

# Individualism as a neurosis

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There is a commonly discussed new social phenomena in Australia at this time. At the moment there are more people in their twenties and early thirties living with their parents than there has ever been before. In other words families are changing as they do. The offspring of mother and father are not leaving the 'nest' as rapidly as they did in the past. They are staying at home longer. A few decades ago as soon as age 18 or 19 arrived out is was to share a house with friends.

In the past (and now for that matter) psychological theory would see this new social trend as an unhealthy thing. The theories of psychological of separation and individuation would see such a trend as leading to a new community neurosis. What is supposed to happen is as follows

Born

Age 2 years (the terrible twos) is the first separation stage

Age 3 quiet time

Age 4 (the fearsome fours) is the second separation stage

Age 5 to 12 quiet time

Adolescence is the third separation stage

Adulthood - the person has separated and individuated

In a person's life there are 3 main stages of separation ( 2, 4 and adolescence). These are angry and tumultuous times for many where the child rebels against the parents. The reason why they do this is by being oppositional they are psychologically breaking away from the main attachment figures (parents). They are separating away from them and thus they can discover who they are (individuation). To get that sense of who you are, you have to break away from the primary bond with mother. In that bond you don't have a sense of yourself as an individual.

One of the key components of that psychological break away is the physical move out of the "childhood home". This greatly assists the process of psychological separation. As you can see psychological theorists would take a dim view of this new social trend in families. However maybe there is another explanation which demonstrates how we take our psychological theories too seriously.



With separation and individualism one has a sense of a complete skin around self.

Some of the main theorists on separation and individuation have been Bowlby, Mahler and Erikson. All these theories rest on one assumption - that individualism is a desirable and healthy thing. Modern western democracies have taken individualism to its fullest expression. Civil rights legislation, privacy legislation and our entire legal system spends enormous amounts of time and energy defining which individual person owns precisely what.

Psychological theory is consistent with this and tells us that the Free Child in each of us must gain expression. We are told to strive for our own individual thoughts, feelings and beliefs. We are told that the healthy person is the one who has been able to psychologically disengage from the parents. To become truly individuated. Those who don't achieve this are considered neurotic.

The problem with this is it can easily lead to a sense of alienation. A sense of

not belonging. With high individualism comes a lack of community. What is the first community each of us have - the family. Psychology tells us that to become healthy you must psychologically leave that first community in your life.



A sense of community gives one a sense of belonging and a sense of a place in the world. The opposite to individualism.

One could argue that the high divorce rate is due in part to this emphasis on individualism. In a marriage there are two individuals who choose to form a small community of two people. In order for that community to survive they must give up some of their individualism. Psychology and society in general place a high value on the individual and thus each individual person's Free Child needs and wants are highly valued. Thus marriage and individualism collide in this sense.

In marital counselling I sometimes hear people say, "This marriage is not meeting my needs" which is an individualistic way of viewing marriage. To my mind it is completely missing the point. It is viewing marriage as a thing that is supposed to make people feel better, like a "happy pill".

Please take a minute to consider my argument here as what I am saying may appear as heresy. With less emphasis on individualism means people give up more of their individual Free Child needs for the sake of maintaining the community

(marriage). Western psychology would have a big problem with this suggestion.

If the children are staying longer in the parental home then we are in essence evolving more into an extended family structure. Generally speaking this will require more emphasis on the community (family group) and less on each individual's Free Child needs.



Living in a family community inevitably results in a conflict of each individual members Free Child needs.

This proposal would rebuke the separation theories of those like Bowlby and Mahler. The type of separation and individuation they suggest would be considered neurotic rather than healthy. There needs to be less of an emphasis on separation and individuation and more on living in a community with attachment figures. The penultimate goal for the child is not to grow up and psychologically separate from their parents but instead to change their attachment. To completely separate from the parents would be considered a neurotic condition.

Individualism and psychotherapy

Transactional analysis has been typical of this relentless pursuit of individualism. Consistent with other theorists like Bowlby, Eric Berne presents the concept of Autonomy as being the psychological healthy state. The dictionary

definition of autonomous means to act independently, to self govern and to be free. It comes from the Greek word "autonomous" which means - 'having its own laws'. The antithesis to individualism is collectivism but western psychotherapy focuses on the question of

Who am I?

not

Who are we?



In western society we are very focussed on this question and not on the group.

A good example of this is found in the psychological concept "self actualisation". That inborn tendency to maximise one's own talents and potentialities. The originator of this theory Abraham Maslow did not also hypothesise the idea of "our actualisation": That inborn tendency to maximise our collective talents and potentialities. Theorists like Maslow have been very influential in thinking about society for the past 50 years. To my mind the relational approach throws much more emphasis on a collectivist view of life and human relationships. It is not so driven towards an individualistic goal as the state of psychological health.

The two person psychology of the relational focuses at least more so on who are

we, rather than who am I, the individual. (See T. White(2007)). The concept of co-creation also has a focus on "co-llectivism" rather than one individual's creation. With the two person approach and co-creation, individualism is in one sense obliterated. It can't exist because you cannot understand human communication or human relationships without taking the other person into account at least to some degree.

In this way the goal is not self actualisation but "our actualisation". Two people actualise together and this provides further understanding of the difference between working 'with' the transference and working 'in' the transference. When working with the transference the individual client is seen to be moving towards self actualisation. When working in the transference the couple (client and therapist) are moving towards a state of combined actualisation. A state of not who am I?, but who are we? The goal is not to "cure" the client but to "cure" the therapist-client relationship. That to my mind includes a basic shift in thinking about what is psychological health.

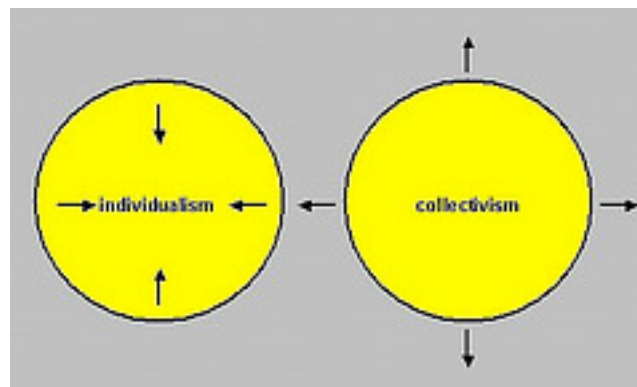
To my knowledge there has been very little resistance to individualism being seen as the penultimate goal of modern psychotherapy. It is not hard to understand why we have been so willingly accepted the individualistic goals of psychotherapy. Individualism is all about ME. It strikes a very familiar chord in the narcissistic heritage of us all. It is about my Free Child needs and wants and about getting those wants satisfied. That obviously feels good.



This woman is thinking in a collectivist way. For a 'couple' to work there must be some emphasis on the collective group rather than just two individuals.

The down side to such narcissism is a sense of alienation. I like the concept of psychotherapy being either a solvent or a glue. Historically psychotherapies have been solvents which permit people to separate and thus allows them to be individual. Psychotherapies that are more 'glue' like will be presenting some kind of collectivism as the psychological goal. This it seems safe to say is more of the relational approach in psychotherapy.

As mentioned before if one moves further along this line of logic one ends up with quite a different concept of psychotherapy. Gone is the concept of the client getting help from the therapist, instead one ends up with a client and therapist who form a relationship and the the goal is to self actualise that relationship. This it would seem is a much more collectivist approach to psychotherapy. It is much more about the therapist in the therapeutic relationship which allows one to understand more of what it means to be 'in' the transference.



#### References

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