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Rethinking Borderline Personality Disorder in our society from a philosophical and sociological perspective

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The aim of this article is to show the possible relations between certain socio-historical changes characteristic of late modernity and the formation of the identity, as keys to understand the increased incidence of Borderline Personality Disorder. The theoretical approach to address this complex problem of identity in our current society includes the contributions of Canadian sociologist, James E. Coté, and the question about the modern technique of German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Their profound thoughts about our current way of dwelling in the world had led us to rethink the problem of identity in the light of the marked increase of Borderline Personality Disorder and their resulting dysfunction of identity.

Key words: Identity, Late modernity, Borderline personality disorders

Reflexión en torno al problema del Trastorno de Personalidad Límitrofe en nuestra sociedad actual desde una mirada filosófica y sociológica

El propósito del presente artículo es mostrar las posibles conexiones entre algunos cambios sociohistóricos propios de la modernidad tardía y la conformación de la identidad, como claves para comprender el aumento en la incidencia de los trastornos de personalidad límitrofe. Para abordar teóricamente al complejo problema de la formación de la identidad en nuestra sociedad actual, se incorporan los aportes del sociólogo canadiense James E. Côté y la pregunta sobre la técnica moderna del filósofo alemán Martin Heidegger. Sus profundas reflexiones sobre nuestro actual modo de habitar el mundo, contribuyen a repensar el problema de la identidad a la luz del notorio aumento de la incidencia de los trastornos de personalidad límitrofe y su característica disfunción de la identidad.

Palabras clave: Identidad, Modernidad tardía, Trastornos de personalidad límitrofe

INTRODUCTION

The diagnosis of borderline personality has become substantially more frequent in recent years, rising from 2% of the population in 1995 to 3.5% today. It is also seen that the diagnosis is being made at progressively younger ages.¹ Borderline personality disorder has been investigated a great deal and there have even been attempts to classify it as either a mood disorder or within a psychosis. The term *borderline* was introduced in 1953 by R.P. Knight,² of the Menninger Foundation. The term originated from the idea (now in disuse) that some patients would be on the borderline between neurosis and psychosis. Its official use was established in the 1980s to be included among Axis II disorders in the DSM-III with the name of Borderline Personality Disorder. In this condition and among the diagnostic criteria indicated in the DSM-IV-TR,³ which are the most important for the purpose of this work, we find a general pattern of instability and conflict in interpersonal relations, identity problems (unstable self-image or sense of self) and chronic feelings of emptiness.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, O. Kernberg⁴ has established that this disorder is characterized by a stable pathological organization of the personality that is resistant to change and whose main function includes alterations in mood, cognition, impulse control and identity integration. Its diagnosis should be made in terms of "structural criteria" rather than "clinical-descriptive" criteria. This would be done by observing the underlying personality structure (neurotic, borderline or psychotic), which would be determined in relation to overall functioning of the self and its object relations. Research on the subject over time^{2, 5-9} shows that the pattern of affective and behavioral instability, plus the difficulty of identity formation, are elements that are always present when characterizing the essence of the borderline personality.

If we incorporate into the discussion the theoretical challenge of studying the relations between the shaping of identity and the characteristics of the sociocultural transformations per se of our period, understanding the

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significant increase of the diagnosis of the borderline pictures - one of whose principal problems is related, as already stated, with the consolidation of identity, is enriched and made more complicated. Coinciding with the points made by James A. Côté,¹⁰ our late modernity (or post-modernity) is characterized by substantive changes in settings that are essential when considering the formation and consolidation of identity (as daily personal relations, relations with institutions - family, school, work and massive practices of long-scale consumption, among others). The above could make it difficult in some persons to successfully circumvent the consolidation stage of identity.

According to the psychoanalysis Lidia T. Scalozub,¹¹ the asymmetry and generational difference characteristic of the bond between parents and children would be altered or blurred. This would, in many cases, generate confusion of the children regarding their parents who have forgotten or been careless in their role as adult guide and who, in the desire to respond to the social demand of a desirable and young body image, made the framework of the generational differences diffuse. This phenomenon would make the previous generational experiences less appreciated and used by the offsprings in the identity formation process. Thus, their future would appear as uncertain in the sense that they would not bear alone the task of becoming the principal architects of their own identities.

In turn, the decline of the traditional institutions of socialization, whose mediation allows the new members of a society to efficiently become a part of the culture (family, school, political or religious institutions) has stripped them of referents in the process of consolidating their identity. This may make it more comprehensible that the young people with the most psychological vulnerability make a search for identity or for belonging through means that often are dangerous and even openly self-destructive, such as, for example, abusive drug use and diverse interventions on the body, which they experience as a way of having something "for always". Thus, for example, in the context of a world made up of short-lived objects and relations, tattoos covering a large extension, piercing (opening holes in different places of the body to insert a metal object), or branding (producing marks in the skin by cutting or burning) fulfill the function of a long-lasting mark, which makes it possible to deny the caducity linked to the passage of time which is lived with anxiety in a secularized period, in which acts lack transcendental meaning. In turn, there is consensus¹¹⁻¹⁴ in which the generalized increase of this type of juvenile practices of corporal intervention can be understood as possible ways of earning the acceptance of a reference group and living a magical experience of changing *Self* (resisting pain, before more powerful, improving self-esteem).

In this context, borderline personality disorders would be the extreme case of the problems many young people

have to achieve successful consolidation of their identity. When internal perception is experienced as fragile and somewhat chaotic, the elements of the external world (habits, fashions, membership in a homogeneous group) acquire great importance, observing marked lack of preparation for the adult social life. This accentuates structural failure, leaving the subject at the mercy of despair and without forming an integrated adult identity and with limited possibility to be integrated into the increasingly complex world.¹³

The decisive philosophical contributions of M. Heidegger and the sociological reflections of James A. Côté, allow us to construct a theoretical frame oriented at enlightening the understanding of the characteristics of our current social world and the challenges and difficulties encountered in subjectivity.

REFERENTIAL FRAME

The question on technique in Heidegger

In 1953, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger developed his ideas about modern technology whose validity is undeniable, above all if we consider how this has continued to change, becoming more complex and affecting our daily lives.

This Heideggerian approach to the technique goes well beyond a simple framework for anthropological reflection (a *techné* as the exercise of human action on *physis*) and an instrumental concept of the technique (in which *techné* is viewed as a tool at the service of certain human goals and needs). It proposed a "*transcendental* [ontological] view"¹⁶ on this field. The radicalism of the Heideggerian question on the technique is given by the possibility of considering the technique as an expression of a way in which man (*Dasein*) *dwells in the world*. It is important to clarify that in Heidegger, *dwelling* (a word that means simultaneous "*taking care of and cultivate*") did not originally or fundamentally mean that of "dwelling in the world," but rather refers to the fundamental feature of being a man (mortal) on the earth: "man is insofar as he dwells."¹⁷ On the other hand, it should also be considered that the being that is most characteristic of man is not an ego or isolated consciousness that is then thrown on the beings. On the contrary, the "being in the world is given in its original condition of "openness." That is, finding oneself in what one does, in their occupation with the entities among which one lives (relations with others and with things). That is why the philosopher does not speak of "subject" but rather of *Dasein*, to refer to the fact that the being has always been in the middle of the world, being occupied with the entities. In other words, the being is

not something internal. It is something that is outside, in the world, something that occurs historically, and not in an isolated point in time.¹⁸

Considering the above, it can be stated that in its essence, the technique in Heidegger is a "*historical modulation of the truth*" that is related to *poiesis* (ποίησις), a production, which ultimately means moving something hidden into the realm of disclosure. Heidegger indicates that this disclosure or "produce" of *poiesis* can occur in three ways: as craft, as *techné* (understood in the Greek world as both technology and art, which refers what is not produced by itself) and as producing by the *physis* (which refers to what is produced by itself, to what emerges, sprouts and comes to be present). In an original sense, *poiesis* implies a "protective" disclosure, as it does not consist in an attack against what is disclosed, but rather a "letting be," allowing all that is to unfold its essence, pointing to a notion of that involves a link with a nature that supplies us its energies, for example and old windmill, as against a calculable and exploited nature, for example, the megaindustrial of mineral extraction.

Thus there would not be a simple *poiesis* in the disclosure mode of modern *techné*, but a disclosure that is fundamentally a *provocation*. In this way, the state of openness of *Dasein* would be modulated in our time as a *provocative disclosure* (*das herausfordernde Entbergen*). Unlike the "artisanal" *techné*, involving a "surrender" to what the forces of nature produce, in modern technology, there is an "attack" on nature to discover its stored energies in order to extract, accumulate and exploit them to the full extent. Our relationship with nature is conditioned by a violent demand, not a simple use or provision.²⁰ In this modality, the entity appears as an object, as a standing reserve (*Bestände*), which is always offered as ready for consumption, and subject to calculation. On his part, man is also reduced to simple resource or human capital, thus losing his dignity.

The mode of ἀλήθεια (*Alétheia*) that now prevails is provocative disclosure (*das herausfordernde Entbergen*), which makes the being destined to man, who is induced to assume everything *a priori* and inevitably as material for production. Thus, "the earth and its atmosphere become raw materials (*Rohstoff*). Man becomes human material (*Menschenmaterial*) yoked to the proposed goals," states Heidegger.²¹

The predominance of the technical lead the "gods and nature to withdraw," and lead man to remain alone, eradicated, knocked out of the earth. The calculating and manipulative thinking identifies any entity as available for consumption, threatening, instrumentalizing and devastating key areas of human dwelling (nature, language and link to the divine). The man of modern technology would be in a situation of indiscriminate exploitation of the

world, carelessness and forgetfulness of being that leads to radical neglect:

modern men would twist hopelessly around themselves, as isolated individuals or also a massive collective in private and public life. Not only does that which is sacred remain hidden as a trace of divinity, but also the imprint of the sacred, the intact, seems to have become extinct salvation can only come from a place where there is a turning point in the relationship between man and being¹⁹.

The provocative disclosure would imply a supreme danger: since it is unilateral and exclusionary, it appears as the only possible destiny of man, as a measure of everything and not as a possible modulation of our dwelling in the world. As man of the technical period, we live under the deceiving appearance that "everything we find only consists in being a product of man,"¹⁵ we find only ourselves, and our loneliness, in every endeavor we undertake.

Heidegger proposes another radically different dwelling, oriented by what is called "protective disclosure." This is not an "attack" against disclosure, but rather a release, an "allowing-to-be," permitting all to unfold their essence. This dwelling has the fundamental trait of *protecting* (*schonen*): "Real protection is something positive that occurs when, in advance, we leave something in its essence, when we retro-harbor something inherent to its essence."¹⁷ This means a relation of filiation, care and closeness with the original unity of what Heidegger calls "quaternity" (*das Geviert*): earth, sky, gods (the sacred, whether in its presence or absence) and the rest of mankind. This "protecting of the dweller," implies the commitment to allow things to remain in this quaternity and means a bond with nature and with others, different from the mere appropriate, exploitation or calculation, and stressing the tradition, care and respect for the unity of mortals, gods, nature and living beings, also respecting the dignity of their mystery. In a world of increasingly powerful factual mechanisms, the enormity and single-sidedness of the calculation and spectacle of dominated nature and the loneliness and separation of man show that we have lost the sense of the sacred. Getting *on the path to our place of residence* would imply the opening up in some way to a different relationship with the unity of what is.

James Côté and his socio-historical view of identity

To the profound philosophical Heideggerian thinking, we can add the contributions of the social sciences to consider the characteristics of our current relation with the world and ourselves. The sociological view of James A. Côté on the complex processing of forming the identity in our current society, incorporates different interpersonal levels

of analysis. These include macrosociological, psychological and microinteractional factors. They link the field of culture with the problems of identity. For Côté, the different cultures establish different parameters of forming the identity and through the socializing influence of the institutions, encourage certain personality characteristics, promoting the development of certain "types of character."

In pre-modern cultures (before the nineteenth century), parent-child relationships were governed by traditional rules that were not questioned and the weight of ancestors in the formation of adult identity was very important. In modern culture. This promoted a heteronomous character type, "guided by tradition," In this regards, Côté stated that:

The important relations of life are controlled by careful and rigid conventions learned by the young during their years of intensive socialization that end with entry into adulthood. The range of options is limited, so the apparent social need for an individualized character type is minimal.¹⁰

In modern culture, the intergenerational link is weakened, relations between parents and children are substantially changed. Parental authority may be questioned and the offsprings use non-traditional sources in the shaping of their adult identity (for example, their peers). In the societies subjected to the impact of the first industrialization, geographic mobility, urbanization, accumulation of capital and massive production, an "inwardly guided" character will predominate. Although this supposes the existence of generalized developmental and socially predetermined objectives, and preestablished patterns of acceptable behavior that guide the action, parents begin to view their offspring as individuals who should "make themselves" (self-made man). Thus the individuals begin to make choices and exercise initiatives more independently than their ancestors did.

Finally, in the post-modern culture, the gap between parents and offsprings has greatly increased and the life experiences of their parents are less appreciated and used by the offsprings in the shaping of their identity. The future appears as uncertain in the sense that they now bear alone the task of becoming the principal architects of their own identities. As there is dominion of mass production resources and overabundance of goods and services, the "psychology of scarcity" characteristic of "inwardly developed" is replaced by a "psychology of abundance" and large scale consumption, which leads to an "outwardly guided" character type. Once the production problems are solved, consumption emerges as the way of identifying personal loyalties and relationships and others appear as references, since their opinions and approval are required to achieve objectives (always changing). The individuals learn early to monitor the social environment to ensure that their habits and consumption patterns (especially with regard to appearance and behavior)

conform to the accepted standards. For Côté, the predominance of this type of character would help to understand that the diffusion of identity would be a phenomenon on the rise. Consequently, following the categories of Marcia,²² Côté proposes the "achievement" of identity, which is associated with psychological health, may be declining. This would explain the difficulties that adult individuals have in establishing and maintaining long-term commitments in our society today.²³ The current pressures of socialization in society encourage directionality toward others and an orientation toward discovering one's own identity through image consumption, which is very sharp in youth cultures. This would make it possible to understand phenomena, such as the large investment in time that some young people dedicate to activities that allow them to project a certain image, to obtain validation from others through consumption, while gratifying narcissistic desires (consumption of music, drugs, and various interventions on the body, etc.). The consequence of this would be that large numbers of consumers would be maintained who are not very concerned about what the future holds and who are highly responsive to the constant changes in trends and values, without a proper basis of direction or guidance standards.

Social life is currently becoming more and more problematic, in terms of the individual possibilities of establishing a stable and viable identity based on the commitments embodied in a community. Pre-modern and modern institutions were a support for individual identity and continuity between generations; through their mediation, new members of society are effectively integrated in culture. Today, these institutions are failing or have failed, and they are being replaced by patterns oriented toward explosive consumption. Thus, it is possible to deduce that both individual identity formation and traditional culture are heavily damaged. The individuals are without institutional support and orientation toward the transitions of development, the individuals are left, more than in the past, to their own internal resources. In turn, the individuals require more personal resources to cope with this complex, changing and many times hostile social context, maintaining a stable sense of ones self. Influenced by the image market, it is to be expected that a significant number of young people will simply "let themselves go" from one image to another, without the sense of direction that allows them to articulate life experiences coherently.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Heidegger's view allows us to rethink the problem of identity, situating it in the context of relationships that man, in his condition of openness, establishes with the world, thus rising above a vision that reduces it to a closed inward-sameness. The "we" (as a fundamental dimension,

although not unique of the being) would be prior to the particular *Dasein*. Therefore, the *Dasein*, essentially make up with "others," is going to gradually become singular, that is, time and work is required to "find oneself" and distinguish oneself from the others, which explains the complexity of the identity processes.

From a sociological standpoint, the thinkings of Côté are consistent with those of Heidegger, since they reflect on how different cultures and historical periods establish parameters of identity formation, which must be incorporated when approaching the complex processes of identity formation.

The late modernity promotes socialization that encourages a directionality towards others and guidance to discover one's own identity, fundamentally through image consumption. This shapes a problematic scenario for the human of our time with respect to their possibilities of establishing a stable and viable identity on the basis of the commitments embodied in a community.

This particular dwelling of man of the modern technique, indicated by Heidegger, is also stressed by Côté when he explained the passing of the pre-modern societies to the modern ones and the current "worsening" of certain characteristics of modernity, in the so-called late modernity, in which a particular way of related with others, objects and the world predominated, which has increased subjective malaise. This is a world of overabundance of goods and services (a kind of "large supermarket"²⁴), of large scale consumption and failure or clear failure of the traditional institutions of socialization (family, school religion) through whose mediation the new generations supported the shaping of their individual identity and incorporated them into the culture, favoring the intergenerational continuity. On the other part, this secularized world has led to both the development of staunch individualism, as well as the demystification of nature, operating a "cold intervention of the spirit on the human body and the rest of nature, that is, on the *res extensa* upon being stripped of its divine nature."²⁵ Likewise, the development and application of the scientific method favors the vertiginous progress of science and technology, whose rationality overvalues productivity and consumption, aspects that would have been accentuated in late modernity, and that Heidegger denounced with the following words:

Everything works. This is precisely what is inhospitable, that everything works and, by working, always leads to more working and that technology increasingly tears humans away from the earth and uproots them We are left with only pure technological relations. Where humans live is no longer the earth.²⁶

Finally, one of the salient features of this post-modern world is the loss of the religious sense of existence: "This fundamental re-bonding of man with the divine, which

sustained him for centuries and millennia, has been replaced first by the Goddess of Reason, then by science and, in recent decades, by money and pleasure, taking this finally in its most ephemeral and decadent sense."²⁵

This contrasts with the idea of "freedom" promoted by our society, which mobilizes individuals to discover their identity through the use of image and its consequent immediate, gratification-oriented, physical self-improvement according to the "external" standards of the market (consumer *techné*, drugs, extreme interventions in the body, etc). Consequently, the subject of late modernity tries to get validation from others through consumption while gratifying narcissistic desires at the same time, finding no outlet for their constant discomfort.

Based on these backgrounds, it is possible to rethink the increase of borderline personality disorders in our times. The psychological characteristics of this disorder can be rethought in light of the particularities of our current lifestyle and cultural patterns of conduct that it promotes,

In a world of contingencies in which social and intergenerational ties have weakened and with the installation of a present-oriented temporality mobilized by the desire to consume objects that the image market holds out as a volatile promise of happiness and identity, ever changing and eternally unsatisfied, borderline disorder can be seen as an expression of the subjectivity and dynamics characteristic of the contemporary social bonds, such as:

the *weakening of the identity supports* (the paternal function, the decay of *nomos* instituted by the family structure, "disenchantment with the world")..... the rule of *image* as a bargaining chip in intersubjective relations, and the growing importance of *consumption* in both the subjective and social economy of postmodern societies.²⁷

In this recently described general context, the growing increase in identity diffusion and loss of sense or direction that allows the coherent articulation of the experiences of life is not surprising. From different perspectives, this work has attempted to propose the urgency of rethinking the challenges and problems of our current period on its impact on personality identity. This is understood as a necessary condition to find a place for oneself in society. As a possible response, Heidegger, in his reflection on technology, proposes that we should not forget other possibilities of *dwelling*, closer to the care of the original unity of earth, sky, mortals and gods, a task that is even more difficult when the "technical world" is not considered, that is, when it is naturalized as the only possible way to reveal what we are, that is, of our identity.

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