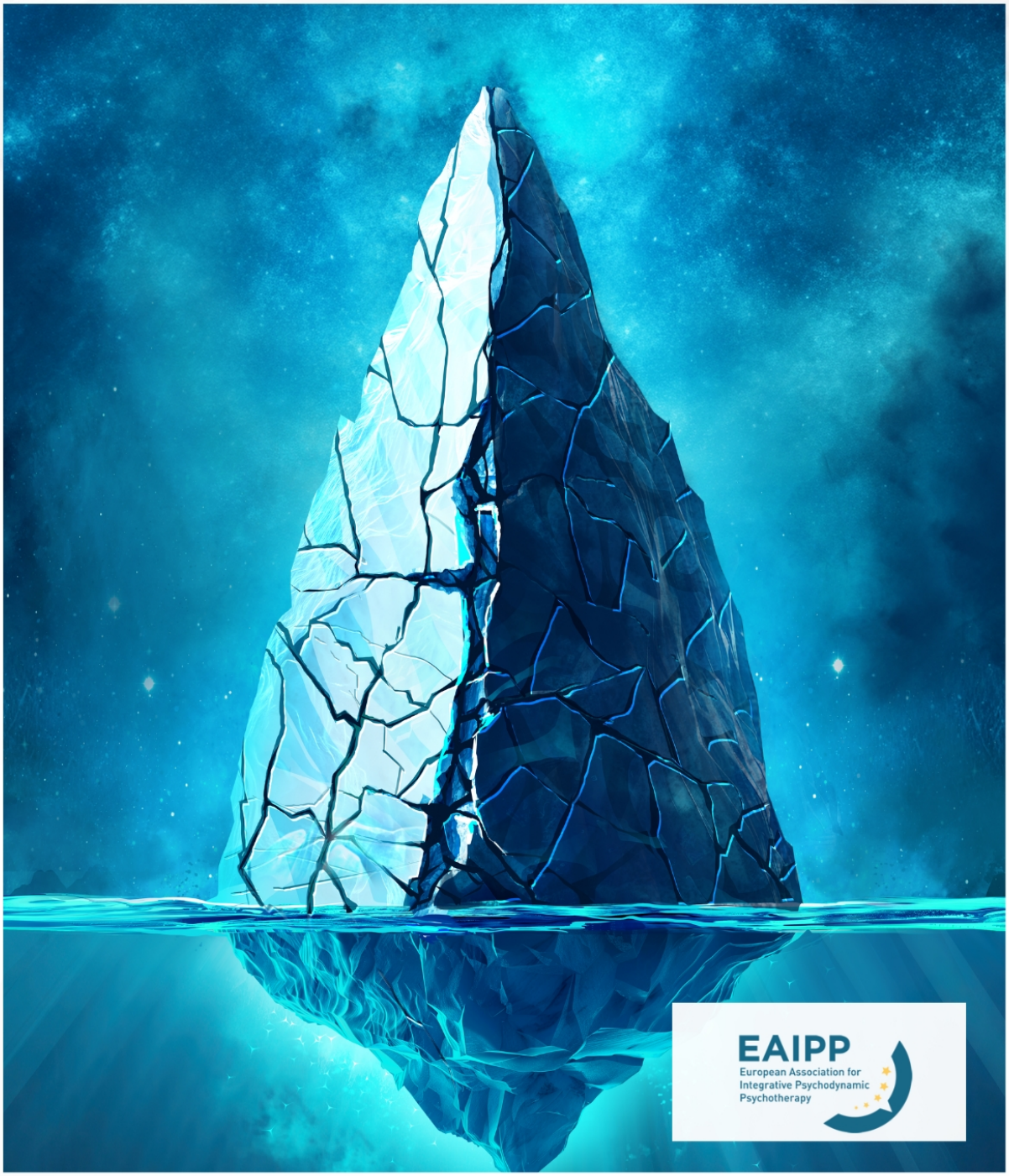
ISSN 3042-3341 (ONLINE)

INSIGHTS

JOURNAL OF THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR INTEGRATIVE PSYCHODYNAMIC PSYCHOTHERAPY



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MASTHEAD

"Insights" - journal of the European Association for Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

Publisher: European Association for Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

Location: Belgrade, Gandijeva 187/32
Email address: journal.integrative.psy@gmail.com

The journal is published at least once a year in electronic form. Articles will be published on the EAIPP website: https://eaipp.org/eaippjournal/

The goal of the journal: to gather relevant professionally applicable guidelines and knowledge in order to contribute to the improvement of work in the field of integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy, as well as to a greater understanding of internal human processes; to show the scientific and professional public contemporary theories, models, techniques used in practice that are applied or can be applied in professional practice. The idea is to integrate scientific and professional contributions in order to improve and expand the corpus of knowledge of psychotherapy and psychological practice.

Thematic framework of the journal: The journal publishes original professional and scientific papers, review papers, book reviews, which have not been previously published and have not been simultaneously submitted for publication in another publication.

PREFACE

Dear readers,

I am very pleased with the launch of this journal under the auspices of EAIPP and the publication of our first issue.

The goal of the journal is to promote new knowledge in the field of integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy, as well as other integrative approaches to psychotherapy that are based on psychodynamic principles. The journal is open to various types of papers, including theoretical-methodological articles, research papers, case reports, book reviews, and other forms of presentation that contribute to the development of theoretical and methodological insights in this field.

I would like to express my special thanks to the authors who enriched this issue with their papers, as well as to the members of the editorial staff who thoroughly reviewed the submitted works, prepared them, and edited them for publication. I also invite all interested authors to enrich future editions of the journal with their contributions. Together, we can broaden horizons and promote professional contributions to psychotherapy, both within the modality of integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy, and through the exchange of insights with other modalities.

Thank you for your support and I wish you a pleasant read.

With respect,

Nebojša Jovanović
Author of OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy modality

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Jovanović, N., & Rudec, M. (2024). What is the approach to anxiety disorder in O.L.I. integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy: Eight types of panic attacks. Insights: Journal of the European Association for Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, 1, 1–28. ISSN 3042-3341 (Online)

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What is the approach to anxiety disorder in O.L.I. integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy

Eight types of panic attacks

Abstract

This paper explores the connection between various forms of anxiety and panic attacks and deficits in the development of core emotional competencies: neutralization, mentalization, object wholeness and object constancy, tolerance of ambivalence and frustration, will, and initiative. These competencies represent fundamental emotional processing and regulation capacities that enable individuals to cope with life's challenges and the emotions they evoke. When underdeveloped, each of these competencies gives rise to a specific form of anxiety: a deficit in neutralization leads to anxiety related to emotional overload and loss of control; impaired mentalization is associated with social anxiety and misinterpretation of one's own and others' actions; a lack of object wholeness results in persecutory anxiety and fear of disillusionment or guilt when love and aggression are directed toward the same object; compromised object constancy underlies separation anxiety; low frustration tolerance manifests as anxiety in the face of unmet needs; insufficient ambivalence tolerance produces decision-making anxiety; a weakened will leads to anxiety around self-support and persistence; and deficits in initiative evoke fears of visibility, rivalry, and symbolic "castration anxiety." These distinct anxieties are frequently observed in clients suffering from one of the eight identified types of panic attacks. Identifying the specific fears associated with each underdeveloped emotional competency allows clinicians to detect areas of deficit and focus therapeutic work on unlocking and strengthening the relevant capacity, using targeted techniques outlined in the taxonomy of therapeutic goals within OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy.

Keywords: anxiety, emotional competencies, fear, panic attacks, integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy

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1. Introduction

Why would a person be so afraid of life, or something in life, that he gets a panic or anxiety disorder? The most logical answer to that is: because he feels that he lacks some ability, or abilities, with which he could overcome the situation or problem.

O.L.I. IPP does not deny that many things can be the basis of panic states or attacks, which are discussed in different psychotherapy approaches: unconscious causes, trauma, compulsion to repeat for the sake of mastery, irrational beliefs, life script... All of this is true. But why does someone keep some content in their unconscious that they could become aware of and overcome? Why do they repeat the trauma instead of realizing it, psychologically processing it, and overcoming it? Why does an intelligent person create and maintain irrational beliefs about themselves, the world, and life? If they were to reflect on the way they think on their own, and without the help of a therapist, they might realize that they hold irrational beliefs. Life constantly confronts us with our irrational beliefs through the consequences we face. Why don't we learn from those experiences?

We believe that the answer lies in basic emotional processing skills – emotional competencies that we have not developed, and which would allow us to cope with life's problems and the emotions they cause. When a person does not develop the necessary abilities, they try to solve life's problems as best as they can without those abilities, using, as a substitute, various "expensive" and ineffective defense mechanisms. They find different ways to do some life work without the necessary tools, to "fix" something "so-so", according to the principle of "good enough until it breaks again." In this way, people develop organized systems of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that in O.L.I. we call "counter-skills."

Counter-skills are illegitimate ways to perform some life tasks – forms of "botched work" with which we try to "patch the holes" in our own abilities to cope with life. They are, in the short run, easier ways to overcome some tension, discomfort, or pain. But in the long run, they stop the development of our life competencies – abilities – and cost us a lot. Counter-skills are seemingly easier, but extremely expensive ways to overcome unpleasant emotions and states. These are forms of "business with life in the dark," forms of laziness that we pay for dearly, but with deferred payment. The most common name for these forms of behavior is "defense mechanisms." Every defense mechanism is some kind of lie, an unconscious distortion of reality to make it easier for us. Of course, these were forms of adaptation to the environment in which the person grew up and had their own developmental function. The problem with infantile adaptive mechanisms is that an adult can develop more mature mechanisms and abilities to process emotions that serve to adapt rather than distort reality.

Are "mature defense mechanisms" the maximum range of human development? They are not. Instead of defense mechanisms, people can develop basic abilities to process emotions – emotional competencies that are not based on distorting reality, but on testing and mastering it. These emotional competencies have already been discovered in psychodynamic theories, in four psychoanalytic psychologies: classical psychoanalysis – drive theory, ego psychology, object relations psychology, and self psychology. While building the O.L.I. method, I did not "reinvent the wheel" nor "discover fire," but rather extracted from various psychodynamic theories the

basic abilities for processing emotions, and from various psychotherapy modalities, techniques that can serve for their development or unblocking. In the O.L.I. method, we approach anxiety disorder by building or unblocking the basic ability to process emotions that are not working, and because of which these anxiety reactions or disorders occur.

2. Basics of OLI IPP

2.1. Emotional Competences

O.L.I. IPP is an integrative approach. The foundation for integrating various theoretical frameworks, methods, and techniques is provided by a model of basic emotional competencies. The core principle of the O.L.I. method is that "there's no craft without tools," meaning a person cannot change unless their fundamental "tools for life"—the basic abilities for processing emotions—are developed or unblocked. These abilities serve as the "software" of our psyche, processing emotional information (emotions being a form of information processing). "Bugs" or "viruses" in these executive programs lead to dysfunctional emotions, misperceptions, and misinterpretations of relationships with oneself, others, and the world. The O.L.I. IPP psychotherapist works on two levels: the level of content and the level of process. While listening to the client's content, discussing life events, relationships, love, and work, the therapist pays particular attention to the patterns the client uses—the typical ways they process their experiences and the emotions those experiences evoke.

One of the fundamental life principles or laws governing human behavior, which we teach our clients in O.L.I. IPP, is: "People do what they shouldn't because they don't do what they must—develop themselves." People employ various manipulative skills (counter-skills) on themselves and in their relationships with others because they haven't developed, or are not using (due to blockages), legitimate human capacities for managing emotions.
The O.L.I. method focuses on two key, complex abilities: the capacity for love and the capacity for work. These two complex human abilities are like "Lego bricks," composed of a set of smaller, simpler building blocks—basic emotional competencies.

Therapeutic techniques from various approaches are incorporated into the work with the client if they can contribute to developing a specific basic emotional processing ability. This is the foundation for integrating techniques from different schools of thought, whether they originate from psychodynamic, behavioral, or other orientations.

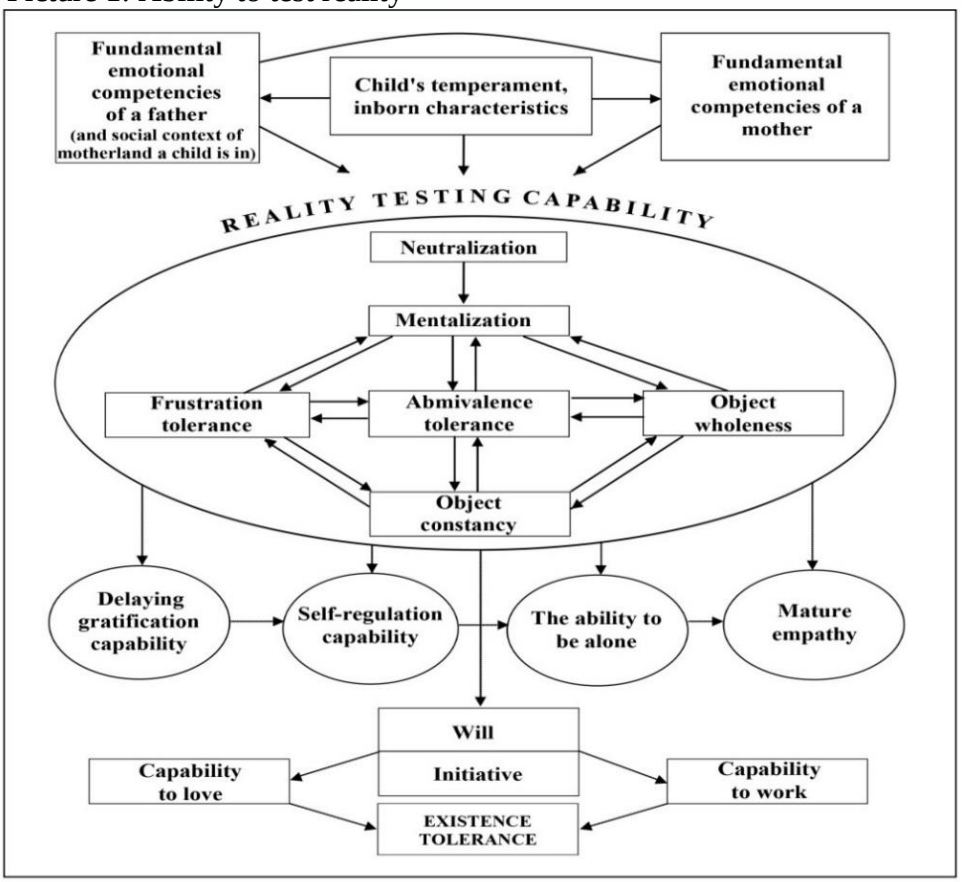
What are these emotional competencies?

1. **Neutralization – "The regulator of the psyche"**
2. **Mentalization – "The articulator of the psyche"**
3. **Object wholeness – "The glue of the psyche"**
4. **Object constancy – "The stabilizer of the psyche"**
5. **Tolerance for frustration – "The immune system of the psyche"**
6. **Tolerance for ambivalence – "The guide of the psyche"**
7. **Willpower – "The engine of the psyche"**
8. **Initiative – "The driver of the psyche"**

Without any of these foundational components, the psyche becomes impaired—an individual is metaphorically "missing a screw," a critical element of psychological functioning. Their capacity to love and work becomes compromised.

Without developed neutralization, the individual is at the mercy of their instincts—impulsive, irrational, and inarticulate—much like a "headless chicken." Without object wholeness—the ability to perceive another person (the "object") in an integrated, holistic way—experience becomes fragmented, split into dichotomies of good and evil. The person "loses their grip," seeing others either through rose-colored glasses or in total darkness, prone to idealization or devaluation. Without object constancy—the stabilizer of the psyche—the individual becomes emotionallyunstable and excessively dependent on others. A lack of frustration tolerance renders the person psychologically unprotected from life's inevitable frustrations in love, work, and relationships, causing them to "break under pressure." Without ambivalence tolerance, the individual becomes indecisive, unable to manage or integrate conflicting emotions toward others, situations, or themselves, and struggles to evaluate options and make decisions. Without willpower, they lack the stamina and inner energy required to consistently pursue their goals and desires. Without initiative, they remain reactive—unable to "turn the key" and activate their own "engine," depending on external forces to motivate action. These competencies are not isolated; rather, they interact and influence one another, as illustrated in the following diagram:

Picture 1: Ability to test reality



Source: Author of the paper

Through forty years of practice as a psychotherapist, I have come to understand that human beings are inherently competent and will not engage in any behavior unless it offers them some form of benefit. Even when individuals participate in clearly destructive or self-destructive actions, they do so because these behaviors provide some emotional payoff—whether a sense of satisfaction or, at the very least and often at great cost, a temporary relief from tension, fear, pain, or other distressing emotional states. This “benefit” does not necessarily promote personal growth; it does not direct the individual toward development, the acquisition of life skills, or the enhancement of their capacities. Rather, it simply renders something—if only momentarily—more tolerable, easier to endure, or less painful, functioning as a kind of "lesser evil."

Although defense mechanisms can serve as protective strategies against various forms of anxiety, each mechanism inherently involves a degree of reality distortion—a kind of self-protective deception. Freud (1964) regarded repression as inherently pathological. He stated:

“Defense mechanisms help in controlling danger... and probably the ego could not achieve this during development without their involvement. But it is also certain that they themselves can become dangerous. The ego often does not relinquish them after the complex years of early development, which can lead to infantile behavior.” (p. 237) Most classical psychoanalysts hold that, when defense mechanisms fulfill their developmental role of protecting the immature ego, they should ideally "retire"—or be activated only in acute crisis situations to protect the vulnerable ego until it regains stability. However, individuals tend to resist relinquishing anything that reduces their anxiety unless they have developed a more effective means of managing it.

Hartmann (1958), however, proposed that mechanisms which originally served a developmental purpose are not discarded but instead transformed into more mature, adaptive forms. His thinking aligns with Freud’s view that the adoption of genital primacy does not eliminate pregenital drives, but rather integrates them into genitality, thereby diminishing their earlier infantile predominance. “Nothing is thrown away,” but is instead transformed into more developmentally advanced and adaptive expressions. Defense behaviors that initially emerged as responses to internal conflict, once the conflict is resolved, may evolve into behaviors that become autonomous from their origins and serve new adaptive functions. This conceptual framework guided the identification of mature, reality-based mechanisms for coping with anxiety—emotional competencies—which became foundational elements in the integration of the OLI IPP model. However, in order to access these competencies within the therapeutic process, it is first necessary to address immature defense mechanisms, counter-skills, and the secondary gains clients derive from them.

2.2. Secondary Gain – Benefit from One’s Own Harm

One of the crucial reasons why people do not transition to more mature patterns—emotional competencies without distortion of reality or manipulation of themselves and others—is the concept of secondary gain. This exists in every immature behavior, symptom, and manipulative pattern. It always plays a role. To help educators remember and consistently keep it in mind while working with clients, I introduced a “law” of psychodynamics that states: “A person never

does anything unless they gain some benefit from it."Of course, it is impossible for behavior to exist without motive. This is a fundamental psychological fact. Every behavior serves to fulfill a need, driven by some motive.

Gain is a psychoanalytic concept first recorded and defined by Freud (1917). Freud described two types of psychological gain resulting from defense mechanisms (and "illnesses"): primary and secondary. For Freud, primary gain was the reduction of anxiety caused by the defensive operation that resulted in the creation of a symptomatic illness.
An example of primary gain could be a patient who shoots at his wife using his right hand. He feels guilty and has an internal conflict due to this action. Then, the right hand becomes paralyzed through a mechanism called conversion (transforming a psychic conflict into a physical symptom). This punishment results in reduced guilt and a decrease in intrapsychic conflict and anxiety—i.e., the primary gain. Freud further defined secondary gain as interpersonal or social benefits that the patient achieves as a result of the illness (e.g., support, attention, sympathy, protection, allowance for dependency…).

In the literature, a wide range of secondary gains is described:

1. Satisfaction of existing dependency needs (Ross, 1982).
2. Satisfaction of vengeful desires (e.g., receiving compensation for idleness in environments where employees felt undervalued or engaged in high-risk jobs; revenge against parents for poor parenting—"see what you made").
3. Obtaining attachment; attempts to elicit concern (Bokan, 1981).
4. Overprotection by significant others.
5. Family antagonism (anger) arising from a disability or incapacity may increase the patient's dissatisfaction and reinforce their conviction that they have the right not to work, feeling harmed by society and assuming a kind of "mission" to resist.
6. Work-related benefits; less strenuous working conditions; avoidance of work.
7. Sympathy and concern from family and friends.
8. The possibility of withdrawing from unpleasant or unsatisfying life roles or activities.
9. The role of "patient" enables the individual to communicate and relate to others in a new, socially sanctioned manner.
10. Financial benefits associated with disability (e.g., disability pension).
11. Access to medication for reducing tension or inducing calmness.
12. Keeping a spouse in the marriage.
13. Maintaining status within the family.
14. Maintaining family affection.
15. Exerting dominance within the family.
16. Release from socio-emotional roles.

It is widely accepted that both primary and secondary gains operate through unconscious mechanisms.

We could say that at the core of secondary gain lies the ambivalence between the need for dependency, parasitism, remaining in a childlike role, and living off others, versus the need for maturation and independence—living on one's own terms, not only financially but also

emotionally. Secondary gain is considered unhealthy because it is not directed toward development. There is always a part of us that desires an easier path—to "cocoon," to "score" something, to "win" through manipulation—and a part of us that aspires to growth, independence, and mutuality in relationships. The latter constitutes the foundation for establishing a working alliance in the therapeutic process. When we succeed in linking the client's symptoms and the suffering that brings them to therapy—the harm they experience as a result of secondary gains—with their immature and manipulative behavior patterns, they reach a point of choice (now being aware of these patterns). At this point, they must choose whether to relinquish the secondary gains or to accept and reconcile with the suffering caused by their continued reliance on them. One cannot have "both the lamb and the money." However, it is not possible to take something away from a person without offering something in return. To give up immature behavioral patterns, individuals must develop more mature forms of behavior—and the mature gains that come with them—which requires the development of emotional competencies.

People are highly creative and diverse in forming their own maladaptive strategies, often becoming experts in practicing them. They become specialists in generating the very symptoms from which they suffer. This is especially true in anxiety disorders—those who suffer from them often become highly skilled in producing such states. Therefore, we should approach them not as victims, but as experts. What does this mean? It means identifying the ways—the algorithms—through which they create these psychological states.

To fully understand the behavioral patterns that lead to secondary gains, it is not enough to simply identify what the client gains in an immature way; we must also understand how they achieve these gains. This brings us to the concept of counter-skills.

2.3. Counter-skills - "job-doing" behavior patterns

Counter-skills are more complex forms of behavior than defense mechanisms, often involving the interplay of multiple defense mechanisms and related patterns. The term counter-skill is used to emphasize both abilities and "counter-abilities" (Jovanović, N., 2013). We distinguish counter-skills from defense mechanisms because they represent the misuse of defense mechanisms—used for secondary gain, even when unnecessary. Counter-skills are dead ends on the path of development. Just as it is important to understand the direction in which developmental abilities are moving and where they should lead, it is equally crucial to know where they can go astray and how they can return to the developmental path after reaching a dead end. Recognizing and illuminating counter-skills—also referred to as "job-doing" skills because they provide certain emotional benefits while causing significant harm, primarily by halting the client's development—are essential. This process includes recalculating them (i.e., reassessing both the gain and the harm through the process of emotional accounting, a technique developed in Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy), relinquishing them, and replacing them with core emotional competencies. These steps are necessary for initiating the process of change.

Every behavior reflects a certain skill and strategy. No skill or strategy is inherently bad; they are evaluated in relation to their goal. Is being clumsy a skill? Of course. The question is: who

needs such a skill, and what goal does it serve? Take Mr. Bean, for instance. He earns a substantial income from the perfected skill of appearing clumsy, awkward, and silly. Do you think this can be convincingly performed without understanding the essence of those skills and the process that led to their refinement? Is being depressed a skill? Of course—just as being enthusiastic and good-natured is. If there were an audience, individuals prone to depression who had the motivation to consciously explore their skills could hold seminars and workshops. If you wonder why someone would develop a skill that doesn't serve anything positive, then you may be missing a fundamental characteristic of human nature (or of living nature in general): people never develop skills that serve no purpose. People never do anything from which they don't gain some benefit, because there would be no motivation to initiate that behavior. Where there is behavior, there is motivation. Where there is motivation, there is also a need that the behavior satisfies, along with a belief that such a need can be fulfilled in some way, and that it is worth the effort.

To change outcomes—if we are dissatisfied with certain consequences in our lives—we need to change the skills that lead to them. First, we must recognize and identify our maladaptive strategies, and then replace them with basic emotional competencies. O.L.I. Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy (IPP) is directed toward this process. It is an approach to the person through their skills—the process of becoming aware of maladaptive strategies and developing basic emotional competencies.

The method of working can therefore be outlined in several steps:

- Discovering "maladaptive strategies," "bugs" in the processing of emotional information—how the client creates their problem by attempting to master some developmental task in an inadequate manner.
- Confronting the client with defenses, "counter-skills," and unsuccessful forms of adaptation.
- Educating about emotional competence, which is a healthy adaptive mechanism. Demonstrating "how it's done," procedural learning.

3. Types of Anxiety and Panic Attacks – Connection with Deficiencies in Basic Emotional Competencies

A panic attack can occur when a life situation demands the use of certain abilities that are either undeveloped or blocked. In essence, panic arises when we want something but lack the internal resources or capacities to achieve it. When counter-skills are insufficient to help us attain something important, to regulate anxiety, and basic emotional competencies have not been developed to replace them, this results in heightened anxiety—which can escalate into panic attacks or persistent panic states. We will not experience panic if we fully give up on a goal that is important to us. If we suppress our desires, needs, and surrender the goal—effectively numbing ourselves—we are more likely to experience depression. Panic occurs when we still want, but cannot. In this sense, panic is paradoxically a kind of ally, however strange that may sound. It serves as an internal alarm signaling that something is fundamentally wrong—"we can't go on like this"—and that we either need to change something in order to move toward what we want, or face the painful alternative: the suppression of desire and need. Panic is an

inner call to grow, a signal that development is necessary. A panic attack is an opportunity. If we make use of it, it can push us toward growth and greater competence. If we ignore or avoid it, it often leads to the use of more costly counter-skills, resulting in numbing, detachment from reality, and self-deception. We must replace counter-skills with competencies, because—as the saying goes—"there is no craft without tools." Basic emotional competencies are our tools for navigating life. Each of them functions as a tool for the healthy management of a specific type of anxiety. There is no single, uniform anxiety disorder. Each basic emotional competency corresponds to a specific form of anxiety that emerges when that ability is underdeveloped. The therapist's approach is therefore determined by the type of anxiety presented and the deficit in a particular emotional competency that they are working to develop or unblock in the client. Let us now explore which emotional tools are necessary, and what types of anxiety emerge from their absence.

3.1. Neutralization

Neutralization – *Anxiety of Overwhelm and Loss of Control* (In a panic attack, fears may include: going insane, losing control over impulses, harming others or oneself when impulses break through, fear of uncontrolled sexual outbursts, or dying from a heart attack during emotional turmoil.)

Neutralization refers to the individual's capacity to remain reasonable, *to calm emotional arousal*, and to convert the *energy of passion* into the *energy of reason*, directed toward problem-solving, adaptation, and the rational fulfillment of needs. It represents a core function of self-regulation—essentially, the psyche's internal regulator. When psychic energy is balanced, a person becomes capable of mentalizing: of reflecting upon and understanding their own internal states as well as those of others, and only then proceeding to action. In everyday language, people intuitively describe the processes of neutralization and mentalization through phrases such as: "Calm down first," "Settle yourself," "The morning is wiser than the evening... Then think about why this is happening to you, why you feel the way you do, why he or she feels the way they do... and only then will you know what to do... calm your passions, don't react on impulse... hormones are clouding your judgment... think it through, reflect on it, and things will look different." These expressions describe moment-to-moment processes of neutralization and mentalization. However, these abilities also manifest as enduring traits. Some individuals are generally reasonable and reflective, whereas others tend to be impulsive and unthinking in their reactions. Some think before they act; others act first and reflect later.

3.1.1. Deficits in Neutralization:

Without developed neutralization (Hartmann, 1939, 1950; Kris, 1951), the individual remains at the mercy of their drives—"like a headless chicken"—impulsive, irrational, and affectively unmodulated, behaving as though "something has taken hold of them." Such individuals often verbalize this experience through expressions like: "It's stronger than me," or "I get taken over." The corresponding anxiety is one of overwhelm, closely linked to fears of obsession, madness, loss of control, or mental disintegration. It also includes concerns about possible psychosomatic consequences of unregulated emotional states—most commonly, fear of cardiac issues—manifesting as a diffuse and pervasive fear of one's own impulses and their potential outcomes.

3.1.2. Counter-skills in neutralization

Two common types of avoidance counter-skills can be observed in individuals with underdeveloped neutralization, corresponding to Erikson's (1982) concepts of maladaptations (an excess of a trait) and malignancies (a deficit of a trait). Maladaptation involves the development of a neurotic pride in impulsivity, where impulsive behavior is rationalized and reframed as spontaneity, openness, passion, or intense emotionality. In contrast, malignancy entails the avoidance of all situations in which impulses—particularly aggressive or sexual—might emerge. This often includes social withdrawal, seclusion at home, and the use of panic attacks as a justification for avoiding environments where emotional or instinctual breakthroughs are possible. In such cases, obsessive-compulsive behaviors and intrusive thoughts may function as powerful defenses, serving to compensate for the individual's insufficient capacity for neutralization.

3.2. Mentalization

Mentalization – *social anxiety related to misunderstandings of one's own and others' actions.* (During a panic attack, fears such as: feeling "lost" in social situations, "I won't know what to say if someone says something to me," misunderstandings of one's own and others' actions or emotions, maladjustment, fear of appearing as a "social idiot," "weirdo," or "naive.")

Mentalization is a mental process through which a person implicitly or explicitly interprets their own or others' actions as meaningful based on intentional psychological states such as desires, needs, feelings, beliefs, and reasons (Bateman and Fonagy, 2004).

3.2.1. Deficits in mentalization

The inability to reflect on one's inner state, and the failure to recognize that others possess their own beliefs, desires, and intentions, characterizes a deficiency in mentalization. This results in the individual's inability to understand both themselves and others, leading to insecure emotional attachment. Such an individual is prone to drastic mood swings and fluctuating self-representations, remaining at the mercy of both external and internal events. *Psychic equivalence* refers to the phenomenon where mental states are equated with physical reality, while *omnipotence of subjectivity* is the belief that one's own mentalization is infallible, leading the individual to assume they are always correct.

3.2.2. Counter-skills in mentalization

Counter-skills (Defensive Patterns): As with deficits in the development of any emotional competence, maladaptations or malignancies may emerge. In maladaptations, *hyperactive mentalizing occurs*—an attempt to perceive mental content even where it does not exist, such as in delusional ideas of reference or paranoid thoughts. The individual struggles to distinguish fantasy from reality, and their functioning reverts to a "make-believe" mode, where they pretend to understand and mentalize. *Omnipotence of subjectivity arises*—where the person believes their mentalization is infallible, and they are always right. In malignancies, the individual avoids any reflection or discussion about emotions or psychological states. They may claim, "I don't

understand such things," or express a dislike for overthinking or analyzing. They believe that matters should occur spontaneously, without much consideration of motives or psychology, as this, they argue, "spoils the authenticity of relationships and experiences." These individuals primarily discuss facts and events, avoiding conversations about internal experiences, motivations, or psychological states. They interpret actions solely in terms of physical constraints or observable goals, often adhering to the belief that thoughts and feelings change exclusively through action (e.g., "Do this, and you'll feel better"). This avoidance often extends to social situations, particularly those involving closer interactions, personal conversations, or discussions about emotions.

3.3. Object wholeness

In the case of undeveloped object constancy, *persecutory anxiety arises*, along with a *fear of disappointment* (following idealization or infatuation). This is accompanied by a fear of persecutory guilt and disintegration, particularly when love and aggression are directed toward the same object. The individual may attempt to avoid the depressive position due to the intense, opposing feelings they experience toward the same person. A prominent manifestation of this dynamic is the "fear of personality disintegration," characterized by drastic oscillations in self-experience, such as alternating between an inflated sense of self ("superhuman") and a deeply diminished sense of self ("miserable self"). Such an individual may display arrogance and a sense of superiority in some areas and situations, only to exhibit helplessness and a sense of worthlessness in others. This successive splitting, or "temporal splitting," leads to the division of self or object representations over time, resulting in fragmented personalities that seem to possess independent existences (Kohut, 1977). Common expressions, often voiced after the loss of a relationship with a loved one, include: "I'm falling apart," or "I'm bursting at the seams."

During panic attacks, individuals experience intense fears. In the context of negative emotions, there is a fear of losing neutralization and control, along with the fear of acting impulsively and dangerously toward oneself and others. Additionally, there is a fear that others, onto whom aggression is projected, may retaliate or commit harmful acts against them. Persecutory anxiety emerges, accompanied by the fear of destruction and disintegration, as expressed in thoughts such as, "I will be destroyed" or "I will fall apart." The mechanisms of splitting and projection dominate, fueling anxiety about one's own destructiveness—"the evil within me will destroy all that is good." In the context of positive emotions, there is a fear of self-idealization, leading to the person potentially appearing "blind," "stupid," "naive," or "exploited," and experiencing deep disappointment and hurt. If the individual has such experiences—likely in cases where object wholeness is underdeveloped—there is a simultaneous desire for idealization (e.g., falling in love) and fear of new injury, which can amplify anxiety and trigger panic attacks when stronger positive emotions occur. Furthermore, the fear of ambivalence is also prevalent in individuals with underdeveloped object wholeness, particularly the fear of persecutory guilt and disintegration if love and aggression toward the same object coexist. This leads to the avoidance of the depressive position, as individuals experience extreme opposing feelings toward the same person.

Object wholeness is the capacity to maintain and integrate the different aspects of experience (both positive and negative) related to a person, oneself, or reality as a cohesive whole. In terms

of its function, object wholeness has been described as the "glue" of the psyche. The concept of "object wholeness" was introduced into psychoanalytic theory by Melanie Klein (Klein, 1940). Developing object wholeness involves overcoming the mechanism of splitting, a primitive defense mechanism by which the psyche separates the positive and negative aspects of an object's experience, treating them as if two distinct objects exist. In psychoanalysis, the term "object" refers to a person, object, or situation toward which feelings of love or hate are directed. According to Melanie Klein, every child undergoes a phase of early development referred to as the "schizoid-paranoid position," during which splitting is the predominant defense mechanism, and there is no perception of the object as a whole (Klein, 1948). In this phase, the perception of the mother is divided into the "good mother" (the "good breast"), who is loved, and the "bad mother" (the "bad breast"), who is hated. As the child matures, integrating the good and bad aspects of the object, oneself, and the world leads to what Klein calls the "depressive position." This phase is marked by feelings of guilt related to the child's aggressive impulses toward an object that is now perceived as whole. If positive feelings toward the object predominate in the child's experience, the child develops a need to "repair the object"—to mend the "damage" caused by aggressive fantasies directed at the loved object. However, if negative experiences and feelings toward the object dominate, the reparative process fails, leading to overwhelming tension that the ego cannot manage. This results in a regressive return to the schizoid-paranoid position, accompanied by a renewed separation of good and bad objects.

3.3.1. Deficit in object wholeness:

When object wholeness is not functioning properly, individuals in everyday speech often describe the perception of someone with a deficit in object wholeness using expressions such as: "not whole," "cracked," "snapped," "falling apart," or "fragmented." Experts refer to this condition as "personality fragmentation." Without object wholeness, the "glue" of the psyche—the capacity to experience both another person ("object") and oneself in a cohesive and integrated manner—is lost. As a result, experiences of the other person or the self are split into a black-and-white dichotomy of good and evil (often described as having "snapped"). The primary mental operation becomes categorization, where experiences are reduced to binary classifications of good and bad, with no continuum between them. This leads to intense emotions—either overwhelmingly positive or overwhelmingly negative.

3.3.2. Counter-skills in object wholesness

Counter-skills (defensive patterns): These can develop into maladaptations or malignancies. In maladaptations, a person intensifies splitting and rationalizes it by clearly distinguishing between good and evil, having "pure" emotions, not feeling "in the gray area," not relativizing good and evil, and experiencing strong emotions because they are passionate and morally clear-cut individuals. They build their neurotic pride around this extremity, interpreting the outcomes of black-and-white views and reactions as the consequences of honor, honesty, and morality in a world of people who are not "pure," who do not clearly distinguish between good and evil. In a person with a deficit in object wholeness, there is persistent splitting of self and object representations, accompanied by intensified emotions. Temporal splitting leads to erratic behavior (a person may love one day, hate the next, without awareness of the opposing feeling in the previous period). They do not see and do not feel the contradiction, minimizing its effect

on their partner (“these are just my quirks,” “I got out of bed on the wrong foot”...). They perceive this variability and moodiness as their character that others should accept as it is, without protest. Symptoms such as splitting, emotional overload and violence, malignant erotic transfer (Akhtar, 1994), paranoid states and reactions also appear.

Splitting, emotional overload and violence

A failure to develop object wholeness results in persistent splitting of self and object representations, leading to the loss of object wholeness. Splitting induces recurrent, intense, and convincing oscillations in self-esteem (Akhtar & Byrne, 1983; Kernberg, 1976; Mahler, 1971), which sustains an insecure sense of identity. This "diffusion of identity" not only causes noticeable contradictions in personality traits but also produces temporary discontinuities in self-perception, akin to living in fragments (Pfeiffer, 1974). The inner world becomes populated by caricatured partial objects, and the individual perceives themselves and others in a fragmented manner—either as wholly good or entirely bad. These fragmented perceptions do not integrate but instead function independently. There is an inability to understand others in their totality or to tolerate ambivalence, resulting in a tendency to respond to real challenges with negative mood fluctuations. In clients with an actively directed ego, overwhelming aggression that cannot be neutralized may lead to destructive and violent behavior.

In the case of malignant erotic transference (a term referring to the client's behavior within a therapeutic context, though it may also manifest outside psychotherapy), the client may experience the belief that "in love, anything is permissible." This includes gross violations of another person’s boundaries, imposing demands, insisting on the fulfillment of personal needs, engaging in blackmail, or manipulation, because the client operates under the notion that "need is the law."

Paranoid states and reactions

While idealization of an object of love is a normal and integral component of intimate attachment, when employed defensively, it functions to shield the dyad from ambivalence. Such relationships are inherently fragile, as they are unable to withstand disappointments. When a disappointment occurs, the idealized object is abruptly transformed into its opposite, the "bad object," and intimacy shifts into hatred (Kernberg, 1995). The exaggerated and unrealistic nature of idealization hinders the formation of a genuine intimate bond, as true intimacy necessitates a realistic perception of the other. Although love and hatred are present in most human relationships, intimacy requires the capacity to integrate these conflicting emotions and the ability to tolerate ambivalence (Kernberg, 1984). Another primary defensive mechanism, prevalent in the paranoid-schizoid position and obstructive to intimacy, is projective identification. This defense, which is closely tied to splitting, involves projecting unwanted aspects of the self—primarily destructive ones—onto others. The other person is subsequently induced to act in a manner that aligns with these projections, leading the projector to perceive them as a threat, compelling a need to control them. These primitive defenses obstruct genuine contact, dialogue, reciprocity, and authentic connection with the other. As a result, under these circumstances, intimacy becomes unattainable.

In malignancies, there is a retreat from communication and a life dominated by fantasy. Akhtar identifies two prominent types of such fantasies: the fantasy of "one day..." (where one expects a future devoid of pain and conflict) and the fantasy of "if only..." (where one imagines that everything in life would be different if a specific past event had not occurred). Individuals who engage in these fantasies demonstrate little interest in the present or future, becoming fixated on events from the past. By dwelling on what has already happened, they cling to the belief that life would be fine if only a particular event had been avoided. This leads to the idealization of life before that event, fostering a sense of heightened vulnerability and nostalgia. Both fantasies create a magical fusion with the good object, either in the past or future, while withdrawing from present reality. Additionally, these fantasies hinder the ability to mourn or process grief.

3.4. Object constancy

In the context of panic attacks, the specific phase of separation-individuation in which an individual has stalled influences the type of anxiety experienced. In the symbiosis phase, there is anxiety characterized by feelings of helplessness and "cosmic loneliness." The differentiation phase generates anxiety related to being "suffocated" or "losing oneself in a relationship," coupled with a strong desire for symbiosis and a corresponding fear of suffocation, loss of self, and boundary dissolution. The reapproachment phase brings anxiety related to losing support, fear of "no going back," and an inability to return to the object once separation occurs, accompanied by guilt due to the process of separation. The separation phase involves the fear of losing the object, an inability to be alone, and a fear of loneliness and independence.

Hartmann (1952) introduced the concept of object constancy in psychoanalytic literature, stating, "...it is a long way from an object that exists only while satisfying needs to that form of satisfying object relation which includes object constancy." This concept refers to a developmental stage in which a child’s connection to a cherished object stabilizes, becoming an internalized, enduring connection that is independent of the object's immediate function in fulfilling needs.

Anna Freud (1965) described the progression from dependency to reliance on one's own strength, highlighting the 'stage of object constancy,' wherein a positive internal image of an object is maintained, regardless of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The term 'object' in this context predominantly refers to the mother, a point made explicit in Spitz’s (1946, 1965) concept of the 'libido-invested object,' which refers to the development of a stable bond between the child and the mother. However, it was Margaret Mahler’s work that most prominently placed the concept of object constancy within the context of the mother-child relationship. Mahler (1963) proposed that the emergence of object constancy occurs in the later stages of childhood, specifically between 25 and 36 months of age, during the fourth sub-phase of the separation-individuation process. Her primary criterion for this development was the child’s ability to tolerate short separations from the mother—a capacity that Mahler believed resulted from the child’s formation of a stable internal representation of the mother. The process of separation-individuation, as part of personality development, involves complex, circular interactions between psychosexual development, ego maturation, and the differentiation of self and object representations, which together facilitate the achievement of object constancy.

Separation and individuation involve two interdependent processes and complementary types of development. Separation refers to the intrapsychic process that leads to self-object differentiation and "objectification" (Hartman, 1956). It is the process by which the mother begins to be perceived as separate from the self. Individuation, on the other hand, centers around the child's developing self-concept and arises through the evaluation and expansion of the child's autonomous ego functions. Together, these processes lead to readiness and satisfaction in independent functioning. The capacity to maintain and utilize a stable mental representation of the libidinal object results from interdependent, reciprocal relationships between maturation, modulation, and the fusion of libidinal and aggressive drives; ego development, including perceptual apparatus and memory; defensive and adaptive functions; as well as actual experiences of gratification and frustration in the child's life. This process particularly depends on the emotional availability of the mother and the quality of the mother-child interaction (McDevitt, J.B., 1975).

What always loves us, what constantly meets all our needs, is often not perceived as such; rather, we tend to regard it as an inherent part of our subjective ego. We dismiss what has always been hostile toward us. However, for that which does not unconditionally fulfill our desires—what we love because it brings us pleasure and hate because it does not serve us in every regard—we attach specific mental markers and traces in our memory that carry the quality of objectivity (Ferenczi, 1926). This psychological pattern can also be observed in adult relationships. If we have a partner who always pleases us, who behaves in such a way that "wherever we turn, they're right there," we may begin to overlook them as a person. We take them for granted, assuming what they do. In the current system of "child-centered education," parents are often seen in this way by their children, as if everything they receive from their parents is assumed, as though the kindness and support they consistently offer go unnoticed.

3.4.1. Deficit in object constancy

To develop object constancy, it is essential for the child to first achieve object integration—integrating various aspects of their experience with the mother into a cohesive whole, recognizing her as a person who both satisfies and frustrates. Prior to the development of object constancy, the object does not exist as a whole entity. Object constancy is attained when the specific defense mechanism—splitting the object's image—is no longer easily accessible to the ego (Mahler & Furer, 1968).

Mahler also proposed a sequence of stages through which the child must progress to achieve a sufficiently stable sense of self and others:

- *Symbiosis Subphase* (up to 4 months): During the symbiotic phase, the 'basic core' (Weil, 1970) of the child is in a state of entanglement with the mother's self.

- *Differentiation Subphase:* From around 4-5 to 8-9 months, this first subphase of separation-individuation involves the child being drawn inward toward autonomy, beginning to recognize their psychological separateness through rudimentary exploration of the self, the mother, and their environment.

- *Practicing Subphase* (from 9 to 16-18 months): In this phase, the child, now crawling and later walking, exuberantly explores their newfound psychological autonomy and motor freedom. While still seeking emotional reassurance from the mother, the primary focus is on practicing their ego functions and expanding the circle of exploration.

- *Reapproaching Subphase* (between 16 and 24 months): In this subphase, the child feels that their autonomy and psychomotor freedom are now constrained, and they begin to recognize that the external world is more complex than they previously imagined. A child who has experienced a narcissistic injury realizes they are not as powerful and capable as they once thought in the earlier phase. As a result, they regress, hoping to find symbiotic unity with the mother again. However, this return invokes ambivalence, as the drive for individuation has already taken hold, and the child has experienced the gratification of ego development through autonomous functioning. This ambivalence manifests in behavioral contradictions, with the child sometimes seeking closeness and fusion with the mother, and at other times confidently distancing themselves to assert autonomy, control, and separation (Mahler, 1974).

- The final *subphase of separation-individuation*, occurring between 24 and 36 months, culminates in the achievement of object constancy and, consequently, self-constancy. During this subphase, the child develops a more stable and realistic sense of self. It also involves the consolidation of a deeper, though somewhat ambivalent, internalized object representation of the mother, with libidinal attachment that is less vulnerable to transient frustrations. Object constancy ensures the long-term presence of the mother within the child's mental structure. Meanwhile, self-constancy establishes a coherent, autonomous self-representation with minimal fluctuations under the pressure of drives. Together, these functions eliminate aggression towards the self and object through repression, rather than through splitting. The capacity to tolerate ambivalence now emerges as a key developmental milestone.

The child becomes capable of more complex relationships with the object (Kramer & Akhtar, 1988). The internal presence of a "good-enough mother" (Winnicott, 1962) diminishes the need for her physical presence. Through both clinging to and separating from her, the child maintains an "optimal distance" (Bouvet, 1958; Mahler, 1974). This "psychic positioning" allows for intimacy without sacrificing autonomy and separation without experiencing painful loneliness (Akhtar, 1992). Simultaneously, the development of "constant reality" (Frosch, 1966) occurs, enabling the autonomous ego functions to tolerate environmental changes without psychic disturbance or maladaptive disruption.

Achieving constancy of self and object is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process that continues to unfold. Mahler (1968, 1971, 1974) emphasized that while her descriptions focus on the separation-individuation phase, this process continues to evolve and stabilize throughout further maturation, even into adulthood.

Understanding the subphases of the separation and individuation process, along with the issues that arise if a person becomes "stuck" at any stage, helps us better recognize specific anxieties in adult clients and link them to fears associated with panic attacks.

Without the development of object constancy, which serves as a stabilizer of the psyche (Hartman, 1952), a person remains "unstable" and dependent on others. They lack a stable mental representation of both the other and themselves, and struggle with self-regulation. This leads to a pronounced "need-fear" dilemma, marked by a strong desire for symbiosis alongside a fear of suffocation, losing oneself, and boundary dissolution in relation to the ego (Akhtar, 1987, 1990, 1994; Burnham et al., 1969). Depending on the stage of object constancy development, various anxieties can dominate:

- Anxiety of helplessness or "cosmic loneliness," with a feeling that "the world is empty, without an object" – during the symbiosis phase.
- Anxiety of suffocation or "losing oneself in the relationship" – during the differentiation of self and object phase.
- Anxiety of losing support or "no turning back," often accompanied by guilt over separation – during the reapproachment phase.
- Separation anxiety, marked by fear of losing the object, an inability to be alone, and fear of solitude and independence – during the separation phase.

3.4.2. Counterskills in object constancy

These maladaptations are also categorized into two groups: maladaptations and malignancies. In the case of maladaptation, the person focuses on controlling the object and establishing a symbiotic, dependent relationship. Depending on the stage in which the development of object constancy has stalled, counter-skills can manifest as patterns of merging, building symbiotic relationships without differentiation. For instance, in the symbiotic phase (or failure of differentiation), the couple may become an undifferentiated "We," with no clear boundaries between individuals. There is no optimal distance between them, and their identities are overly fused. When there is a standstill in the reapproaching sub-phase, counter-skills are organized around attempting to achieve both symbiosis and separation, leading to a "need-fear dilemma." This manifests in behaviors like "one rushes toward, the other runs away," or cycles of breakup and reconciliation, where one partner takes freedom at the cost of the other’s dependence. Individuals with borderline personality disorders often oscillate between rapprochement and escape, symbiosis and separation (Akhtar, 1990). They are on a constant "seesaw" between these extremes, creating chaotic and unstable relationships, marked by oscillations between love and hate (Gunderson, 1985; Melges & Swartz, 1989). Periods of idyll and periods of intolerance occur as they struggle with the fear of complete union and, simultaneously, the desire for it. On the other hand, a person with a narcissistic organization may show more stability and less frequent oscillations (Adler, 1981; Akhtar, 1989; Kernberg, 1970a). However, narcissistic individuals build double standards for themselves and others. They do not want to relinquish their complete autonomy in relationships, but they also refuse to acknowledge their partner’s autonomy or respect their separate mental life.

In cases of malignancy, counter-skills emerge in the form of avoiding real relationships and fulfilling the need for symbiosis through fantasy. A paranoid personality recoils at any shift in distance initiated by others (Akhtar, 1990b), relying instead on the 'reliability' of their fear of betrayal (Blum, 1981). When feelings of closeness and the need for another person arise, the paranoid individual responds with paranoid fears directed at the object of affection, maintaining

emotional distance. Simultaneously, rather than forming a genuine emotional connection, they sustain a fantasy of a special, magical bond with the object (e.g., sharing thoughts, being constantly “in each other’s heads”). The paranoid personality cannot tolerate indifference, yet neither can it tolerate contact. Constructing a "special connection" becomes a substitute for real intimacy. However, this substitute resembles being perpetually "online"—an experience that is itself threatening. When negative emotions emerge within the relationship, such a connection is perceived as dangerous, as though the partner might "enter their mind and control them."
A schizoid personality, on the other hand, appears to withdraw while maintaining a vivid, imagined connection with their objects (Akhtar, 1987; Fairbairn, 1952; Guntrip, 1969). Instead of engaging in relationships with real people, the schizoid individual resolves the need-fear dilemma by retreating from real interaction and sustaining connections that exist solely “in their mind,” with imagined figures.

3.5. Frustration tolerance

Frustration tolerance - anxiety of not being able to stand being frustrated ("I can't stand it") Depending on the type of needs related to some phase of psychosexual development or the injury of some need related to self-image, narcissistic injury, we can also notice specific anxieties related to certain needs whose unsatisfaction, or even the suspicion that they may be unsatisfied, can cause panic attacks:

- "oral" needs - fear of not being able to satisfy the need for protection, to be tucked away, to be the center of someone's attention, to receive without the obligation to give.
- "anal" - fear of losing autonomy, of being trapped by something, that someone or something will impose their will on us, fear of losing control over the situation, one's own emotions.
- "phallic" - fear of standing out (castration fear punishes us for exhibitionism or rivalry), fear of losing pride (of one's masculinity or femininity).
- narcissistic needs - fear of losing self-worth, good self-image. Fear of negative reflection of one's features, actions, ambitions, fear of contempt from others, loss of self-esteem, feeling of worthlessness, inferiority, irrelevance. Fears of losing the idealized image of parents or some other group to which I belong, the destruction of ideals.

In OLI IPP, we called frustration tolerance the immunity of the psyche, because this ability is the basis of our resistance to frustrations that life brings with it. Like physical immunity, frustration tolerance is developed by experiencing weakened triggers – optimal frustrations (Kohut, 1971). In the psychological sense, the ontogenetic development of man is not possible without frustration; at the same time, the level of frustration must be adequate to the specific developmental stage and children's capacities, which can differ individually according to the constitutional peculiarities themselves.

3.5.1. Deficit in frustration tolerance

Basically, we can say that undeveloped frustration tolerance has its roots in two types of sources:

1. Trauma (traumatic failure to satisfy certain developmentally important needs), and
2. Fixation (excessive satisfaction, lack of optimal frustration, eroticization).

We compared frustration tolerance with immunity. When we talk about immunity, we distinguish between what we call "general immunity"—the body's overall ability to deal with pathogens—and "specific immunity" to particular pathogens. A similar distinction can be made regarding the ability to tolerate frustration. We can say that some individuals generally tolerate frustration better than others, possessing a stronger "general psychological immunity" to the frustrations that life inevitably brings.
However, it is also true that each person has their own "Achilles' heel"—a particular type of frustration that is more difficult to endure than others. These types of frustration can, even in adulthood, be experienced as "typical representatives" of frustrations tied to one of the aforementioned developmental stages and the unmet needs associated with those stages. In such cases, the individual may respond in ways similar to their reactions during childhood.
In defending themselves against frustrations they cannot bear (or are convinced they cannot bear), individuals typically employ one of two common strategies: 1. avoiding all situations in which they might experience the frustration of a need to which they are particularly sensitive (malignancies), or 2. attempting to coerce or manipulate others into satisfying that need (maladaptation).

- Without frustration tolerance, a person lacks immunity to the frustrations brought by life, love, and work, and tends to "crack under pressure."
- The person has an "Achilles' heel"—a specific type of frustration they cannot tolerate, accompanied by a fear of "what if this happens to me."
- Specific intolerances—anxieties related to the inability to tolerate frustration—can include: "oral" (frustration of the need for receiving, care, protection), "anal" (frustration of the need for autonomy, retention of "ownership," control over impulses), "phallic" (frustration of exhibitionistic or rivalrous needs).
- Lack of frustration tolerance related to narcissistic needs manifests as hypersensitivity to injuries to one's self-image (grandiose self) and the image of the idealized object (idealized parental image)—resulting in narcissistic injury anxiety (shame, embarrassment, etc.).

3.5.2. Counter-skills

Also, these behaviors are organized into two groups: maladaptations and malignancies. In the case of maladaptation, the individual is focused on actively manipulating others to force them into satisfying their needs, as they are unable to tolerate the satisfaction of those specific needs. This manipulation may involve force, oversensitivity, or inducing guilt, among other tactics. In contrast, with malignancy, the individual withdraws from situations in which they might experience frustration regarding a particular need to which they are especially sensitive. They may devalue or deny the need itself ("I don't care...", "It's stupid..."), thereby avoiding, through rationalization, the experience of frustration. Alternatively, they may project the need onto another person with whom they identify and partially satisfy the need through that person, "living vicariously through them," while the other person is exposed to the risks the individual themselves fears.

3.6. Ambivalence tolerance

Ambivalence tolerance is associated with anxiety related to decision-making and the fear of making mistakes. There is also a fear of guilt if conflicting emotions are directed toward the beloved object. In cases of panic attacks, intense anxiety arises when a decision must be made.

3.6.1. Deficit in ambivalence tolerance

The fear of making a mistake, of taking responsibility for decisions made, and of losing something is a central aspect of ambivalence. Deciding on something often implies the loss of something else. Individuals exhibiting this fear have identified with both polar opposites, and their identity depends on maintaining both. They may perceive resolving ambivalence as equivalent to losing a part of themselves. The fear of commitment in ambivalent individuals is often closely related to a profound fear of death, including the fear of losing their social identity through death. As adults, they may develop an ego identity characterized by procrastination, engaging in a constant but ultimately unfulfilled pursuit of specific goals and values that are intended to guide their lives, but without realization. The refusal to commit to anything, the refusal to take a stance, impedes the formation of a solid identity. The fear of death is frequently linked to a sense of an unfulfilled, unlived life, a result of persistent ambivalence. Decision-making, determination, and commitment can be perceived as "something definitive," embodying finality—death.

Patrick McGuinness (2004) conceptualized new anxieties of the modern age related to the fear of missing something, or the fear of losing something: FOMO and FOBO. FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) refers to the anxiety associated with missing out, being out of touch, or failing to stay informed. This fear often leads individuals to experience anxiety when they lack internet access, feel disconnected, or miss opportunities for social interaction. It involves fears of not being part of significant social events or making the "right" choices in a world where every experience is expected to be fully enjoyed. This fear can also be observed in the lives of clients who express concerns about missing out on aspects of life, failing to experience all that life has to offer, being late in their achievements, or feeling inefficient and unable to fully engage in life’s opportunities.

FOMO is closely related to FOBO (Fear of Better Options), which refers to the fear of committing to a choice because a better option may always emerge. Every decision entails both gain and loss. For instance, if I choose one partner, what if a better option appears later, or if I select a job, what if a better one comes along? FOBO is characterized by feelings of anxiety, frustration, stress, and unhappiness. These fears stem from an overabundance of freedom of choice, which becomes problematic for the postmodern individual who lacks clear criteria to guide their decisions. In their postmodern, Faustian desire to overcome all limitations, they struggle to accept that, in life, something must always be sacrificed in order to embrace what is truly valuable and chosen. Parenthood, for example, represents a choice to forgo many opportunities for career advancement or leisure in favor of dedicating time, love, and energy to one’s children.

- The ability to tolerate ambivalence has often been referred to as the psyche's guide. It represents the capacity to tolerate conflicting emotions toward another person, oneself, or activities, with the predominance of positive feelings. This ability involves the capacity to commit, to make decisions, and to move toward or away from something. Commitment is possible only if we can simultaneously acknowledge different emotions. Fleeing to one side of the polarity does not represent tolerance or resolution of ambivalence but rather serves as a defense against it. In psychoanalysis, the term ambivalence describes the simultaneous existence of conflicting feelings toward the same object (person, item, phenomenon, etc.). The term was introduced by Paul Eugen Bleuler in 1952.
- Manifestations of a Developed Ability: A person with a developed tolerance for ambivalence is able to decide whether to remain in a relationship or engage in an activity, despite negative feelings. The decision is clear.When they say "yes," they truly mean it, despite being aware of some negative feelings toward the relationship or activity. When they say "no," they make a definitive decision and refrain from engaging in the relationship or activity. When working, they do not sabotage themselves with ambivalence, procrastination, or exaggeration. Instead, they work in accordance with the demands of the task or goal they have set.
- A person without ambivalence tolerance is indecisive, unable to confront conflicting emotions toward another person, an activity, or even themselves. They struggle to weigh emotions honestly and make a commitment or decision. A mature decision requires "measuring without cheating"—an honest and thorough assessment of all the emotions we have toward the object of our decision.

3.6.2. Counter-skills in ambivalence tolerance

They manifest as maladaptations and malignancies. In maladaptations, various maximalist patterns emerge in which the individual "cuts corners," acts with apparent decisiveness and commitment, and demonstrates excessive care and effort toward the person they "love." They may overemphasize the positive aspects of the relationship while repressing the negative, or conversely, highlight the negative while repressing the positive—yet still remain in the relationship. Perfectionism is one such maladaptive pattern. The opposite expression of the same mechanism can be found in passive-aggressive behavior. In malignancies, the person tends to be superficial, struggles to make decisions, avoids commitment, delays decision-making, and attempts to "have it both ways." They often build superficial relationships in order to avoid the internal conflict produced by ambivalence, emotionally "fluttering" from one connection or option to another. FOMO and FOBO are included among malignancies, as they reflect chronic indecisiveness driven by a persistent fear of missing out on something better or more meaningful.

3.7. Will

In the case of undeveloped will, *anxiety related to self-support, perseverance, loss of freedom, and autonomy develops.*

3.7.1. Deficit in Will

In panic attacks, the following anxieties are present: anxiety about the lack of self-confidence – "Can I rely on my own perseverance," will, self-discipline, work habits... Anxiety about the loss of freedom, autonomy, and fear of being exploited – "They will impose on me, trap me, use me..." A person with undeveloped will "positions" themselves to be controlled and then resists control. Fear of a "slave-like life" (employment, fixed working hours, constant obligations, loss of freedom…). Fear of losing will, fear of relaxation – a person with a strong, disciplined will, which serves as overcompensation, fears relaxation, slipping into the opposite extreme, the laziness hidden within them. Fear of intimacy – resorting to manipulative skills, manipulating the will of others. Fear of contradictions within oneself, fear of hidden weakness, fear of hidden strength, fear of exposure and breakdown of manipulative skills, and fear of being unmasked.

We called the will "the engine of the psyche." That engine should lead a person toward personal development and encourage the development of others. Rank (1932) attributed to the will a positive line of development that leads to the achievement of the highest form of human creation—the creation of personality. The instrument of that creativity is the human will, "which can manifest negatively as inhibition (control) or as creative energy that moves, gives direction, and purposefulness." Will, however, is an engine that can "drive" in different directions. The key characteristic of a mature will is that it "drives" in the direction of development, adaptive behavior, and living at one's own expense. The key characteristic of an immature will is that it "drives" in a direction that does not lead to the development of the person (nor to the development of others) but is directed toward manipulation of oneself and others, and some form of "parasitism," living at someone else's expense. A mature will is directed toward exchange and reciprocity; an immature will is directed toward exploitation—taking from others, with the help of manipulation, without reciprocity, proper, or adequate exchange. We have already mentioned one of the "laws" of OLI IPP: "people allow themselves to do what they shouldn't because they don't allow themselves to do what they should—to develop" (Jovanović, N., 2013).

Rank described several stages in the development of the will. The first developmental stage of the will manifests as "counter-will," as a "won't" that opposes the will of others—what "must" be done. The second stage, the phase of positive expression of will, or good will, refers to the willingness to do with one's own will what must be done ("what must be done is not difficult"). The third, creative phase, relates to the person being willing to do what they themselves want (achieving their own goals). A halt in any of these stages leads to specific deficits in the development of the will.

3.7.2. Counter-skills in will

The deviation of will is the imposition of one's own will on others through various means of active and passive manipulation. People with weak will manipulate passively, using some form of weakness, typically attaching themselves dependently to active manipulators with stronger will. Those with strong will, who are not focused on development, use active manipulative skills

(counter-skills) to dominate the will of others. Manipulations of will are based on projecting one's own inner contradictions (the parts they hide or repress) onto others.

A will that is weak or not directed toward development is used for passive or active manipulation of others. It can become "stuck" in "counter-will"—constant opposition and defiance, in "goodwill"—the need to please, manifest as "self-will," or as "lack of will."

All these manifestations are directed toward some form of manipulation instead of self-actualization. Love is replaced by power, irresponsibility, dependence, the use of others, fear-based respect, a sense of personal righteousness, or the feeling that others depend on the person—for some "comforting reward." In manipulating others' will, a person denies a part of themselves, which they then control in others.

Counter-skills are organized around maladaptations—active skills for imposing one's will on others—and malignancies—passive ways of attaching to others' will. These are described in detail in the book The Ability to Love and Work – OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy (Jovanović, 2013). While the active manipulator gains by winning, the passive manipulator gains by losing. Active manipulators (maladaptations) manipulate through some form of overt power: "The Dictator" exaggerates their strength, "The Calculator" exaggerates their control, "The Bully" exaggerates aggression, and "The Judge" exaggerates criticism. Passive manipulators (malignancies) manipulate through some form of weakness: "The Weakling" exaggerates sensitivity, "The Clinger" exaggerates dependence, "The Do-Gooder" exaggerates care and love, suffocating others with kindness, and "The Protector," the opposite of The Judge, exaggerates support. Both The Do-Gooder and The Protector can also fall into the category of active manipulators.

3.8. Initiative

Initiative – anxiety of standing out, rivalry, "castration anxiety." Fear of guilt for taking initiative, for taking matters "into one's own hands." Fear of envy for success, of being degraded out of envy, malice, or rejection by the environment. Fear of punishment for bold desires, for standing out, or for competitiveness. In panic attacks related to deficiencies in initiative, these fears particularly arise when the person is exposed, advancing, or wishes to advance, to achieve or conquer something, or when they are in or anticipating rivalry—especially if they "dare" to stand out.

Initiative is the ability to independently start or initiate something, the willingness to take the first step, and the responsibility to persist in the initiated activity. Initiative means "recognizing and doing what I believe needs to be done before someone asks me to do it." According to Erikson's (1985) theory, a mature, developed capacity for initiative is the ability to develop activities or projects, along with the confidence and belief that it is acceptable to do so, even if there is a risk of failure or mistakes. The basic virtues or skills involved in initiative include a sense of purpose and direction, the ability to make decisions, the ability to collaborate with and lead others, the ability to define personal direction and goals, and the capacity to take initiative and appropriate risks.

Failure: If expansion and attempts at initiative during development are followed by excessive fear, feelings of guilt due to rivalry and sexual fantasies, it may lead to a halt and abandonment of initiative. Failure in resolving this crisis leads to the entrenchment of feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fears for life and limbs (the so-called "castration anxiety"—"I stood out too much, showed my power, so they could punish me by cutting off my penis"). In girls, this leads to an unconscious belief that they had male genitalia, which were cut off as punishment for secret deeds and thoughts. Initiative is lost, and a "persecutory conscience" develops—a constant internal voice that constantly watches, accuses, burdens with guilt, and drives self-punishment. Such an outcome of the crisis can lead to persistent self-limitation, not allowing the individual to live in accordance with their capacities. Another possible resolution is initiative expressed despite strong feelings of guilt. The tension created in the person's body during this can lead to "tireless efforts" to show their initiative by working compulsively (workaholism), as if their worth consists solely of what they strive to do. This way of resolving the crisis often leads to psychosomatic illnesses.

3.8.1. Deficit in initiative

Without initiative, a person becomes reactive, lacking the "key" to their "motor"; they require someone else to initiate actions on their behalf. They fear acting independently and taking responsibility for their actions. "Castration anxiety" arises—the fear of being "demeaned," "removed from position," or "punished for standing out, exhibiting themselves, or claiming something that doesn’t belong to them." This is accompanied by anxiety related to rivalry, defeat, and "impotence," symbolized as "a smaller penis." The individual fears that the rival will defeat and demean them, leading to anxiety related to phallic-narcissistic injury.

3.8.2. Counter-skills

Maladaptations—Initiative developed despite guilt, which denies the presence of guilt, can lead to a merciless pursuit of initiative at the expense of others, insensitivity, and the "theft" of initiative from others, often even from one’s own children (for example, a parent who consistently initiates activities related to the child's interests before the child can express their own desires or interests). As with the development of autonomy and will, autonomy acquired through the denial of shame and doubt can lead to impulsiveness, self-will characterized by thoughtlessness, and disregard for others. The sexual initiative of a phallic-retributive individual, as Erikson describes, can be a maladaptive response to the initiative stage crisis versus guilt—exploitative, ruthless, aimed at collecting trophies and satisfying sexual needs and ambitions. This can also apply to women, where the "fatal femme" initiative focuses on seducing and abandoning, trophy collecting, and even performing castrative actions. Malignancies—Aversion to any risk and a lack of initiative. Such individuals avoid exposure, advancement, competition, and any form of rivalry. They are content with a job beneath their potential, as it avoids attracting attention, standing out, or provoking envy and rivalry. They may opt for a less attractive partner to avoid arousing jealousy or the risk of their partner being "stolen." Often, individuals with malignancies in initiative avoid sports, as it involves rivalry, winning, and losing.

Implications for Working Techniques in the O.L.I. I.P.P. Method:

- **We do not approach every type of anxiety in the same way.**
- **In fact, we do not "treat" anxiety directly, but rather focus on developing the emotional competencies that have not been fully formed. This is the psychodynamic mechanism through which anxiety is overcome.**
- **We correct the "errors in the software" that form the underlying basis for the "clinical picture."**

Since each of the basic emotional competencies has its own algorithm, with specific steps that occur within our mental apparatus when we engage them, we are able to more precisely define the types of learning and psychotherapeutic techniques that facilitate the development or unblocking of a particular ability. This is made clearer by the therapeutic goal taxonomy we have developed, which helps in sorting psychotherapeutic techniques and learning methods throughout the process of psychotherapy.

- **Therapeutic techniques are "sorted" based on which ability they activate or unblock, and at which stage of development.** (Cmiljanović, Škorić, 2024)
- The O.L.I. method also offers a **taxonomy of therapeutic goals, clarifying which types of learning occur during psychotherapy and which abilities are activated by specific forms of learning.**

Table 1
Taxonomy of Psychotherapeutic Goals – Sorting Psychotherapeutic Techniques by Types of Learning and Applicability for the Development of Specific Emotional Competencies.

Types of Learning - Knowledge	Basic Emotional Competencies Processes						
	Neutralization & Mentalization	Object wholesness	Object constancy	Frustration tolerance	Ambivalence tolerance	Will	Initiative
Conceptual	M	E	T	H	O	D	S
Declarative	M	E	T	H	O	D	S
Procedural	M	E	T	H	O	D	S
Metacognitive	M	E	T	H	O	D	S

Conclusion:

In this paper, we have linked various types of anxiety and panic attacks with deficiencies in the development of certain basic emotional competencies: neutralization, mentalization, integrality and object constancy, ambivalence tolerance, frustration tolerance, will, and initiative. These are fundamental abilities for processing and managing emotions, which, if undeveloped, hinder our ability to cope with life's challenges and the emotions they trigger. The anxieties we encounter in clients often relate to one of the eight types of panic attacks. Recognizing the specific fears that emerge when any of these competencies are underdeveloped can help identify which emotional competency is deficient. This, in turn, allows us to focus on its deblocking and development, utilizing specific techniques designed to cultivate these abilities, as outlined in the taxonomy of therapeutic goals in OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy.

Broad-spectrum techniques and targeted techniques: It is often unclear what a technique is actually meant to address or develop. Commonly, these techniques are generalized, with assumptions like "expanding awareness," "confronting rejected aspects of oneself," or "taking responsibility." These "general practice techniques" are akin to a broad-spectrum antibiotic—casting a wide net to address whatever issues may arise.

However, by understanding the basic emotional competencies and their functions in our minds, we can select specific techniques that target the development of these abilities. Recognizing the specific fears that arise from deficiencies in any of these competencies enables us to pinpoint which emotional competence is lacking and direct our focus toward its development. Panic attacks occur when an individual perceives that a life task cannot be accomplished due to the absence of the necessary competence.

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Lifelong development of object wholeness/another perspective

Summary: Psychodynamic theories of development primarily focus on early development and how it shapes later patterns of human behavior. One of the eight key emotional competencies in Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy is object wholeness, a concept introduced by Melanie Klein (Klein, 1940). Klein explored the earliest stages of object wholeness development and identified manifestations of its deficiencies in adults. We believe that further research into the developmental stages of this ability during later periods of life is valuable. A relevant study comes from an author who uses Jane Loevinger's theory of ego development as a frame of reference (Loevinger, 1970). This paper provides a brief overview of Loevinger's theory, connects it with Klein's findings, and incorporates the contributions of Fairbairn and Kohut to present a potential model for the lifelong development of object wholeness, its relationship to polarities, and the path toward wisdom. Discoveries about ego development from research outside of psychotherapy can greatly enhance our understanding of psychological development, helping us better comprehend the stages of development and what Vygotsky (1993) refers to as the "zone of proximal development." Understanding where we are headed and the "stations" along the way allows us to more effectively guide those on their developmental journey.

In this paper, we also present an understanding of ego development through the lens of the development of relationships to opposites, as proposed by Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011). This perspective offers a different view of the ability to fully experience object wholeness, as described by Melanie Klein during early childhood. It suggests that development starts and ends with object wholeness, progressing from unity to separation, and ultimately returning to unity at a higher level.

Keywords: object wholeness, polarity, integration, ego development

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The object wholeness - the glue of the psyche

"For naught so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give;
Nor ought so good but, strain'd from that fair use,
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.
Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,
And vice sometime by action dignified."

(Shakespeare, "Romeo and Juliet", speech by Friar Lawrence)

1. Introduction

Object wholeness is a term introduced into psychoanalytic theory by Melanie Klein (Klein, 1940). Developing object wholeness involves overcoming the mechanism of splitting, a primitive defense mechanism by which the psyche separates the positive and negative aspects of object experience, treating them as though they were two distinct objects. In psychoanalysis, the term "object" refers to a person, an object, a situation, or any other entity towards which feelings of love or hatred are directed. According to Melanie Klein, every child, in the early stages of development, passes through a "schizoid-paranoid position," in which splitting is the dominant defense mechanism, preventing the child from experiencing the object as a whole (Klein, M., 1948). In this phase, the child experiences the mother as divided into a good mother ("good breast"), who is loved, and a bad mother ("bad breast"), who is hated. As the child develops, the integration of the good and bad aspects of the object, the self, and the world leads to what Klein describes as a "depressive position." This results in feelings of guilt due to aggressive impulses directed at the object, which the child now perceives as a whole. To the extent that the child's experience is dominated by positive feelings toward the object, the child develops the need to "repair the object" — to repair the "damage" caused by aggressive fantasies directed at the beloved object.

As long as negative experiences and feelings toward the object dominate, the reparation process remains unsuccessful. The tension becomes too great for the ego to control, leading to a regressive return to the schizoid position, in which the object is split into good and bad. We assert that only this regressive return to the splitting mechanism can be considered a defense, and that the world of split good and bad objects, experienced in early life, represents a natural state of the immature ego. Defensive regressive behavior arises from the anxiety experienced when attempting to reconcile the good and bad representations of the object into a unified whole — the "realization" that we hate what we love, that we have fantasies of destroying the object on which we depend. Integrating these intensely conflicting feelings and representations into a single whole is difficult. However, as long as intense ambivalence does not dominate — when positive experiences of the object prevail — the ego can tolerate ambivalence and navigate the

depressive position through the reparative process. At this point, splitting ceases to be a necessary defense.

According to its function, object wholeness can be described as the "glue" of the psyche. It represents the ability to integrate different aspects of one's experience (both positive and negative) concerning oneself, others, and reality as a whole. When this function is impaired, individuals often express the perception of a person with a fragmented object representation using colloquial terms such as: "he's unhinged," "he cracked," "he flipped out," or "he lost it." In clinical language, this is referred to as "personality fragmentation."
Object wholeness is what enables an individual to perceive themselves, others, and the world in a realistic manner, without distorting their perceptions to fit an idealized or desired image. The defense mechanism of splitting, which arises when object wholeness is not adequately developed, creates a significant distortion in the experience of reality by separating the positive and negative aspects of the same object into distinct, opposing categories ("partial objects"). This process of splitting leads to a fragmentation of the self. The primary cognitive operation employed by those who struggle with object wholeness is categorization and classification, wherein distinct classes and categories are sharply divided and seen as mutually exclusive. Individuals with a well-developed sense of object wholeness are able to remain "intact, glued, and integrated," even under significant stress. The predominance of positive emotions—what we refer to as basic trust and optimism—persists, thanks to this "glue," even in the face of overwhelming negative emotions. When experiencing anger or fear, such individuals do not lose sight of the positive aspects of themselves, others, or reality. These positive aspects serve to protect them from being completely overwhelmed by negative emotions.

Fairbairn (1952), building upon Klein's concept of internalized objects, posited that the foundation of later repression mechanisms lies within object relations, rather than instincts, as Freud had suggested. He asserts: "The first defenses used by the still immature ego in mastering unsatisfactory relationships with others are mental internalizations or introjections of the object of dissatisfaction."

The child's ego is organized around defenses against unsatisfactory object relations. Initially, these defenses are based on the splitting of conflicting experiences, projection, introjection, and negation. This results in a "vertical split" of the self.

Kohut (1971, 1977) elaborated on the various manifestations of deficiencies in the cohesiveness of the self through the mechanisms of vertical and horizontal splitting of the personality. In vertical splitting, two distinct selves emerge, separated on an experiential level ("double personality").

One self is the "superman self," typically formed from the experiences mirrored by the parent, reflecting what the parent valued in the child due to its alignment with their narcissistic needs. The other is the "miserable self," which develops from the lack of mirroring and validation of the child's authentic self, including their needs, ambitions, talents, and skills. Such an individual may exhibit alternating behaviors: arrogance and a sense of superiority in certain contexts, while displaying helplessness and feelings of worthlessness in others. This successive splitting, referred to as "temporal splitting," results in fragmented representations of self or object across time, leading to split personalities that appear to possess independent existences ("Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"). In horizontal splitting, the mechanism involves the suppression of grandiose needs and fantasies, which can give rise to a lack of ambition, inertia, "false modesty," and feelings of emptiness, numbness, and a lack of initiative. The self becomes divided horizontally into conscious and unconscious aspects of the unique self.

Achieving and maintaining the integrity of the experience of self and object is a crucial ability for ego development and personality integration. The term "object" has a broad definition. Objects refer not only to significant figures in the child's development but also to anything in which emotional investments are made. We can experience our self, other people, our work, and our life as either complete or fragmented. For example, living in the past reflects a lack of completeness in the experience of our life over time, while living "from today to tomorrow," focused only on the present, also reflects a lack of experiencing one's life as a whole. Excessive emphasis on one aspect of the self, such as ambition in work, while neglecting others, such as the ability to love or maintain good health, also reflects the fragmentation of the self. The ability to maintain the integrity of an object is the "centripetal force" of personality, the force that sustains cohesion. A deficiency in this ability leads to an intense fear of fragmentation, or "falling apart."

The integrity of the object is the capacity that makes us whole, individuals "of one piece," and integrated. It also encompasses what makes our experience of others and reality whole—integrated. However, this ability does not simply develop in early childhood, provided that the relationship with the object is sufficiently adequate, but follows its own developmental trajectory throughout life. Klein described the earliest stages of the development of object-wholeness and some manifestations of deficits in this ability in adulthood. We argue that monitoring the developmental stages of this ability in later stages of life is a promising area for further research. One such study is based on a theoretical framework rooted in the theory of ego development (Loevinger, 1970).

2. Maturation of personality through opposites

Beena Sharma and Susanne Cook-Greuter (Sharma and Cook-Greuter, 2011) explore the relationship between personality maturation and the mastery of polarities, specifically how

individuals make sense of their experiences through opposites. Thinking in opposites is deeply ingrained in the way we interpret our experiences. Whenever we extract something from the phenomenological continuum, we automatically create an object (A) and its opposite (not-A). Describing experiences in dualistic terms is inevitable in everyday language. Integrating interdependent opposites is a central aspect of developing a comprehensive perspective on reality. The fact that much human suffering arises from mental mechanisms that split experience into opposing categories such as good-bad, light-dark, and pleasure-pain has been acknowledged since ancient times. Inherent in our method of making sense of the world, as we become more socialized members of society, is the attribution of value to the desirable and undesirable aspects of experience. Our inclination to form preferences, accompanied by moral judgment, leads us to favor one aspect of experience over its opposite. The Buddha taught that our strong attachment to a particular aspect of reality—one of the opposites—is the root cause of suffering. We often wish to eliminate opposites from our lives, seeking to overcome weaknesses through willpower, extend life through advances in medicine, or slow aging through scientific possibilities. Maturity brings the realization that "a glass of bile needs a glass of honey... when mixed, it is the easiest to drink" (Njegoš, *Gorski vijenac*). We begin to recognize that what we have regarded as mutually exclusive choices are, in fact, interdependent dimensions of a single reality, in which one concept can only be understood through its opposite. Only a few individuals learn to accept the unfiltered experience of reality beyond our constructs and symbolic representations.

Beena Sharma and Susanne Cook-Greuter (Sharma & Cook-Greuter, 2011) pose several key questions: 1. How and to what degree do oppositions and polarities contribute to meaning-making? 2. Are there polarities specific to each stage of ego development that adults must navigate? If so, what are these polarities? 3. Is there a connection between the stage of ego development a person has reached and the way they relate to polarities?

Development begins with differentiation, following the stage of symbiotic fusion with the object. The Bible also begins with differentiation and naming: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth; then He created the light and separated it from the darkness, and He called the light day and the darkness night." He then instructed Adam to give names to the animals and plants, thereby marking and differentiating them by their names. Continuing development involves progressive distinction and differentiation. Starting from a simple dualistic division of some continuum into "light and dark," "day and night," "positive and negative," progressive differentiation and elaboration lead us from undifferentiated beginnings to greater knowledge and control over the world.

However, differentiation is only one side of polarity. No matter how useful and developmental it may be, it loses its meaning without its opposite. The construction of meaning also relies on the process of comparing and recognizing similarities. As we mature, we learn to distinguish

between what is similar and what is different, enabling us to construct a coherent mental or symbolic map of reality. The more complex and integrated our map of reality becomes, the more developed we are. However, the mechanisms of progressive differentiation and elaboration inevitably reach a limit, beyond which further differentiation becomes excessively complex and experientially meaningless. Integration is required.

Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011) state: “Ego-development theory is a theory about people's distinctive stories about who they are, what is important to them, where they are going, and what they imagine the world and reality to be. The theory explores how people create different meanings in the lives they live. It describes the ego construct as the heart of the human drive to create meaning. According to the theory of ego development, the ego has two functions: 1. The ego as a processor perceives, mediates, orchestrates, metabolizes, and digests both external and internal experiences during development, processing the most subtle differences in transcendent reality. The ego is thus seen as a tireless storyteller, a creator of meaning. 2. The ego as representation, on the other hand, integrates all aspects of experience to tell a coherent story about itself. It does this by creating permanent and solid self-images to ward off the fear of non-being and transience.”

Research by Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011), using the SCTi-MAP (Sentence Completion Test Integral - Maturity Assessment Profile), shows that there are patterns in the stories the ego communicates that change across the developmental trajectory. MAP is based on the assumption that our language reflects the complexity of our map of reality and the level of differentiation and integration we have reached. The depth, complexity, and range of our perspective are evolving. As the individual matures, the ego tells a new story about "Who I am" and "How reality works." The theory of ego development provides a diagram of these pathways of changing self-representations, distinguishing nine different stages of adult development, each of which is a discrete level of self-identification. People at each stage create meaning in a unique way that is qualitatively different from the previous stage. Each subsequent stage represents a transformation of the previous perspective, i.e., it includes and transcends the prior point of view.

Before we proceed to the developmental stages of the relationship to opposites, let us first clarify how the authors define the key terms they use:

1. *Opposites* 2. Different Types of Opposites: (A) *Value-neutral* and (B) *Value-colored*. 3.*Polarities and Multiplicity.*

Opposites refer to "the other part of a pair that is corresponding or complementary in position, function, or nature, differing in quality, direction, result, or significance." These two elements that make up opposites are often referred to as "poles." Opposites can be categorized as: (a) Value-neutral and (b) Value-colored.

Value-neutral opposites are descriptive without an evaluative component, such as long-short, big-small, or boy-girl. In these cases, neither element is inherently better or worse, more desirable or less desirable. Value-colored opposites refer to pairs of seemingly opposing, contradictory values that carry evaluative judgments and generate tension. These opposites are marked by a positive or negative value attached to each element. For example, one gender may be viewed as better or more desirable than the other.

Children absorb these value-colored distinctions through socialization and acculturation, learning to internalize which behaviors or characteristics are considered "good" (e.g., "clean" rather than "dirty") and which are "bad" (e.g., "naughty" rather than "good"). Displaying traits associated with one gender may result in reward, while displaying traits associated with the other may lead to punishment. This tendency extends and we begin to attribute value judgments to all our experiences related to opposites.

2.1. Polarities and multiplicities

When both poles within a pair have a positive or negative value, they are referred to as polarities. Polar pairs consist of two interdependent poles, both of which may be desirable at different times in order to maintain a system. For instance, "firm" - "flexible" are positive opposites, as are "structured" - "flexible." Multiplicities represent relationships between concepts in which multiple poles or polarities are interconnected. These are commonly encountered in theories that explain the interdependence of more than two elements or poles. For example, to fully understand the human being, it is important to consider the relationship between mind and body, emotions and reason, as well as the spiritual and material.

The human tendency to transform polarities, which are essentially interdependent positive pairs of concepts, values, or constructs, into opposites leads to tension between poles that, in reality, constitute an interdependent dynamic whole. To function adequately in reality, both poles of polarity are necessary. In some situations, being structured is beneficial, while in others, being flexible is more advantageous; sometimes firmness is required, and other times softness. Until we mature, we are unable to perceive the dynamic and interdependent relationship between the parts and the whole.

Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011, p.30) provide the following example (Figure 1) to clarify the general structure and nature of polarity.

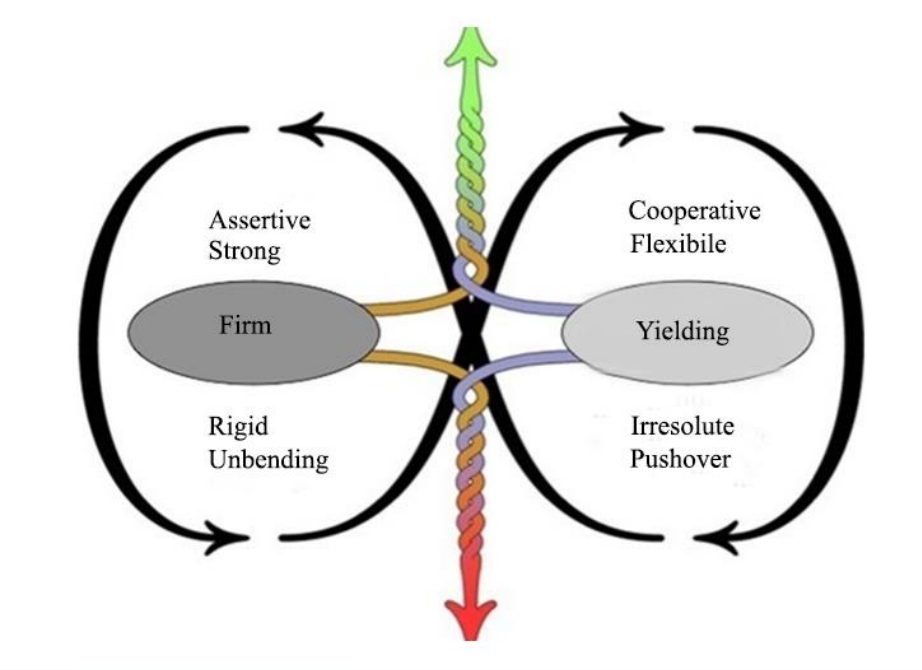

Figure 1. *Firm-yielding* polarity map

Each pole in polarity carries a value. In the context of polarity: being firm and yielding, assertiveness and strength are positive aspects of firmness, while cooperation and flexibility are positive aspects of yielding. When we become overly focused on valuing one gender and exclude the other, negative aspects emerge: we become rigid and unyielding if we emphasize firmness, or indecisive and submissive if we prioritize indulgence. If one gender in a pair becomes preferred, its interdependent opposite is excluded, neglected, or rejected. We then tend to describe the opposite pole in terms of its negative aspects, dismissing the positive aspects it possesses.

This illustrates how the tendency to split experiences is connected to valuation, culture, and its pervasive influence on speech and thinking. Polarization prevents us from recognizing the inherent value of the opposition and attaining wisdom. Psychotherapists encounter this daily in their practice—discords, conflicts, disagreements, and misunderstandings between individuals, along with mutual devaluation stemming from the valuation of different oppositions. When we discuss the will and its manipulation, we observe that the inability to integrate opposition leads individuals to become passive or active manipulators. Similarly, in choosing a partner, one often encounters a selection of someone who overemphasizes the opposition we have rejected within ourselves.

Research that is not clinical, which does not stem from psychotherapeutic experience but instead utilizes the analysis of language—through language-oriented instruments such as MAP—

reaches similar conclusions regarding the importance of developmental pathways of object wholeness and the ability to integrate opposites.

When we observe the relation of a person's polarities over time, we observe oscillations between the two poles, with dynamics that often resemble an endless loop. The more strongly we value one polarity, the more we fear losing it, and the more we reject its opposite. We fear losing our identity if we allow for an alternative perspective. However, it often happens that when a person emphasizes one polarity, they also encounter the limitations of the preferred pole—their less desirable side—making the positive aspects of the opposite temporarily attractive as a natural solution: "allowing myself to be like that." The fear of losing the preferred pole generally prevents these attempts to integrate the opposition. This inability to reassess and find value in the rejected oppositions can lead to developmental stagnation.

When discussing psychotherapeutic techniques that facilitate the development of object wholeness, we find that they typically involve "experimenting" with opposites in an environment where the client feels accepted and encouraged to explore the opposites they have rejected. Overcoming black-and-white thinking and embracing dialectical thinking are important indicators of development and, according to the theory of ego development, serve as markers for transcending the conformist stage.

How firmly a person adheres to a particular polarity, as well as how they evaluate others' preferences and to what extent they invest in an "either-or" perspective, can serve as indicators of a specific stage in ego development. By monitoring respondents' stated or implicit preferences in their responses to the MAP, the authors utilized this instrument to assess the level of ego maturity, exploring three ways in which polarities can be significant in the development of the ego: 1. The arc of polarity that underlies the entire developmental trajectory, 2. The shift from the "either-or" perspective in the conventional stage to the inclusion of both perspectives in the postconventional stages, 3. The specific preferences for certain polarities at different stages of ego development.

1. *Arc of polarity: The* theory of ego development posits that human beings progress through stages of differentiation and integration. As shown in Figure 2, development begins with an unconscious, symbiotic fusion with the mother at birth, progressing toward the differentiation and demarcation of the self, ultimately reaching the highest conventional stage—the stage of consciousness. Thus, the first five stages of ego development in adults, from the impulsive stage to the stage of conscientiousness, reflect a fundamental trend toward differentiation between the self and others/environment.

We have already mentioned that the salvation stage was considered the stage people reach in Western countries. However, research over the past fifty years has shown that adults can develop beyond the conventional stages and that such development can be classified. Kok-Greuter (1985, p. 32), as illustrated in Figure 2, divided Loevinger's broadly defined *Integrative*

Stage into two developmental stages: the *construct-awareness* stage and *the unifying stage* . In the construct-awareness stage, individuals become aware of how reality is both perceived and constructed through filters shaped by language. The individualistic stage is also referred to as the pluralistic stage. In the theory of ego development, movements beyond the conventional stages are described as a process of deconstructing previous positions toward increasing integration. The four post-conventional stages demonstrate a pervasive trend toward assimilation and integration, along with a growing awareness of belonging and unity with humanity and the planet. The arc of development, therefore, progresses from differentiation (the initial part of the journey) to integration.

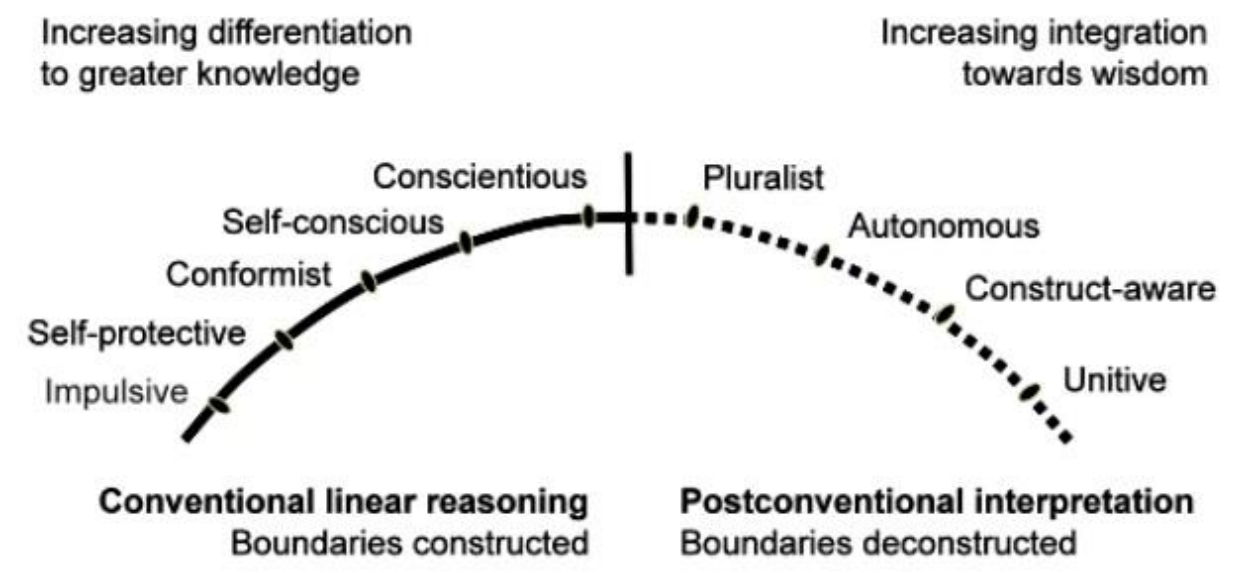

Figure 2. Arc of polarity-differentiation and integration

The functioning of the *differentiation-integration* polarities can also be observed during transitions from one stage to another in the development of the ego. In Figure 3 (Cook-Greuter, 1985), we see that in certain stages (*self-protective, self-aware, pluralistic-individualist, and construct-awar*e), each subsequent stage is characterized by differentiating oneself from the previously achieved integration. In contrast, *the conformist, conscientious, autonomous, and unitive* stages represent stages of new integration. The polarity of integration-differentiation is rooted in two conflicting human urges: autonomy (independence, individuality) and homonomy (belonging, togetherness).

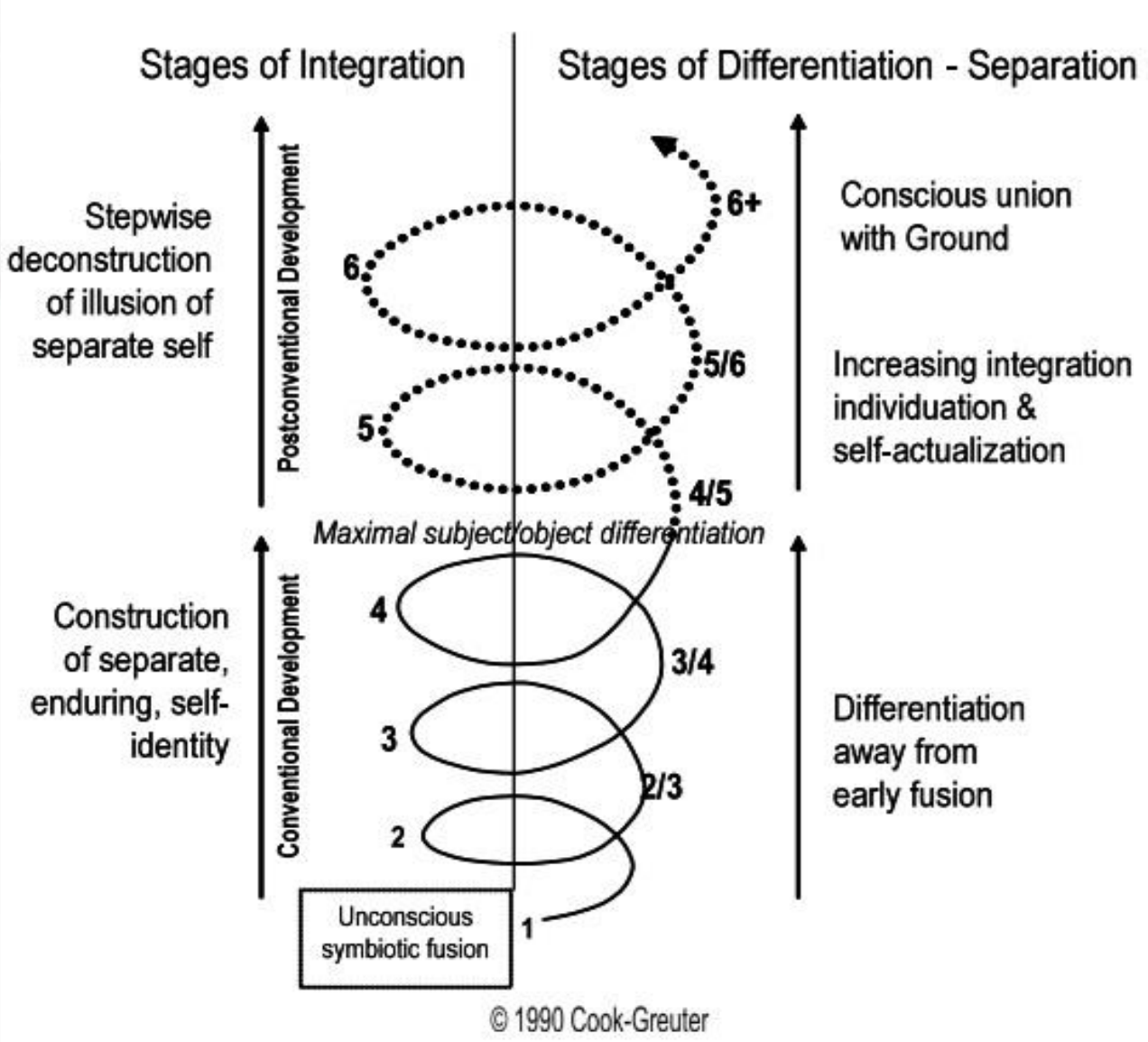

Figure 3. Alternative emphasis on differentiation - integration

2.2. Polar dynamics between conventional and post-conventional

What distinguishes the conventional from the post-conventional way of constructing meaning is the shift from a predominantly "either-or" way of thinking and feeling to the integration of both alternatives. Increasing the ability to integrate polarities is a crucial aspect of post-conventional thinking. Furthermore, we observe that certain aspects of polarity are predominant in the conventional experience of reality, while the opposite polarity becomes integrated as one moves toward a broader and more mature post-conventional reality. Below, we will list the most fundamental of these polarities.

The Part and the Whole: People at the conventional stages tend to orient themselves toward the parts of the system rather than the whole. Meaning is extracted by breaking reality into

manageable pieces. Analysis (from the Greek word analysis, meaning to separate into parts) is the primary mechanism for deconstructing something into parts. A broader perspective and greater orientation toward the whole emerge only in the post-conventional stages, when individuals begin to understand that they are part of a much larger whole. However, the dynamics of differentiation and integration are also evident here. People who have just reached the pluralistic stage often reject the focus on parts and prefer to view only the whole, dismissing the functioning of the previous developmental level. This tendency reflects the "either-or" way of thinking. Those who have transitioned to the post-conventional perspective may initially resist any "atomistic" or "reductionist" view of reality. Only with further development can previous perspectives be integrated, and the individual discovers that focusing on parts is not inherently detrimental, provided it is not exclusive.

Self and Others: The same part-whole orientation can be observed at conventional stages as a focus on one's own needs (part) versus the needs of the group or nation (whole). In any case, the inclusion of others is limited to those who belong to "my group" and manifests as an "us-versus-them" attitude, with firmly defined boundaries. Integration at the post-conventional level occurs with the realization that we are all far more interdependent than previously understood. The stage of autonomy is the first post-conventional stage where there is full awareness of the complex interdependence of self and others, as well as of parts and the whole.

External - Internal, Subjective - Objective: In the early conventional stages, expression is concrete and action-based. The emphasis is on what is external and visible. At the stages of self-awareness and conscientiousness, belief in scientific objectivity becomes particularly important. People at the self-awareness stage focus on expertise and skills rather than the inner life (one might question whether, in general, the ego development stage in academic psychology is stuck at this level). Truth is external and is investigated through external authorities. Although a serious interest in objective self-knowledge can also be observed at the stage of conscientiousness, inner exploration truly begins at the pluralistic stage. Only then do individuals become aware of their cultural conditioning and recognize the limitations of their own objectivity. In the later post-conventional stages, a growing awareness of internal contradictions and paradoxes aligns with the recognition of contradictions in external systems and between internal and external realities.

Short-term - Long-term, Linear - Non-linear: The short-term perspective dominates conventional stages and leads to reactive problem-solving. Long-term consequences and a systemic approach are not fully addressed. This was previously mentioned when discussing the temporal dimension of object wholeness—the ability to view one’s life as a whole, in continuity, through the past, present, and future. A preference for short-term problem-solving leads to reliance on common-sense reasoning and a focus on linear causality. In contrast, a post-conventional perspective allows for the discovery of non-linear relationships and circular causality. It diminishes the need for cognitive closure, defined action, and predictability. At the autonomy stage and beyond, long-term goals and the impact on the well-being of future

generations become more important. Actions can then be designed with consideration of multiple timeframes, levels of impact, and varying contexts.

Absolute - Relative: People at the stage of conscientiousness are capable of holding multiple perspectives and understanding complex systems. However, the focus remains on objective descriptions and the discovery of fundamental, absolute laws of nature and regularities in human behavior. In the post-conventional stages, a new sense of freedom from absolutist thinking emerges. The emphasis shifts to the diversity and relativity of experience, perspectives, and multiple ways of being human. When taken to an extreme, this may lead to the conclusion that no point of view is better than another—that "everything is relative" (a position often associated with postmodernism). The integration that follows absolute relativism occurs at the autonomy stage and beyond. At this stage, despite recognizing general uncertainty, a person can and must make well-founded decisions, justifying them based on several criteria. These include, but are not limited to, ethical principles and clear ideas about what is needed for the system, as well as consideration of the short-term and long-term impacts of a particular course of action.

All of the above polarities play a role at each stage, but the authors provide a broader pattern that helps define and characterize the distinction between conventional and post-conventional ways of constructing meaning. Of course, preferences for basic polarities alone cannot determine an individual's level of ego development. It requires the presence of numerous otherindicators that collectively contribute to the assessment of one's specific worldview.

3. Polarities through stages of development

At each stage of development, we can observe how individuals manage the phenomenon of polarity and its dynamics. Regardless of the stage of development we are in, we can, either consciously or unconsciously, attach ourselves to one polarity, unaware that we are excluding the other. Our current perspective provides us with a sense of self and the security that comes from adhering to a specific set of clear values.

As we outgrow the limitations of a particular stage, we begin to recognize the value of the opposite polarity, which becomes more important in the next stage of development. Upon entering a new stage, we often consciously reject the polarity that we favored in the previous stage because we have become aware of its limitations and negative aspects. We are motivated by the advantages of exploring a new perspective and the desire to integrate new insights into what we deem important.

Table 1 (Cook-Greuter, 1985) lists typical polarities that form the basis of experience at various stages of development. For each polarity, one can identify a preferred polarity, either consciously or unconsciously, as well as the opposite polarity, which has been neglected or rejected. This rejection often occurs due to an inability to recognize the potential usefulness of the opposite polarity or out of fear of its perceived negative aspects.

Table 1. Accepted and neglected genders at different stages of ego development - Conventional stages

Stage	Accepted polarity	Unaccepted polarity
Self-protective	Own interests, needs Action Externalizing responsibility	The needs and interests of others Thinking/reflection, planning. Taking responsibility
Conformist	Others (care) "We" External features Permissiveness, obedience Standards/rules	Self (care) "They" Internal qualities Assertiveness Context/flexibility
Self-conscious	Received knowledge Assimilation Advocating Unilateralities/my way Productivity	Reconsidered knowledge Thinking Research Cooperation/ways of others Effectiveness (quality)
Conscientious	Planned Linear causality Orientation to the future Insight, prudence Objectively	Spontaneous, emerging Nonlinear interdependence Here and now Intuition Subjectively

With the transition from conventional to post-conventional stages, the capacity to "see both sides" of polarity increases significantly. The integration of various polarities is a key aspect of the *autonomous level*. However, subtle preferences still persist, influenced by the value placed on an integrative perspective and the recognition of the limitations inherent in earlier, partial views. This can lead to a reluctance or inability to appreciate the value of previous perspectives. The last two polarities in the table below are typically not recognized by individuals at the autonomous level (Table 2, Cook-Greuter, 1985).

Table 2. Accepted and neglected polarity at different stages of ego development - postconventional stages

Stage	Accepted polarity	Unaccepted polarity
Pluralistic	Horizontally Decision making by consensus To be Gratefullness Personal/subjective Contextually	Vertically Directive decision-making To work Evaluative Objective/analytical Standardized
Autonomic	Overarching System Goals Dynamic Solutions Principles To know Searching	Individual needs/goals Linear problem solving Practicality Mysterious Not looking

3.1. Development of understanding the concept of polarity

After highlighting some of the polarities in adult development, both in general and at individual stages, Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011) present their perspective on the evolution of the concept of opposites. Figure 4 illustrates how oppositions and polarities are understood, maintained, and eventually transcended at different levels of ego development. The capacity to handle opposites evolves from a state where only one aspect of experience, or an "either-or" possibility, is perceived, to more inclusive ways of engaging with opposites, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the very definitions and boundaries once used to create meaning in earlier conceptualizations. As maturity increases, polarities are consciously accepted and integrated. At the highest levels of ego development, individuals become aware of the paradox that the distinction between dualism and non-dualism itself forms a dualistic framework.

To demonstrate this progression—from the initial complexity of understanding oppositions to their potential resolution at the unitive stage—the authors provide examples of responses from MAP. At the preconventional and early conventional stages (self-protective and conformist), individuals are often able to perceive only one aspect of reality, or its opposite. Attention tends to focus on a single side of the experience. For example, on MAP, responses may emphasize only one side of a situation: *Raising a family*—"is enjoyable"; *Raising a family*—"is a struggle." In the subsequent self-aware stage, individuals begin to recognize opposites within the same

whole. This stage marks an initial awareness and willingness to acknowledge conflicting or oppositional elements within one's mental model of how the self and the world function. For instance, a response might be: *When I am criticized*—"I feel hurt, but I learn from it..."

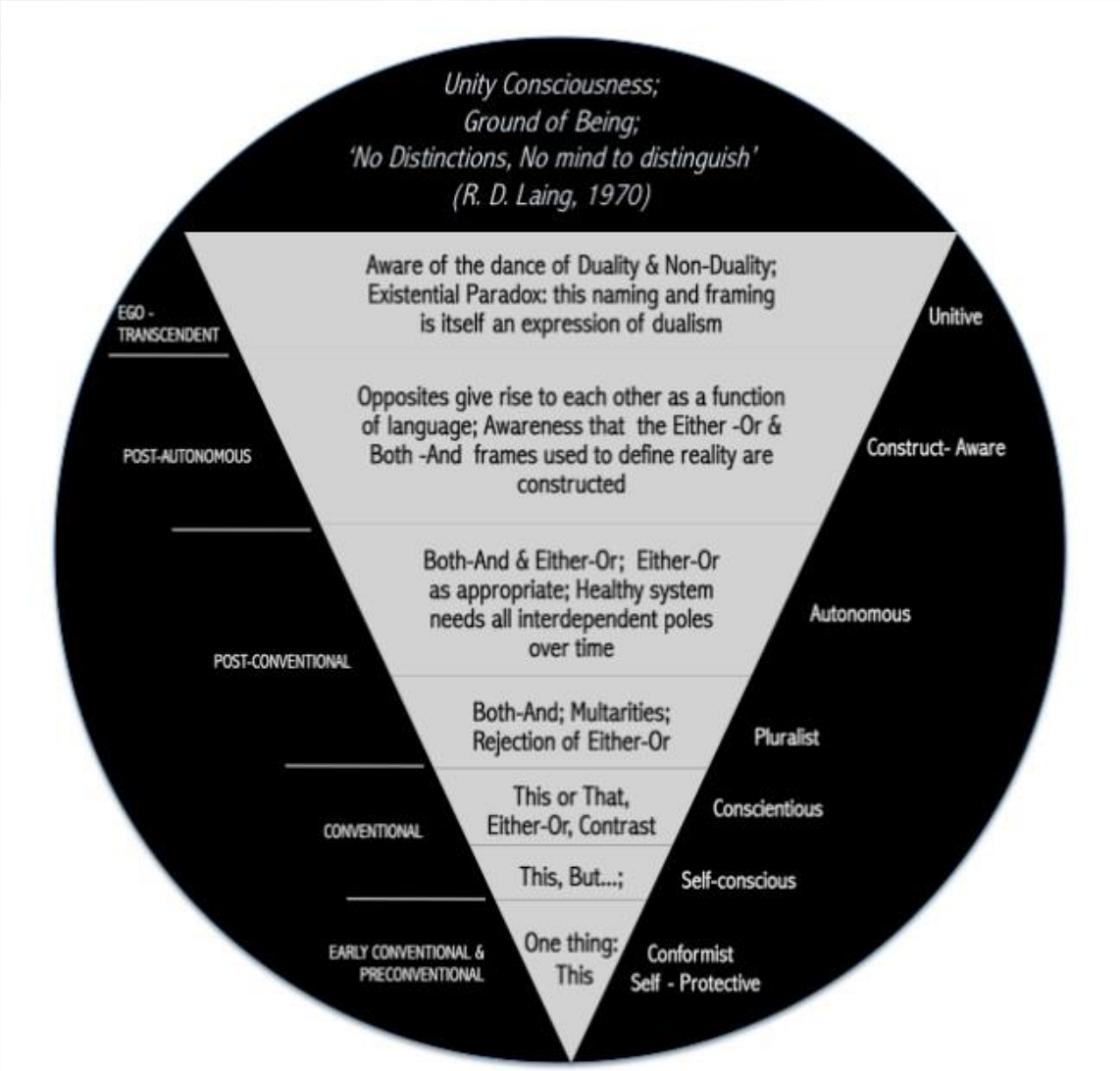

Figure 4. Development of the concept of opposition

At the most differentiated of the conventional stages, the stage of conscientiousness, an initial understanding of the tension between opposites emerges. Individuals at this stage report the need to "juggle" or "balance" different aspects of their experience. The world is still often described in "either-or" terms; however, at least two contrasting possibilities can now be recognized. For example: *Raising a family*—"requires balancing work and personal life...". At

the pluralistic stage, a multiple-perspective approach becomes common. Individuals begin to recognize that, in general, there are more than two possibilities. They may offer a list of ideas, including contrasting elements and multiple viewpoints, each regarded as equally significant. For the first time, individuals become aware of their own evaluation and interpretation of what is important, while respecting both sides of the polarity. Divergent, "both-and" thinking now appears more appropriate than convergent, "either-or" thinking. For example: *Raising a family—*"*requires that women embody multiple roles—housewife, intimate partner, spiritual leader, and adapt to various situations...,*" or *When I am criticized—*"*sometimes I accept criticism, sometimes I reject it, depending on the person and the nature of the criticism...*".

At the autonomous stage, "both-and" thinking extends to multiple levels of interconnected systems. A key characteristic of this stage is the ability to perceive both sides of an issue and the whole, and to choose the "both-and" framework when necessary. For the first time, the interdependent tension of opposites is understood as an inevitable part of life. For example: A good boss… "*knows what needs to be done, but is also able to involve others in making changes and improvements that impact all levels and parts of the organization*."

At the construct-awareness stage, a new understanding emerges regarding how language frames one's reality and how the boundaries we create are not only arbitrary but also useful distinctions. Opposites can now be accepted because individuals recognize that they are necessary for each other. The key to a deeper understanding lies in finding a unifying basis that encompasses both opposites. At this stage, people intuitively sense that the need to manipulate oppositions to alleviate or eliminate tension can be transcended. This is reflected in responses such as: Rules are… "*artificial constructs that we sometimes use to explain (distant) reality or to control (the flow of) events – and, as our creations, they can exist, change, or cease to exist, depending on what we want or need*."

At the stage of *unification*, a person understands that opposites are two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the underlying reality. The struggle between opposites is a symptom of the illusion that the boundaries we impose are real. Therefore, the resolution of opposition lies in the dissolution of all boundaries – including those between the thoughts that create our map of reality and the experience of reality itself. For example: "Being with people..." *is not necessarily dependent on proximity (distance) or the time spent together; we can be physically next to someone and not truly 'be' with them. 'Being with' seems to be more about realizing that the 'other' is somehow a part of 'you' and 'you' a part of 'them – at least, if only for a moment*."
For a person at the unitive stage, the immediate experience of oneness with the universe and its eternal rhythms—expansion and destruction, birth, death, and rebirth, ordinariness and uniqueness, ego awareness and ego transcendence—represents freedom from the confines of language and the constructs created by objectifying reality and framing it in dualistic terms.

To summarize, the conventional mind views liberation, salvation, or happiness as freedom from the negative. However, at later developmental stages, it recognizes the futility of seeking freedom from "pairs" (oppositions). A person at the construct-aware stage can perceive the contradiction inherent in the very desire for freedom and understand how this desire itself can become a form of imprisonment. At the highest level of maturity, as measured by MAP, an individual simply observes the interplay of oppositions, fully understanding their universal nature. They come to recognize both polarities as two sides of the same experience, with arbitrary boundaries between them, where neither is intrinsically positive nor negative, nor more or less valuable than the other. In Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, we refer to this ultimately unifying ability as "existence tolerance" (Jovanović N. et al., 2013).

Concluding considerations

In this paper, we presented a perspective on ego development through the lens of the evolving relationship with opposites, as outlined by Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011). This view offers a different angle on the ability to fully experience the object at an early age, as described by Melanie Klein. It suggests that development begins and ends with this dynamic: it moves from union, through separation, to rejoining at a higher level.

Sharma and Cook-Greuter (2011) argue that the foundation of ego development lies in the ability to assign meaning to our experiences in an increasingly complex and appropriate manner. As we name, interpret, and assign value to our experiences, and as we begin to perceive what was previously unseen, our worldview expands. The continuous capacity to renew our perspectives, question our assumptions, reevaluate our interpretations, and reframe our experience of reality in a more comprehensive way is at the heart of the developmental process. More specifically, becoming aware of the value and utility of previously less valued opposites provides us with a powerful tool for broadening our perspective. This ability is also one of the key foundations of psychodynamic psychotherapy methods. Working with polarities helps clients recognize the interdependence of elements that were previously separated in their earlier conceptions. One of the primary developmental tasks in psychotherapy is to include and integrate what was previously rejected, and to incorporate the opposite of what was once privileged.

Insights into ego development from research outside of psychotherapy can significantly supplement our understanding of psychological development. These insights help illuminate the stages of development and provide clarity on what developmental psychologist Vygotsky (1993) refers to as "the zone of proximal development." When we understand where we are headed and the "stations" along the way, we are better equipped to guide those in their developmental journey.

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Vertical Unconsciousness and New Defense Mechanisms

Abstract

This paper explores the observed transformations in the Ego of clients in the contemporary era, connecting these changes to broader shifts in culture, the structure of modern Western society—under whose strong influence Serbia also falls—lifestyle alterations, and the prevailing value system. These cultural dynamics are examined through the conceptual frameworks of *repressive*, *narcissistic*, and *perverse cultures*. In examining changes in the Ego, the paper introduces the concept of the vertical unconscious, which differs from the traditional horizontal unconscious. While the horizontal unconscious is primarily organized around the defense mechanism of repression, the vertical unconscious is structured through mechanisms such as *splitting* and *atomization*. The paper also addresses newly emerging defense mechanisms, with particular attention to mechanisms aimed at avoiding psychic merging. A dominant defense identified in this context is *partialism*, understood as a core mechanism in the vertical unconscious. These mechanisms contribute to a state of unconscious disconnection between the conscious layers of the psyche, further complicating internal integration.

Keywords: vertical unconscious, defense mechanisms, ego, splitting, repression, atomization, narcissism, perversion.

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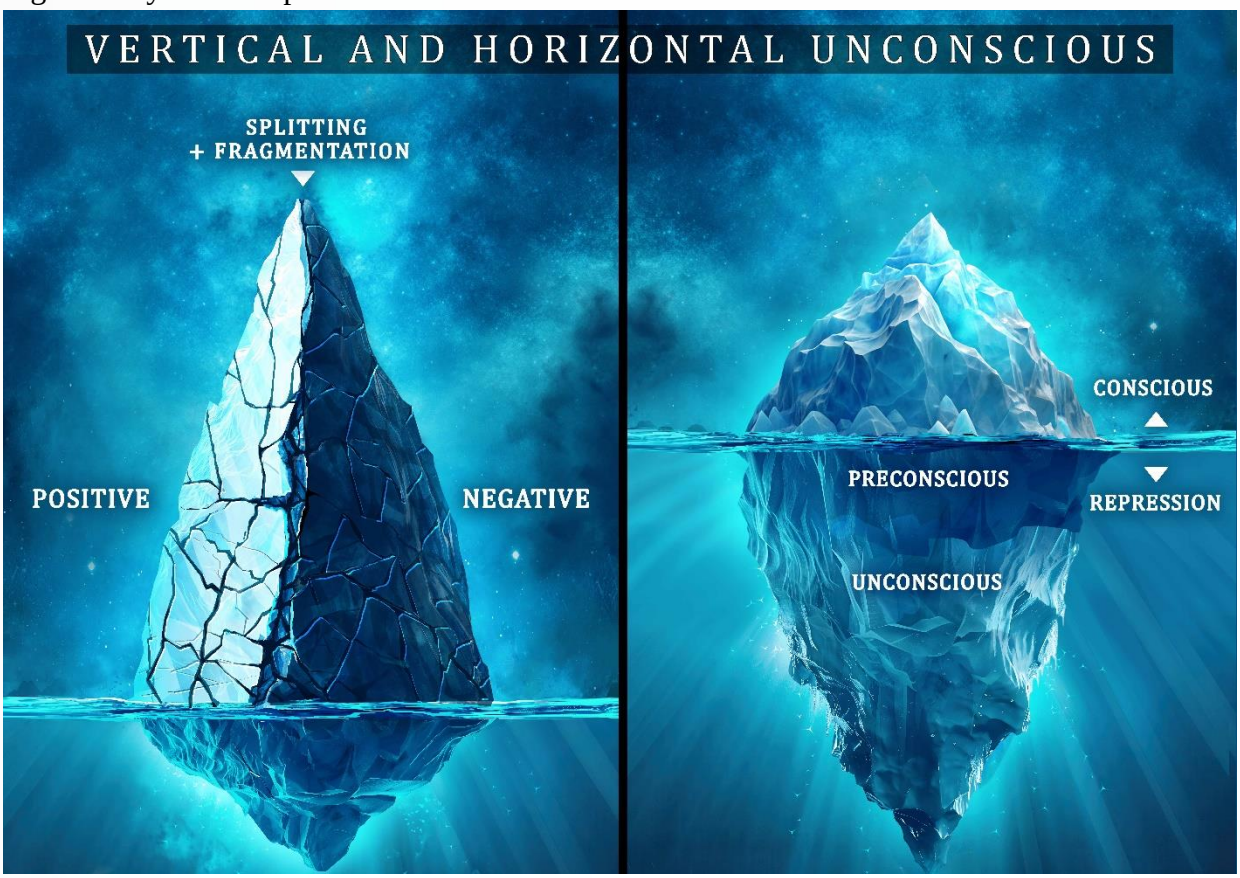
1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two types of unconscious processes, each excluded from conscious awareness through distinct types of defense mechanisms. To better differentiate between these, we introduce two terms not previously established in psychoanalytic literature: the *horizontal unconscious* and the vertical unconscious. We propose that the unconscious may be understood as comprising two dimensions: The *vertical unconscious* arises from splitting as a defense mechanism. It is marked by a polarized, black-and-white perception, where opposing aspects of the psyche alternate in awareness but are never integrated—each becoming the shadow of the other at different points in time. The horizontal unconscious is organized around repression, where undesirable aspects of the personality are "pushed into the basement" of the psyche, excluded from awareness through more mature defenses. (See Figure 1 for visual representation.) Depending on whether a client is primarily governed by splitting and other primitive defenses (such as projection, introjection, and denial), or by more mature mechanisms centered around repression (supported by intellectualization, rationalization, reaction formation, sublimation, etc.), therapeutic techniques are adjusted accordingly.

Figure 1: Symbolic representation of the vertical and horizontal unconscious.



Source: The author of the paper

The is well established in psychoanalytic literature. It presupposes that repressed contents were once conscious, but came into conflict with the conscience, the Superego, or the Self, thereby provoking anxiety due to their perceived unacceptability. As a result, they were expelled from the "stage" of awareness into the basement of the unconscious. To prevent their return, "guards" were placed—forms of Ego censorship—defense mechanisms that support the process of repression. These include intellectualization, rationalization, reaction formation, sublimation, and other so-called mature defense mechanisms. The horizontal unconscious forms the basis of what is traditionally termed *neurotic conflict*—an ongoing inner struggle between the Superego and the Id, between repressed desires, needs, and emotions seeking expression and satisfaction, and the conscience or fear of external consequences. This conflict often manifests as ambivalent, contradictory emotions toward people or activities to which these needs are directed—a phenomenon referred to as the *conflict of ambivalence*. Individuals may experience ambivalence toward love objects such as parents, partners, children, work, success, or even the psychotherapist from whom they seek relief. This ambivalence extends to nearly all aspects of emotional life. In the therapeutic setting, such dynamics are expressed through resistance to the therapeutic process (the simultaneous desire and refusal to engage), as well as through fluctuations in transference—ranging from idealization to frustration and hostility. In *transference neurosis*, this is often accompanied by intense preoccupation with the therapist's personality, and disappointment or anger when transference needs remain unmet. The therapeutic aim, in this context, is to foster *emotional competence*, which we define as the capacity for *tolerance of ambivalence*.(Jovanović, 2013).

After briefly outlining the concept of the horizontal unconscious, the focus of the paper now shifts to the vertical unconscious and the mechanisms underlying it, which we believe remain insufficiently explored in existing literature. Clinical experience—our own and that of many colleagues—suggests the emergence of characteristic shifts in the organization of the Ego in the contemporary era. These shifts may be understood through the lens of the vertical unconscious and a weakening of the Ego's synthetic function. These developments will be examined in a broader socio-cultural context, interpreted through the framework of repressive, narcissistic, and perverse cultures. These cultural dynamics, and their impact on psychic structure, will be explored in detail in the second part of this paper.

2. Defense Mechanisms of the Vertical Unconscious

Unlike the horizontal unconscious, where the primary defense against anxiety focuses on repressing contents deemed inappropriate by the Superego, the vertical unconscious functions differently. In this case, the person defends against forming connections between conscious contents in order to avoid experiencing anxiety related to ambivalence, contradiction, and the complexity of perceiving and experiencing an object. The individual thus protects themselves from engaging in deeper and more realistic connections with people, work, and even the links between thoughts and phenomena, essentially rejecting complexity and thoughtful reflection. These internal processes can be described using different terms— (the reluctance or inability to

These internal processes can be described using different terms—*disconnecting* (the reluctance or inability to form connections and think) and *atomization* (the fragmentation of connections that once existed within the mind). These processes are separated because we believe they represent distinct phenomena. *Splitting* is an active defense mechanism that involves avoiding ambivalence by severing connections and separating the positive and negative aspects of an object within consciousness. This process reduces complexity into simplified opposites and introduces vertical partitions between them, creating the illusion in the mind that these opposites do not belong to the same entity. *Disconnecting*, by contrast, refers to the mind's tendency to avoid thinking or failing to connect phenomena that are, in reality, interrelated.

Kernberg (1967) provides a detailed account of primitive defense mechanisms and makes a clear distinction between repression and splitting. According to his theory, splitting is the developmental precursor to repression and continues to operate pathologically in individuals who are fixated at the pre-Oedipal stage. As a result, they are unable to form coherent relationships with objects or establish constancy. Kernberg identifies two general levels of Ego organization: one related to the pre-Oedipal stage (vertical unconscious) and the other associated with Oedipal pathology (horizontal unconscious). At the pre-Oedipal level, splitting functions as the primary defense mechanism, supported by denial, primitive idealization, primitive devaluation, and projective identification.

These primitive mechanisms related to splitting have been well-established in the literature, and their role is clearly understood. They facilitate splitting by projecting aspects of the self onto others, introjecting parts of others into the self, or denying the existence of certain aspects of oneself or others. These mechanisms prevent the coexistence of opposites in consciousness and avoid the unbearable conflict of ambivalence. Over time, these mechanisms can evolve into more mature defense mechanisms as they develop into higher levels.

For instance, *primitive denial*, as defined by Kernberg (1967), refers to the tendency of patients to negate the emotional significance of an aspect of consciousness that contradicts their current experience. The patient is aware that, at certain moments, their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about themselves or others are in complete opposition to those they have had at other times. However, these conflicting memories hold no emotional significance for the patient and cannot influence their present emotional state. Kernberg (1967) emphasizes that "primitive denial implies that emotions experienced at one moment are denied at another." He further argues that a more advanced form of denial, which he calls "negation," involves denying the emotional significance of something that was never even present in consciousness. It is as though that emotion or content is "pushed into the basement" of the horizontal unconscious. In this way, the more primitive form of denial facilitates splitting, while the more advanced form leads toward repression.

Melanie Klein (Klein, 1934, as cited in Segal, 1973) made a crucial reformulation of the concept of defense mechanisms. She argued that defense mechanisms not only protect the ego from

overwhelming emotions but also serve as the organizational principle of the child's mental life (Lerner, 1998). The child's mind operates by clearly distinguishing between pleasant and unpleasant experiences (Grala, 1980) related to objects, categorizing them into separate "folders" (the "good" and "bad" objects). According to Kernberg (1967), splitting is an inevitable tool by which the child's ego separates pleasant from unpleasant experiences. However, the question arises whether it is accurate to apply the term "splitting" to this early state of the mind. At this stage, the mind simply separates pleasant and unpleasant experiences, which is not yet a defense mechanism. It is more an instinctual tendency of disconnection. It is only when the ability to perceive the whole object develops and the ambivalent feelings that contradictory representations of the object provoke emerge that the unconscious tendency to split them again can be considered a defense mechanism, known as splitting.

Freud (1915) already discussed "different latent mental processes that enjoy a high degree of mutual independence, as if they have no connection with one another and do not know anything about each other." He further suggested that "we must be prepared, if this is the case, to assume the existence within us of not only another consciousness but also a third, a fourth, perhaps an unlimited number of states of consciousness, which are unknown to us and to one another." These statements, while intriguing, appear confusing and contradictory upon closer scrutiny. When Freud refers to "latent mental processes" that "know nothing about each other," he seems to imply *fragmentation within the unconscious*, or what we might call "compartmentalization." But how can these different latent processes remain unaware of each other if no vertical barriers exist within the unconscious? An additional puzzle arises when Freud speaks of "states of consciousness" that are "unknown to each other." Firstly, a "state of consciousness" is, by definition, not the same as a "latent mental process," yet Freud appears to use the two terms interchangeably. Moreover, it remains unclear where such a "state of consciousness" resides when it is "unknown" to us. Can a state of consciousness exist at an unconscious level and still be called a "state of consciousness"? The concept of the *vertical unconscious* provides a potential answer to these questions. It seeks to explain the mechanisms responsible for creating and maintaining this fragmentation of consciousness, in which unconscious connections between phenomena—otherwise perceived at different times—appear only in isolated "mental spaces." How do these different mental processes remain hidden from one another, and why do they fail to connect into meaningful wholes? This central question is the focus of this paper.

In attempting to answer this question, we aim to present a mechanism that is not active, regressive splitting, but rather the prevention of connection. The ***mechanism of avoiding connection*** is an unconscious tendency to avoid linking qualities, representations of another person, oneself, work, or avoiding a more complex picture of anything—what we consider a specific defense mechanism against potential ambivalence or overwhelm. The defense is set up in advance, as the mind's reluctance to connect, similar to the non-valence of chemical elements. We will call this mechanism ***partialization*** (or atomization)—the tendency not to connect. It is important to distinguish the mechanism of splitting something that was previously connected

from partialization, which is the unwillingness to connect, "coupling" information. Partialization can be a more permanent feature of one's thinking or a fragmented state of mind. Maintaining this fragmented state is supported by other defense mechanisms, as defense mechanisms "work as a team," which we assume have arisen or become more frequent as a result of changes in the organization of everyday life in the modern era.

2.1. Auxiliary defense mechanisms organized around partialization

The task of these mechanisms is to maintain and support disconnection in thinking and relationships. They typically achieve this by influencing attention, diverting it from the whole to a greater number of disconnected fragments:

" *Scrolling* " (Flowing), "mental promiscuity": Herdi (2023) defines "flowing" as "a modern defense mechanism of a neurotic level involving unconscious engagement with social media applications, quickly scrolling through content without conscious attention, with the goal of temporarily alleviating mental stress." This could also be described as scrolling through connections, tasks, and various superficial content on social media—a form of mental promiscuity. The pursuit of likes, followers, and engaging with unknown individuals satisfies narcissistic needs without genuine object-relatedness. Similarly, a tendency to remain constantly engaged in social interactions or superficial relationships can be seen as mental promiscuity. It resembles "mental bulimia," where the mind is constantly filled without processing, leading to "chronic emotional hunger."

"The Mechanism of Superficiality" A little bit of everything, but nothing enough." This mechanism involves engaging with relationships or activities only until ambivalence arises. When ambivalence appears, the person shifts to another object or topic, avoiding deeper connection.

Superficiality is one of the typical defense mechanisms against the ambivalence often experienced during adolescence. It is surprising that superficiality is not commonly listed in traditional defense mechanism literature. Essentially, superficiality represents the fragmentation of relationships into small pieces, which is distinct from the splitting of good and bad, love and hate. This results in the release of tension through "a large number of small holes" across multiple channels, none of which are significant enough to create strong emotional connections. The strategy is "a little bit of everything, but nothing enough." The individual avoids attaching to any single object or activity and does not develop the intensity of attachment that would evoke strong emotions of love and hate, thus sidestepping the conflict of ambivalence (and the need to develop tolerance for it). A younger child cannot practice this, as they are dependent and have fewer ways to release tension. Adolescents, on the other hand, have more relational outlets and often choose superficiality to avoid the internal conflict of ambivalence. Where there is no strong attachment to a person or activity, there is no strong ambivalence.

We believe that the abuse of the mechanism of superficiality is one of the key reasons why many adolescents struggle to develop the ability to tolerate ambivalence. The development of this ability is a continuous process; it does not end in early childhood with the establishment of object constancy but, much like object constancy, continues throughout life (Jovanović, 2013). One possible consequence of failing to develop this competence is that, when faced with "serious matters" such as choosing a profession, university, job, long-term relationships, marriage, or having children, many adolescents experience panic attacks—or even entirely deny the need for development. Further personal growth requires the ability to tolerate frustration and the ambivalent emotions that this frustration brings.

Mechanism of Not Thinking: This mechanism is frequently used by adolescents. "Not thinking" is distinct from repression. The individual is aware of both sides of their ambivalent feelings, but when conflict arises, they resolve the issue by diverting their attention to a third area using the "distraction mechanism," which serves as an auxiliary to the "not thinking" mechanism.

Distraction mechanism: This often involves activities such as staring at a computer, listening to music, or watching television—with the hope that "things will resolve themselves." Unlike repression, where certain thoughts and emotions are pushed into the unconscious, in "not thinking," they remain conscious. One side of the ambivalence is not devalued ("I don't care about that... school doesn't matter..."), nor is it denied ("there is no problem"), but when a decision needs to be made, the person avoids thinking about it. The mind redirects itself to something else to sidestep the discomfort of the conflict. This is often expressed through statements like, "Oh, forget it, I can't think about that right now..." which tend to surface when something needs to be done. The feeling of ambivalence creates discomfort and tension, which demands resolution. It is easier to defend oneself through superficiality and "not thinking" (as long as there are no immediate, more unpleasant consequences).

Activism: This defense mechanism leads the individual to prioritize energetic action over employing practical strategies to solve problems. They engage in a flurry of activities, often avoiding what is truly needed (such as studying or preparing for an exam). Instead, a range of urgent, yet irrelevant, tasks suddenly appears—tasks that require minimal cognitive effort. The person seems very active and busy, as though preparing to address a problem or task, but these actions serve only to distract from the actual solution, creating the illusion of productivity.

Building Self-Object, Partial Relationships: The promiscuous mind views the object (whether it be a person, work, or anything emotionally invested in) as a tool to fulfill personal needs—an extension of one's desires. Objectless relationships form, where the object is treated as a mere instrument. It's akin to a transactional relationship: you take what you need when you need it, but you don't truly connect with the object as a person. This dynamic is also observed in psychotherapy, where a new type of countertransference emerges in therapists: feeling needed but insignificant, much like prostitutes. In this scenario, the client's interest in the therapist's personality is minimal. The focus is solely on the therapist's role and the function they serve,

with no classic transference neurosis or obsession. Similar dynamics occur when clients discuss their relationships—everyone feels like they're being used for a specific function, needed in a limited capacity but dismissed as individuals.

Hyperfocusing: Concentrating on a fragment of something without the intention of seeing the whole or understanding the broader context. This leads to polarized thinking, a "narrow vision," and intense emotions that accompany polarization, resulting in an incomplete perception. Such emotions often become mistaken for the truth, as they are supported by the following mechanism:

Emotionalization of Thinking: The belief that truth is equated with personal feelings—this serves as a defense against complexity, reasoning, and connection. Emotions are rationalized as "honesty" or "spontaneity," which masks impulsive reactions born from thoughtlessness and narrow, partial perspectives. Intense feelings replace logical arguments, knowledge, and reasoning as the standard of truth.

Bion (1962) argued that emotions must undergo a transformation to become part of thinking. Initially, emotions serve as raw material for thought and dreaming. In the second stage, after achieving object constancy, emotions can manifest as knowledge, providing tools for further thought development and personal growth. Affects, in their informative role, signal inconsistencies (e.g., between past and present states, or between desired and current realities) and indicate whether something aligns or conflicts. When this inconsistency exceeds a certain threshold, Principle B is activated, diminishing or eliminating the emotional signal ("I can't see it, hear it, feel it..."). The emotionalization of thinking is the belief that raw emotions validate the truth of something. Many people develop this mindset along with what we call "neurotic pride"—taking pride in thoughtlessness and emotional reactions, seeing them as indicators of "authenticity" and "honesty." As the saying goes, "What the wise man is ashamed of, the fool takes pride in."

Devaluation of Logic: Logic provides connections between phenomena, but these connections are often avoided due to ambivalence. Logic relies on rules, and rules are generalizations. Generalizations are rejected as they limit personal experience and the satisfaction of needs—particularly when those needs are partial, contradictory, or disconnected from the need for healthy relationships with others. The mantra of "living in the moment" embodies this, representing the partialization of time: "I live for now, for this moment, and will deal with the consequences later."

Avoidance of Generalizations: Similar to the behavior seen in some autistic children, this involves "brain-breaking" attempts to understand the underlying principles or patterns behind individual events, thoughts, or ideas. It results in speaking without a clear purpose. Recounting events or experiences without the mental effort to identify the underlying regularities or messages leads to vague communication—essentially, "what did the author mean to say?"

Speech becomes disconnected and meaningless, offering no clear message. This is an expression of a fragmented, unconnected mind.

2.2. Substitutes for thinking - defensive mechanisms against thinking

If the function of thinking—meant to facilitate understanding and adaptation to reality—is threatened, it must be substituted with something that resembles mature, complex thinking but lacks its depth. This creates an orientation without true understanding. As a result, defensive pseudo-thinking develops: childish and immature, a refusal to grow up and "think for oneself." Defense mechanisms, in this context, serve to delay maturation, preventing separation and individuation. A ban on thinking is essentially a ban on growing up, on developing independence in reasoning. Thinking for oneself becomes undesirable for those seeking to maintain control over another person's submission. The prevalence of certain defense mechanisms in different epochs is socially conditioned and is perpetuated through "agents of socialization"—family, school, media, and so on.

Mainstream "Thinking": This is the replacement of reflective, integrated principles with uncritically adopted "swallowed" introjects. Functioning in the adult world requires principles, attitudes, general beliefs, and ideas. The absence of thoughtful, tested generalizations is replaced with superficial, unquestioned ones, adopted without critical examination, and internalized to conform to the reference group one wishes to belong to, avoiding rejection or sanction. The previously described defensive mechanisms create a foundation for such thinking. In the fear of rejection and due to a lack of trust in their own reflective thoughts, individuals defend mainstream ideas as if they were sacred truths, memorizing predetermined arguments to support them. Debate becomes intolerable because it threatens the firmness of beliefs that substitute for actual thinking. Those who do not share the "officially accepted" opinion are excluded, a phenomenon now known as "cancel culture."

Cancel Culture: This term refers to a cultural phenomenon where an individual deemed "politically incorrect" or who acts or speaks in an unacceptable way is ostracized, boycotted, avoided, fired, or attacked, often with the assistance of social media (Bromwich 2018). This exclusion, or "cancellation," can extend across both social and professional circles, whether on social media or in real life, and typically involves public figures.

Conformism, Mannerism, and Following Success Trends: Rather than developing generalizations through reflection, mannerism replaces principles and the ethics derived from them. It presents itself as sincere behavior but is, in reality, mere imitation. Mannerisms are not based on consciously evaluated values or authentic connections, but on swallowed introjects and behaviors that create the illusion of communication, connection, adaptation, and thinking. For example, "give me a hug" becomes a manneristic gesture lacking real emotional connection; manneristic speech becomes a collection of empty phrases, clichés, and formulaic expressions.

In order for these to be maintained, certain “counter-skills”, , are required:

Unfinished Thoughts and Sentences, Themes: When a conclusion that doesn’t align with one’s desires is anticipated or when thinking is required, an inability arises to “hold the thread”—to stay focused on the topic or to continue the conversation. This defensive habit leads to frequent shifts in thought and conversation, resulting in discussions “about everything and anything,” losing track of the point, failing to draw conclusions, and fragmented speech. Ideas or thoughts are not followed through; consequences are not considered, and ideas are not connected to one another, nor to opposing thoughts. The result is a confused, disconnected mind, filled with firmly introjected beliefs that remain unexamined and internally unrelated.

Blurring and Exclusion: This occurs when the world is seen as if through fog—there’s no effort to clarify, truly understand, or make something “crystal clear.” The satisfaction comes from simply making something “discernible.” Blurring is facilitated by being poorly or insufficiently informed. It’s a form of avoidance, an absence. One may be physically present but mentally detached, like a bored student in class. As Bajaga describes: "Ba ba bam bam bam, I don’t want to know anything." It’s akin to isolating oneself from a problem, similar to falling asleep under stress. Exclusion refers to being “here” without fully noticing, not registering what is happening. This detachment is often accompanied by a relaxation of the eye muscles, causing blurred vision. When someone has detached themselves through blurring, it can feel as though they are looking through you, rather than at you.

Labeling: This involves giving an epithet in place of true mentalization. When asked why someone is acting a certain way, the response is often reduced to a label: "Because they’re an idiot..." The epithet is treated as an explanation, much like the **argumentum ad hominem** fallacy. There is no attempt to psychologically analyze or understand the underlying motivations behind someone's actions. The epithet is accepted as sufficient explanation, masquerading as thought, opinion, or assessment.

Repetitive Interpretations: A phenomenon may be noticed, but instead of genuine analysis, repetitive interpretations or opinions are parroted, often those propagated by the media. There is no willingness to question or engage with these interpretations. The person clings to them “like a drunk to a fence,” absorbing others’ thoughts without processing or critically examining them. These introjected ideas are unchallenged, swallowed without reflection or independent thought.

Our understanding of defense mechanisms against thinking can be linked to the cognitive distortions described by Aaron Beck (1972). These distortions—automatic thoughts and habitual thinking—often manifest as a defense mechanism against deeper reflection on specific topics. Below, we will list some cognitive distortions Beck mentioned to illustrate how they break the rules of logic, helping to avoid engaging in deeper reflection.

Jumping to conclusions: Instead of drawing logical conclusions based on real evidence, individuals immediately focus on a conclusion (often negative) and then seek out evidence to support it, disregarding any contradictory information. Those who jump to conclusions often believe they are "mind readers" (assuming they know others' true intentions without asking) and "predict the future" (thinking they can foresee how things will unfold and that their predictions will come true).

Focusing on the negative: Individuals who engage in this distortion overgeneralize the negative and neglect the positive. They tend to filter their thoughts through a "mental filter," so rather than noticing the many positive aspects of their surroundings, they concentrate only on the one negative thing.

Overgeneralization: Negative conclusions are applied to events that are not directly related to the original situation being evaluated. People make sweeping generalizations based on a small sample of experiences, drawing broad conclusions from limited evidence. These excessive, hasty generalizations often replace conclusions that would be formed through deeper thinking and identifying patterns or relationships among phenomena (Beck, 1972).

3. Social Influences on the Formation of Vertical Unconscious

In this part of the paper, we will focus on the societal changes that have led to typical shifts in the organization of the Ego and Super Ego, and how these shifts have contributed to the formation of certain prevalent character structures as adaptations to unhealthy social conditions.

3.1. Repressive Culture and Neurosis

Repressive culture was defined by overly strict moral norms that clashed with fundamental aspects of human nature—particularly the drive to satisfy sexual and aggressive impulses. Within this cultural framework, the needs of the Id (the instinctual part of the personality) were in constant conflict with the Super Ego (the internalized moral authority or conscience). The Ego, positioned in the middle as the mediator, struggled to reconcile these opposing forces. When the Ego was unable to effectively manage this internal conflict—due to the intensity of the demands or the weakening of its defense mechanisms—psychological symptoms would arise. This internal tension was expressed through neurosis. In essence, neurotic individuals were those who internalized the dominant social norms and repressed the parts of themselves that were incompatible with those norms into the unconscious (Freud, 1938; Fromm, 1955; Reich, 1946).

However, as the constraints of repressive culture loosened over time, this did not lead to the anticipated psychological liberation or the development of more mature, integrated personalities. Quite the opposite: it appears that these cultural changes fostered regression to lower levels of psychological development, contributing to the emergence of narcissistic, perverse, and psychotic cultural patterns.

3.2. Narcissistic Culture and Narcissistic Pathologies

Later, Lasch (1991) and other authors expanded upon the mechanisms underlying narcissistic culture. Lasch sought to link the dominance of modern capitalism with the rise of consumer culture and the accompanying consumerist mindset, which fostered the development of a *narcissistic personality structure*. This structure, which perceives individuals as fragile and easily damaged, contributes to phenomena such as the fear of attachment and long-term commitments (including religious ones), the fear of aging (seen in the "youth cult" of the 1960s and 1970s), and an excessive fascination with fame and celebrity (initially cultivated through the film industry and later reinforced by television).

The narcissistic individual becomes a perfect consumer—of things they do not genuinely need but desire in response to vanity and narcissistic cravings. The aim of social influence becomes the shaping of a vain, seduced individual, a willing buyer of images, brands, and all the symbolic markers of worth associated with the narcissistic personality. In this context, the consumer becomes complicit in their own manipulation, eagerly purchasing anything marketed as a measure of their value.

In psychotherapeutic literature, extensive theory and methodology have been developed for working with the narcissistic dimension of the personality—including concepts such as narcissistic transference and self-object transference. Whereas neurotics typically struggle with guilt, narcissists are marked by "narcissistic injuries": wounds to their self-worth, heightened sensitivity to shame (especially when their grandiose self-image is threatened), and pervasive feelings of inner emptiness. For the narcissistic personality, "image," "marketing," and "branding" become central psychological activities. What matters most is not who they are, but how they appear—how they are perceived. Yet, paradoxically, they still strive to present themselves as aligned with certain dominant moral ideals. But what about contemporary society? What type of personality structure is now encouraged through the primary agents of socialization—family, school, peer groups, media, and social networks? Increasingly, many authors suggest that narcissistic culture is giving way to a perverse culture.

3.3. Perverse Culture

Narcissism and individualism of the late 20th century, through the valorization of selfishness, greed, material gain, and exploitation, paved the way for the development of a perverse mode of functioning, primarily by “turning a blind eye” to various forms of social and moral deviation (Hoggett, 1992). In everyday discourse, the term *perversion* is often narrowly associated with sexual deviation or sexualized practices that fall outside the dominant norms of a given society. Historically, many such practices were classified as “perverse,” although some have since been redefined as normative or removed from diagnostic or moral classifications altogether.

In their book *The Age of Perversion: Desire and Technology in Psychoanalysis and Culture* (2016), Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco broaden the concept of perversion, placing it within a wider social and cultural framework. The authors open the book by offering an overview of contemporary forms of perversion, emphasizing how they relate not only to individual psychopathologies or mental illness, but to broader social dynamics that shape modern identity, desire, and interpersonal relations.

Susan Long (2002) expands the scope of investigation to problematic organizational dynamics within corporations and institutions, initially conceptualized through neurotic and psychotic processes. This approach promotes the idea of treating organizations as patients requiring treatment. In other words, organizations were viewed within psychotherapeutic frameworks (Bion, 1970), which led to the pathologization of the organizations themselves, people at work, and their group dynamics. The concept of "perversion" challenges this perspective, as it is not easily understood as a disease but rather as a form of corruption involving power dynamics and social relationships with malicious intent.

Long suggests that perversion compels us to think about how people unconsciously connect with one another. This leads to an exploration of how individuals relate to each other and how their beliefs form collective meaning. This has been called the supreme principle of community (social law), where the main dynamic is understood as the principle of action for society as a

whole. There is no suggestion that every, or even most, individuals personally exhibit this dynamic in its clinical sense. Instead, it is proposed that society functions systemically based on this identified dynamic, which then influences individuals and shapes their behavior. A narcissistic society fosters the development of an increasingly perverse society by "turning a blind eye" to injustice, corruption, and exploitation, creating perverse structures by seeking (unconscious) accomplices in corrupt behavior. Perversity differs from the self-love/self-interest of narcissistic dynamics, which remain within the law or at least acknowledge it and attempt to stay within its boundaries. Moreover, (secondary) narcissists crave the love and recognition of others. However, the perverse position exploits others in a much more detached or even cold manner. It carries an exploitative attitude, viewing others primarily as accomplices in achieving exploitation.

In Freudian psychoanalysis (Freud, 1938), perversion is understood as a deviation from the normal goal of adult sexuality. Perverse forms of sexuality are seen as fixations at an earlier stage of sexual development (where an adult exhibits childlike forms of sexuality). The sexual instinct is present, but the object toward which it is directed is inappropriate or immature. For example, in fetishism (specific objects or body parts such as shoes or feet are particularly arousing), sadomasochism, or the sexual abuse of children, there is a clear sexual impulse, but the object is inappropriate, as is the manner of relating to the object (e.g., sadomasochistic or exploitative behavior).

One of the key traits of the perverse mind is the *denial of reality*—an obstinate refusal to accept what is right and true. The individual is aware that something is wrong but simultaneously convinced that what is wrong is, in fact, acceptable. This belief is held with rigid certainty. For example, a sadist knows that torturing another person is wrong, but they convince themselves that it is acceptable, viewing the victim as a mere tool to satisfy their desires. They deny the moral wrongness of their actions and stubbornly pursue their needs. Furthermore, they actively seek *to create an environment that supports their perversity*. Reality TV shows exemplify this, where perverse behaviors are normalized as a way to be "interesting" or "shocking" in order to boost viewership and publicity.

Freud (1938) analyzed this dynamic as stemming from the splitting of the ego, where the person simultaneously holds two contradictory beliefs—one of acceptance and one of rejection. This psychological splitting occurs as a defense against the fear of uncertainty or "ignorance." Freud's analysis of fetishism, which he regarded as a prototype of perverse dynamics, highlights the child's attachment to the fetish as a substitute for the mother's penis—something they refuse to let go of despite clear evidence to the contrary. To abandon this belief would mean admitting that the child was wrong in their early understanding of sexuality. This dynamic works as follows:

- *Denial* of the possibility of castration.

- *Retention of the fantasy* of a phallic mother, with the fetish acting as a replacement for the missing phallus.

The crucial aspect here is the refusal to accept the position of "not knowing." The fetishist's rejection of sexual differentiation means they also deny the truth that their early childhood theory of sexuality—where both mother and father were believed to have a penis—was incorrect. This refusal to acknowledge their earlier misunderstanding seems intolerable to the child, who clings to false knowledge in the face of an uncomfortable truth. The fear of being in a state of unknowing is so overwhelming that the child holds onto this mistaken belief. This avoidance of acknowledging ignorance stems from a deep-seated fear of powerlessness and immaturity. If this fear of unknowing persists, it can lead to a rigid and perverse certainty about the world.

This certainty is often validated by others, and thus, an accomplice becomes necessary or is created. The accomplice is viewed as an extension of the self—someone who aids in confirming the perverse belief. For instance, a sadist requires a victim. This dynamic of "not knowing" versus "rigid certainty" extends beyond the individual to larger social structures, such as media or organizations. The media, for instance, knows that it is promoting content that undermines human dignity and perpetuates perversity, yet it continues to portray it as acceptable. This is because such content generates viewership and profits. The more perverse the content, the more attention it attracts, demonstrating the perverse logic at work in broader societal contexts.

Hinshelwood (1991), in his dictionary of "Kleinian" thinking, suggests that Kleinians "tend to view all perversions as manifestations of the death drive—impulses that distort sexuality." A significant debate in describing perversion is whether the perverse position is merely destructive, corrupt, and criminal, or if it can also be creative. Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984) argues that perversion operates within a cycle of both destruction and creativity, with a central element being the challenge to the laws of nature and society. In this context, every boundary must be transgressed by the perverse, including generational ones. Unable to cope with feelings of inferiority toward the father during the phallic stage, and recognizing their sexual immaturity and inability to fulfill the mother's desire, the child, relying on denial as their primary defense, devalues everything associated with paternal order, authority, and values. In doing so, they construct their own illusory "new normal" world. "My hypothesis," says Chasseguet-Smirgel, "is that perversion represents the reconstruction of chaos, from which a new type of reality emerges—the anal universe. This replaces the psychosexual genital dimension, the domain of the father."

Phillip Rieff (1996) makes a similar argument, claiming that at a certain turning point, culture can no longer sustain a stable range of moral demands. Its authority weakens—less is required, and more is permitted. Spectacle then becomes a functional substitute for values and for what is sacred. Mass regressions occur, with large portions of the population reverting to levels of destructive aggression historically accessible to them. The individual psychic defense of denial,

paired with a desire for security, seems to underpin the dismantling of boundaries. The perverse state of mind thrives in uncertainty because, in this state, nothing holds importance, and anything can pass—it is permitted. Chasseguet-Smirgel and Rieff (1984, 1996) both acknowledge the role this position plays in processes of cataclysmic social change, even while recognizing its deep personal destructiveness.

3.4. Differences between neurotic, psychotic, and perverse states of mind

Psychoanalysis has explored the connection between the mind and two mental principles—the pleasure principle (the "primary principle") and the reality principle (the "secondary principle"). The main forms of psychic organization are viewed through the lens of their relationship to pleasure and reality (Freud, 1924). A neurotic/normal position primarily uses repression. Reality is distorted because its parts are unbearable, and when repressed thoughts threaten to become conscious, defense mechanisms are employed. These mechanisms act to distort reality. The relationship to reality is adaptable, and when a neurotic reaches normalcy (i.e., when the neurotic becomes more capable of thinking their thoughts, rather than turning unwanted thoughts into symbolic symptoms), their relationship to reality can be based on non-defensive experience.

The psychotic position involves a severe splitting of both reality and the ego, as a large part of reality is hated and rejected. Libido is turned inward, and thinking is disconnected from reality. It is dominated by fantasy. For Bion (1961), in this position, destructiveness is directed towards the relationship with reality, and as a result, thinking and connection are destroyed because thinking is the transformation of experience in a real but frustrating environment. The psychotic position is narcissistic, and the connection with others is interrupted and severed. In the psychotic position, the mechanisms of fragmentation of thought are evident, characteristic of what we initially called the vertical unconscious.

How, then, can we define perversity? Like the psychotic position, the ego in perversity is split. However, the relationship to reality is more ambivalent. Similar to repression, the defense of denial of reality involves some recognition of reality before it is rejected. Unlike repression, in the perverse structure, the recognition of reality coexists with its denial, even in conscious fantasy. This is a characteristic feature of the "vertical unconscious"—an unconscious refusal to connect conscious phenomena. The negation of logical principles, as Freud (1938) analyzed through the dynamics of fetishism, is achieved by splitting the ego so that contradictory beliefs, both "yes" and "no," are held simultaneously.

Although developmental stagnation and psychoneurotic defense are central to the emergence of a perverse state of mind—placing it within the framework of mental health issues—there are also important social dimensions to consider. These include characteristics related to corruption, aggression, and the violation of social boundaries, which complicate attempts to define perversity. This difficulty is particularly evident in how societies engage with perversity.

Long (2000) introduces another important factor in the psychoanalytic understanding of perversity: the relationship between perversity and dissociation. Perversity is sometimes seen as the opposite of neurosis, in that fantasy is not repressed but rather made manifest. The primary defenses in perversity are denial and displacement. However, denial is also a feature of dissociative states, which are typically considered neurotic (such as amnesia, fugue, or multiple personality disorder).

Dissociative states differ significantly from anxiety states (which are often central to neurosis) and seem to require a relationship to reality that mirrors the dynamics found in perversity. Consider, for example, the extreme case of multiple personality disorder. In such cases, the ego is split, and the subject is both aware and unaware of the different personalities within them. An illusory reality is created, and entire social contexts or fabricated lives are unconsciously reflected as "accomplices." The key characteristic here is the construction of a produced identity. Research tends to show that dissociation is a response to trauma—either psychological or physical—and in some cases, it may represent a delayed reaction to early childhood trauma. The dynamics of dissociation involve a profound desire to escape from a painful body or psyche, making it a more radical form of defense than repression, as it leads to a greater distortion of reality. When a painful set of thoughts or experiences is rejected, the perverse structure of dissociative states becomes clearer. This response is often linked to childhood trauma, wherein not only the pain and trauma are rejected but also the knowledge of the abuse and potentially the abuser—the primary figure of dependency.

This discussion is crucial because it suggests a connection between perverse denial, dissociative states, and the construction of illusory identities. One possible response for victims of sadistic or sexual abuse is to become an accomplice to, or even reenact the abuse later in life through identification with the aggressor. Although the roles of abuser, victim, and accomplice differ significantly and exhibit distinct behavioral symptoms, each individual is ensnared within a parasitic and perverse system, regardless of whether they are consciously aware of it.

The following points related to the perverse state of mind summarize the psychoanalytic understanding of perversity, based on the above discussion as well as the works of Pajaczkowska (2000), Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984), and Lacan (1970).

3.4.1. Characteristics of the Perverse State of Mind

1. The perverse state of mind is not merely a deviation from moral norms. It involves deriving pleasure from the suffering or exploitation of others, prioritizing personal gratification over the collective good. In such a mindset, reciprocity—the foundation of mature, reciprocal relationships—is absent. Others are reduced to mere tools or objects, exploited to fulfill personal needs, rather than being recognized as independent individuals.

2. A person with a perverse personality structure perceives reality but actively denies it. They are aware that something is wrong, but choose to reject it because it threatens their self-interest. *They dismiss societal values and construct an illusory world*.

This may reflect a special case of Freud's "and/and" position, wherein opposing ideas are held together, yet their connection is illusory. In the perverse mindset, this dynamic fosters the destruction of truth and reality, allowing for parasitic relationships to flourish. The goal is to obliterate social differentiation, building a distorted world in which boundaries and differences are erased. As repression is not the primary defense, fantasies are more readily accessible to consciousness. This leads to the breakdown of social and generational distinctions, as noted by Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984).

3. A person in a perverse state is inclined to *draw others into their perversity*, whether consciously or unconsciously..

4. *On a societal level, the perverse state of mind flourishes when relationships become instrumental. In such systems, individuals are treated as mere means to achieve specific goals*—such as in reality TV, where the focus is on generating sensation, increasing viewership, and profiting at any cost. Within this perverse system, the truth is simultaneously known and denied; the wrongness of the situation is recognized, yet it is rebranded as acceptable or even desirable to serve selfish interests.

5. *Perversity perpetuates itself*. Corruption breeds further corruption, fueled by the complicity of individuals who deny their role in the system, engaging in self-deception. Perverse defenses can become instinctual, acting as driving forces that sustain and reinforce the destructive cycle.

One of the key tendencies of perverse culture is the transformation of human connections. Bion (1970) identifies three fundamental forms of relatedness: commensal, parasitic, and symbiotic. Commensalism refers to a relationship where two entities share a third for the mutual benefit of all parties involved. Symbiosis, in contrast, refers to a relationship where one entity depends on the other for mutual benefit. Parasitism, on the other hand, describes a relationship in which one entity depends on another to produce a third, resulting in harm or destruction for all parties.

It could be argued that a psychotic structure, existing in its own parallel universe, maintains a commensal relationship with society and reality. However, the psychotic or narcissistic position is not always benign. It often involves the fragmentation of thought processes, and on a societal level, this leads to a severing of connections with the community—thinking that is collaboratively constructed with others. A commensal relationship, where two ideas or entities develop alongside each other without direct interrelation, can be seen as harmless. The key

factor that allows commensal relatedness to be creative rather than destructive is the nature of the "container"—the group or society—that holds and shapes these ideas.

The neurotic or "normal" state of mind, on the other hand, can be understood as more symbiotic in the relationship between the individual and others (and society). In this state, societal attitudes and the thoughts of others influence the individual's thinking, and the individual's thoughts, in turn, shape society. This relationship can be in conflict, but when adequate "containing" (or receiving) occurs, it can lead to therapeutic and sometimes transformative effects.

What, then, is the nature of the perverse state? As discussed earlier, the perverse position is characterized by the persistent denial of reality, despite continuous evidence to the contrary. It can be seen as a form of "persistent error." Moreover, it has been argued that the perverse state is closer to primary narcissism than secondary narcissism. In this position, others are not merely loved or admired, but exploited or used as accomplices to maintain the illusion of self-sufficiency. This is not a state of self-love, but rather one of (illusory) self-sufficiency in which external realities are denied or distorted. When this mindset, coupled with corrupt institutional power, dominates, it has significant implications for collective life.

When considering neurotic, psychotic, and perverse dynamics in terms of the possibility of cognition, we can make the following distinctions:

- The *neurotic* unconsciously knows certain truths but is unable to consciously process them due to the repression of knowledge deemed undesirable by the environment or the Superego. As a result, the neurotic distorts these insights through unconscious defense mechanisms, which allow them to avoid directly confronting this troubling information.

- The *psychotic* on the other hand, holds thoughts that are tightly bound to internal processes but treats them as concrete truths linked to the narcissistic self. This makes reflection on the thought, its processing, or its relationship to others impossible. The psychotic is unable to integrate these thoughts into a shared reality, resulting in disconnection from both external and internal sources of understanding.

- The *perverse* state of mind involves the denial of new information or contradictory thoughts, clinging instead to the certainty of a previous belief or perception, even while, on some level, knowing it is wrong. To manage this contradiction, the individual creates an illusory and idealized world in which their belief remains unquestioned. This certainty demands confirmation from another, meaning that an accomplice is required to validate the individual's position. The accomplice becomes embedded within the perverse structure, but the primary dynamic remains the need for external confirmation of certainty and power, despite the presence of contradictions. In this relationship, the

other is subordinated and treated as an object, turning the relationship into a parasitic one.

In a parasitic relationship, the psychotherapeutic framework of thinking is most severely challenged. The treatment and creation of "the other" as an accomplice, along with the simultaneous denial of reality while being aware of it, positions perversion outside the realm of mere illness. This distinction may explain the difficulties faced by correctional services when working with sexual offenders. As a society, we remain uncertain about whether these individuals should be treated or imprisoned, and whether they should be seen as sick or criminal. Beyond the individual level, psychoanalytic insights into perversion have regrettably been underexplored when applied to groups and organizations.

Understanding perversity not only illuminates perverse systems more broadly—encompassing organizations, institutions, and society—but also provides a shift in how we analyze these entities. It moves the focus away from a strictly psychotherapeutic lens toward an understanding of perverse social relations, the embedding of exploitation, and the treatment of people as objects within social systems, institutions, and organizations. To sustain and expand such a system of governance and exploitation, a particular structure of subjugation is required, one that involves active participation from its members. Furthermore, we must ask: Is the rapid development of technology guiding us toward the creation of a psychological structure where people will lead illusory lives in virtual realities, devoid of mutual communication and disconnected from reality?

3.5. Is psychotic culture the next step?

If we observe the ongoing shifts in typical human functioning, we may justifiably ask whether the next step in this progression could be the emergence of a psychotic culture—another step down the developmental scale of mental health and maturity.

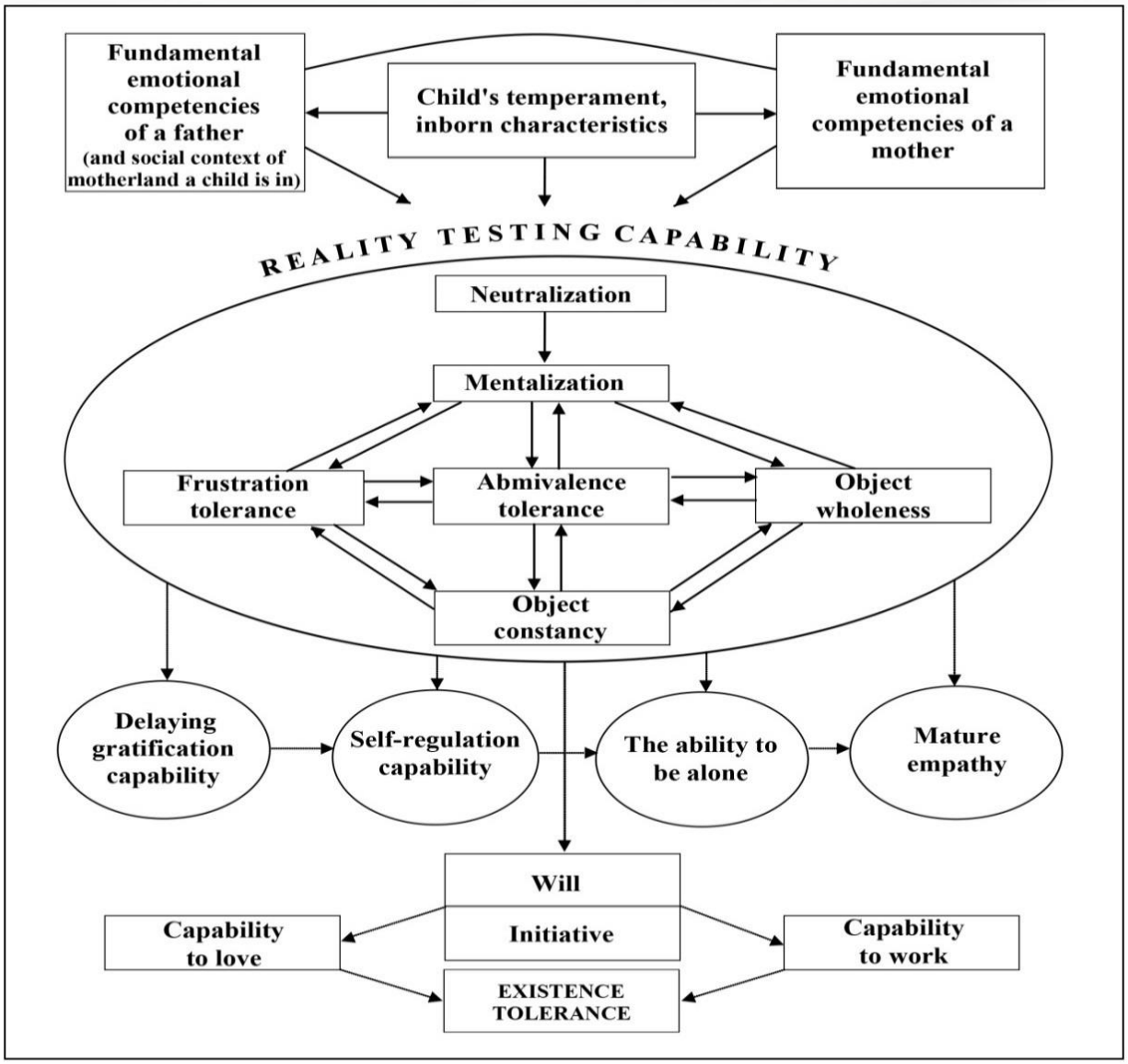
This shift manifests in society in various ways. For instance, the weakening of family bonds and the early exposure of children to TV and computers—environments that cultivate short attention spans and deliver sensory stimulation through brief, bombastic content—hinder the formation of lasting emotional connections. There is an overwhelming emphasis on instant gratification, with information quickly replaced once it ceases to be exciting. This results in a culture of "too much, too soon," where the ability to process, connect, and internalize information is diminished. No effort is required to achieve satisfaction, and intelligence—defined as the ability to adapt to new situations—becomes irrelevant. Over time, this passive engagement leads to difficulties in adapting to real-world challenges, and many regress to this state in times of stress, often turning to psychoactive substances as a coping mechanism.

Psychoanalytic literature has long explored the role of the mother in early childhood development, particularly concerning object constancy and the formation of a cohesive self. It emphasizes the "good enough" mother—the responsive and attuned caregiver. However, there

has been little discussion on how broader societal factors affect not just the mother, but also the father and the family unit as a whole. The reduction of maternity leave, maternal anxiety over job insecurity, the erosion of professional identity, and the social devaluation of motherhood all create substantial barriers to achieving the "good enough" mother ideal proposed by psychoanalytic theory. Even when a mother successfully navigates these societal obstacles, other significant challenges remain for the healthy development of the child. These challenges are part of a broader cultural shift, transitioning from repression, through bribery, to a culture that dulls the mind. Children today face a variety of negative influences from the education system, the media, and social networks—each of which obstructs emotional and cognitive development.

In a previous article (Jovanović, Stevanović, 2024), we discussed the shifts in the Superego and the corresponding changes in psychotherapeutic approaches necessitated by these transformations in the Ego and Superego of an increasing number of individuals—our potential clients. This raises an important question: Do we need to develop a new theory and methodology, or can we adapt existing frameworks to work effectively with these clients? In forthcoming texts on the evolution of the Superego and the development of new psychotherapeutic methodologies—focused on Ego integration, strengthening its synthetic function, and analyzing and maturing introjects through psychotherapy—we will offer perspectives that we believe will be valuable in addressing these contemporary shifts in the human psyche. Concerning basic competencies for processing and managing emotions—foundational for the development of the Ego's synthetic function—we have explored this in (Jovanović, 2013) and in the theoretical-methodological manual for OLI IPP (Jovanović, N., 2023). Here, we present a diagram illustrating how complex abilities develop from basic emotional competencies, akin to building with Lego blocks, ultimately leading to reality testing and the Ego's synthetic function (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Diagram of basic emotional competencies and the development of the synthetic function of the Ego



Soure: The author of the paper

Conclusion

Numerous clinicians, psychotherapists, and other practitioners have observed shifts in the Ego and Superego of clients, particularly in Western culture, and are attempting to link these changes to social factors, reflected through various agents of socialization, which influence individual transformations.

When discussing changes in the Ego, we can say that traditional mechanisms of the "horizontal unconscious" (we introduced the terms horizontal and vertical unconscious to differentiate between the unconscious resulting from repression and the unconscious resulting from splitting and "partialism"—a mechanism of avoiding connection, where the individual is unaware of the connection between conscious aspects of the mind) have largely been replaced by mechanisms of the vertical unconscious. In this context, new, previously undiscussed defense mechanisms have emerged. Beyond splitting, which has already been described in the literature, and the associated "primitive defense mechanisms" (denial, projection, introjection, projective identification, etc.), we have also identified mechanisms that center around partialization—a tendency to disconnect.

Partialism is not an active, regressive form of splitting but rather a preventive mechanism that hinders integration. *The mechanism of avoiding integration* is distinct from other forms of defense. It represents an unconscious tendency to avoid connecting traits, representations of others, the self, work, or any more complex concept. This is a specific defense mechanism against potential ambivalence or feelings of being overwhelmed. The defense is preemptively set as a reluctance of the mind to connect, akin to the non-valency of certain chemical elements. We term this mechanism partialism (or atomization)—*the avoidance of integration*. In everyday language, a person who fails to make connections that are clearly obvious to others is often described as "not getting it." A "clasp" refers to a mechanism that connects things. It is important to distinguish between the mechanism of splitting—where something once connected is now fragmented—and partialism, which is the reluctance to connect or "clasp." Partialism can be a more enduring characteristic of a person’s thought process, leading to a fragmented state of mind. Other defense mechanisms work to maintain this fragmented state, as defense mechanisms tend to "function as a team," collectively supporting and preserving the disconnection in thinking and relationships. They often achieve this by diverting attention from the whole to a greater number of disconnected fragments. This group of mechanisms includes: excessive scrolling, superficiality, lack of thinking and distraction, activism, the creation of self-objects, partial relationships, hyperfocus, emotionalization of thought, devaluation of logic, avoidance of generalizations, substitutes for thinking—defensive mechanisms against thought—and *counter-skills* (defensive patterns in thinking and speech).

In the second part of the article, we explored the sociocultural context within which changes in the Ego and Superego occurred across different historical periods, evolving from a repressive

culture, through narcissistic tendencies, into a perverse culture, with a tendency toward transitioning into a psychotic culture.

We posed the question: Who benefits from a person who does not think, does not connect, parasitizes, and exploits others without recognizing their humanity? Who requires and why does a perverse mind exist, and does this, logically, lead to the next step: a transhumanist, psychotic culture?

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Transformations of the Superego in Contemporary Individuals

Abstract

This paper examines the changes in the super-ego and the typical pathologies observed in contemporary clients. It traces the evolution from the conflict neuroses of the Victorian era, in which the ego feared a strict and moralistic super-ego, to the narcissistic culture characterized by narcissistic disorders, self-love, and the narcissistic ego ideal. The paper then explores the shift to a perverse culture, where the super-ego is "dismantled," all values and authorities are undermined, and the exploitation of others, as well as the recruitment of others into one's own exploitation, has become normalized. The paper concludes by raising critical questions about the necessary theoretical and technical adjustments required to adapt psychotherapeutic practice to these emerging cultural shifts.

Keywords: changes, superego, contemporary man

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1. Introduction

There is a growing number of authors who recognize and write about the changes in morality, conscience, and the super-ego of modern individuals. The loss of values, the degradation of authority, and the collapse of moral norms are increasingly evident. While early 20th-century authors wrote about the rigid, strict Victorian super-ego that needed to be softened, mid-20th-century thinkers began to describe a narcissistic super-ego (or ego ideal), pointing to narcissism as a dominant social pathology that permeates all spheres of life—love, work, social relations, sports, and art.

Neurotics suffered from guilt, whereas narcissists suffer from "narcissistic injuries," wounded egos, threatened self-worth, and shame (when their grandiose self-image is challenged), as well as a pervasive sense of emptiness. It has been argued that narcissistic culture paved the way for the development of a perverse culture. The narcissism and individualism of the late 20th century, by promoting selfishness, greed, the accumulation of wealth, and exploitation, laid the groundwork for the emergence of a perverse mode of functioning, one characterized by "looking the other way" in the face of various social deviations.

The broader definition of perversity is not necessarily tied to sexuality, but rather to a more general condition of mental and moral corruption. Perverse behavior differs from the self-love or self-interest typical of narcissistic dynamics, which usually remain within the law or, at the very least, recognize its existence and try to operate within its boundaries. Furthermore, (secondary) narcissists still long for love and recognition from others. In contrast, the perverse position uses others in a more detached or autistic (perhaps cold) way. It embodies an exploitative stance, in which others are primarily viewed as accomplices in the pursuit of exploitation.

In a previous article published in this journal, we discussed changes in the ego in modern society, including the concept of the vertical unconscious and the emergence of new defense mechanisms—such as compulsive scrolling, superficiality, diminished capacity for reflection, chronic distraction, the emotionalization of thought processes, and the devaluation of logical reasoning.We recorded complaints from educators, noting that children and adolescents show a declining interest in learning, perceive school as boring, and increasingly seek immediate gratification through games, social networks, and digital content. In place of Victorian morality centered on the repression of sexuality, a new morality is emerging—one of short-term hedonism and, in particular, intellectual passivity and mental laziness (Jovanović, 2024).

Sexuality and aggression are now increasingly less repressed, while under the banner of human rights, the gratification of impulses is openly encouraged. The superego, figuratively speaking, has been "tarred and feathered," and a "new normal" superego is forming, one grounded in an inverted system of values. This new moral framework disdains traditional norms, while the gratification of personal impulses becomes a primary value (modern terminology frames this as self-love or authenticity).

This “new normal” superego also retains a prohibitive function—namely, the prohibition of thought itself. Rather than enforcing moral norms, it introjects stereotyped attitudes toward topics about which one is no longer permitted to think independently. There is a clear agenda and a list of issues within the “brave new world” on which dissenting thought is not tolerated (vaccines, climate change, LGBT rights, diverse sexual identities, migration, faith in science, the theory of evolution…). Everything else—except for tax evasion and breaking the law—is permitted. A brave new superego indeed. What we observe in social institutions, we also see in individuals: politicians are allowed to be immoral, corrupt, and even irrational, as long as they remain aligned with the predetermined agendas of their sponsors. The media is similarly permitted to lie, sensationalize, and manipulate public opinion—as long as it adheres to accepted narratives.

In this paper, we present a historical overview of changes in the superego through the work of other authors, alongside our reflections on how these transformations are mirrored in psychotherapeutic practice and what we, as psychotherapists, can do in response to these challenges.

2. Changes in the Understanding of Conscience in Psychoanalytic Thought

2.1. Super-Ego as the Product of Fear of Punishment

In *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1923), the superego is introduced as one of the three structures of the psyche, alongside the id and the ego, within Freud's second topographical model. In this context, Freud discusses the superego and the ego ideal (the idealized version of the self one aspires to become) as though they were interchangeable. The ego ideal refers to the internalization of an ideal, typically during childhood, toward which the individual strives and against which the actual ego is measured. Another conceptual path that led Freud to the notion of the superego involves individuals' moral behavior. A person's moral compass develops through repeated exposure to norms of what should and should not be done, shaped in interactions with parents, cultural influences, and caregivers. This prolonged exposure leads to the internalization of parental authority—an introjection that ultimately serves as the foundation for the superego.

There are very few works within psychoanalytic literature dedicated to methodology—beginning with Freud himself, where a notable gap exists between writings on method and those on theory—and even fewer that focus specifically on the analysis of the superego. This is a peculiar situation, given that Freud regarded the superego as the primary source of therapeutic change. In *Group Psychology* (1921), for example, he states that the analyst can influence the analysand primarily through their superego. When discussing hypnosis, Freud introduces the idea that the hypnotist, as a loved object, occupies the place of the ego ideal for the hypnotized individual. He links this concept to analysis and the analysand's suggestibility within the transference relationship with the analyst, concluding that the analyst's effectiveness stems from being positioned in the place of the analysand's superego. Thus, the superego plays a crucial role in analytic therapy.

After decades of neglecting what Freud (1933) described as the "desired field of work for psychoanalysis"—namely, "the problems posed by the unconscious sense of guilt, its connections to morality, education, crime, and delinquency..." (p. 61)—in favor of preoccupations with narcissism, shame, the self, relationality, and more recently the neurological foundations of the mind, issues related to the superego, guilt, and conscience now appear to be re-emerging as relevant topics. It seems timely to reconsider psychoanalytic theory on morality. In earlier works (Jovanović, N., 1985; 1988), prompted by Freud's assertion that the key field of psychoanalytic work is on the superego, I explored the idea of psychoanalysis as a form of secondary moral education. "One who has successfully gone through education in self-truthfulness," Freud asserts, "is permanently protected from the dangers of immorality, even if their measure of morality deviates in some way from the commonly accepted societal one." This statement suggests the existence of more universal moral principles that transcend social conventions. Immorality, Freud implies, stems from a lack of self-truthfulness. Knowledge—truth—is healing and leads to transformation in the domain of morality. Freud expresses the aim of therapy as follows: "... the patient should be taught to liberate and fulfill their own nature, not to resemble us." These statements imply that psychoanalysis enables the reconstruction of the superego toward an acceptance of "one's own nature." But this raises the question: what exactly is the nature of the person? Is it inherently dangerous to society and civilization, or is it fundamentally good, merely distorted by societal influence through the introjection of prohibitions into the superego—prohibitions that label this inner nature as

animalistic and threatening? Freud's writings offer seemingly contradictory views on this issue. If the Id is malevolent, if destructive impulses and evil are rooted deep within the psyche, then what is the purpose of exploring those depths? More pointedly, what purpose would be served by "liberating" what is found there? Wouldn't psychoanalysis, in that case, be facilitating the very acting out it claims to mitigate?

Psychoanalysis does not encourage acting out; irresponsibility is the antithesis of freedom. Freedom implies self-control, which is not a matter of unconscious repression, but rather the capacity to think of others and to respect their rights. This understanding of freedom is not antisocial, but it can stand in opposition to forms of society that do not respect each individual's right to autonomy. It is evident that psychoanalysis has a political dimension and implications, a dimension that is often suppressed or diluted through its incorporation into medicine, as argued by R. D. Laing in his books *Social Forgetting* (Jacoby, 1975) and *Repression of Psychoanalysis* (Jacoby, 1983).

Fromm explores the distinction between two concepts that are often used interchangeably in practice: responsibility and duty. The term "duty" is derived from the Latin word "debere," meaning "to owe." When an individual "fulfills a duty," they are essentially paying what they owe to an external authority, such as the state, society, or their parents — the authority that governs them. If the authority is internalized in the form of the super-ego, a duty towards this internalized authority arises. Should an individual fail to fulfill their duty, they are expected to be punished by either the external or internal authority.

On the other hand, the word "*responsibility*" comes from the Latin "*respondere*," meaning "to respond." A person is considered "responsible" when they respond to what is before them — to reality, their needs, or another individual. The capacity to respond is inherent to living beings. "Only a person who is alive can respond, or more accurately, the extent to which a person is alive is the extent to which they are able to respond. To the degree that they are 'dead,' they cannot respond... From this follows the general formulation: freedom contains responsibility, and responsibility contains aliveness." Consequently, an individual with a significantly diminished love for life (a necrophilic individual) is incapable of responding responsibly, despite possibly being able to perform duties. This is because they lack the vitality needed to respond fully to the world around them. As Fromm (1982) notes, "By fulfilling their duty, a person can forsake their own responsibility" (p. 73).

2.2. From Fear to Love: The Evolution of Conscience

1. **Hypomanic State** – In this phase, individuals deny feelings of guilt. This state is observable in those who view themselves as "supermen," in amoral individuals who disdain those with scruples, and who are unable to recognize or understand themselves. They reject guilt because it is too overwhelming, persecutory, and threatens the integrity of the ego.

2. **Hypoparanoid State** – Individuals at this stage also deny feelings of guilt but project their negative qualities onto others. For them, guilt becomes something externalized, something they attribute to others rather than acknowledge within themselves.

3. **Authoritarian Conscience** – In this stage, individuals acknowledge their moral conscience, but their super-ego still predominates, often with persecutory tendencies. At this point, they "perform duty" and can experience guilt that compels them to obey the authority of both their internal and external super-ego.

As these states are gradually overcome during the course of analysis (though they never fully disappear), and through the development of self-understanding, a fourth state emerges — a humanistic or depressive conscience:

4. **Humanistic Conscience** – At the core of the "humanistic conscience" lies what Melanie Klein describes as the depressive position, or the depressive elements of conscience. This position is directly tied to the development of object relationships — the capacity for object love. It follows the paranoid-schizoid, persecutory phase in the development of relationships with objects (and the development of the super-ego). Initially, the child holds split perceptions of the "good" and "bad" object, such as the "good" and "bad" breasts. The child does not yet perceive the mother as a whole person, but rather as separate partial objects that both satisfy and frustrate. At this stage, the child does not form a relationship with the mother as a whole but with fragmented representations of the object and themselves. The "good" breast is loved, while the "bad" breast is hated and perceived as a persecutor, with the child projecting their own aggression onto the partial object. By integrating the perceptions of the good and bad objects into a whole object and experiencing the mother as a complete person, the child confronts their ambivalence, aggression toward the beloved object, and feelings of guilt. This confrontation gives rise to the desire for reparation — the wish to correct the damage and injustice done to the object.

From her extensive clinical experience, Melanie Klein (2002) proposed significant revisions to the classical theory of the super-ego. She identified pre-Oedipal fantasies and anxieties related to authority in children under the age of two, leading her to conclude that a primitive form of the super-ego ("archaic" super-ego) was present even in the first year of life, which contradicted Freud's earlier claim that the super-ego develops later in childhood.

Kleinian theorists distinguished between persecutory guilt, which leads to self-torment, and depressive guilt, which, instead of being a fear of oneself (as seen in shame and self-reproach), concerns caring for others and making reparations. Depressive guilt involves repairing harm done to others and restoring the relationship. The timing of the transition from paranoid-schizoid and narcissistic positions to the depressive position and the capacity for concern remains controversial, but it is clear that conscience, as the depressive position of concern for others, emerges much earlier than Freud's concept of the super-ego.

The Kleinian perspective, which emphasizes the development of conscience based on love rather than fear, is now supported by empirical research on the "moral life of babies" (Bloom, 2010), which indicates that moral functioning has pre-Oedipal roots.

As Sagan noted, it has long been challenging to understand how a mental function (the super-ego), formed from aggression turned inward under the threat of castration, and functioning according to Freud's (1930) description as "like a garrison in a conquered city" (p. 123), can

simultaneously be the seat of conscientious care for others (humanistic conscience). For Sagan, while the super-ego may encourage hatred, conscience is rooted in attachment and love.

Individuals who have experienced the fusion of libido and aggression, leading to the development of a depressive–humanistic conscience, are less obedient because they feel less persecuted, but they are troubled by the harm they cause to their internal and external good objects—they feel greater responsibility towards their "loved ones." The humanistic conscience is evidently not antisocial; rather, it is social in a qualitatively new way, representing a step forward in the moral evolution of humans. Psychoanalysis has shown that the differentiation between experiencing oneself and another person, in certain aspects, is an illusion. The way our super-ego relates to the ego—determining our sense of self-respect—also shapes our relationship with others, influencing our respect for them. By siding with the analysand and helping them free themselves from the persecutory elements of their archaic super-ego, the analyst is not opposing society. The analysand does not lose their conscience, but their conscience transforms qualitatively, becoming less motivated by fear and more by "love for their close one," or rather, an object. The ethics of analysis are meant for a society where the "accepted moral" is not dominated by persecutory elements, for a society grounded in a "humanistic conscience." Unfortunately, as seen in the earlier analysis of societal movements towards narcissistic, perverse, and psychotic cultures, where others are increasingly regarded as objects rather than human beings, societal changes seem to be heading in the opposite direction.

Sagan illustrates the distinction between conscience and super-ego by quoting Mark Twain's depiction of "Huck's dilemma": Huck's super-ego demands that the runaway slave Jim be reported to the authorities, while his conscience urges him to protect his friend. While Freud viewed the formation of the super-ego as the result of aggression turned against oneself, the super-ego forms through the internalization of culture. Freud did not fully account for the fact that the culture being internalized was often racist, sexist, moralistic, and so on. Drawing from Lifton's (1986) work on Nazi doctors, Sagan emphasizes that they were mostly not psychopaths but rather misguided idealists; they did their jobs, as Sagan would put it, "under the flag of the super-ego," just as those working in the "killing fields" with the Khmer Rouge, or most terrorists, did. As Carveth (2010) argued, psychoanalysts have been overly inclined to trace human destructiveness to the id—the so-called "beast" within humans—while grossly overlooking its roots in the unique human super-ego.

2.3. What to do with a sharp Super-ego of a client?

Should it be demolished and its functions transferred to the Ego?

Some authors have drawn attention to difficulties inherent in the functioning of the superego. Freud, for instance, regarded transformations within the superego as a central focus of psychoanalytic work with patients. The radical proposition that the primary objective of analytic therapy is the complete "demolition" of the superego—its functions subsequently assumed by the ego—was put forward by Alexander (Alexander, 1925). In advancing this view, Alexander concentrates on the unconscious dimension of the superego, which he characterizes as primitive, temporally and realistically disjointed, maladaptive, and automatic in its functioning.

Should it be modified, help it mature? Establish morality in thinking?

"Where the Superego was, let there be Ego"?

Two years later, Ferenczi (1927) concurred with this view: "Only a complete breakdown of the superego can lead to radical healing" (p. 100). However, by conflating the superego with conscience, most psychoanalysts feared that eliminating the former would also destroy the latter, potentially fostering psychopathy. Consequently, they advocated for the modification and maturation of the superego rather than its elimination and replacement with conscience.

In opposition to the immoral moralism of the superego, Alexander and Ferenczi—as well as Bion later (1962)—sought to establish genuine morality through thinking. Conscience was understood as a rational function of the ego, in which the individual considers the consequences of their actions for both themselves and others. This could be encapsulated in a reformulation of the Freudian dictum: "Where the superego was, let there be ego."

Replace it or supplement it with moral sentiment – Conscience from feeling.

Unlike such rationalism, Sagan recognizes that conscience does not arise from reason but from feeling, from what Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1774) calls "pity"—sympathy or empathy.

Racker (1966), in his article on the origins of ethics, observes that Freud's findings regarding the origin of the superego in fear correspond to a series of observable facts, yet he questions whether that is the full explanation. He proposes that there exists a natural capacity to distinguish between good and evil from the very beginning—though not in an ethical sense, and especially not in relation to others. This capacity pertains to the ego and initially involves the ability to differentiate between pleasure and displeasure. Pleasure, or that which causes it, is experienced as the original "good," while displeasure is experienced as "bad." This primary distinction later plays a crucial role in discerning what is good or bad for another person, once love for an object has been established. This principle is reflected in the ethical maxims "Do not do to others what you would not want done to you" and "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Racker continues his analysis by stating that the issue is not whether there exists a natural capacity for distinguishing good from evil, but how the individual (the child) begins to apply this capacity for discrimination to their objects. At this point, we encounter the "external influence" Freud refers to as the "fear of losing love," which arises from the child's dependence on adults. Psychoanalytic research has identified various stages in the development of a child's morality.

In the first stage of development, the infant is entirely preoccupied with its own needs and experiences good and evil through responses to satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Klein, 1937). Satisfaction evokes "primary love" for the "good object" that provides it, while dissatisfaction elicits hatred and anger toward the "bad object" that causes it. At this stage, the moral problem does not yet exist. The good object is loved, and the bad object is hated. These are experienced as distinct, and there is no dilemma involving an ambivalent relationship toward a whole object that is simultaneously good and bad—both satisfying and frustrating.

That which produces satisfaction in the infant—such as food, care, and closeness—originates from the love expressed by the mother and is perceived and experienced by the child, eliciting a loving response. This response becomes associated with the feeling of "goodness." "This love makes the child feel connected to its objects and leads to identification with them—its close ones, human beings. By combining these two processes—the internal capacity for

distinguishing between satisfaction and suffering (and thus between what causes each), and the knowledge (both internal and experiential) that love and identification with others are 'good'—it becomes evident that human beings originally possess a sense of what is good or bad for their fellow beings. Naturally, I am referring here to what is fundamental and elemental ('from the beginning'), without ignoring the many ethical dilemmas that inevitably arise from the complexity of life" (Racker, 1966).

In the second stage, the dominance of needs persists, but the mother who provides satisfaction (the "good object") and the mother who frustrates (the "bad object") are increasingly perceived as one integrated entity. At this point, the dilemma emphasized by Freud arises for the child: aggression directed toward the object may result in the loss of love, punishment, revenge, or the fantasy destruction of the desired object.

The moral issue only authentically and realistically emerges in the third stage, when there is sufficient love and identification between the ego and the object. Freud's final conceptualization of the superego aligns with these findings. Through his research, Freud discovered that the superego is not merely an extension of external authority internalized by the child, but that its formation, particularly its aggressiveness, also depends on the aggression the child directs toward its objects.

According to Freud, this aggression is primarily repressed due to external prohibitions. In order to avoid directing aggression toward the object, the child turns it inward. Consequently, the harshness of the superego arises not only from parental strictness but also from the child's internalized aggression turned against itself. The severity of the superego results from two influences: the instinctual frustrations that release aggression, and the experiences with objects that lead the child to internalize its aggression, transforming it into the superego.

Thus, self-love provides the foundation for the subsequent understanding of what is good or evil for others. These moral foundations are not externally imposed but rather emerge universally, forming the basis for ethical judgments across all cultures. Self-love, at the core of morality, is critical. A person loves themselves when the ego has developed positive "interpersonal relationships" with its internalized objects that constitute the superego. Therefore, the relationship with others is a projection of the relationships within the inner "political stage" of the personality. Racker posits that this very identification of "I" with "You" represents the foundational structure of ethics and morality.

3. The New Normal Superego

Has there been a deconstruction of the superego or significant changes in its organization?

While psychoanalysts debated whether the superego should be dismantled, transformed, or developed into self-love as the foundation of conscience, such that it might, through love for others, evolve into mature morality, culture was simultaneously undergoing evolution, effecting changes in the superego that are observable today in many individuals. What, then, is this new "postmodern superego"?

3.1. The Postmodern Superego

The concept of the postmodern superego was introduced by Slavoj Žižek (1999) to highlight the transformations he observed in the moral behavior of Western societies at the turn of the new millennium.

Postmodernism is characterized by a skeptical and nihilistic attitude toward universal concepts such as truth, reality, and knowledge (Bauman, 1998). In essence, postmodernists tend toward self-referentiality, pluralism, and a disregard for traditional norms.

George Frankl (2001), in *Foundations of Morality*, identifies a series of predominantly negative behaviors and attitudes that characterize the postmodern subject within this social and cultural context. Frankl emphasizes the rise of tendencies such as unlimited greed—defined as an "oral-cannibalistic drive" (p. 13)—the predominance of selfishness, and the liberation of sadistic-destructive impulses. According to Frankl, this new morality emerges as a result of the colossal failure of traditional values during the twentieth century, as evidenced by numerous wars, increased poverty, unemployment, prejudice, oppression, and the establishment of extermination camps.

Frankl (2001) asserts, "We cannot trust our judgments or even our perceptions because we cannot trust the concepts of our civilization that have determined our judgments" (p. 7).

These twentieth-century events led to a wave of disillusionment that severed the bond between individuals and authority. The authorities in question here are not only governors and law enforcement officials but also gods, parents, teachers, and anyone holding power over us. This relationship, once marked by respect, fear, and admiration, is now characterized by anger, skepticism, mistrust, and uncertainty. This shift is fundamentally tied to the superego, which is why Frankl (2001) claims to witness the "murder of the superego" (p. 29).

Similarly, Žižek (1999) describes the postmodern subject as increasingly narcissistic, preoccupied with freedom, self-fulfillment, and enjoyment. While Frankl focuses more on the problem of the unfiltered liberation of instinctual impulses, Žižek emphasizes the postmodern cultural ideology that underpins these impulses. Both authors agree that there has been a reversal of traditional values and parental authority in favor of freedom and liberation. However, the central question remains: What is this freedom, and does it entail responsibility?

This rejection of authority and tradition in favor of a personal and subjective moral code, subject to change from one situation to another, is characteristic of postmodern thought. It has created a climate of moral uncertainty in which every value, rule, and moral code is constantly

questioned and doubted. The motivations for behavior that guided individuals in earlier times have been discarded in favor of a generalized nihilistic disbelief in the values proclaimed by the Enlightenment.

Old values have been dismantled, as has the superego that was built upon them. But what remains? Has something new been constructed—new values, new meaning, new purpose? The question also arises: Has only the superego rooted in fear been demolished, or has the conscience, originating in love, been destroyed as well? Has love been eradicated?

Has the Superego been replaced by a narcissistic Ego Ideal? Or has the content of the Superego been replaced with opposing values? Between narcissistic and perverse cultures.

Since tradition can no longer be relied upon, everything becomes a matter of individual choice, and mental life is dominated by an excess of possibilities. This reality encapsulates the contemporary phenomenon of "reflexivity" (Žižek, 1999), where every impulse is subject to choice, and everything becomes open to debate. The so-called "new normal" arises as a product of the "hypernormalization" of what was once considered a deviation from normality. However, this raises the question: Why the rise in anxiety among individuals if they are no longer threatened by a rigid moralistic superego?

Jesus (2023) suggests that as the superego weakens, the ego ideal may grow stronger, leading individuals to experience shame rather than guilt. Furthermore, considering that the ego ideal has historically been linked to narcissism (Freud, 1991; Rosenfeld, 1952), and given that postmodern society is described as predominantly narcissistic, it could be posited that the ego ideal has taken control of the psyche at the expense of the superego. This hypothesis may provide an explanation for the persistence of anxiety, even though the connection to external authority has been fractured.

If we accept the emphasis placed by postmodernism on individualism, freedom, and its dismantling of moral institutions, it becomes clearer why individuals might feel a lack of moral compass. The freedom to make personal choices only heightens uncertainty and complicates decision-making, especially when compared to the relative simplicity of following tradition or religious texts, which preordain life's goals and the means to achieve them.

If the superego has been destroyed, one would expect the disappearance of guilt. The experience of remorse arises with the depressive position as a response to harmful attacks or fantasies about such attacks on a parental figure. The intensity of guilt serves as a useful indicator of the dominance of the superego, often reflecting the extent of repressed aggression. When guilt is experienced, feelings of love and admiration surpass anger and resentment, prompting the individual to seek reparations for previous sadistic attacks. However, Frankl postulates that when the bond of love with authority is severed, remorse does not arise, and anger is more freely expressed. He suggests that this scenario illustrates the current state of Western civilization, where individuals no longer experience guilt or experience it to a significantly lesser degree than before the twentieth century.

The absence of guilt does not necessarily imply that the superego has been entirely destroyed. If we consider Melanie Klein's concept of the dual superego, in which good and bad are split through the mechanism of splitting, the absence of guilt may indicate the presence of a primitive

and sadistic superego that has not yet reached the depressive position of integrating good and bad objects and the need for reparation. Alternatively, it could signify a collective regression to the paranoid-schizoid position.

Indeed, Frankl's description of current behaviors, in the context of what he considers an absent superego, appears to correspond with behaviors associated with a pathological superego, as described by Bion (1967), or a primitive Kleinian superego. Assuming the superego is formed when the first bad object is introjected, could it still be considered a superego if the sadistic phase never ended and the individual remained incapable of remorse? If the superego never developed beyond the introjection of bad objects, would this entity—constituted solely by bad objects, fostering fear and retribution—still be classified as an archaic superego? Could such a partial, distorted construct serve as the source of any mature conscience? To recall the stages of moral development outlined by Money-Kyrle (1952): from the hypomanic, through the hypoparanoid and authoritarian stages, to the humanistic conscience, with the first three stages characterized by guilt and fear, while the final stage is based on love for the object and the need for reparation (the depressive position). What is the persecutory aspect of the new (and yet archaic) superego? What are its demands?

According to Žižek, the postmodern superego has introduced a specific and unique obligation—the obligation to be free and to enjoy life. This mandate, reminiscent of a direct command from the id, generates "new guilt and anxieties instead of opening a brave new world where we can enjoy reshaping and transforming our multiple identities" (Žižek, 1999).

"Be careful what you wish for; it might come true," as the popular saying goes. When and how, as in the story of Dr. Faust, who made a pact with the devil and sold his soul to be freed from all limitations, will the devil "come to collect"? The liberation of instincts brought by postmodernity appears to be free from constraints only at first glance. In Žižek's article in the *London Review of Books* titled “You Can!” (1999), the author argues that in a society overwhelmed by permissiveness, there are no "strong prohibitions." However, it is impossible to escape the overwhelming freedom it conveys. Thus, "You can!" becomes an imperative, transforming into "You must." There is a call for unlimited transgression with a promise of suspended judgment. Yet, if individuals are encouraged to maximize pleasure and enjoy life to the fullest, failing to do so—whether by not enjoying enough or by being unable to enjoy—results in guilt for failing to be happy and successful, as dictated by the new age. Even if culture no longer imposes obligations, postmodern individuals now impose them on themselves, feeling compelled to enjoy because they are the ones who "choose" to fulfill these demands. Postmodern society, then, is falsely permissive, filled with regulations and impositions under the guise of ensuring happiness. Rather than experiencing guilt for wrongdoing or harm caused to another human being, modern individuals are more likely to feel guilty for indulging in something sweet while on a diet, skipping the gym (narcissistic dictates of physical appearance), or failing to present an attractive Instagram post to showcase the quality of their lives.

Patrick McGinnis (2004) conceptualized the new anxieties of the digital age: FOMO and FOBO. FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) refers to the anxiety of missing out on experiences, information, or social interactions. It reflects a fear of being disconnected from the digital world, feeling excluded from significant events, or missing opportunities for social engagement. In addition,

FOMO manifests as anxiety over failing to make the "right" choices in a context where every experience is expected to be fully realized. This fear extends to many areas of life, as illustrated by clients' concerns about missing out on life's possibilities, falling behind in achievements, or being inefficient in their pursuit of success. FOMO is often closely tied to FOBO (Fear of Better Options), which is the anxiety about committing to a decision because a better option might emerge later. Whether it's choosing a partner or a job, FOBO stems from the belief that every decision offers something but also takes something away. What if I pick one partner and later meet someone more compatible? What if I accept one job only to encounter a better one later? FOBO induces feelings of anxiety, frustration, stress, and dissatisfaction, primarily due to the overwhelming freedom of choice. This becomes a significant challenge for the postmodern individual, who lacks stable criteria for decision-making. In their postmodern Faustian quest for omnipotence, aspiring to transcend all limitations, they struggle with the inherent sacrifices life demands—accepting that some opportunities must be foregone in favor of others, such as when choosing parenthood over career advancement or leisure.

The new-normal superego, emerging in this context, is liberal with respect to many ethical norms but paradoxically becomes rigid, dogmatic, and even dictatorial on select issues. One might ask: To what master and for what purpose does such a superego serve? Perhaps recent works offer clues to this question.

Lieberman (2019) aligns with Frankl's portrayal of postmodern society, offering an analysis in her book *An Analysis of the 'New Super-Ego' – Greed and Envy in the Recent Era of Wealth*. In her work, Lieberman—a seasoned clinical psychoanalyst—was motivated to explore the concept of the "new super-ego" after noticing an increasing number of her patients' concerns connected to this phenomenon, which she attributes to contemporary cultural shifts. She observes a rising prevalence of symptoms such as guilt, anxiety, extreme boredom, "psychic emptiness," helplessness, and despair, which have become emblematic of the modern psyche.

Lieberman attributes these developments to the aftermath of the horrific wars of the twentieth century—an era marked by unprecedented levels of death during conflicts—as well as to the transformative technological advancements that have revolutionized the way people learn, spend their time, think, and communicate. This society is infused with a spirit of change and revolution, which, she argues, challenges the traditional superego. The superego, a custodian of tradition, fear, hatred, love, guilt, aggression, and obedience, finds itself at odds with a new social order that rejects the authorities and values of the past. The tension between this ancient entity—the superego—and a society that seeks to dismantle all traditional values exemplifies one of the characteristics of the perverse mind. Could this revolutionary stance—seeking freedom through the elimination of the moralizing superego—be the path to a new world?

Lieberman examines how shifts in societal values and behavioral norms have influenced what analysts now observe in their clinical practice. Drawing on clinical data, she highlights the psychological foundation of values that are promoted by current political and societal trends. She explores what she terms the "new super-ego" in a society where deceit is rampant, often unpunished, where greed and envy seem to be on the rise, and where there is an increasing focus on the body and physical appearance. Traditional gender roles have been challenged, yet they have given way to confusion and chaos. Relationships are formed and maintained through technology, but many individuals feel increasingly lonely and empty. She reflects on the changes in her patients over the years, noting, "I have seen tremendous changes in the psyche

of those who come for treatment today compared to those who came 40 years ago. The patients I see today in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic therapy largely present with diminished ego resilience and different values and morals."

The "new super-ego," Lieberman argues, is rooted in a narcissistic morality: for many in contemporary culture, achieving high ideals—or even "goodness"—has come to mean physical fitness, exercise, and diet. The pursuit of wealth also plays a central role. This shift is not necessarily driven by altruism, kindness, or behaviors traditionally regarded as "moral." Lieberman connects these changes to broader societal and cultural transformations, particularly the increasing tolerance for lying and deceit, which has, in many ways, become normalized and expected. Corruption, too, is often seen as something that cannot be avoided. People's reactions vary, ranging from anger to moral indignation, often choosing to "turn a blind eye" as a coping mechanism for disappointment and disgust. The widespread distrust in authority, the erosion of values, and growing uncertainty around employment have created significant obstacles for young people in achieving independence.

"Among therapists, there is a growing perception that many young people today feel 'entitled' to the material possessions and earnings of their parents. Consequently, guiding young individuals through the processes of separation and individuation has become increasingly complex. Forty years ago, it was expected that children would achieve independence by the age of 21, supporting themselves and eventually starting families. Today, however, this is no longer the case. Parents of adult children—grandparents included—find themselves caught between their desire to maintain close relationships with their children for societal reasons, to preserve their youth, or to act as a buffer in unhealthy marriages, and the growing cultural norm where parents (and even grandparents) often provide financial support for their children's housing, vacations, and even psychotherapy. This tendency to 'hold on' to their children is in direct conflict with more rational desires to see them achieve adult independence." (Lieberman, 2017, p. 227–228)

These conditions suggest a form of cultural corruption, where youth are increasingly not expected to achieve full independence and are allowed to remain in a "parasitic" state. At the same time, there is a noticeable conflict: an increasing dependence on parents coupled with an emerging disrespect towards them. Many young people feel that parents are obligated to provide for them, yet do not deserve respect in return. This dissonance is further exacerbated by the growing trend among older generations to idealize youth. In a society where wisdom and respect are no longer associated with aging, but rather with weakness, the gap between generations widens. Young people increasingly feel that they have little of value to learn from older generations. As a result, middle-aged individuals strive to maintain youthful appearances for as long as possible. Technological advancements in body and skin modification—such as face-lifts and tummy tucks—have blurred the physical distinctions between young and old. The focus on physical appearance, exercise, and maintaining a thin body has transformed the nature of guilt. Rather than feeling guilty for harming another person, modern expressions of guilt are more likely to stem from indulgences like eating a cookie or skipping a gym session. The phrases "You are what you eat" and "You are where you eat" (with restaurants now being status symbols among the wealthy) reflect how identity has come to be defined by consumption.

Lieberman's book, published in 2019, does not consider global events that unfolded after its release, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdowns, or related behavioral shifts. It also omits

the recent conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, the escalating geopolitical tensions, and the mounting fears of nuclear catastrophe. The collapse in the credibility of international institutions like the UN and WHO, as well as the increasing sense of impending apocalypse or a "New World Order" meant to restore global control, has led many to question what the future holds. Issues once dismissed as "conspiracy theories" are now openly discussed by political leaders, international officials, and intelligence agencies alike, including heads of state such as Vladimir Putin. This raises a critical question: Who benefits from these profound changes in the ego and superego of the global population, and what are their ultimate objectives?"

In his 2023 text, Jesus analyzes human behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic to question whether people today are less obedient to authority. He views the pandemic as a unique test of obedience, both on a community and global scale, raising the possibility that Milgram's (1974) obedience study might yield different results today, showing decreased compliance. He questions whether individuals have become more resistant to authority and whether this reflects a broader trend of increasing disobedience, cynicism, and perceived freedom. Has the postmodern Western individual shaped an autonomous "orphan superego" without parental authority? Do individuals now act according to Lipovetsky's (1992) "principle of sovereignty," where concern for justice and solidarity is a personal conviction rather than submission to authority?

In *The Twilight of Duty* (1992), Lipovetsky identifies a collective concern for morality, solidarity, and justice in hypermodern societies, where people fight for ethical causes in a genuine demonstration of generosity. This behavior, he argues, contrasts with cultures marked by selfishness and egocentrism. Hypermodern societies often prioritize issues such as human rights, social minorities, and climate change. However, Lipovetsky also claims that even the defense of minority rights, such as those of transgender individuals and the LGBTQ+ community, increasingly adopts "rigid, dogmatic strategies," which resemble a form of ideological dictatorship.

This raises the question: Is the "principle of sovereignty" — concern for justice and solidarity — merely a façade for the introjection of a globalist agenda, instilled through continuous neo-Marxist propaganda? According to this view, the vanguard of this agenda is no longer the working class, but rather minorities — anyone who feels discriminated against. Could what Lipovetsky describes as an ethical shift actually be the rise of WOKE ideology? WOKE has gained significant traction in the West, leading to both supporters and critics. It emphasizes individualism, focusing on personal identity, adaptability, and introspection, and is particularly popular among young people. The term "woke," originally emerging in the 20th-century civil rights movements, was revived in 2014 during the Ferguson riots in the U.S. following the police killing of an African American man. These protests were led by the precursors of the Black Lives Matter movement, which some critics consider controversial or even extremist.

Some argue that WOKE culture is not a subculture or counterculture, but rather an integral component of the dominant culture, supported by globalist elites in the U.S., Canada, the UK, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. WOKE culture promotes social and political awareness, particularly in combating racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. However, the original principles of WOKE have expanded, with "social justice warriors" increasingly fighting against a broad array of issues, which has transformed it into an anti-traditional movement. In

this sense, WOKE could be seen as a rejection of old, traditional values and social relations — potentially amounting to the demolition of the superego itself.

The WOKE movement critiques dominant cultural forces and group identities, invoking moral absolutism, intolerance, and narcissism, while glorifying victimhood and replacing traditional values with opposing ones. If WOKEism is truly a fight for minorities, why does it rely on "cancel culture," a harsh stance against traditional orders and identities, and efforts to silence all opposing views?

Studies on collective obedience are rare, but when discussing obedience during the pandemic, one might ask: does this reflect blind obedience to unreasonable measures during an artificially induced pandemic aimed at training the global population to accept a globalist agenda? Many "conspiracy theorists" (including scientists among them) argue that the pandemic measures were designed to restrict fundamental human freedoms under the guise of "medical measures." Alternatively, as Lipovetsky suggests, the pandemic response could be seen as a reflection of “concern for solidarity and justice.” If COVID-19 measures were viewed as a moral duty to society — a moral obligation to do good and act ethically — individuals may have supported these measures as an expression of their personal sovereignty, adopting government directives as their personal beliefs. This would allow individuals to submit to authority without directly acknowledging it, thus maintaining their individualism. While this dynamic existed even before the postmodern era, the increased freedom to express opinions and rebel now pressures individuals to act based on personal beliefs, rather than merely following rules.

Debates on social media highlighted a sharp division, even hostility, between two opposing groups — "vaxxers" and "anti-vaxxers" (often labeled "conspiracy theorists"). "Vaxxers" viewed themselves as responsible citizens and criticized anti-vaxxers as "psychopaths" endangering public health. In contrast, anti-vaxxers saw vaxxers as "useful idiots" blindly trusting science, with some believing that the vaccinated were enabling a global enslavement. They considered themselves "enlightened" — the ones who saw through the global conspiracy. Without considering these opposing views, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the true nature of observed behaviors. Does non-compliance with pandemic measures indicate a new form of disobedience or an alternative form of obedience, depending on whether people view the measures as deceptive? Jesus assumes that the pandemic measures were medically justified and analyzes global human behavior with that perspective.

Jesus raises the question: is postmodern Western society still suffering from overwhelming impositions under the assumption of submission to authority? During the pandemic, health authorities issued guidelines, which governments around the world turned into laws and mandatory dictates. Individuals were required to stay home during lockdowns, and those caught outside without permission faced penalties. Events and public gatherings were banned; face masks had to be worn in public places and on transportation (even pregnant women were forced to wear masks while giving birth). Regular disinfection of hands and surfaces became mandatory; people were required to maintain a 2-meter distance from others; schools and workplaces closed; international borders were largely shut, preventing non-residents from traveling; and during special holidays like Christmas, New Year’s, and Easter, domestic travel was prohibited, preventing many from visiting family and friends. The specific restrictions varied by country, but they were widespread.

Was all of this necessary to fight the pandemic, or were these measures an experiment by certain centers of power to gauge global obedience, serving as a model for future global dictatorship? Jesus assumes that these measures were medically justified, based on scientific evidence to combat a global health threat. From this perspective, he analyzes the behavior of the masses.

There is no doubt, he argues, that these restrictions placed a significant strain on people's mental health, leading to social isolation, disrupted work and family routines, economic instability, increased social anxiety, germophobia, and more sedentary lifestyles. Besides being a burden with numerous consequences, some directives issued by European governments revealed inconsistencies and contradictions that could have fostered distrust, potentially sparking revolts and disobedience. For instance, the value of wearing masks for the general population was debated. The pandemic response and adherence to isolation rules varied significantly across the Western world. While some countries demonstrated high compliance, others largely disregarded at least some of the measures intended to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2. Opinions on how the pandemic was managed and whether enforcing measures was necessary were deeply divided, splitting society into two opposing camps. This division made it difficult to analyze the situation as a whole and reach a solid conclusion about our current state of obedience to authority. Nevertheless, both scenarios — compliance and non-compliance — can be analyzed to better understand the state of the postmodern super-ego.

3.2. Non-Compliance scenario

At the same time, it seems that the struggle against authority gave individuals a significant sense of power, symbolizing the end of Freudian helplessness from childhood and, consequently, independence from the need for the super-ego. The postmodern super-ego, in this context, is an attempt to dismantle the super-ego. The current widespread disbelief in God only intensifies this mass feeling. Those chosen to protect society have become a threat by abusing their power—a power that we, in fact, granted them, making us feel guilty and unworthy of trust. As a result, the disappointment directed at the abusive father figure transforms into self-disappointment and a deep distrust in justice and the social systems that produced this disorder. The disobedience shown by these protesters is all the more significant, especially given that, in the context of the pandemic, it risked labeling them as conspirators (“conspiracy theorists,” “anti-vaxxers”), selfish individuals, or even exposing them to the risk of contamination with SARS-CoV-2. Depending on the country, they also faced the potential for fines or criminal charges if caught disobeying. As Erich Fromm puts it, "to be disobedient, one must have the courage to be alone, to err, and to be a sinner." In some countries, such as France, this protest movement gained more traction and was taken more seriously than in others, where it was quickly dismissed and labeled as the work of conspiracy theorists, pandemic deniers, or individuals holding pseudoscientific beliefs. This raises a hypothetical question: what if this truly was a conspiracy against humanity? Could the disobedient protesters then be seen as individuals with a strong conscience, risking much for the common good? Can we even consider such an idea, especially when this group of disobedients included many respected scientists, doctors, and individuals with reputations and integrity?

3.3. Compliance Scenario and the Regressive Super-Ego

In countries like Portugal, the high level of compliance suggests that the postmodern super-ego may have regressed into the traditional and Freudian super-ego, better equipped to handle

emergencies, such as the mortal threat posed by the pandemic. As long as individuals follow the rules, they feel safe and protected. The mere suggestion of illness and death is enough to evoke a religious-like zeal and devotion to those who offer protection from harm, restoring the broken connection with authority and forgiving past transgressions. In 2021, despite the widespread belief that over two-thirds of politicians were corrupt and that corruption had increased during the pandemic, Portugal's compliance with government directives was remarkably high. This suggests that struggles for democracy and anti-systemic views are often reserved for times of peace and stability. In times of crisis, under intense pressure, the postmodern super-ego's inclination toward liberation, freedom, and pleasure can become seriously repressed, as Freud (1920) predicted, when he argued that all drives are conservative and tend to retreat to a known, previous state.

In countries where respect for authority prevailed, the authority exercised by government leaders was seen as what Fromm describes as “rational authority” (Fromm, 1984, p. 20), which is exercised in the name of reason and, therefore, is deemed indisputable. In contrast, irrational authority operates through force and suggestion. Of the two, rational authority is more dangerous, as it does not compel obedience directly; instead, individuals are under the illusion that they are acting voluntarily, following only what seems reasonable. As Fromm (1984, p. 47) wisely asks, “Who can disobey the ‘reasonable’ ones? Who can disobey when they are not even aware they are submitting?”

Jesus concludes that the postmodern super-ego is a fragile structure that can regress to earlier states when necessary or under serious threat. However, he also presents another possibility: the adherence to COVID rules could actually support the idea of the postmodern super-ego, rather than indicate a regression. As Lipovetsky noted, hypermodern societies have developed a concern for solidarity and justice. Therefore, if the COVID measures were seen as a duty to society—an obligation to do good and act ethically—the individuals enforcing them could be supporting their individual sovereignty by adopting government directives as their own personal beliefs. This could be understood as a way of submitting to authority without fully acknowledging it, thus preserving their sense of individualism. Of course, individuals could adopt rules as personal beliefs even before the postmodern era; however, with the increased freedom to express opinions, rebel, and disobey today, individuals are more likely to act based on their personal beliefs, rather than simply following the rules.

Such a conclusion implies that the authority, in the case of the pandemic, is rational—that it does not exploit the crisis for personal gain, infringe upon human rights, or enforce a “medical dictatorship.” It suggests that all warnings and opinions asserting otherwise are “conspiracy theories,” spread by individuals infected with the “postmodern super-ego” who irrationally seek to overthrow authority, even at great personal cost and despite the potential danger to public safety. The idea that a regression to the old “Freudian super-ego” is beneficial in dangerous situations suggests that such a regression is, in fact, a good solution.

Risking the label of "conspiracy theorist," one might ask—purely for the sake of scientific doubt and the allowance of alternative perspectives—whether the authority involved in the pandemic measures is increasingly malevolent. Does the total control of media narratives and the suppression of expert debate introduce new introjects into people's super-egos, demanding absolute obedience? The super-ego that says: “You can do whatever you want—be promiscuous, selfish, narcissistic, reject all moral norms, values, and even God... And it’s fine

to be like that. Everything is allowed, except for thinking differently and challenging my agenda to rule the world." It seems that Jesus does not, at least hypothetically, consider this alternative.

In the previous chapter, it was noted that the function of the super-ego, which traditionally censored the impulses of the ID, has been suppressed or at least modified in the postmodern era. The liberation of ID instincts, particularly the release of aggression toward paternal authority, is evident. Liberman (2019) observed how parents lose authority over their children, while children, in turn, impose their will upon their parents. If the super-ego once served to suppress the Oedipus conflict and preserve the bond with the threatening father, it now seems no longer capable of fulfilling that role. During the protests against COVID-19 in France, the attitude toward the figure of the father (equated here with the government) ceases to be "ambiguous" and instead becomes charged with aggression and disappointment. This phenomenon is partially driven by events of the twentieth century, as Frankl (2001) claims, and fueled by postmodern culture and ideology.

The ideals defended by postmodern individuals are fundamentally at odds with the authorities and hierarchies that perpetuate social inequalities and abuse power. In today's postmodern context, values like subjectivity, individualism, and liberation have become social imperatives that must be upheld at any cost. Since these ideals often conflict with the authority that can restrict them, it's natural for tensions to arise. The government is seen as the oppressor, the enforcer of rigid rules, and the one who limits individual freedom. Authoritarianism, in this sense, symbolizes everything that postmodern individuals seek to dismantle. This shift in power, seen in various protests, leads to the rejection of laws crafted by the same authority. The belief in temporarily suspending the law creates space for the expression of aggressive and instinctual drives, bordering on anarchy, as evidenced by the violence and riots during the pandemic (Wood et al., 2022). The intensity of these drives is directly linked to the anger directed at authority.

Anger toward the "father" figure is nothing new; it is as old as the concept of the family itself (Frankl, 2001). What is new, however, is the unprecedented freedom to express that anger. Postmodern culture not only permits the satisfaction of desires but encourages a direct confrontation with more powerful figures. The disinhibition of the Oedipus conflict, especially the rebellion against authority, is linked by Freud to the decline of religion and moral restraint. Freud (1923) argued that religion and morality, or "the higher nature of humans" (p. 34), were acquired through overcoming the Oedipus complex. However, the anger toward authority alone does not equate to a full liberation of the ID instincts. On the contrary, the pandemic led to a significant suppression of the ID for those who complied with the COVID restrictions. Many of our social needs were curtailed or highly regulated, our basic behaviors, such as touching our face, had to be monitored, and even feelings like fear, anxiety, and panic were controlled to prevent them from overwhelming us.

Some argue that during COVID, media censorship became prevalent. Mainstream media outlets often refused to publish alternative views or interview experts who questioned the government's stance on COVID rules and vaccines (Chang et al., 2022). Moreover, differing opinions that did appear were quickly removed from the web and made difficult to access. This kind of censorship, which suppresses instincts and impulses, seems to invoke the traditional Freudian super-ego rather than the postmodern super-ego, as Frankl might suggest. However, if we consider Žižek's interpretation of the postmodern super-ego, censorship becomes an integral part of it, though the content being censored has shifted. Now, it is about enforcing freedom,

equality, respect, self-expression, and enjoyment. This form of censorship, exemplified by political correctness, places significant pressure on individuals to conform to certain values and ideals. Contrary to Frankl's view, it's clear that there is still strong pressure on individuals to align with specific norms.

This leads to important questions: Who is the new authority that we serve? Why do we serve it? How does it communicate its will, and what are its ultimate goals? In the previous passage, Jesus cautiously raises these questions, acknowledging that since tradition no longer guides us and there is no universally accepted moral code, all our impulses, experiences, and actions have become subjects of extensive thought and debate. Why do we focus on certain information and prefer one analysis over another? Faced with a multitude of opinions, it becomes increasingly difficult to take a firm stance on any issue or individual. Instead of negating the super-ego, as George Frankl might argue, this reality only intensifies the anxiety that arises from constant doubt, desire, and reflection.

"If the law has lost all its credibility, how do we differentiate between good and bad?" This question, along with many others, arises from a culture rooted in relativism and subjectivity. Under the Freudian super-ego, anxiety was a result of the certainty of knowing what we must not do. In contrast, under the postmodern super-ego, anxiety stems from the absolute uncertainty of knowing what we should do. This conclusion suggests that the ego-ideal has replaced the super-ego. Clinical observations by Lieberman support this idea. She argues that the "new super-ego" is more narcissistic and subjective—being a "good person" is now defined by adapting to one's ideal of goodness, wealth, and beauty, rather than engaging in altruistic actions such as helping others, following moral codes (like the Ten Commandments), respecting the elderly, or simply being kind. People are now guided by a different set of values and standards that profoundly affect the nature and functioning of the super-ego.

The question that arises is whether these changes in the ego and super-ego (discussed in the article "Vertical Unconscious and New Defense Mechanisms") are the result of spontaneous societal shifts—due to changes in lifestyle, scientific advancements, technology, and digitalization—or whether they were intentionally directed by centers of power to create a specific type of person that fits their "agenda" during a particular historical period.

Throughout history, social influence has been achieved through typical mechanisms of shaping the mind, also known as "mindsets" or "means of socialization." These mechanisms can be understood in terms of different personality structures and their associated strategies:

1. Mechanisms of repression – Neurotic personality structure of the 19th century: In this period, there was a prohibition on sexuality and aggression. People experienced neurotic conflict and were conditioned to be obedient to authority.

2. Mechanisms of bribery – Narcissistic personality structure of the 20th century: This phase involved the prohibition of traditional values, which were replaced by the pursuit of "specialness." Individuals became driven by the desire to acquire things that symbolized value—essentially, becoming good buyers of what society deemed worthy.

3. Mechanisms of dulling – Perversion of personality structure in the 21st century: Here, the prohibition of independent thought became prominent. People's thinking had

to be shaped externally, leading to dependency, neuroticism, and a disconnection from traditional values and institutions. The individual became self-centered, using others as mere tools for personal gain.

4. Mechanisms of insanity – The likely psychotic culture of the near future: This involves withdrawal from reality, disinterest in the world around us, and the creation of personal "parallel universes." People may retreat into virtual reality, becoming socially useless, disconnected from meaningful social engagement and interaction.

These mechanisms, which are already becoming dominant, represent the shift toward a future where individuals are less connected to reality and more isolated in their subjective worlds.

Let's return to the question raised by Jesus: Who is the new authority we serve? Why do we serve it? How does it communicate, and what are its strategies and ultimate purpose? This raises crucial questions about the forces shaping us, especially in terms of the kind of personality structure that is being cultivated.

Who needs a perverse personality structure? A psychotic one? What will be done with these individuals as subjects? Are they simply replaceable by robots or artificial intelligence? If the ID (the unconscious aspect of the psyche) with its destructive forces—particularly the death instinct—no longer poses the primary danger to civilization, then what is the true source of humanity's vulnerability? According to some authors, the problem may lie not in the inherent ID but in the super-ego imposed by authority through socializing agents. But who or what has "spoiled" humanity for centuries?

It is clear that not all social institutions are inherently bad. Laws serve a purpose, and norms as social conventions help maintain order in society. But what explains the excess of limitations, the indulgence in debauchery, or the abuse of one person by another? Where is the source of this evil? Is it intrinsic to the ID of humankind, or does it originate from those in power who craft the deviations we see in the world?

Chomsky famously said, *"A smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable thinking, but allow for a very lively discussion within that spectrum"* (1988). Does this phenomenon play out within psychoanalysis and psychotherapy? There's lively discussion in the field about the influence of parents—especially the mother—on psychological development. However, contemporary literature rarely addresses the broader societal influences: the media, social networks, and education systems. Even less often explored is the question of who is orchestrating these processes, who is behind the conceptual frameworks that shape these influences, and who is organizing the agents of socialization.

Does this extensive influence—these forces shaping human development and creating the ego and super-ego—ultimately contribute to the making of a *"useful idiot"*? This term, often used pejoratively, refers to someone who unconsciously or naively supports a political or ideological agenda that is not in their best interest. The term is often attributed to Lenin, though it is unclear whether he ever used it. It gained prominence during the Cold War and continues to describe those who uncritically support a political agenda.

But can this term be limited to political ideologies alone? Could it also apply to the lifestyle choices, the absence of moral values, the narcissistic superego, and the exploitation of others—

forms of behavior that reflect a broader, more systemic agenda? A way of life has emerged where individuals unknowingly or passively support the very systems that shape and distort their character. Could this unconscious compliance be part of a larger agenda—an ideological framework that seeks to create a specific type of person, one whose values and desires align with certain economic or political interests?

Conclusion

Numerous clinicians, psychotherapists, and other practitioners have noticed significant changes in the ego and superego of clients, especially within Western culture. These practitioners are increasingly attempting to link these changes to societal causes, suggesting that various agents of socialization are playing a role in shaping individual transformations.

When discussing changes in the ego, as explored in the article *"Vertical Unconscious and New Defense Mechanisms,"* we can observe that the classical mechanisms associated with the "horizontal unconscious"—a term used to describe the unconscious resulting from repression—are being replaced by mechanisms tied to the vertical unconscious. To distinguish between these two forms of unconsciousness, we use "horizontal unconscious" to describe the repressed aspects of the psyche, while the "vertical unconscious" involves splitting and partialism—a mechanism that avoids connection, where the individual remains unaware of the interconnections between different aspects of the conscious mind. Within this vertical unconscious, new and previously undescribed defense mechanisms have emerged. While splitting (and its associated primitive defenses such as denial, projection, introjection, and projective identification) is well documented, we have also observed a tendency toward nonconnection—the refusal or inability to integrate and connect aspects of the self.

These changes in the ego, characterized by fragmentation, nonthinking, and disconnection, correspond with significant transformations in the superego. In particular, the superego has become more susceptible to uncritically absorbing external influences or introjects, further contributing to its fragmentation.

In this paper, we examine these shifts in the superego, attempting to trace their origins back to societal changes. We argue that the rise of narcissism and individualism in the late 20th century, combined with the valorization of selfishness, greed, wealth accumulation, and exploitation, laid the groundwork for the development of a perverse superego. This form of the superego encourages individuals to turn a blind eye to ethical deviations and moral lapses. It is important to note that this is not to suggest that most individuals exhibit these dynamics on a personal level within the clinical setting. Instead, we propose that society, as a whole, operates systematically on the basis of these dynamics, which then shape and influence individual behavior.

As the typical human mode of connection has shifted toward a more parasitic form—where relationships are increasingly exploitative—this, in turn, has affected both the ego and the superego. With this shift in how we relate to others and to reality, we must ask: What remains of the superego? Has it been deconstructed, or have significant changes occurred in its organization?

Psychoanalysts have traditionally looked to the id as the primary source of human destructiveness—the "beast" within each person. This focus has led them to overlook the possibility that destructiveness may instead be rooted in the superego. Over time, psychoanalytic theory has addressed the client's superego in various ways. Early thinkers like Alexander and Ferenczi suggested that the superego should be demolished, while Melanie Klein proposed that it should be transformed from its primitive, persecutory forms into one based on love for the object. Money-Kyrle further developed the idea of transforming immature forms of the superego into more mature ones, and Racker introduced the notion that self-love is the foundation of morality. Despite these theoretical developments, psychoanalysts have largely debated whether the superego should be demolished, transformed, or whether a foundation of self-love could lead to a mature morality based on love for others.

However, while psychoanalysts have been engaged in this theoretical debate, culture itself has evolved in ways that have influenced the organization and function of the superego. In doing so, it has created the "postmodern superego", a new structure that reflects the values, contradictions, and cultural shifts of the current era. This is not merely a theoretical construct, but a tangible phenomenon that can be observed in the behavior and attitudes of contemporary individuals.

The concept of the postmodern superego was introduced by Slavoj Žižek to describe the transformations he observed in the moral behavior of Western societies around the turn of the millennium. Postmodernists argue that rational and scientific values have led humanity into wars, as well as exacerbating poverty, prejudice, and oppression. Postmodernism is characterized by a skeptical and nihilistic stance toward universal concepts such as truth, reality, and knowledge, and also toward any form of authority. Does this signify the erosion of the superego? And, in this context, is this the outcome that Alexander and Ferenczi considered desirable?

The authorities in question here are not limited to political leaders or law enforcement, but also include God(s), parents, teachers, and anyone in a position of power. The relationship with these authorities, once characterized by respect, fear, and admiration, has now been replaced by anger, skepticism, mistrust, and uncertainty. This shift in authority undermines the traditional superego, which, according to Viktor Frankl, leads to what he refers to as the "murder of the superego." Similarly, Žižek (1999) describes the postmodern subject as increasingly narcissistic, fixated on freedom, self-fulfillment, and enjoyment. While Frankl focuses on the unchecked release of instinctual impulses, Žižek highlights the cultural ideology that underpins these impulses. Both thinkers agree that traditional values and parental authority have been dismantled in favor of freedom and liberation. However, this raises the question: What kind of freedom is this, and does it encompass responsibility?

Old values and the superego shaped by those values have been dismantled, but what remains in their place? Has something new been constructed—new values, meaning, or purpose?

The so-called "new normal" emerges as a result of the "hyper-normalization" of behaviors previously considered deviations from the norm. However, the question persists: why is there an increase in anxiety among individuals if they are no longer under the threat of a strict moralistic superego?

Jesus (and others) suggests that as the superego weakens, the ego ideal may become stronger, leading individuals to experience shame rather than guilt. Furthermore, since the ego ideal has historically been linked to narcissism, and postmodern society is often described as narcissistic, it could be posited that the ego ideal has assumed control of the psyche at the expense of the superego. This hypothesis may offer an explanation for the persistence of anxiety despite a weakened connection to traditional authority structures.

If we accept the postmodern emphasis on individualism and the obligation to be free, along with its dismantling of moral institutions, it becomes understandable why individuals experience a lack of moral direction. The freedom to make one's own choices, rather than providing clarity, only increases uncertainty and complicates decision-making. This is especially apparent when compared to the simplicity of adhering to tradition or religious doctrines, which predefine life's purpose and the means to achieve it.

The absence of guilt does not necessarily imply the destruction of the superego. If we consider Melanie Klein's concept of the dual superego, where good and bad are split through the mechanism of splitting, the lack of guilt might indicate the presence of a primitive and sadistic superego. This superego may not have reached the depressive position, in which the integration of good and bad objects and the need for reparation occur. Alternatively, this absence of guilt could signal a collective regression to a paranoid-schizoid position.

Žižek argues that the postmodern superego has introduced a unique obligation—the obligation to be free and to enjoy life. In this context, the ego ideal becomes a dictatorial force. If individuals are encouraged to maximize their pleasure and enjoy life to the fullest, they are compelled to comply. When they feel they could have experienced more pleasure or are unable to enjoy life as expected, they experience guilt for failing to meet the mandates of happiness and success dictated by the new era. In a society that no longer imposes moral obligations, postmodern individuals impose them on themselves. They feel compelled to fulfill these "chosen" norms, as they perceive themselves as the ones who "chose" them. Postmodern society, though appearing permissive, is in fact filled with rules and imposed expectations disguised as efforts to ensure happiness. Rather than feeling guilty for causing harm or injustice to others, the modern person is more likely to feel guilty for indulging in a sweet treat while dieting, for skipping the gym (responding to the narcissistic imperative of physical appearance), or for failing to post something attractive on Instagram or another social network that showcases the quality of their life.

Patrick McGinnis conceptualized new anxieties of the digital age: FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), the fear of missing something or being uninformed, and FOBO (Fear of Better Options), the fear of committing to one choice because a better alternative might always be available.

The neo-normal superego (or ego ideal) is liberal toward most ethical norms, yet rigid, dogmatic, and prone to dictatorial tendencies on certain "chosen issues." One might question which master it serves and the purpose for which it is designed.

Lieberman concludes that the "new superego" is based on a distinct moral framework grounded in narcissism.

Jesus (2020), observing human behavior across various countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, attempted to analyze the postmodern superego, viewing it as a fragile structure capable of reverting to previous forms (such as the repressive superego, obedient to authority) when needed or when a significant threat arises. However, he remains uncertain in his conclusion and leaves open the possibility that adherence to COVID-19 regulations supports the idea of a postmodern superego rather than indicating a regression. As Lipovetsky observed, hypermodern societies have developed a heightened concern for solidarity and fairness. If the COVID-19 regulations were understood as a societal duty, a moral obligation to act ethically, those who complied might support their individual sovereignty by adopting government directives as their personal beliefs. This could be seen as a way of submitting to authority without acknowledging it explicitly, thus maintaining their individualism.

Regarding Jesus' conclusion, a justified question arises. His conclusion presupposes that the authority, in the context of the pandemic, is rational, that it does not exploit the situation for profit, infringe upon human rights, or implement a form of "medical dictatorship." This perspective also assumes that opposing viewpoints and warnings are mere "conspiracy theories" spread by those influenced by the "postmodern superego," who irrationally seek to overthrow authority, even at great personal cost and at the risk of endangering public safety and societal stability. It suggests that a regression to the older, "Freudian superego" might be viewed as a preferable solution in times of crisis (as if such regression were beneficial).

Risking the label of a "conspiracy theorist," could we, for the sake of scientific skepticism and the allowance of alternative perspectives, pose the question of whether the authority—particularly in the case of the pandemic and its accompanying measures—is becoming increasingly malevolent? Through total media control and the suppression of professional debate, might authority be introducing new introjects into the superego, demanding absolute obedience? A superego that dictates: "You may do as you wish—be hedonistic, selfish, narcissistic, reject all moral norms, values, and faith, discard collective identities (be they national, familial, gender-based, or even human). And this is acceptable. Everything is permitted, except opposing this worldview or challenging my global agenda." It seems that Jesus does not engage with this possibility, at least not hypothetically. He continues to frame the behavior of those opposing government measures as an unconscious struggle with paternal authority, an eruption of aggressive impulses from the id, thereby disregarding the potential that these individuals might be resisting on the basis of rational, informed opposition to manipulation and the erosion of human rights.

Nonetheless, Jesus (2020) observes the confusion individuals experience regarding whom or what to trust. While under the Freudian superego, anxiety arose from certainty about what one must not do, under the postmodern superego, anxiety emerges from a profound uncertainty about what one should do.

Examining the broader societal changes in the superego through the lens of neoliberalism, which stands as the dominant political ideology in the West, reveals similar mechanisms of fragmentation as seen in the individual's ego. Society has become sharply polarized, with one side (typically the left, or globalists) focusing on dismantling traditional values and collective identities, while the other side (typically the right, or sovereigntists) strives to preserve and strengthen them. These ideological divisions manifest in everyday socialization processes, shaping the individual through family, education, and the media. Through processes of

introjection and identification, individuals are increasingly fragmented and confused, hindering the development of a coherent self-image and an understanding of the world and the values that should be internalized.

There exists a profound ambivalence within society, which also reflects on the individual level. People struggle to construct a coherent value system because the moral image of the world has become divided, fragmented, and polarized. The positive and negative aspects of values no longer communicate with one another, as they are separated by mechanisms of splitting and partialization. Each side clings to what is beneficial for itself, while projecting opposing values onto others. This leads to the reinforcement of individual, often illogical, and irrational stances that are based more on superficial emotional reactions than on thoughtful, reasoned consideration.

Thus, the problem of moral judgment arises. Since these judgments often result from deeply ingrained but unconscious introjections, individuals become increasingly defensive in upholding their views. Polarization is not merely an ideological struggle but a profound psychological division that prevents meaningful dialogue and healthy discussion, ultimately impeding the ability to form complex ethical conclusions. This phenomenon is not only an individual issue but has evolved into a societal problem, pervading all spheres of social life.

In this fragmented social context, a crucial question emerges: How do we navigate a world in which truth is relativized and moral values become subjective? The distinction between good and evil becomes a matter of personal allegiance, while truth increasingly becomes a narrative shaped by ideological forces. Each side perceives itself as representing the "good," while opposing viewpoints are framed as "evil," fostering confusion and uncertainty in everyday life.

On the individual level, the consequences of this collective confusion are evident. Many individuals, confronted with complete uncertainty about what is right, retreat into their “safe zones,” where they believe they can maintain control. However, this often leads them to become what might be termed “useful idiots”—unquestioning followers of ideological narratives, who fail to critically assess the truthfulness or ethical justification of the ideologies they adopt.

In such a world, the role of the therapist cannot be confined solely to addressing the individual problems of clients. Our clients present challenges that are not only the result of their internal conflicts but also the broader social "radiation" that permeates their micro-world. As therapists, we are confronted with the question of how to maintain value neutrality while remaining attuned to the broader social reality. Are our therapeutic tools and techniques adequate to address this pervasive societal confusion?

Within the framework of O.L.I. Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, specific methodological approaches have been developed to address the defragmentation of the Ego and Superego. The aim is to foster the development of object integrity, as well as the maturation of introjects—from primitive, raw introjects to those that can be consciously processed, accepted through identification, or, if necessary, rejected. This approach provides an opportunity to overcome polarized, emotionally charged stances and offers clients tools to achieve inner balance, thereby fostering the development of a healthier and more coherent value system.

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Considerations of Narcissistic Personality Organization from the Perspective of Kohut's Self Psychology, Freud's Psychosexual Stages of Development, OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, and Their Implications in Psychotherapeutic Practice

Case Study "Z.D."

Abstract

This paper explores narcissistic personality organization through an integrative lens encompassing three psychodynamic approaches: Kohut's Self Psychology, Freud's theory of psychosexual stages of development, and the OLI integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy model. The primary aim is to demonstrate the complementarity of these frameworks in both understanding and addressing narcissistic pathology, as well as to illustrate their application within clinical practice.

The theoretical section examines the core concepts of each approach, while the practical application is presented through the case study of "Z.D.," which exemplifies a psychodynamic methodology in working with narcissistic personality organization. The paper discusses specific challenges encountered during the therapeutic process, including transference dynamics,

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resistance, and narcissistic defenses, emphasizing the role of empathic attunement in fostering a strong therapeutic alliance.

The findings underscore the importance of a psychodynamic framework in comprehending and treating narcissistic personality organization, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective therapeutic interventions. This paper enhances understanding of the clinical manifestations of narcissistic pathology and offers practical guidelines for improving psychotherapeutic work with this client population.

Keywords: narcissistic personality organization, self psychology, psychosexual development, OLI psychotherapeutic modality, integrative approach, psychodynamic approach, introjection, analysis of introjects, case study

1. Introduction

The final decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have witnessed a marked increase in interest in narcissistic personality organization—not only within clinical practice and scientific literature but also in broader societal discourse. While numerous studies examine narcissistic personality disorder and the broader phenomenon of narcissism, this paper focuses specifically on the psychodynamic aspects of narcissism. It explores the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral patterns characteristic of narcissistic personality structures, along with the value systems that sustain them. Particular attention is given to the function of these patterns in maintaining narcissistic equilibrium and a positive self-image, as well as to the ways in which the psychotherapeutic process can facilitate the development of more mature mechanisms for sustaining realistic self-esteem and adopting alternative value systems.

Modern society, with its emphasis on individualism, social media influence, and the pursuit of instant gratification, has created fertile ground for the development and expression of narcissistic behavioral patterns (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). In clinical settings, therapists increasingly encounter clients presenting with complex symptomatology consistent with narcissistic personality organization, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and the formulation of effective therapeutic strategies (Levy et al., 2019).

It is crucial to emphasize that narcissism is not exclusively a pathological phenomenon but rather a universal aspect of the human psyche, manifesting in varying degrees and forms across individuals (Kohut, 1971). In psychotherapeutic practice, elements of narcissistic personality organization are observable in a majority of clients—either as components of their character structure or as narcissistic defenses activated during the therapeutic process. The ubiquity of narcissistic dynamics makes their understanding essential for all psychotherapists, regardless of theoretical orientation.

Working with clients who exhibit pronounced narcissistic personality organization presents distinct challenges for therapists. These individuals often employ rigid defenses that obstruct access to their inner emotional world and authentic affect (Levy et al., 2019). Difficulties in establishing and maintaining a therapeutic alliance are common. Moreover, these clients tend to exhibit heightened sensitivity to narcissistic injuries, which can precipitate premature termination of therapy or intense acting-out behaviors. Therapists may encounter complex countertransference reactions, ranging from feelings of inadequacy and helplessness to frustration or a desire for confrontation. A central challenge involves maintaining an empathic connection, particularly when faced with the client's grandiosity or devaluation of the therapist, as well as striking a balance between supporting healthy narcissistic needs and addressing maladaptive patterns.

Psychodynamic approaches have proven indispensable in working with narcissistic personality organization, offering a uniquely profound understanding of intrapsychic processes, unconscious conflicts, and the developmental foundations of narcissistic pathology. Their theoretical depth and clinical sophistication provide a robust framework for conceptualizing the complex dynamics underlying narcissistic states and for developing effective therapeutic interventions (Kernberg, 2014). Of particular importance is the psychodynamic capacity to elucidate how early developmental experiences and object relations shape present-day functioning, and to provide a reparative emotional experience through the transference–countertransference relationship.

Given all the aforementioned points, understanding narcissistic personality organization necessitates a comprehensive approach that integrates multiple theoretical perspectives. This paper focuses on three psychodynamic approaches: Kohut's Self Psychology, Freud's psychosexual stages of development, and the OLI integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy model. Although these approaches emerged in different historical contexts and are grounded in distinct theoretical foundations, they exhibit a remarkable degree of complementarity in understanding and treating narcissistic personality organization.

Heinz Kohut, through his groundbreaking development of Self Psychology, offered a perspective on narcissism that moves beyond the traditional view of the phenomenon as purely pathological (Kohut, 1971, 1977). His conceptualization of self-object needs and the centrality of empathy in therapeutic work laid the foundation for a more humane and effective treatment of narcissistically organized clients. Kohut's notions of the grandiose self, the idealized parental imago, and the twinship self-object provide a valuable framework for understanding the development and maintenance of narcissistic personality organization.

In contrast, Freud's theory of psychosexual development—particularly his conceptualizations of oral, anal, and phallic narcissism—offers insight into the developmental origins of narcissistic patterns and their connection to early childhood stages (Freud, 1914/1957, 1923/1961). Furthermore, the understanding of narcissistic pride and the value system underpinning narcissistic character pathology represents an essential component in psychotherapeutic work with this population.

The OLI integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy approach contributes a more contemporary integrative perspective, emphasizing emotional competencies and the development of "counter-skills." This model introduces new tools for working with narcissistic personality organization, while also synthesizing classical psychodynamic concepts with modern insights into emotional development and personality functioning.

The motivation for writing this paper arises from clinical experience, which underscores the need for integrating diverse theoretical perspectives when working with narcissistically organized clients. The aim is to demonstrate—through theoretical analysis and the case study

of "Z.D."—how these distinct approaches can be utilized in a complementary manner within therapeutic practice.

The paper is structured to begin with a detailed theoretical overview of the three approaches, followed by an examination of their practical implications in therapeutic work. The central section presents a clinical case study that illustrates how theoretical constructs are manifested in practice and how diverse therapeutic interventions can be integrated into a cohesive therapeutic framework. Special attention is given to the analysis of transference, defenses, introjects, and the process of psychological change, along with the particular challenges involved in working with narcissistic vulnerability.

By integrating theory and clinical application, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of narcissistic personality organization and to offer practical guidelines for more effective psychotherapeutic work with this complex client population. It is our belief that combining insights from these approaches can significantly enhance clinicians' capacity to support individuals with narcissistic personality organization in their process of psychological growth and development.

2. Theoretical part

2.1. Kohut and the psychology of the self

Kohut made a highly significant contribution to the understanding of narcissism by redefining it as a developmental process that, in its healthy form, leads to the formation of a realistic image of the self and others (Kohut, 1971). In contrast to the traditional view of narcissism as purely pathological, Kohut conceptualized healthy narcissism as the foundation for the development of mature self-esteem and realistic ideals.

According to Self Psychology, the narcissistic sector of the personality is a universal structure present in all individuals. However, adverse developmental experiences may lead to its pathological organization, which manifests through distorted representations of the self and significant others, as well as through the intense use of defense mechanisms aimed at preserving these distortions (Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

Kohut identified two key pillars of the narcissistic sector of the personality that emerge during normal development:

1. The grandiose-exhibitionistic self, which, through optimal development, evolves into healthy self-assertiveness and realistic self-esteem.

2. The idealized parental imago, representing the internalized image of the parents and their values, which, over time, is transformed into realistic internalized ideals and guiding values.

What does this mean in practical terms? We are all born with unrealistic perceptions, a sense of omnipotence, and a lack of awareness of our own and our parents' actual capabilities. The developmental process entails a gradual transformation of this initial infantile omnipotence and idealization. Through a series of minor, optimal frustrations and disappointments, the child slowly reshapes their unrealistic representations of the self and parental figures (Kohut, 1984). In healthy development, these disappointments are integrated and balanced by realistic achievements related to the grandiose self and by a realistic assessment of parental capacities and values. We come to understand that we are not omnipotent or superior, but we are "good enough"—we possess a stable sense of self-worth that does not rely on grandiose distortions.

Conversely, pathology within the narcissistic sector can manifest in two primary ways: as fixation on grandiosity within the domain of the grandiose self, or as deficits resulting from fixation on archaic idealizations of others within the domain of the idealized parental imago. Understanding these developmental trajectories is essential for planning psychotherapeutic interventions that foster the emergence of more mature and realistic structures of the bipolar self.

2.1.1. The grandiose self

Kohut's theory of Self Psychology places particular emphasis on the development of the grandiose self, which evolves into the self-assertive pole of the bipolar self through optimal development (Kohut, 1971). This transformation is expressed through three key components: the regulation of self-confidence, the capacity to derive enjoyment from physical and mental activities, and the ability to achieve personal goals and ambitions.

The transformation of the archaic grandiose self primarily occurs through the process of parental mirroring. Kohut (1984) highlights that an adequate parental response both recognizes and reflects the child's authentic talents and abilities, thereby conveying a message about their value and potential.

Inadequate mirroring can lead to various forms of pathology in the domain of self-assertive ambitions, including deficits in self-confidence regulation, an inability to derive satisfaction from activities, and difficulties in maintaining goals or a sense of purpose. The types of inadequate mirroring are as follows:

-*Deficit Mirroring*: Characterized by the complete absence of reflection on the child's qualities, conveying a message of worthlessness. The underlying message is: "You are not interesting, not valuable."

-*Selective Mirroring*: Focuses solely on characteristics that are valued by the parent, often reflecting the parent's unfulfilled ambitions. Parents might say, "Look at him, just like me," while subconsciously thinking, "He will achieve what I couldn't, thereby compensating for my own failures," sending the message: "You are only valuable when you meet my expectations."

-*Negative Mirroring*: Actively devalues the child's characteristics and potentials, either directly or through comparison with undesirable models. Criticism might be expressed as: "Why are you playing with that like a little girl?" or "Why are you so clumsy? You always mess things up..."

-*Uncritical Mirroring*: Supports grandiose representations, hindering the development of a realistic self-concept. The child might be praised with statements such as: "Everything you do is amazing, phenomenal, genius..."

-*Indirect Mirroring*: Expressed through indirect communication, such as when the child hears compliments only when the parent boasts to others or when others say that the parent is proud of them. This may lead to an excessive sensitivity to social evaluation and an obsession with how others perceive them.

Each of these mirroring patterns creates specific deficits in the formation of a mature bipolar self and the development of realistic self-esteem (Kohut, 1984). In clinical practice, different patterns of inadequate mirroring manifest as:

- Injuries to the self-image.
- Inauthentic behaviors aimed at obtaining positive mirroring.
- Overemphasis on certain characteristics to secure a sense of belonging.
- Preoccupation with social evaluation.

2.1.2. The Idealized Parental Imago

In addition to the development of the grandiose self, the developmental trajectory of the idealized parental imago represents another critical process in the formation of a healthy personality. Kohut (1971) emphasizes that, under optimal developmental conditions, this imago transforms into several essential psychological functions. Primarily, it fosters the development of self-soothing and self-satisfaction capacities, allowing the individual to maintain psychological balance even in the absence of external support. Simultaneously, the ability to experience enthusiasm and invest in ideals is cultivated.

During maturation, the archaic idealized parental imago undergoes significant transformations within the idealized self-object matrix. As Kohut and Wolf (1978) note, this process culminates in the formation of the mature pole of the bipolar self. Characteristics of this mature state include the development of realistic ideals and functional self-regulatory mechanisms, enabling the individual to function adaptively.

In cases of pathological development, inadequate fulfillment of self-object needs can lead to significant deficits in self-regulation. These deficits manifest through various forms of psychological instability, such as diffuse anxiety, sleep disturbances, and eating dysregulation. Particularly characteristic is the persistent unconscious expectation of external regulation by idealized figures, signaling insufficient internalization of regulatory functions.

A lack of self-regulation also manifests through uncontrolled impulses toward addictions, perversions, and criminal behaviors. A common feature is the inability to experience excitement for specific activities, invest in meaningful pursuits, or achieve ideals with sustained commitment. In an effort to compensate for these deficits, various mechanisms often develop. One of the most frequent is compulsive idealization, which is characterized by a constant search for idealized figures and susceptibility to manipulation by charismatic leaders. This mechanism is particularly compatible with grandiose personality structures. Another significant compensatory mechanism is the assumption of the parental role, where the individual unconsciously seeks desired gratification through excessive self-sacrifice and self-negation.

In his later works, Kohut (1984) identified three primary sources of pathological development: mismatches between the temperaments of parent and child, the parents' inability to provide

empathic responses, and excessively high self-object needs on the part of the child. These factors significantly contribute to the formation of self-object deficits and the emergence of narcissistic vulnerability.

Self-objects, which Kohut (1971) defines as psychic extensions of the self, play a fundamental role in the development of self-regulatory capacities. When deficits are present in this domain, individuals often engage in a persistent search for self-object gratification, experience an intense fear of re-experiencing early traumas, and encounter considerable difficulties in sustaining intimate relationships.

In clinical practice, working with clients who exhibit deficits related to the idealized parental imago requires particular sensitivity. The therapeutic process is typically marked by the emergence of idealizing transference, which serves as a crucial mechanism in the reconstruction of impaired self-regulatory functions. A central focus of therapy lies in the gradual integration of realistic ideals and the cultivation of more adaptive self-regulation mechanisms.

2.1.3. The Twinship Alter Ego as the Third Self-Object Need

In the later phases of his theoretical work, Kohut (1984) identified a third fundamental self-object need: the need for a twinship alter ego. This need is expressed as a profound longing for the experience of essential similarity with other human beings.

In terms of its developmental significance, the twinship alter ego fulfills several key functions in the child's psychological maturation. Primarily, it affirms the child's basic sense of humanity through experiences of belonging and perceived sameness with others. It also supports the development of talents through identification with significant others who possess similar abilities or interests. An important function of the twinship alter ego is its role in enabling the safe exploration of differences, offering the child a stable psychological base from which to investigate and integrate their unique traits. Furthermore, it serves as a vital bridge between the grandiose self and the idealized parental imago, facilitating the integration of these essential self-structures.

Under optimal developmental conditions, the need for twinship naturally evolves into several core psychological capacities. These include the ability to form deep empathic connections with others, the capacity to build and sustain authentic interpersonal relationships, and a realistic sense of belonging that is not burdened by an excessive need for sameness or fear of difference.

However, deficits in the fulfillment of the twinship need can give rise to various pathological manifestations. These often include a pervasive sense of being fundamentally different from others, significant difficulties in forming and maintaining intimate relationships, and a compulsive search for a "soulmate," which may impede the development of realistic relational patterns.

In the clinical context, twinship transference presents with specific manifestations that are essential to recognize. This frequently involves a pronounced need for the client to experience a sense of fundamental similarity with the therapist. It may be expressed through an increased emphasis on shared characteristics and experiences, as well as an intense fear of perceived differences, which can complicate the therapeutic process.

2.2. Freud and Psychosexual Stages of Development

Manifestations of narcissistic grandiosity exhibit considerable variability, shaped primarily by two key factors: the nature of the mirroring responses that established value criteria during development, and the specific phase of psychosexual development in which narcissistic injuries occurred (Freud, 1914/1957; Kohut, 1971).

Narcissistic pride, functioning as a defensive mechanism against feelings of inferiority, may be invested in various aspects of the self, each closely tied to the value system of the mirroring environment and the child's dominant developmental needs (Reich, 1933/1972). These investments may be expressed through:

- Moral qualities (e.g., emphasized integrity and orderliness)
- Physical attributes (e.g., appearance, strength)
- Relational characteristics (e.g., dominance or submissiveness)
- Behavioral patterns (e.g., marked aggressiveness or pronounced passivity)
- Sexual identity (e.g., "masculine potency" or "moral purity")

Paradoxically, even seemingly negative traits can serve as sources of narcissistic pride. Kernberg (1975) emphasizes that adopting the role of a "victim" or displaying demonstrative modesty may become means of narcissistic gratification. A defining feature is the extremity with which a particular trait is expressed—whether through exaggeration or inhibition—which serves to distinguish the individual from "average others" (McWilliams, 2011).

It is also important to note that narcissistic pride may be overt or covert, a distinction particularly evident in so-called "shy" or covert narcissists (Masterson, 1993). This distinction holds significant implications for both diagnostic formulation and therapeutic strategy.

2.2.1. Oral, Anal, and Phallic Narcissism

Each phase of psychosexual development is characterized by specific dominant needs, orientations, and modes of gratification, which give rise to distinct **forms** of narcissistic pride, as well as particular forms of narcissistic injury, experiences of inferiority, and characteristic defense mechanisms (Freud, 1914/1957). The stage of psychosexual development exerts a significant influence on the **content** of the narcissistic sector of personality, its mode of expression, specific sensitivities to narcissistic injury, and the defensive structures employed.

In the context of the relationship between psychosexual stages and the development of narcissism, theorists have elaborated the concepts of *oral*, *anal*, *and* phallic narcissism (Freud, 1924; Ikonen, 1998; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1964; Jovanović et al., 2013).

Oral narcissism is marked by fantasies of omnipotence, perfection, and entitlement to the unlimited fulfillment of needs (Kernberg, 1975). This developmental stage is defined by the lack of differentiation between self and object, a phenomenon particularly evident in borderline personality organization. The grandiose self emerges as a defensive structure against profound feelings of fragmentation, disconnection, emptiness, and insatiable longing. It is sustained by an internalized image of the self as a supreme being inherently deserving of unconditional gratification (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1964). The idealized parental imago is experienced as a mere extension of the self, whose principal function is to serve the self's needs—often manifesting in the compulsive search for "the right one." Narcissistic injury at this stage, whether resulting from a failure to mirror the grandiose self as perfect or from the object's deviation from total devotion, often leads to intense envy, devaluation, rage, hatred, and a profound sense of inner emptiness (Jovanović et al., 2013).

Anal narcissism centers around control, "cleanliness," diligence, meticulousness, perfectionism, and orderliness as key elements of narcissistic pride (Reich, 1972). As a defense against the demands of the anal phase, opposing values and traits may also be developed as alternative sources of narcissistic pride: counter-will, resistance to demands, defiance, and stubbornness. Narcissistic vulnerability at this stage is primarily linked to the potential loss or lack of recognition of these values, as well as the loss of control over the self or the object (Ikonen, 1998). The is manifested either through an image of perfect precision and control, or through an ideal of total "freedom" and defiance. The is experienced as an object that highly values and exemplifies these traits.

Phallic narcissism is characterized by narcissistic pride centered on power—particularly sexual potency in men, and sexual allure or desirability in women—as well as dominance over the opposite sex and rivalry with same-sex peers (Freud, 1924; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1964). Narcissistic injury at this stage is primarily experienced as "**"**, that is, the loss of potency, status, or symbolic power.

In clinical practice, it is essential to recognize the client's specific narcissistic needs, their sensitivity to particular types of narcissistic frustration, the defensive reactions these frustrations provoke, and the compensatory mechanisms employed (McWilliams, 2011). Of particular importance is identifying the aspects of self-image and self-worth to which the client is especially vulnerable. In individuals with a narcissistic personality structure, the central dynamic revolves around maintaining self-worth and preserving balance within the narcissistic sector of the personality. This intense preoccupation often impedes the development of a value system grounded in reciprocity and mutual recognition (Jovanović et al., 2013).

2.2.2. The Value System in Narcissistic Personality Structure

The value system of individuals with narcissistic personality structure is shaped by two fundamental motivational forces that guide their behavior and decision-making processes (Kernberg, 2004). The first is an intense need for attention, admiration, and confirmation of superiority. The second is a defensive drive aimed at protecting the fragile ego and preserving a grandiose self-image (Kohut, 1971).

Pathological narcissism can be conceptualized as a form of psychological dependency on external sources of self-validation. This dependency fundamentally alters the individual's moral compass, giving rise to a value system that significantly diverges from normative ethical frameworks grounded in the principle of reciprocity (McWilliams, 2011). In contrast to the genital character structure, which, according to Freud, internalizes ethical principles akin to Kant's categorical imperative ("Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" or "Always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means"), pre-genital structures—including narcissistic ones—form a distinct set of values (Freud, 1914/1957).

According to recent research (Jansen, 2021), the narcissistic value system is characterized by the following features:

Primacy of image and external appearance – Material success, physical attractiveness, and social status serve as primary sources of confidence and self-worth. Depending on the subtype of narcissism (oral, anal, or phallic), this may manifest in overt materialism, pronounced asceticism, or deliberate unconventionality.

Selective respect – Marked by rigid adherence to values that reinforce narcissistic pride, with little regard for others' perspectives and boundaries. This frequently results in devaluation of others and violations of their personal integrity.

Instrumental relationship with truth – Truth is relativized and subordinated to narcissistic needs, often leading to distortion of reality and denial of facts that threaten the grandiose self-image.

Extreme egocentricity – The world is interpreted exclusively through the lens of personal needs and significance, resulting in impaired capacity for genuine empathy and authentic interpersonal connection.

Instrumental loyalty – Relationships are viewed through a utilitarian lens, with superficial bonds of interest that are easily severed once they cease to serve narcissistic functions.

Need for control – Manifests as an intense desire to control both one's own image and the behavior of others, frequently expressed through manipulation in interpersonal relationships.

This value system gives rise to a distinct pattern of help-seeking: individuals with narcissistic personality structure typically seek psychotherapy only when their grandiose self-concept collapses or when they lose control over sources of narcissistic gratification (Kohut, 1977). Paradoxically, the very value system that sustains their psychic structure also impedes the formation of authentic relationships that could provide a more realistic foundation for self-esteem and psychological security.

Reconstructing such a value system constitutes one of the central challenges in psychotherapeutic work with narcissistic personality structures. This process requires a profound transformation of internalized patterns of self- and other-evaluation (McWilliams, 2011).

2.2.3. Phallicism as a Defensive Organization

In her seminal study on phallic defenses, Ikonen (1998) explores the various ways in which phallicism manifests as a defensive organization against the psychological challenges of the oedipal phase of development. Her analysis reveals a complex network of psychological mechanisms that shape the individual's relationship with the self and others.

A key aspect of this defensive configuration is the *dynamic between egocentricity and reciprocity*. It is essential to distinguish between early-childhood reciprocity and genital reciprocity—while the former arises naturally in early development, the latter represents a developmental achievement requiring a higher level of psychological maturity (Freud, 1923/1961). Genital reciprocity forms an integral part of mature adult relationships and is deeply embedded in the concept of genital sexuality. This includes the experience of complementarity between genital organs and a mutual willingness to engage in sexual intercourse through the activation of the entire organism, including participation in pre-genital activities. A lack of such reciprocity can significantly impair sexual satisfaction or render coitus altogether impossible (Mitchell, 2002).

Another central issue within phallic organization is the *defense against early experiences of sexual inadequacy*. Jovanović (2013) emphasizes that children, regardless of external constraints, spontaneously experience a sense of sexual inferiority in comparison to their parents. The young boy perceives himself as ineffective or unimpressive in the sexual realm, while the girl may develop a fear of potential damage. For both sexes, this sense of sexual inadequacy represents a profound narcissistic wound, the resolution of which requires intense psychological work. This often results in the formation of primary fantasies: the boy comes to believe that he must be efficient and impressive in order to become a man, while the girl internalizes the idea that she must endure suffering to become a woman.

Violence frequently emerges as a specific defensive response to this early narcissistic humiliation. As Kernberg (1995) explains, the display of strength and potency—both sexual and otherwise—often serves to mitigate these early narcissistic injuries. Many individuals spend

a significant portion of their lives in pursuit of such relief. Through phallic identification, sexuality becomes intertwined with destructiveness, and various forms of domination and submission are experienced as validations of sexual power or potency. Understanding this dynamic is essential to comprehending diverse manifestations of violence in human behavior.

Finally, phallicism plays a substantial role in shaping cultural and individual *conceptions of power*. The most dramatic expressions of power are often associated with phenomena such as destruction, conquest, victory, and domination. Within this context, reciprocity—which considers the needs and subjectivity of the other—is frequently interpreted as a weakness or as a manipulative tactic. When power is constructed through a phallic lens, it is believed that phallicism is a necessary prerequisite for possessing agency and initiative in the world (Benjamin, 1988). This belief system often produces a rigid dichotomy in which reciprocity is perceived as a threat to phallic integrity, resulting in a polarized worldview where one must be either dominant or subordinate.

2.3. The OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy

OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy is a contemporary therapeutic approach that synthesizes insights from four foundational psychoanalytic schools: classical psychoanalytic theory (drive psychology), ego psychology, object relations theory, and self psychology. The acronym *OLI*, which stands for *Discovering Personal Truth – Removing False Information*, reflects the core orientation of this approach.

The theoretical distinctiveness of the OLI model lies in its integrative nature. The foundation for synthesizing various theoretical frameworks, methods, and techniques is the model of basic emotional competencies. The central assumption of the approach is that genuine psychological transformation cannot occur without the development of core emotional processing capacities, which function as executive programs of the psyche responsible for interpreting, modulating, and integrating emotional information (Jovanović et al., 2013).

2.3.1. Ability to Love and Work

Jovanović and colleagues (2013) emphasize the development of two complex abilities central to the OLI approach: the *ability to love* and the *ability to work*. These abilities are conceptualized as composite structures, formed by the emotional competencies outlined by the authors. Among these, eight basic emotional competencies are identified, all of which are crucial for understanding the narcissistic personality organization:

1. *Object Integrity* – In narcissistic organizations, this manifests through a characteristic splitting of self and others into idealized and devalued aspects.
2. *Neutralization* – Deficits are observed in the inability to neutralize and channel intense aggressive and libidinal impulses into the service of the Ego.
3. *Object Constancy* – Deficits here manifest in unstable representations of the self and significant others, forming the basis for narcissistic vulnerability.

4. *Tolerance of Ambivalence* – The narcissistic structure struggles to integrate opposing aspects of self and object representations.
5. *Mentalization* – This competency is often compromised in narcissistic organizations, manifesting as difficulties with reflective processing of emotional experiences and understanding the mental states of others.
6. *Frustration Tolerance* – In narcissistic organizations, this competency is particularly evident in easy irritability and intolerance when narcissistic selfobject needs are unmet, leading to anger and revenge.
7. *Will* – Deficits here involve the inability to manipulate the will of others to satisfy one's needs, or conversely, a lack of will to pursue hidden grandiose goals, as seen in "shy narcissists."
8. *Initiative* – In narcissistic structures, initiative often manifests in harmful behaviors, focusing on dominance and control over others.

These competencies are vital because their deficits directly correlate with key characteristics of the narcissistic personality, such as instability in self-esteem, difficulties in maintaining a cohesive self-concept, challenges in regulating self-confidence, and characteristic patterns in interpersonal relationships. Understanding these deficits provides a more accurate understanding of the psychodynamics of narcissistic functioning, facilitates clearer conceptualization of therapeutic goals, and supports the efficient selection of therapeutic interventions.

Epistemologically, the OLI approach can be defined as a *knowledge procedure* aimed at detecting and correcting dysfunctional beliefs about oneself and the world. This is particularly relevant in the context of narcissistic issues, as it allows for the correction of characteristic narcissistic distortions in the perception of the self and others.

2.3.2. Counter-skils

In addition to emotional competencies, counter-virtues represent another central concept in OLI Integrative Psychodynamic Psychotherapy. These manifest as complex patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior that lead to specific psychological states and relationships with others, from which the person derives unhealthy emotional benefits. These benefits, although reducing psychological tension in the short term, do not foster development but instead represent a form of "psychological parasitism."

Unlike classical defense mechanisms, counter-virtues are more intricate structures that serve as substitutes for basic emotional abilities. They develop when an individual seeks to resolve important developmental tasks in an easier manner, avoiding the necessary effort and pain that accompanies psychological growth. Essentially, they represent an attempt to "avoid the cost" of development and "live off a trick," leading to stagnation rather than separation and individuation (Jovanović et al., 2013).

It is crucial to understand that individuals never develop abilities that serve no purpose, as emphasized by the authors. Every behavior reflects a particular ability and strategy, and no strategy is inherently "bad"—it is evaluated in relation to the goal it serves. People are experts in the problems they have. For instance, a depressive person becomes an expert at creating depression, while someone with panic attacks becomes an expert at generating panic. They know exactly which thoughts to nurture, what body posture to adopt, and how to breathe in order to reach a certain state. Of course, most of this is done unconsciously, the authors emphasize.

The primary cause behind the development of counter-virtues lies in distrust—towards oneself, others, life, and life's laws. They carry fundamental delusions, such as the belief that others will love us more if we appear more perfect or sinless, or that love can be gained through manipulation. This, of course, is one of the greatest human delusions, as the truth is often the opposite—the more honest we are in acknowledging our human weaknesses, the easier it is for others to accept and love us (Jovanović et al., 2013).

When basic emotional skills—what we can consider ego functions—fail to develop at their natural pace or stagnate at a certain stage, these compromised formations we call counter-skills take over. They protect the ego from immediate pain, but do so at the expense of further development. Instead of mature abilities that can protect the ego from psychological pain and encourage growth, "workable" skills emerge, which carry a high psychological cost in the long run.

In the therapeutic process, it is crucial to recognize and clearly define these counter-skills. Only when a person realizes how they are creating their problem can they begin to develop skills that lead to something more developmentally constructive. Thus, recognizing stereotypical behavioral patterns—when a person consistently starts the same things, with similar outcomes, interprets them in the same way, and draws similar conclusions—can indicate the reproduction of counter-skills that lead to stagnation. The person remains in a state of dissatisfaction because they extract some secondary benefit from it, and this mode of adaptation feels familiar, thus perceived as safer.

A positive sign of change in therapy is when the client shows curiosity about self-investigation and a "desire for function"—finding enjoyment in new ways of functioning and feeling the need to discover, practice, and apply new behavior patterns. This indicates a shift from maintaining counter-skills to developing basic emotional abilities.

In the context of narcissistic personality organization, counter-skills play a particularly important role because they represent sophisticated patterns through which a person attempts to maintain a grandiose self-image and avoid confronting narcissistic wounds. Individuals with narcissistic personality structures often develop highly complex counter-skills that serve to protect their fragile self. These counter-skills manifest through various behavioral patterns that,

on the surface, may seem like expressions of strength and superiority, while actually masking deep insecurity and vulnerability.

Some typical counter-skills in narcissistic personality structures include developing special skills to maintain a grandiose facade, manipulative patterns that keep others at a "safe" distance while simultaneously using them for narcissistic supply, and complex projection mechanisms that attribute unacceptable characteristics to others. These counter-skills often become so sophisticated that they represent a kind of "art"—the person becomes an expert in maintaining the narcissistic structure, often unaware of the cost paid in terms of the inability to develop authentic relationships and true self-development.

In therapeutic work with narcissistic personality structures, understanding counter-skills is of crucial importance. They represent a bridge between theoretical understanding of narcissism (whether through Kohut's self-psychology, Freud's psychosexual stages, or other approaches) and practical therapeutic work. Recognizing and working with counter-skills enables the therapist to understand how the narcissistic person actively maintains their personality structure, which is a prerequisite for planning effective therapeutic interventions.

It is particularly important to understand that these counter-skills in narcissistic structures are often ego-syntonic—the person perceives them as part of their identity and may show strong resistance to their examination. Therefore, in the therapeutic process, it is necessary to carefully balance between empathetic understanding of the function these counter-skills have for the person and gradually working on transforming them into healthier functioning patterns. The OLI approach, with its integrated understanding of various therapeutic modalities, allows flexibility in working with these complex patterns, adapting interventions to the specific needs and capacities of the client with narcissistic personality structures.

3. IMPLICATIONS IN PRACTICE

3.1. Kohut and the Importance of Empathy

In working with the narcissistic personality organization, Kohut's understanding of narcissistic wounds and the role of empathy is a cornerstone of therapeutic approaches that significantly influence psychotherapeutic practice (Kohut, 1971).

Empathy plays a dual role in the therapeutic process. It serves as the primary means of understanding the client's subjective experience and their self-object needs, while also acting as a key healing factor that facilitates the repair of narcissistic wounds through the provision of a corrective emotional experience (Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1987). Through empathic understanding, the therapist is able to identify and respond to the unmet self-object needs of the client—whether these needs are related to mirroring, idealization, or alter ego experiences (Kohut, 1984).

In practical terms, the therapist must be especially attuned to the subtle signs of narcissistic injury, which may manifest as resistance or disruptions in the therapeutic relationship. Kohut (1971) emphasized that maintaining an empathic stance is essential for the success of the therapeutic process, even when the client exhibits grandiosity or devaluation. Consistency in the empathic approach fosters the gradual internalization of the therapist's functions and promotes the development of more stable self-structures within the client.

Understanding the nature of narcissistic wounds and the central role of empathy directly informs the tasks of the psychotherapeutic process, from establishing the initial therapeutic relationship to supporting the development of more stable and integrated self-structures (Ornstein & Kay, 1990). These insights lead to specific therapeutic interventions, which will be explored in greater detail in the following sections.

3.2. Tasks of the Psychotherapeutic Process

Psychotherapeutic work with individuals possessing a narcissistic personality structure can be conceptualized as a progression through three interrelated tasks, each of which presents its own unique challenges and requires a carefully tailored approach.

3.2.1. Establishing the Therapeutic Relationship

The establishment of an authentic therapeutic relationship represents a distinct challenge when working with narcissistic personality structures. This process is complicated by the client's value orientation and their need to preserve grandiosity, which often rests on fragile and unstable foundations. According to Kohut's theory, narcissistic pathology emerges from a lack of parental empathy during early development, resulting in an inadequate capacity for self-esteem regulation in adulthood.

Clients with a narcissistic structure typically display a profound fear of losing their narcissistic pride and confronting underlying feelings of inferiority. For them, a reciprocal relationship is perceived as a significant threat, as it deviates from their ingrained dichotomy of superiority and inferiority—where reciprocity is often not internalized as part of their relational experience. Resistance is further fueled by the reluctance to relinquish established behavioral patterns, counter-skills, and manipulative strategies that provide significant secondary gains. The absence of authentic relational skills can lead to depression and self-contempt, thereby complicating the therapeutic process.

For these reasons, Kohut emphasizes that the therapist must empathically experience the world from the client's perspective, ensuring the client feels truly understood. Interpretations can be used to help the client process their often intense emotional reactions to perceived failures of empathy from the therapist. This process enables the client to begin understanding why they experience these empathic failures so deeply and to grasp the need to restore stability and comfort after any breaches in the empathy provided by the self-object. As the therapeutic relationship evolves, the client starts to recognize why these small empathic failures resonate so profoundly within them.

3.2.2. Recognizing Narcissistic Vulnerability

After establishing the initial therapeutic alliance, the process naturally progresses toward recognizing and accepting narcissistic vulnerability. This is a particularly sensitive phase that requires careful dosing of interventions. Clients typically first express a sense of injury to their self-image, often accompanied by anger, rage, shame, or fear of being hurt and "unmasked." It is important to understand that narcissistic structure is driven by two key needs: the need for admiration as compensation for a sense of worthlessness and the need to maintain the idealized self-image.

The client's recognition of defense mechanisms must be gradual and carefully guided. The therapist should be aware of how challenging this situation is for the client and prevent the awareness process from being experienced as "exposure" or "unmasking." Facing reality without the usual defenses can be extremely frightening for a client who suddenly realizes the insecurity of their relationships and the lack of authentic connections.

3.2.3 Building a New Value System

The final phase of the therapeutic process focuses on developing more authentic relational patterns and reconstructing the value system. This process typically begins through the therapeutic relationship, which serves as a model for new patterns of connection and is gradually generalized to other relationships where possible. Without concrete experiences of reciprocity and mutual respect within the therapeutic relationship, it is difficult to expect change in other areas of life.

A particular challenge in this phase is the resistance of the social environment to change. People with whom the client has been in relationships often show distrust toward the client's changes, either due to previous negative experiences or because they benefitted from the client's previous way of functioning. The therapist should help the client develop a realistic attitude toward these challenges and build new relationships based on authenticity.

According to Kohut's model, it is crucial that the therapist maintains empathic understanding of the client's subjective experience throughout all these stages, allowing for the gradual development of missing self-functions. Interpretations are used selectively and primarily serve to help the client understand their intense reactions to empathic failures and to develop more stable internal structures.

3.3. Transfers as Responses to Self-Object Needs

In normal development, parents fulfill a child's self-object needs through two fundamental processes: reflecting the child's feelings and thoughts, thereby providing a sense of value and understanding, and accepting the child's need to see the parent as a protector. During psychotherapy with an individual possessing a narcissistic personality structure, these self-object needs manifest through different forms of self-object transference, which are attempts to repair early developmental deficits (Kohut, 1971).

Mirroring Transference occurs when the therapist takes on the role of building the structure that the client has not yet developed. Kohut (1972) emphasizes that the narcissistic client requires the mirroring they either did not receive or did not receive sufficiently in order to build a structural part of the self. In this transference, interventions that are not perceived as praise can lead to feelings of worthlessness and provoke a narcissistic injury. Wolf (1988) highlights that non-empathetic interventions by the therapist can unintentionally reactivate early trauma, harm the self, and lead to anxiety, often accompanied by a temporary fragmentation of the client's self-cohesion.

Narcissistic Rage, as identified by Kohut (1972), may emerge as a reaction to a blow to archaic grandiosity or a traumatic disappointment in the idealized figure. This reactive form of aggression can be highly destructive and persists as long as the self remains severely vulnerable and prone to fragmentation.

In the process of normal development, the child gradually internalizes the parental functions of self-regulation through a process called *transmuting internalization* (Kohut, 1984). In narcissistic clients, this process is disrupted, resulting in the need to rely on the therapist for self-regulation due to an underdeveloped capacity for it (Mitchell & Black, 1995).

Idealizing Transference occurs when the client attributes idealized characteristics to the therapist, such as exceptional strength, superior intelligence, and infallibility in judgments.

Ornstein (1974) emphasizes that prematurely breaking these idealizations is detrimental to the therapeutic process and can lead to the termination of therapy.

Twinship (Alter Ego) Transference represents a specific form of narcissistic transference, in which the client feels the need to rely on the therapist's functions, perceiving them as similar to their own. Kohut (1984) describes this transference as a need for a "psychological twin" who affirms the reality of the client's psychological experience. In this transference, there is an intense need for validation of similarity and a fear of difference, which can lead to a desire to merge through similarity.

Fusion Transference, according to Baker & Baker (1987), represents the most archaic form of transference. In this dynamic, the other person is experienced as part of the self, with the client adopting the position of the omnipotent tyrant. Boundaries between self and object become blurred, and any attempt at separation or highlighting differences can lead to intense anxiety and narcissistic rage.

3.4 Defenses in Narcissistic Personality Structure

In the course of psychotherapy, defenses inevitably arise as protective mechanisms to shield the individual from reliving painful experiences. Kernberg (1975) highlights that individuals with narcissistic personality structures exhibit a distinctive constellation of primitive defenses, which function to preserve a grandiose self-image and protect against narcissistic injuries. These defenses are deeply ingrained in early development and represent fundamental strategies for maintaining psychological equilibrium.

Denial is the most primitive form of defense, where the individual completely disregards awareness of painful stimuli or facts. McWilliams (2011) makes a key distinction between denial and repression—while repression pertains to internal internal states, denial involves ignoring external reality. In narcissistic clients, denial serves to uphold an idealized self-image, shielding them from confronting their own limitations. This defense is particularly evident in situations that threaten the grandiose self-image or might result in narcissistic injury.

Reality distortion involves a significant alteration of external reality to align with the person's needs. According to Kernberg (1975), this defense is a hallmark of the narcissistic personality structure, manifesting through selective interpretation of events and distortion of others' motives and intentions. Klein (1946) described how reality distortion helps sustain splitting and idealization, which are central mechanisms in the narcissistic organization. Through this defense, narcissistic clients maintain the illusion of their uniqueness and superiority.

Projection entails externalizing unacceptable internal feelings and attributing them to others. Rosenfeld (1971) specifically emphasizes that narcissistic clients project their own aggression, feelings of inadequacy, and envy onto others. This mechanism helps preserve the grandiose self-image by externalizing undesirable aspects of the self. Projection is especially evident in

the therapeutic relationship, where clients often project their own destructive impulses and feelings of dependency onto the therapist.

Understanding these defense mechanisms is essential for assessing the extent of narcissistic pathology, planning therapeutic interventions, and managing resistance in therapy. The therapist must exercise great caution when interpreting these defenses, as premature or non-empathetic confrontation could either intensify the defenses or lead to the termination of therapy.

4. CASE STUDY: "Z.D."

The following is a case study of psychotherapeutic work with a client who has a narcissistic personality organization. The case will be described from the perspective of the psychotherapist and author of the paper, Sandra Jovanović. For confidentiality purposes, the client will be referred to as "Z.D." or simply "the client."

4.1. Basic Information About the Client

4.1.1. Basic data

The client is a 45-year-old man. He currently lives in Belgrade, in his own apartment with his wife and son. Professionally, he operates in the "gray zone" of the economy, with strong ambivalence toward formal employment. His social life is primarily instrumentalized and organized around business interests, with a notable lack of authentic friendships.

The client exhibits characteristics of a narcissistic personality structure, which is manifested through complex patterns in relational functioning, professional life, and social relationships.

4.1.2. Primary Family

The client comes from a two-member primary family, where he grew up as an only child with both parents until the age of seventeen, when his father passed away. The family dynamic was marked by a dominant maternal figure and a passive, withdrawn father.

The relationship with his father is characterized by emotional distance and a devaluation of his father's personality. The client describes his father as someone "in the shadow of his mother"—professionally unaccomplished and without significant authority within the family. It is notable that the client shows no emotional reaction to his father's death during adolescence and emotionally distanced himself from a father who did not serve as an adequate role model for identification.

The maternal figure, however, dominates both the childhood narrative and the current relational dynamics. He describes her as a "manly woman"—extremely capable and hardworking, yet emotionally distant and strict, who took on all traditionally male roles in the family. Interestingly, there is a lack of any feminine characteristics in the description of his mother. Early experiences with her were marked by emotional unavailability and neglect of his developmental needs ("she didn't have time to deal with him"), which led to the development of adaptive behavioral patterns, such as "playing the victim." Initially, these patterns were used at school and later in his business activities.

A particularly significant moment in the relationship with his mother occurred during adolescence, when he experienced public humiliation in front of peers. This event still triggers intense emotional reactions, indicating a significant narcissistic injury during a critical developmental period when the client was striving to establish an independent identity.

The current relationship with his mother is marked by a complex emotional dynamic, rooted in patterns of control. The client perceives his mother's behavior as excessively controlling and overwhelming, creating constant tension in their interactions. Early relationship patterns with his mother are unconsciously repeated in his current family relationships, perpetuating a vicious cycle of dysfunctional behavior. When it comes to setting healthy boundaries with his mother, the client faces significant challenges, often overwhelmed by strong feelings of guilt. This dynamic is further exacerbated by his mother positioning herself as a victim ("playing the pity game"). In moments when he feels powerless in his relationship with his mother, the client reacts with intense narcissistic anger, which functions as a defense against deeper feelings of injury and helplessness.

A particularly important pattern involves triangulation between the client, his mother, and his wife, where his mother's "helping" becomes a mechanism for control, provoking his wife's discontent. He experiences a significant narcissistic injury when his wife points out his lack of courage to confront his mother, which leads to new marital conflicts and activates the client's narcissistic defenses, anger, and aggression.

4.1.3. Secondary Family

The client lives in his own apartment with his wife and son. The marital dynamic is marked by frequent conflicts and his wife's threats of divorce. The client's perception of the relationship fluctuates between idealizing the early phase, when they were happy as "a rogue and a princess," and the current devaluation of his partner. It is notable that his choice of wife was partially motivated by her profile as a "good girl" and her "inexperience" in relationships, which served as a defense against potential narcissistic injuries by comparing her to his previous partners. He says that he could never imagine his wife being with anyone else, even after him.

Patterns of controlling and violent behavior emerge in the relationship, particularly when the client perceives narcissistic injuries. Physical violence occurs in response to his wife's disagreement or refusal, accompanied by possessive behavior and control over communication. Emotional violence also manifests through devaluation and manipulation, especially when the client feels that his position of power is threatened.

The couple's sexual life mirrors broader relational patterns, with a clear lack of reciprocity and empathy for his partner's needs. Sexuality is often instrumentalized as a confirmation of masculinity, with a noticeable distortion in how he interprets his wife's rejection. The client justifies her lack of sexual desire, which has diminished over time, by attributing it to her discomfort due to his large genitalia. A deeper exploration of their intimate life reveals that the client does not dedicate time or attention to preparing for sexual intercourse, which causes discomfort for his wife and diminishes her desire.

Power dynamics within the relationship are largely shaped by the client's expressed need for dominance, especially through financial power—he claims he "brings the meat to the table." He

consistently devalues his wife's contributions to the household and family, making comments such as, "she works for a poor teacher's salary" or "she takes care of the child but will turn him into a spoiled idiot." This reflects a significant distortion of reality in evaluating the reciprocity in the relationship.

A particularly significant pattern is the client's perception of his wife as a narcissistic extension of his self-representation. This is particularly evident in his dissatisfaction with her weight after childbirth, driven by fear of social judgment. He also displays an intense need for validation through her unconditional approval. This need is especially evident during the renovation of their apartment, where her criticism of his work led to physical violence, including a slap in front of the workers.

The relationship clearly reflects the replication of patterns from the primary family, particularly in rigid views of gender roles. The use of control and domination serves as a defense against vulnerability, mirroring early relational experiences. It is crucial to note that the client's views on masculinity and gender relations are deeply influenced by the patriarchal environment in which he grew up, further complicating the process of establishing healthier relational patterns.

4.1.4 Work and Social Relationships

In the professional sphere, the client demonstrates a deep ambivalence between conventional employment with stable income and irregular activities in the "grey economy." This ambivalence reflects an internal conflict between the principles of reality and the pleasure principle, both characteristic of a narcissistic personality structure.

On one hand, there is the possibility of adopting the role of a "responsible, grown-up bore with a tie," enjoying the stability and benefits of steady employment. On the other hand, he is drawn to the allure of freelancing, with its unstable income and reliance on occasional illegal trade activities. This dilemma manifests in his difficulty creating a functional business plan—his plans are either too vague or subject to constant revisions. By stating that he wants "both the goat and the cabbage," the client expresses a narcissistic fantasy of overcoming basic life principles. He desires a "risky" job without the real risks and a large income with minimal effort.

The client has developed a distinct style of business and social functioning based on intimidation and control. His carefully crafted image aims to instill awe and respect, which he achieves through a complex system of manipulative strategies. These strategies are expressed in several characteristic patterns. He intentionally creates situations where others become his debtors, uses intimidating narratives about the consequences of failing to uphold agreements, frequently resorts to belittling and demeaning others, all while maintaining an emotional distance that preserves his position of power. This approach serves as a defense against his own vulnerability but simultaneously inhibits him from forming genuine relationships.

A significant portion of his business and social life is conducted in a tavern-like atmosphere, where alcohol acts as a "magic potion" that facilitates connections and sustains the desired image. Despite initially claiming to have a "bunch of friends," it became clear during therapy that the client does not have authentic friendships. His social contacts are primarily instrumental and centered around business interests. Over time, he has increasingly excluded even family friends from his life, fearing that closeness would expose his weaknesses.

As the years have passed, a pronounced sense of loneliness has emerged, accompanied by a fear of "bad karma" and the concern that, in moments of vulnerability, he will be left without support. This growing awareness points to the gradual recognition of the cost of maintaining his relational patterns.

A notable pattern is his intense avoidance of negative self-reflection, focusing on preserving his desired image in front of "insignificant people," while neglecting relationships with those whose opinions truly matter to him. This pattern illustrates the instability of narcissistic grandiosity and the constant need to maintain it through external validation.

4.2. Presenting Difficulties and Reason for Seeking Therapy

The client sought help due to pronounced anxiety, which manifested through various fears, particularly in social contexts—something he stated was uncharacteristic for him. The primary issue was a fear of losing control and a worry that others would notice his vulnerability, which in turn created additional pressure. This pressure was also reflected in fears related to heart function, leading to frequent blood pressure checks and repeated visits to doctors for ECG tests.

In the initial phase, the therapist was placed in the position of an idealized "doctor" expected to take responsibility for his healing. This dynamic pointed to deeper relational needs underlying the somatic manifestations of his anxiety.

A significant aspect of the client's difficulties also involved alcohol use. During therapy, it became evident that alcohol served as a tool for regulating anxiety and maintaining a grandiose self-image, particularly within the context of the tavern, which was his primary space for social interaction. The progression of alcoholism and the birth of his child became additional motivating factors for entering therapy. While alcohol functioned as a means of preserving social functioning, it simultaneously disrupted family relationships and impaired his health.

In the professional domain, the client experienced a profound internal conflict between a need for security and stability on the one hand, and resistance to a conventional lifestyle on the other. This conflict manifested in an ambivalent attitude toward work and difficulties in making decisions regarding his professional future.

Throughout the therapeutic process, initial symptoms gradually translated into interpersonal difficulties. The client's relational style—marked by intimidating others or instrumentalizing them as self-objects—revealed deeper deficits in the capacity for close and genuine relational contact. There was a particularly notable deficit in self-regulation and self-soothing abilities, accompanied by an unconscious expectation that an idealized parental figure would magically assume these functions.

As therapy deepened, the client began to articulate additional goals focused on developing a more authentic self. This involved the need to differentiate his own interests and attain a more stable sense of self, less dependent on external validation. Insight into the superficiality of his relationships led to the recognition of profound loneliness, previously masked by social interactions in taverns and alcohol use. Existential concerns were also present, particularly fears related to aging and death. An additional motivation for change was his new role as a father, accompanied by concern about setting a negative example for his child—this prompted a reorganization of his priorities and values.

Therapeutic goals crystallized around the need for the reparation of the grandiose self, the development of more authentic self-assertive ambitions, and a more mature form of self-esteem. The client identified the following as key motivational factors for change: a chronic sense of inadequacy, a constant need for validation, an inability to enjoy activities, lack of persistence in goals, loneliness, and a desire to be a positive role model for his son.

4.3. General tone of the relationship

The dynamics of the therapeutic relationship with the client clearly reflected patterns indicative of a narcissistic personality organization. From the outset, his attitude toward the therapeutic process was marked by deep ambivalence, which manifested through various defense mechanisms and characteristic patterns of behavior and communication.

Within the therapeutic relationship, the client frequently employed an evaluative, manipulative gaze and a distrustful squint as a way to maintain emotional distance. He also attempted to undermine the therapist's competence by inquiring about the therapist's private life. Initially, resistance to emotional connection was disguised by claims of "emotional illiteracy," which later evolved into more overt expressions of fear toward engaging in emotional work.

The client's discomfort with seeking help was a constant presence in the therapeutic space. One notable pattern was his oscillation between grandiosity—manifested in ideas of how he could be a therapist himself—and feelings of inferiority, stemming from his very need for therapy. His perception of the therapist's role as "someone who tells people what is good for them from a safe position" reflected a projective identification of his own need for control and a superior stance. The client mentioned that he already performed this role in a pub and agreed to briefly swap roles with the therapist. This technique facilitated the client's direct confrontation with his

own behavioral patterns and provided insight into the complexities of the therapeutic position. A particularly significant moment occurred when the client experienced narcissistic injury after failing to maintain the imagined superior position of the therapist.

The process of establishing the therapeutic relationship followed the expected challenges associated with working with a narcissistic personality organization. Intense resistance was present, driven by the threat of losing narcissistic pride and the fear of confronting feelings of inferiority, which underpinned his belief that "either you're up or you're down." Emotions such as sadness and fear, perceived as weaknesses, brought brief relief followed by intense shame—he felt like a "loser." Another challenge involved the necessity of abandoning long-established manipulative behaviors, compounded by a profound fear of potential betrayal and retraumatization should the client ever allow himself to emotionally open up.

Despite these challenges, the therapeutic alliance gradually strengthened, moving toward greater trust. The client's willingness to engage with emotional material, despite his verbal resistance and occasional "grumbling," indicated the slow development of a more stable working alliance. A particularly significant shift occurred when he became more able to verbalize his fear of emotional work, saying, "You're going to make me feel bad." This marked an important transition from an initial denial of emotional experience to its gradual acceptance and exploration.

4.4. Course of therapy

4.4.1 First contact and establishing the relationship

The first contact and initial session with the client provided a striking insight into the complex dynamics that would characterize the entire therapeutic process. During the initial phone conversation, a characteristic pattern of relationship establishment was evident—the client communicated with exaggerated familiarity and pseudo-humor. Beneath the superficial indifference, a well-established defense mechanism of devaluing the therapeutic process was clearly in play.

The scene of the first meeting further illuminated the complexity of the client's psychological organization. He arrived dressed in what seemed like camouflage—wearing a tracksuit with a hood, his head deeply tucked into the collar of his hoodie. He hurried past me and entered the room, leaving behind the scent of aftershave lotion and alcohol. His nonverbal behavior—nervous glances and attempts to remain inconspicuous—spoke to a deep ambivalence toward the therapeutic process. However, once inside the therapeutic space, his posture dramatically shifted. He sought to control the situation through specific territorial behaviors, such as occupying the entire sofa and carefully placing his personal belongings in what seemed like a ritualized fashion.

A particularly significant moment occurred early in the session. When confronted with my seemingly simple question about the reason for seeking therapy, the client first appeared

confused, followed by sudden verbal aggression ("Do you know I can break you?"). His threat carried particular weight, amplified by the regressive elements in his voice—a pubescent tone that suggested the activation of unresolved developmental traumas. At this critical moment, my spontaneous response—combining professional distance with formal address and a subtle, gentle smile ("Would you like to talk about why you would want to break me?")—led to a shift in the client's position. He transitioned from being openly aggressive to confused, and eventually to a more relaxed state ("You're gutsy…").

This initial interaction highlighted several significant dynamics. It became evident that the client used intimidation as his primary strategy in establishing relationships, a defensive mechanism masking deeper anxiety. Notably, his behavior shifted rapidly between grandiosity and vulnerability when confronted with an unexpected reaction. This pattern would prove key in understanding his relational dynamics.

In subsequent sessions, the establishment of the therapeutic alliance progressed through a delicate balancing act: maintaining firm professional boundaries while creating a sufficiently safe space for the gradual emergence of the client's vulnerability. Although the first sessions did not directly confront the observed behavioral patterns, they laid the foundational understanding of the client's psychological structure and the anticipated therapeutic challenges ahead.

A key realization was recognizing how the client's need to intimidate others mirrored his deeply repressed fears. This insight became one of the central working hypotheses guiding the therapeutic process. Gradually, the initial therapeutic goals became clearer: developing the capacity to recognize and regulate aggressive impulses, understanding relationship patterns, and exploring the sources of anxiety underlying his grandiose behavior.

Through these initial sessions, it was clear that the central challenge of the therapeutic process would be creating conditions in which the client could gradually let go of rigid defense mechanisms and cultivate more authentic forms of relating. The first phase of therapy thus laid the groundwork for long-term work on transforming ingrained behavioral patterns, while also foreshadowing the complexity and challenges of the change process.

4.4.2. The Process of Change

The period of reconstruction in the therapeutic process was marked by complex work with the client's narcissistic dynamics. In the early sessions, the client demonstrated strong resistance to emotional exploration, often hiding behind statements like, "I don't know about emotions," and intentionally presenting himself as less emotionally competent than he actually was. This strategy acted as a shield against potential narcissistic wounds, helping him maintain his grandiose self-image.

A significant portion of the therapeutic work focused on his relationship with his wife, especially in the domain of sexuality. When I initially asked him to describe his wife, he listed several disconnected physical traits ("tall, black hair, nice boobs and butt..."). Interestingly, he often described men in vivid detail, such that I felt I could recognize them on the street. When I gave him feedback on how I had imagined his wife—as "a black wig at a height of 180 cm, one breast and one butt, all floating and disconnected"—he laughed, marking the first shift toward insight into his objectification of her and his inability to see her as a whole person.

At the start, the client held rigid views on male-female relationships, asserting that "women aren't as into sex as men are." Through careful reality testing and analysis of specific situations, he began to realize how his approach to intimacy created a vicious cycle of dissatisfaction. For example, he admitted that he never prepared his wife for sex—mentally or physically—and expected her to "jump into his arms" as soon as he came home from the bar.

A turning point in his relationship with his wife occurred during their summer vacation when he began applying the concept of reciprocity that we had discussed. He noticed that his wife became much more receptive to intimacy when he gave her attention—taking her to the beach, rubbing her back, walking with her. Paradoxically, this positive experience triggered anxiety in him because he "didn't feel like a man" when his wife initiated intimacy. This moment of confusion and vulnerability was used to further challenge his rigid beliefs about gender roles.

The use of "countermeasures" such as intimidation and manipulation in building and maintaining relationships had served as a substitute for developing mature emotional skills. Over time, the client began to recognize the cost of this approach. He admitted that, when he examined his life, he felt deeply lonely, as among the many people he spent time with, there was not a single true friend. He was afraid to let anyone get close enough to see his weaknesses, maintaining an image of someone who commands fear and respect, but at the expense of authentic relationships.

Through examining his "emotional accounting" using OLI integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy, the client began to understand the true "costs" of his behavioral patterns. This became especially evident in the analysis of his work situation. His main dilemma was choosing between the role of the "responsible, adult bore with a tie" or the "freelancer" who lives day by day. By uncovering the secondary benefits of "twisting" the truth, we came to the realization that his perception of freedom in informal business was unrealistic—he was actually spending significant time "on guard," sitting with insignificant people in pointless conversations at cafés.

A particularly significant part of the work involved his relationship to hedonism. He had long claimed to be a "big hedonist" and believed that through informal work, he was able to "get something from fun" without exerting effort. However, through analyzing specific situations, he began to see the paradox of his "hedonism"—he sat "on pins and needles" with people he

didn't like, drank to relax, and afterward felt guilt and fear. This led to an important realization: true enjoyment shouldn't require so much effort, nor should it produce negative consequences.

A significant part of the change process involved the client's relationship with alcohol, which he used as a "magic potion" to gain confidence. As he put it, when he drank, "his courage returned." However, he also recognized that this behavior was negatively impacting his relationship with his wife and damaging his health. When sober, he often felt miserable or depressed, and drinking served as a way to manage stress and anxiety. Over time, he was able to stop drinking and reduce his time spent in cafés.

A turning point in therapy came when the client began to connect his behavioral patterns to a deep fear of worthlessness. He admitted that he feared "everyone would see how pathetic he was." When asked who "everyone" was, he revealed that these were actually the people whose opinions truly mattered to him—his mother, wife, and family friends—the very people he had previously ignored while focusing instead on "insignificant" individuals with whom he could more easily maintain an image.

In the later stages of therapy, the client began to rediscover and develop authentic interests that he had long suppressed. He shared that he used to enjoy fishing, spending time in nature, and even writing poetry, activities he had hidden from others. Together, we made a distinction between his constructed image and his genuine desires. When he described the kind of person he would like to be—someone who feels fulfilled, relaxed, and creative—he beamed with joy. However, he quickly "returned to reality" and expressed fear about how such a person would navigate life.

The final phase of therapy was marked by the exploration of existential themes—specifically, fear of death and the meaning of life. After reading by Irvin Yalom, which I had recommended, he had a profound realization: the meaning of life lies in leaving something behind. This insight led to tangible changes in his life—he began dedicating more time to his family and creative hobbies, and he reconnected with family friends whom he had previously alienated.

Throughout the therapeutic process, the client gradually developed the ability to recognize and accept his own vulnerability, and he began to build more authentic relationships. Particularly significant was his integration of previously suppressed aspects of his personality, which signaled a gradual transformation of rigid narcissistic patterns.

4.5. Analysis of Introjects

A detailed analysis of the client's introjects reveals a complex network of internalized representations that significantly shape his inner world and current functioning. At the core of this dynamic are the introjects formed through his relationship with his mother, which are especially crucial for understanding his psychological structure. The dominant figure in this constellation is the introject of the "bearded woman"—a representation of the mother as a

strong, independent person who rejects any sign of vulnerability or emotionality. Alongside this, another introject, the "man-woman," was formed, where the mother is internalized as the nurturer and protector of the family in a distinctly masculine way.

These two maternal introjects are in constant conflict with other internalized representations, creating a complex inner dynamic of tension and self-division. A particularly important conflict is the contrast between the mother's negative evaluation of the father as "worthless" and the client's own relatively positive, yet emotionally detached experience with his father. This split is central to his current parenting style, where he projects the assumption that his wife, like his mother's view of the father, is incapable of influencing their children. He fears that offering emotional warmth to the children could lead to the wife assuming a submissive "couch" or "slipper" position—the same position his mother attributed to the father.

It is especially significant how his internalized negative male introject, formed through the mother's castration of the father, actively undermines his attempts to develop a warm, nurturing relationship with his own family. This dynamic highlights how early introjects continue to shape present relationships and behavior, creating a vicious cycle where past experiences repeatedly interfere with the possibility of establishing new, healthier relational patterns.

4.6. Transfer Analysis

The transfer dynamics that unfolded during the therapeutic process provide deep insight into the client's intrapsychic organization and relational patterns. From the very beginning of therapy, there was a notable manifestation of transference. The client explained that his choice of me as a younger therapist was motivated by the belief that he would find it easier to "handle" a younger woman. This dynamic reflects his established pattern of diminishing others in order to preserve his own sense of power, while simultaneously revealing an ambivalent relationship with the therapist as both a threat and a source of help—mirroring his relationship with his mother.

As therapy progressed, additional transfer patterns emerged, shedding further light on the client's inner dynamics. At certain points, idealizing transference was evident, with the therapist seen as a "doctor" capable of "waving a magic wand" to solve problems. Following an unsuccessful attempt at intimidation, which acted as an "initial spark," and several instances where he expressed that I had "grown in his eyes," an interesting shift in transference occurred. The therapist was now perceived as a "man in a woman's body" or a "woman with a man's mind." This transformation represented the client's attempt to resolve the conflict between his need for help and the need to preserve his self-respect.

A particularly significant episode took place when the client "googled" me and displayed intense interest in my hobbies, particularly those he viewed as "masculine." This represented an attempt to integrate me as a figure of the therapist, while also externalizing his internal conflict regarding

gender roles and identity. Through this dynamic, his ability to perceive a woman as a whole person—rather than as a partial object—gradually developed.

In the later stages of therapy, mirror transfers manifested, expressed through the need for validation of his perfection and the search for explicit approval. There was also a twin transfer, where the client engaged in "psychologizing together," identifying with my analytical functions.

Work with transference facilitated the gradual integration of split notions of the feminine and masculine, as well as the initiation of emotional expression work without the paralyzing fear of losing his masculine identity. Through this process, the client began to recognize and accept his own emotionality, particularly in the context of narcissistic vulnerability and sensitivity to perceived insults or disrespect. Ultimately, this transfer dynamic became a pivotal instrument in the process of psychological change and integration.

Conclusion

The case analysis of "Z.D." highlights the multiple benefits of an integrative approach to understanding and treating narcissistic personality organization. By combining various theoretical perspectives—such as Kohut's self-psychology, Freud's psychosexual stages of development, and OLI integrative psychodynamic psychotherapy—a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding emerges, significantly enriching the therapeutic process.

A key element in working with narcissistic personality organization is Kohut's concept of empathy, which plays a dual role. It serves as both the primary means of understanding the client's subjective experience and self-object needs, and as a central healing factor. Through empathic understanding, the therapist can recognize and respond to the client's unmet self-object needs, whether related to mirroring, idealization, or alter ego experiences.

Freud's psychosexual stages offer valuable insights into the specific conflicts tied to the phallic stage of development, shedding light on the fears and defenses the client has constructed to protect against them. These defenses influence the structure of his narcissistic pride. Additionally, the knowledge gained from the OLI method—specifically regarding emotional competence, recognition of "counterfeits," and "emotional accounting"—helps identify dysfunctional patterns, life philosophies, and beliefs, providing a path for the client to recognize and transform them.

The therapeutic process with individuals who have a narcissistic personality structure, as illustrated in the case of "Z.D.," is a complex journey requiring careful balance between different therapeutic tasks. The initial phase of building the therapeutic relationship presents particular challenges due to the client's fundamental need to preserve grandiosity. A balanced relationship often feels like a significant threat because it disrupts the dichotomy of superiority and inferiority the client typically operates within. Recognizing and accepting narcissistic vulnerability is a particularly sensitive phase that demands careful intervention, while the

development of a new value system involves the gradual cultivation of more authentic relational patterns.

Working with transference as a response to self-object needs was crucial in the success of the therapy. Various forms of self-object transfer—such as mirror, idealizing, and twin transference—reflect attempts to repair early developmental deficits. Special attention was given to the handling of narcissistic rage, which can arise when grandiosity is threatened or when an idealized figure experiences a traumatic disappointment.

An understanding of the complex constellation of defenses typical of narcissistic personality structures—from denial and reality distortion to projection—was essential for evaluating the extent of narcissistic pathology and guiding therapeutic interventions. The interpretation of these defenses required careful, empathic alignment; premature or non-empathic confrontation could escalate the defenses or even end the therapy.

The experience of working with this case reinforces that an integrative approach—drawing from diverse theoretical perspectives—provides a more thorough understanding and more effective therapeutic work. Successful treatment of narcissistic personality organization demands not only theoretical knowledge but also specialized skills in handling transference, defenses, and resistances, all while maintaining an empathic connection that fosters the gradual development of more stable self-structures and authentic relationships.

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Book overview „Psychotherapeutic Techniques for the Development of Basic Emotional Competencies“

Understanding, processing, and managing emotions form the foundation of a quality personal, social, and/or professional life. The book Psychotherapeutic Techniques for the Development of Basic Emotional Competencies offers a comprehensive and practical guide for improving emotional competencies, relying on the principles of the OLI integrative psychotherapeutic approach. The authors guide us through techniques that enable a deeper understanding of our own feelings, creating space for personal growth and development, better interpersonal relationships, and the achievement of (professional) goals.

In the first part of the book, the authors focus on two fundamental and interrelated abilities that constitute the foundation of human development and functioning: the ability to love and the ability to work. After defining these key dimensions, the authors elaborate on them through the lens of seven narrower basic emotional competencies, which represent essential tools for understanding, expressing, and regulating emotions:

1. object wholesness; 2. the ability to neutralize and mentalize; 3. object constancy; 4. ambivalence tolerance; 5. frustration tolerance; 6. willpower; and 7. initiative.

Before each emotional competence, the text offers a clear explanation of its significance, practical purpose, and role in everyday life. In a simple and accessible manner, the authors point out what a particular competence represents, how it can be developed, and, perhaps most importantly, what it can contribute to in personal, emotional, social, and professional contexts. This methodological approach not only facilitates the understanding of each individual competence but also provides a broader picture of how they interconnect and complement each other. In this way, the reader gains clarity about the importance of these emotional

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competencies, while the book becomes not only a manual for the development of emotional intelligence but also a guide for integrating these skills into everyday life.

The first competence addressed in the book is object wholeness, also known as the "glue" of our psyche, as it "binds" and maintains its balance and stability. This emotional competence refers to the ability to perceive oneself and others as complex and whole individuals, who contain both positive and negative traits. Understanding and accepting this idea enables us to free ourselves from a simplistic, black-and-white view of the world, where others are often seen either as idealized role models or as entirely negative figures – which is characteristic of the early stages of emotional development.

By developing object wholesness, we gain a deeper insight into human nature, allowing us to connect with others in a more mature and stable way. This competence plays a key role in building authentic and lasting interpersonal relationships because it encourages emotional flexibility, tolerance, and the ability to see all the nuances of human behavior. Through this ability, we make significant progress in personal development and a more qualitative understanding of ourselves and others. In this context, the authors provide a variety of techniques designed to stimulate and enhance the development of this emotional competence. These techniques include practical approaches and exercises that help individuals overcome one-sided and polarized views of themselves and others, as well as build a deeper understanding of the complexity of human relationships. By applying these methods, readers have the opportunity to develop emotional stability, self-confidence, and the ability to create mature and balanced interpersonal relationships.

Next, the book addresses object constancy, or the stabilizer of the psyche, which refers to the ability to keep our psyche stable. Constancy is also explained as maintaining stable and consistent personal boundaries, even in situations where they are tested or threatened. This skill involves a clear awareness of one's own needs, values, and limitations, as well as the ability to communicate and protect those boundaries in interpersonal relationships. Constancy enables an individual to remain consistent in relation to themselves and others, regardless of external pressures or emotional challenges. This includes the ability to say "no" when necessary, to recognize situations that are inconsistent with personal values, and to avoid taking responsibility for the feelings or actions of others. In this context, the techniques in the book are focused on strengthening inner stability, developing awareness of one's own needs and limitations, as well as effectively communicating boundaries in various life situations.

The abilities to neutralize and mentalize represent key aspects of emotional maturity, which the authors thoroughly elaborate on in the book. Through the neutralization ability, an individual maintains their thinking balanced and rational by controlling and reshaping their instinctive emotions. These emotional energies are transformed into neutral ones, which allow rational thinking, effective problem-solving, and the making of thoughtful decisions. The mentalization ability, on the other hand, represents the individual's capacity to think about their inner world, as well as the ability to understand that other people have their own beliefs, desires, and

intentions. This skill enables deeper connection with one's own emotions and thoughts, as well as with the emotional states of others, contributing to better empathy and the building of healthy interpersonal relationships. Mentalization is key to correctly interpreting social situations and making thoughtful decisions based on understanding the motives and behaviors of others.

In the further sections of the book, the authors explain the ambivalence tolerance. This essentially enables individuals to cope with emotional contradictions and uncertainties in their lives, as well as in interpersonal relationships. In other words, it is the ability to make a decision, to move towards something or away from something, while taking into account all aspects of our decision, as well as taking responsibility for them. The techniques the authors propose are based on gradual work to understand and accept internal contradictions, with the goal of increasing emotional flexibility, but also stability.

The frustration tolerate refers to our capacity to cope with unexpected life situations and/or unpleasant emotions. In fact, people with low tolerance for frustration face difficulties when encountering obstacles that stand in the way of achieving goals or completing tasks. Or more simply put, it refers to how quickly or slowly we "break" under emotional pressure. In this context, the authors recognize the importance of learning/practicing frustration tolerance as a key ability for emotional maturity and successfully confronting challenges. The book offers a range of practical techniques and exercises to help in the development of this ability. Through specific examples and tools, readers are guided on how to recognize their own reaction patterns to obstacles, how to increase their capacity to cope with unpleasant emotions, and how to build greater emotional flexibility. The exercises are designed to help gradually strengthen frustration tolerance, thereby improving other important life skills, such as problem-solving, adapting to change, and maintaining inner stability in difficult situations.

In the final part of the book, the authors focus on the of will and initiative abilities. The will ability is reflected in the strength and readiness of an individual to make an effort and persevere in achieving their developmental goals, despite challenges and obstacles. A strong will enables us to take control over our lives, build healthy developmental habits, and defend ourselves from present temptations in order to achieve long-term goals. In this context, various techniques are presented that enable individuals to develop the ability to invest effort into achieving their goals and to become more resilient to temptations that may impede their progress. Through these techniques, readers can learn how to create long-term developmental habits and how to more effectively manage their desires and needs, directing energy toward achieving important life goals. On the other hand, the authors emphasize the significance of the initiative ability, describing it as the tendency to start something, to take action, the willingness to take the first step, but also the responsibility to follow through with it. The techniques presented in this section focus on encouraging an active approach to life's challenges, developing the ability to recognize and take the first steps, even when circumstances are uncertain. The techniques include work on self-awareness and identifying personal goals, as well as exercises that help in

building inner motivation, overcoming the fear of failure, and developing the courage to take action.

Throughout the entire book, the authors clearly emphasize the interconnectedness of all the above-mentioned competencies, pointing out that they are not isolated processes, but form a harmonious and integrated system that allows for emotional growth and development. The abilities of will, initiative, neutralization, mentalization, and other basic emotional competencies are closely related and support each other in the process of achieving emotional balance and maturity. Each of these techniques contributes to strengthening the others, thus creating a comprehensive framework for improving emotional skills. Developing these abilities enables individuals to effectively manage their emotions, build stable interpersonal relationships, and achieve personal goals. Through the integration of these techniques, individuals can achieve comprehensive and sustainable emotional development.

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