

“Identity is being at one with yourself”

A CONVERSATION WITH STEPHAN DOERING*

What is identity?

Doering: It isn't actually that easy to define. You might say: being at one with yourself. This includes many aspects, such as having a clear inner picture of myself, a coherent image, so that I can say what I'm like.

But identity also means being able to integrate the various parts of me into a whole. Identity includes the ability to simultaneously perceive different aspects of myself, especially when they are linked with different, opposing feelings. Being able to remind myself: “I'm a person who has certain positive attributes, but at the same time there are other sides to me which I find less likeable.”

A third element of identity is being aware that you remain the same person across different times and situations. In other words, “I'm the same person at work, at home, and at the sports club, recognisable to myself and others”.

If identity is disrupted, it is only ever possible to see particular aspects at different points in time; in different situations it seems as though this person has 2 or 3 faces, which don't match each other. The person him-/herself can only ever experience and perceive one aspect at a time and has no access – or at least no emotional access – to the others.

To what extent is identity a natural predisposition, and to what extent does it develop over the course of our lives?

Doering: We assume that there is a predisposition for temperament factors, and that certain basic “colourings”, such as affective intensity, are innate. This subsequently shapes personality.

the first step towards mental illness. The most important factor in identity development is early experiences of relationships.

What about intelligence? What impact does it have?

Doering: We assume that, at least above a certain level, within the range for healthy, normal intelligence, this has a negligible impact. Someone can be very, very intelligent and at the same time have an identity disorder; and someone can have a very low IQ but a very well-integrated identity and personality. There are some specific changes in identity in the low-ability area, but we know relatively little about these because hardly any research has been done on this.

What impact do the media have on this whole complex?

Doering: So far we've talked about the basic maturation of identity, what we call the personality structure or the personality functions; this term is also used in the new classification system for mental illnesses, DSM-5. These basic maturation processes are largely uninfluenced by the media and occur very early in childhood. As an analogy, we could refer to innate elements present in the brain structure as “hardware”; the identity maturation that occurs in



Ill. 1: The most important factor in identity development is early experiences of relationships in the first 3 years of life

The way I then deal with this predisposition, this pre-condition or “hardware”, if you like, is influenced by early experiences of relationships – primarily in the first 3 years of life. If the conditions there are good enough, then children are able to experience and integrate these various aspects of their own personality. If the relationships during this period are very difficult, e. g. if there is abuse, mistreatment, or neglect, then this doesn't happen, and this can be

the first few years of life then becomes the “operating system”, a sort of “Windows level”. In this analogy, behaviour at a particular moment in time – for example, the fact that I’m talking to you here about identity – would be the programme currently running on the computer, for example *Word* or *PowerPoint*. So our identity is, as it were, part of our operating system. In later life, certain interests, idiosyncrasies, preferences, hobbies, and values develop; this occurs as a result of external influences. And here, of course, the media play a major role. When adolescents, for example, develop a particular image or ideal of the body under the impact of the media and believe that they have to be slim, tanned, attractive, and fit, this doesn’t in the first instance have anything to do with health or disorders – these are simply societal norms, images and ideas which influence the adolescents and mould them in a certain direction.

Where can media strengthen identity?

Doering: Wherever a) media content is about children themselves and the world they live in, and they recognise themselves, and b) there is no subliminal manipulation, i. e. no communication of prejudices, ideals and values, which children simply adopt without being able to recognise them and reflect on them. Media content

supports identity – in the sense understood by psychoanalysis – when it helps children to understand themselves, develop, and mature. Fairy tales can do this, for example, when they reflect the problems in children’s lives and development. So can good media reports which describe children or young people in crisis situations (e. g. family conflicts, emerging sexuality, bullying at school), and sensitively evoke the experiences of those involved, without judgement, while at the same time showing possible solutions.

Media content supports identity when it helps children understand themselves

For political themes, such as the current issue of refugees, this could mean trying to describe facts and present individual stories in as child-appropriate, factual, and objective a way as possible, without sweepingly categorising people as “good” or “bad”. A report of this kind should identify children’s and young people’s fears and take them seriously, while at the same time thematising the opportunities offered by the integration of immigrants.

What could it mean for identity maturation if, for example, children never

see children on TV who look like them or live like them?

Doering: I think this is dangerous if it goes uncommented – if families or teachers don’t give the children a plausible explanation for this fact that they’re observing; if the child has to deal with it alone. Because then the child can develop the identity of an outsider and possibly be lost to the community. I believe there’s a great opportunity here: for television and other media to reflect the reality of the regional, national, and international community – with the challenges of globalisation on the one hand and with the huge gains offered by diversity on the other. Ideally, of course, we would have stories that show integration taking place on a small scale: for example, children of different origins playing together and learning from one another. This gives children identificatory role models which can strengthen their identity. ■

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