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ALIENATION AND IDENTIFICATION

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Alienation and identification are two technical words used in psychiatry that describe psychological processes of opposite types. I think alienation and identification in some respects describe opposite ends of a spectrum of the types of human relationships that occur; relationships that are rooted in feelings. Early patterns of psychological development are based largely on feelings. More mature patterns of development also frequently integrate feelings as important component parts. How one sees or perceives one's world as an adult is strongly influenced by the repetitive patterns of feeling one experiences as a child. It is in the formative years of infancy, childhood, and adolescence that our personalities are largely molded and shaped. How our personalities are molded and shaped are influenced by factors we bring in the world with us, and also by factors that occur in our world that affect us and influence our growth and development.

In our formative years we tend to take in food and nourishment from those who care for us. Their nourishment helps with the growth of our body and development of our mind. Generally in the process of becoming human we imitate, learn from, and desire to be like people who care for us and those we admire.

This process of becoming human by taking in the attitudes, traits, values, cultural patterns and ideals of those who raise us is called the process of identification. As adults most of us are a composite of many bits and pieces from the different human relationships we have had during our formative years. Our parents or parent substitutes play major roles in shaping our identification.

It is as though our brain is like an electronic computer that gradually becomes more complex. It is also as though this computer is in the process of continually being programmed with information. The information tells the computer what it is, whether it is good or bad, and how it is to function. However, a part of the information that is directed at us is strongly influenced by the information we send out. The information that is directed back at us is not under our control, but we can influence it.

Small children classify incoming information in simple ways. Small children and some adults like things simple and clear-cut. What is good is clear and evident, what is bad is clear and evident. If one is going to develop a system of classification of good and bad one needs to know and experience both good and bad. The experience may be only in one's fantasies or one's fears, but to the small child this is enough. In "children's stories" bad and violence are a necessary part so you can contrast them with the good. There is no old witch unless there is good (the fairy godmother) with which to compare the witch. People are good, monsters are bad; heaven is good, hell is bad; God is good, the devil is bad; and so on. Our system of values is based on good and bad.

Thus basic concepts of good and bad influence all of us, and may influence many of our patterns of thought. Generally we want to possess the good for ourselves, and we reject the bad. We often evaluate good and bad on the basis of our feelings.

In the course of growing up most of us find that the mother who nourishes us, gratifies us, and indulges us is also the mother who frustrates us, and causes us

some pain and discomfort. Ideally, in such a relationship the "good" would outweigh the "bad". Ideally, this nurturant relationship would persist through thick and thin so we can become aware there is only one mother, and from the point of view of our feelings she is both good and bad. Ideally, this relationship with mother (and family) would persist for long enough and be of good enough quality so that we can develop a basic sense of trust in our world, and a sense of confidence in ourselves. Ideally, we will be valued children so that we will hold ourselves to be of worth.

If things happen that impair the quality of the mother-child relationship for any period of time, it will take its toll on the child unless he receives adequate care from a substitute mother.

If life circumstances are such that the child gets intermittent good quality care but in insufficient amounts on the basis of hours per day or hours per week, this also will take its toll.

If the child is cared for by first one mother figure and then another and then another, it will also have its effect on the child. The child will be aware that he is human, but will not develop a stable identity.

If things happen to the child that cause impaired or delayed development, he may also be in trouble, because the expectations and demands placed on him may be beyond his ability to perform. In such a situation he will experience little success and much failure.

To be alienated means to be one who is estranged, apart from, a stranger to, or to be excluded from.

How we feel is quite important as to whether we allow ourselves to be a part of a family or group; or as to whether we feel we are rejected by, excluded from or apart from a family or group.

In general if the bad feelings we have about a person, family, or group outweigh the good feelings, we may say we feel alienated from this person, family or group.

We may develop feelings of alienation at various phases in our development. Generally, the earlier and stronger such feelings are the more detrimental they are to our psychological development and our relationships with people.

If one's early experiences are such he has no desire to become human, he is in serious trouble. One may withdraw from humans and human relationships in infancy, childhood, or later life.

If one's later experiences are such that he feels he cannot trust the people in his world, he is in trouble. Here one may have the roots of paranoid thinking. Here also one may say it's a dog-eat-dog world and one should get what he can when he can because you can't count on people or tomorrow. If the past has been bad, and, based on this experience, one expects the future to be bad, one may then decide to take what he can while the getting is good, and worry about the consequences when and if they come up.

As we grow older our identity continues to grow and enlarge to include the larger family group, neighborhood, town, state, nation, and other groups one may become a part of in work, play, religion, schooling, or politics. Also, as we grow older the areas in which we can develop feelings of alienation are also enlarged. But developing feelings of alienation toward distant groups does not directly threaten our personality organization; in fact, at times it may enhance our identity.

What do the concepts of alienation and identification offer for the hospital treatment of children - and adults?

I think they offer:

1. An understanding of what may have gone wrong in the early life of the person that helped to produce the disturbed pattern of behavior that brought him to the hospital.
2. An awareness of the importance of the staff-patient relationship on the child or adult and on his patterns of personality organization.

Basically, if we feel people care about us we are aware that they are not excluding us or rejecting us. A point worth clarification is that we can show we care in many ways. We do not have to meet unreasonable demands in order to prove we care. At times the way we can show we care is to demand and expect responsible and appropriate behavior from a child or adult. We can show we care by not allow the child or adult to be controlled by his infantile and impulsive feelings.

The power of suggestion has a strong influence on us all. What we expect from our world is what we may get. Our expectation of certain behavior is the suggestion (or feed-back) to the other person. Our expectation is an invitation. Our expectations, however, should be realistic.

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