes—as these are revealed in the analytic transference—and on the distortions of perceptions and understanding in patients to which these can give rise. Some believe that this focus remains essential to the psychoanalytic process.[10]

What then is essentially required of the psychoanalytic environment to enable reflection on such issues of identity and identification to take place? What do analysts and therapists need to know? In particular, do they need to know about the diversity and complexity of the cultures and societies from which their clients may come? How is such understanding to be achieved? One question here concerns the adequacy of the model of training and professional socialization which, virtually since its earliest days, psychoanalysis has offered and which is codified in the regulations of the International Psychoanalytic Association (the IPA) in its Eitingon Model and its variants. This is a model essentially of clinical apprenticeship in which the curriculum is mainly confined to the study of psychoanalytic theory and technique and in which learning takes place through personal experience of psychoanalysis and the supervised conduct of clinical cases. The approach has been rather broader in training

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[10] James Strachey's seminal 1934 paper is still an essential statement of this perspective.

institutions like the Tavistock in London where commitments to practice with a public, state-supported mental health system has brought engagement with the mental health of institutions and communities as well as of individual patients. Here, psychoanalytic methods have been extended to include, for example, short-term couple and group therapy, and to respond to mental health issues arising in families, in schools, in hospitals, and among children in the state care system. Specific stages of development (early years and adolescence for example) and particular mental health problems (such as eating disorders or self-harm) have become clinical specialisms in these contexts.

But while these forms of community-based practice expose professionals to the diverse populations of modern cities and their circumstances, there may be little formal educational provision to inform these experiences. As a possible corrective to this situation, one is reminded of Otto Kernberg's (2016) proposal that psychoanalytic education and training should be located within multi-disciplinary academic contexts, in this way supporting its established method of clinical apprenticeship upon a broader base of learning. At present, it seems often to be assumed that trainees will bring to their training the broader social knowledge that they need from their earlier education or from their everyday experience. But is this belief now sustainable? May some of the concerns about issues of anxiety in the contemporary psychoanalytic world be a result of the failure to give enough attention within its educational practices to its social and cultural context? Might this situation also be contributing to the limited influence of psychoanalysis within broader mental health services?

CONCLUSION

I now return to the question raised at the beginning of the paper. Does one need to decide between the concept of identity as referring on the one hand to what is identical, that is shared in common with other individuals with the same attributes; or on the other hand, as referring to the unique identity of individuals? A related question is whether the concept of identification which has been prominent in the mainstream Freud-Klein tradition of psychoanalysis, especially as it has evolved in Britain, is more or less valuable than the idea of identity which has become widely

discussed in recent decades, particularly with regard to the dimensions of identity attributable to differences of race, gender, religion, and nationality?

It should firstly be said that collective attributions of and claims to a shared identity have sometimes had positive and constructive meanings for large number of peoples whose sense of worth these attributions have asserted. Examples are the claims involved in such affirmations as Gay Pride, Black is Beautiful (or sometimes Black Power), or Sisterhood. Individual identities can sometimes best be affirmed and given recognition in the context of such collective forms of self-expression and self-assertion.

As part of their sense of self-hood, most people have an idea of membership in some larger group which shares common attributes and values. Shared membership of a national or religious community is one of these kinds of identities—conferring or supporting attachments (Rustin). Most individuals feel that their sense of self-hood is sustained by many kinds of group-affiliation, for example those linked to their work, their locality, or their specific cultural affinities. Psychoanalysts should recognize that objects of love and attachment are more extensive than those of internalized family relationships. Connected with this is the idea that *identities* both do and should have complex dimensions.

However, it needs to be recognized that identities in this sense of common attributes and uniformities are potentially repressive of individuality and differences. They become readily linked to antipathies, between those included and those excluded by given definitions of identity. Between, for example: believers and non-believers; members and aliens; nationals and non-nationals. And those of one *race* and those of another, even though no substantive human qualities are determined by biological differences ascribed to race. As I put it in an earlier paper (Rustin 1991), race in particular is an empty category, although one whose construction in society has had and continues to have extremely powerful effects.

Therefore, the essence of my argument is that the idea of identification and the processes of object-relating which it describes should be recognized to have greater centrality to psychoanalytic theory and practice than that of identity. Analysts need to learn to recognize the common attributions, both positive and negative, which will be part of the

experience of their patients and themselves. But they should see these as processual and provisional, as aspects of the self that need to be reflected upon and questioned as part of an analytic process. Psychoanalysis should be about individuation within understood contexts of identification and relationships to different objects.

The issue of identity is potentially a diversion from this individuating purpose. Psychological security may be sought in group membership (in reality or fantasy) because people's relationships to many kinds of particular objects have become precarious and their personal identities thus a source of anxiety, even to themselves. The contemporary salience of the idea of identity, in other words, may thus be in part a symptom of a social malaise.

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