RICERCHE

Defense mechanisms: From the individual to the collective level

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█ **Abstract** In this article we shall deal with the construction and defense of subjective identity as a topic at the intersection of psychology and anthropology. In this perspective, defense mechanisms are seen as falling along a spectrum that stretches from the individual to the collective level. The individual mind is the sphere of the intrapsychic defenses and the interpersonal maneuvers to which each of us appeals, in the relationship with other people and with one's own environment, to defend one's own self-describability and, indissolubly, the solidity of one's own self-conscious being. At a social and collective level, on the other hand, the individual self-protective structures are supported by cultural interventions that organize and intersubjectively "domesticate" our subjectivity and our feeling of being-there.
KEYWORDS: Autobiographical Reasoning; Defense Mechanisms; Grief; Narrative Identity; Ontological Insecurity

█ **Riassunto** *Meccanismi di difesa: dall'individuale al collettivo* – L'articolo si occupa di costruzione e difesa dell'identità soggettiva come tema all'intersezione di psicologia e antropologia. In questa prospettiva, i meccanismi di difesa si dispongono lungo uno spettro che dal livello individuale conduce a quello collettivo. La mente individuale è la sfera delle difese intrapsichiche e delle manovre interpersonali a cui ognuno di noi fa ricorso, nella relazione con gli altri e col proprio ambiente, per difendere la propria autodescrivibilità e, inscindibilmente, la solidità del proprio essere autocosciente. Al livello sociale e collettivo, invece, le strutture autoprotettive dell'individuo sono sorrette da interventi culturali che organizzano e "addomesticano" intersoggettivamente la nostra soggettività e il nostro sentirci esistere.
PAROLE CHIAVE: Ragionamento autobiografico; Meccanismi di difesa; Cordoglio; Identità narrativa; Insicurezza ontologica

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IN THIS ARTICLE WE ADDRESS the construction and defense of subjective identity as a topic at the intersection of psychology and anthropology.[1] Ernesto De Martino's phenomenological psychology of identity will be our compass. Following De Martino, we contend that an understanding of identity in its individual and collective aspects requires a full appreciation of the *precarious* nature of the subject's self-constructed identity and its resulting *defensive* character. In this perspective, consciousness of self involves ongoing

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construction of a system of defences that offer a continuously renovated capacity to cope with the risk of losing one's own subjective identity. All these defensive mechanisms – it is argued – fall along a spectrum that stretches from the individual to the collective level. The individual mind is the sphere of the intrapsychic defenses and interpersonal maneuvers to which each of us appeals, in our relationships with other people and our own environment, to defend our self-describability and, inextricably, the solidity of our self-conscious being. At a social and collective level, on the other hand, individual self-protective structures are supported by cultural interventions that organize and intersubjectively "domesticate" our subjectivity and our feeling of being-there.

▌ 1 The threat of ego dissolution

In a memorable passage – brought to our attention by Remo Bodei[2] – Locke depicts the maintenance of personal identity as *work*:

> [...] the ideas, as well as children, of our youth, often die before us: and our minds represent to us those tombs to which we are approaching; where, though the brass and marble remain, yet the inscriptions are effaced by time, and the imagery moulders away. The pictures drawn in our minds are laid in fading colours; and if not sometimes refreshed, vanish and disappear.[3]

Personal identity consists in this work of ceaseless refreshing ideas to guarantee self-continuity. One is constantly engaged in an effort to build bridges across discontinuities, the gaps of oblivion and the uncertainties of anticipation. If this effort fails, ideas in the mind quickly fade, and often vanish from understanding, leaving behind no footsteps or traces, like shadows flying over fields of corn; the mind is void of these ideas as if they had never arisen in the first place.[4] This dramatically reveals the intrinsic fragility of individuals, with their constant exposure to ever-

present threats of self-disruption and oblivion.

Three centuries later, and after endless debates on personal identity, Locke's inquietude about the precarious nature of the subject's identity self-construction is fully articulated in Ernesto De Martino's concept of "presence". In his ethnohistorical study, *Il mondo magico*, De Martino characterizes presence as "the person's unitary being" or, in Kantian terms, "the transcendental unity of self-consciousness".[5] There is, however, a fundamental difference between De Martino and Kant: the unity in question is not in itself guaranteed insofar as it is not an ahistorical datum, but is, rather, a precarious acquisition, continuously constructed by culture and constantly exposed to the risk of crisis, the *crisis of presence*.

To introduce the issue of the crisis of presence, De Martino examines a large body of evidence that attests to the widespread presence of an altered state of consciousness (called "*latah*" by the Malays, "*olon*" by the Tungus, "*irkunii*" by the Yukagires, "*amurak*" by the Yakuts, "*menkeiti*" by the Koriaks, and "*imu*" by the Ainus). This altered state consists in an access of echopraxia and echolalia resulting in an "ego dissolution" experience, i.e., a blurring of the boundaries between self-representation and object-representation that precludes the synthesis of self-representations into a coherent whole.[6]

De Martino frames this negative moment within a dialectical perspective. He follows Kant in arguing that the act of the transcendental synthetic function grounds the distinction between the subjective unity of the I and the objective unity of the real – and thus the autonomy of the person. But, whereas Kant assumes the person's presence as «a uniform historical given», De Martino argues that «there does not exist any presence, any empirical "being there", that might be a datum, an original immediacy beyond all risk and incapable within its own sphere of any sort of drama and of any development – that is, of a history».[7] As a result, the principle of the transcendental unity of self-consciousness is

seen as including within itself its *opposite* in the form of the risk of the disintegration of the person's unitary being:

> [...] even the supreme principle of the transcendental unity of self-consciousness involves a supreme risk to the person, i.e., the risk of losing the supreme principle that constitutes and grounds it. This risk arises when the person, instead of retaining her autonomy in her relationship to the contents, abdicates the task, and allows the contents to assert themselves, outside the synthesis, as undominated elements, as given facts in an absolute sense.[8]

In other words, Kant does not consider the process of formation of the person or the risks related to this self-making. As a consequence, the Kantian person is always given in its unity, as if the psychological level of analysis was always and in all cases guaranteed by the transcendental level of analysis. De Martino, in contrast, thinks that there is no such guarantee, i.e., that empirical being-there, far from always being given to itself, is exposed to the risk of not being-there and that, consequently, the loss of the original synthetic unity of apperception is a real existential risk. This is precisely what the ethnological and psychopathological literature shows: empirical being-there is not given and guaranteed by its own being but is rather characterized by a structural lability which causes it to struggle for its own individual unity and autonomy. As a result, the self-conscious subject constitutes itself as a repertoire of activities that take pains to cope with its lack of ontological guarantee, constructing itself on the edge of its original "non-being", as it were.

In this perspective, one of De Martino's most important achievements lies in his anticipating the current centrality of the topic of identity in infant research, in social, personality and dynamic psychology, and in psychopathology.[9] To the extent that this interpretation of De Martino's work sits well with contemporary naturalist sensibilities, it may be objected that it maps him onto debates and problems within contemporary psychological sciences and North American philosophy of psychology. As Giovanni Jervis noted,[10] however, De Martino's thought is characterized by a certain tension. On one hand, he was a historicist and committed to a strongly humanist school of thought like the Crocean one, in which he had been trained and which in the 1950s he tried to integrate with Marxism; this committed him to a culturalist denial of universal psychological structures. On the other hand, however, he took an ontological and phenomenological perspective that led him to seek for invariant psychological structures that enable individuals to defend themselves from anguish; this appears most clearly in his interest in psychopathology and structuralist anthropology. In brief, especially in the last years of his life, De Martino wavered between seeing human beings as integrally determined by their history and thinking instead that, to some extent, the history of human beings depends on the species' universal mechanisms. And Jervis even surmises that

> [...] if de Martino had lived in the 1970s and 1980s, he would have realized that just during those years a new revision was in progress, which went in the direction lato sensu of structuralism, i.e., a revival of Darwinian studies, and hence of the importance of the universal structures of the mind as a trait of human species.[11]

With this in mind, De Martino's tension is resolved below by offering a synthesis of the socio-cultural and bio-psychological aspects of identity self-construction.

2 A neo-Jamesian theory of narrative identity

If we turn our attention to current psychological sciences, we immediately realize that today, more than a century after William James's groundbreaking chapter, *The consciousness of*

self,[12] «one cannot make much progress through most areas of human psychology without encountering constructs that invoke the self».[13] In the past 60 years, hundreds of thousands of scholarly articles and chapters have been published about the self; in this article, we focus on three factors that contribute to explaining why the topic of identity has played such a pivotal role in psychology.

The first factor concerns general psychology and consists in the inextricable link between identity self-description and self-consciousness. The second pertains to dynamic psychology and developmental psychology and consists in the fact that the construction of affectional life, during infancy and across the lifespan, is closely linked to the construction of an identity that is well-defined and accepted as valid. The third concerns social psychology and consists in the fact that each of us constantly negotiates the validity of our identity in exchanges with other people.[14]

The interweaving of identity and self-consciousness lies at the heart of Dan McAdams' neo-Jamesian theory of narrative identity. The author begins by opposing his interpretation of James' theory of the self to postmodernist theorizing on identity. According to Gergen, for example, the postmodern identity is multiple, shattered, bereft of any reality except for what is socially constructed from moment to moment in everyday interactions.[15] And in his view, this is all to the good: the multiplicity of the self (which he describes as the "multiphrenic condition") should be accentuated in order to allow the subject to expand in different directions, to evolve, and to create ever new opportunities for personal growth. McAdams takes issue with Gergen: the latter misses a fundamental aspect of selfhood, namely, the process of synthesizing the disparate elements that constitute postmodern identity. This unifying activity corresponds to James' concept of the self as the subject or I.[16]

In this perspective, the I is not a thing, not even a part, a component, or an aspect of the self: «[it] is really more like a verb; it might be called "selfing" or "I-ing", the fundamental process of making a self out of experience».[17] The "Me" is instead «the primary product of the selfing process»; it is «the self that selfing makes».[18] The Me consists in three forms of reflexive experientiality – the material, social and spiritual selves – which originate from the selfing process. It is «the making of the Me that constitutes what the I fundamentally is».[19]

So construed, James' I/Me distinction provides a definition of self-consciousness in terms of identity. It is thus very much in line with De Martino's criticism of those philosophical views that take self-consciousness as a *primum*. I cannot know that I am without knowing who I am: I know that "I exist" insofar as I know that "I exist in a certain way", i.e., with particular features, as a describable identity. There is no consciousness of self without some description of self, and hence without some description of identity.

James' consciousness of self is thus a self-describing, an identity forming, which is a unifying, integrative, synthesizing process.[20] Thus McAdams reads James as anticipating a number of theories in developmental and personality psychology that have made appeal to a general organismic process for integrating subjective experience – e.g., Werner's orthogenetic principle, Piaget's organization, and Jung's individuation.[21] While these various concepts differ from each other in important ways, they converge on the idea that human experience tends toward a fundamental sense of unity in that human beings apprehend experience through an integrative selfing process.

In McAdams' life-story model of identity, James' I/Me distinction is combined with Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Henry Murray's research program on the Study of Lives. Narrative identity is here defined as the «broad narrative of the Me that the I[-ing] composes, edits, and continues to work on».[22] This internalized and evolving story of the self integrates the reconstructed past and the imagined future

to provide life with some degree of unity, purpose and meaning. That is, people make sense of their own lives through narrative structures (such as characters, roles, scenes, scripts, and plots) which make the Me into «an internalized drama».[23]

3 Hermeneutic vs. naturalistic approaches to narrative identity

McAdams' claim that the type of continuity that connects psychological states across time in an identity-constituting way is specifically narrative in character is typically associated with concerns about *practical* identity, which is personal identity considered in its connection to ethical concerns, as in the case of Locke's theory of personhood. The claim is that we constitute ourselves as "Lockean persons" (i.e., as morally responsible agents) by forming and using autobiographical narratives. The unity of a person is the unity of an autobiographical narrative.[24]

In some cases, narrative accounts of personal identity are characterized in opposition to the project to amend Locke's relational memory criterion that can be found in psychological continuity theorists such as David Lewis, Derek Parfit, Sydney Shoemaker, and John Perry. Here the question is a *metaphysical* identity question: on what basis should we reidentify a person as numerically the same despite qualitative differences over time or under different descriptions? Answering such a "reidentification" question calls for a criterion of diachronic numerical identity, a criterion of what makes something one and the same thing as itself at different times. However, when the focus shifts from solely metaphysical puzzles about the persistence of complex objects to the relation between identity and practical and evaluative concerns, the question becomes one of "characterization": what characteristics (character traits, motivations, values, mental and bodily capacities and dispositions, emotional attachments, commitments, memories, and so on) make a person the particular person that she is? Such a question

concerns identity in the sense of the Eriksonian "identity crisis"; it is a *psycho/social/ethical* identity question.[25]

According to some proponents of the narrative view, however, the psycho/social/ethical identity question is importantly related to the metaphysical identity question. In fact, they first build those activities of *self-interpretation* and *self-creation* that are central to our experience of being persons into the kind of continuity that connects person A and person B across time in an identity-constituting way.[26] Then, they identify what enables persons to be actively self-interpreting and self-creating agents with the construction of *self-narratives*. In short, «the metaphysical "glue" that binds person stages together into persons is narrative connectedness, not "mere" psychological connectedness».[27]

The narrative account, however, comes in different forms. Authors such as Jerome Bruner, Alasdair Macintyre, and Charles Taylor view the person as a self-interpreting being in a sense inspired by the hermeneutical tradition, namely a tradition that is largely foreign – or even hostile – to naturalistic commitments.[28] An empirically-informed narrativist account of personal identity requires a view of self-interpretation as an activity of narrative reappropriation of the products of the unconscious processing – an activity implemented by apparatuses such as Dennett's "Joycean machine", or Gazzaniga's "interpreter module", or Carruthers' "mindreading system".[29] In this perspective, persons are self-interpreting beings in a sense that is congenial to a view of personal identity in terms of psychological continuity, but fundamentally foreign to the hermeneutical tradition. As Jervis notes, a hermeneutical notion of self-interpretation, insofar as it puts exclusive emphasis upon meaning (i.e., the intentional directing of consciousness) at the expense of the psychobiological theme of the unconscious, surreptitiously reintroduces the pre-psychoanalytic, pre-cognitivist, idealistic conception of the conscious subject as *primary* subject.[30]

Paul Ricœur's psychoanalytic hermeneutics proves similarly problematic from the perspective of the naturalist. Ricœur made a significant attempt to conciliate between Freud's metapsychology and hermeneutics by investigating how psychoanalysis allows for both the hermeneutical theme of meaning and intentionality and the objective and biological theme of drive causality.[31] This attempt, however, remains within a precognitivist conception of the unconscious. Ricœur defines Freud's methodological approach as «une anti-phénoménologie, qui exige, non la réduction à la conscience, mais la réduction de la conscience».[32] Psychoanalysis thus becomes a *demystifying hermeneutics*; and this project of demystification – the systematic search for self-deception and the uncovering of the underlying truth – is definitely at the core of the critical tradition to which Freud belongs: the "unmasking trend" that has been part of European thought from La Rochefoucauld through Enlightenment philosophers, Marx, Nietzsche, and Ibsen.[33] There is a problem, however. As in the case of the Lockean consciousness, consciousness is taken as *given* by Freud, and this makes psychoanalysis a dialectical variant of phenomenology. In contrast, a dynamic psychology firmly embedded in behavioural sciences is not vulnerable to this objection: it aims to pick up the critical content of psychoanalysis – its being a demystifying project – but within a framework where consciousness is at issue and the unconscious is understood in terms of a particular conception of the relationship between the subpersonal and personal levels of analysis in which the former is always in a dialectical relationship with the latter.[34]

4 Autobiographical reasoning

The selfing process begins to arrange the Me into a self-defining narrative during early adolescence due, in part, to transformations in body (sexuality) and mind (formal operational thinking). There is also an increasing demand by others to acquire an individual socio-cultural identity and prepare for an adult role in society. The upshot is that there is a loss of sense of self – what is generally called, following Erikson,[35] an "identity crisis" – and a need arises to play a more active role in self-definition and self-creation. Constructing and internalizing a life story provides an answer to Erikson's key identity questions – questions regarding who one is, how one came to be and where one is going in life.

Earliest drafts of narrative identity may take the form of "the personal fable", a construct proposed to conceptualize a manifestation of the Piagetian adolescent egocentrism, i.e., the adolescent's belief that s/he is special and unique, omnipotent, invulnerable, which gives rise to a propensity for behavioral risk-taking.[36] Later drafts of narrative identity become more realistic and tempered, as reality testing improves and narrative skills become further refined.

In an effort to wed the Piagetian cognitive-developmental tradition to the narrative tradition, Susan Bluck and Tilmann Habermas have described the social-cognitive changes that must take place in order for the adolescent to initiate the crafting of the life story that is at the heart of McAdams's theory. By the end of their teenage years, individuals regularly engage in sophisticated forms of *autobiographical reasoning*.[37] This is a constructive and interpretative activity that relies on the life story format for drawing connections between remembered events and enduring and current characteristics of the self. This activity is termed "reasoning" to underscore three aspects: the constructive and interpretative nature of the activity, its both cognitive and communicative nature, and the normative aspect implied by its appeal to reason and logic.

Autobiographical reasoning is based on four social-cognitive capabilities. These include the ability to order past events in a temporal manner (temporal coherence), the ability to think about the self in abstract terms (i.e. as embodying certain personality traits) and account for changes or developments in

the self over time (causal-motivational coherence), the ability to summarize and interpret themes within stories and apply these to one's own life (thematic coherence), and having an awareness of cultural norms regarding the major milestones and events one is expected to experience during the life course.[38]

Habermas and colleagues have tracked these social-cognitive changes in life stories across the developmental period from childhood to young adulthood. Habermas and de Silveira showed that a life narrative begins to emerge in middle childhood, but the coherence of this narrative (in all its dimensions) increases during adolescence.[39] This study was longitudinally extended to investigate the development of global coherence in life narratives from childhood to adulthood.[40] It was found that measures of temporal and causal-motivational coherence increase substantially from adolescence up to early adulthood, as does thematic coherence, which continues to develop throughout middle adulthood.

For our purposes, what is particularly important is that autobiographical reasoning is a defense mechanism, a mechanism to compensate for threats of self-discontinuity.[41] It embeds personal memories in a culturally, temporally, causally and thematically coherent life story; thus, in situations of biographical disruption (e.g., a sudden loss of intimate others as in bereavement, or of major roles as in job loss or imprisonment), autobiographical reasoning can re-establish the diachronic continuity of the self through the use of arguments that bridge change by embedding it in a larger life story context.[42]

Another mechanism that can create self-continuity consists in assimilating memories to the present self-concept[43]. The remembered self is systematically distorted by automatically assimilating it to the present self-concept, increasing the similarity between the present and remembered reflected self, in order to maintain conceptual self-sameness. Now, in circumstances of relative stability, assimilating memories to a current self-

concept may be sufficient to establish personal sameness in time or personal stability. However, insofar as such a mechanism bridges personal change «simply by reducing the perception of change», it cannot «create self-continuity when change is acknowledged»[44]. In situations of biographical upheaval, disruptive effects on the sense of self-continuity can be compensated by the use of autobiographical arguments in life narratives.

5 Ontological insecurity

The construct of autobiographical reasoning brings us to the matter of the defensive nature of identity self-construction.

The construction of affectional life, over the course of infancy and, subsequently, throughout one's entire life, is closely linked to the construction of a subjective identity that is well-defined and accepted as valid. The description of the self that the young child pursues is an "accepting description", i.e., a description that is indissolubly cognitive (as a *definition* of self) and emotional-affectional (as an *acceptance* of self). Children need a clear and consistent capacity to describe themselves in a manner that is fully legitimized by caregivers, socially valid, capable of attracting attention and serving as a base for ceaselessly renewed affectional transactions.

Even adolescent crisis, and together with it the process of social autonomization in post-adolescence, are largely a problem of identity. According to Erikson, the fundamental problem of adolescence lies in discovering how to move from a heteronomous identity to an autonomous self-definition; and this requires an identity synthesis, i.e., a reworking of childhood identifications into a larger, self-determined set of self-identified ideals. In Jamesian terms, the various parts of the material, social and spiritual selves must be organised into «a new pattern that confers upon the Me a unifying and purposeful sense of identity».[45] The optimal outcome of such a process is a kind of dialectic balance in which the ego syntonic pole of identity syn-

thesis is predominant over the ego dystonic pole of "identity diffusion". The latter is conceived by Erikson as an insufficient integration of self-images originating from a "weakness of the ego".[46]

This claim leads us into the clinical dimension of the inextricable link between identity self-description and self-consciousness. One cannot ascribe concreteness and solidity to one's own self-consciousness if it does not possess at its center, and as its essence, a description of identity that must be clear and, inextricably, "good", in the sense of being worthy of love.[47] If the self-description becomes uncertain, the subject soon loses the feeling of being present. Thus, also in this case, as in De Martino's theory of presence, the identity self-construction is not a Kantian unifying process. Unlike Kant's originally unitary subject, the psychodynamic subject is primarily non-unitary and incessantly works to gain its unity (or illusion of unity) in the act of mobilizing resources against the threat of disgregation. As De Martino puts it, the unity of apperception is not a given, but a task, «the human task of being-there».[48]

The idea that the selfing process imposes a teleology of self-defense on the human psychobiological system finds illustration in the theories of object relations and attachment, whose theoretical focus is on problems arising from a weakness, fragility, scarce cohesion or insufficient integration of those structures of the mind that Freud calls "*das Ich*" (essentially, the system of defenses). This structural condition of fragility is experienced by the subject as a chronic feeling of insecurity, or lack of self-esteem, lack of confidence in oneself.

Drawing on Ronald Laing's *The divided self*, we can describe the experiences originating from a fragility of the ego as symptoms of "ontological insecurity".[49] The individual with a firm core of ontological security, Laing affirms, is one who owns a sense of the self as a cohesive and well-demarcated entity, as well as a consistent feeling of biographical continuity. By contrast, the ontologically insecure in-dividual is one who is liable to the collapse of subjectivity described as an experience of disintegration, psychic deadness or numbness, and a sense of moral emptiness. Discontinuity in temporal experience is a basic feature of such a condition. Everyday defensive mechanisms are perceived as an indispensable bulwark against both an outer world and an inner world which are experienced as threatening.

In the context of attachment theory, Laing's symptoms of ontological insecurity are seen as the last traces of a remote "basic fault",[50] which is to be traced back mainly to early deficiencies in the infant-caregiver relationship. In this context, the idea of an ego that is fragile, or the idea of a self that lacks "cohesion", identifies a condition that predisposes individuals to a broad and varied pathology including psychoses and personality disorders. Let us consider narcissistic personality disorder.

A share of narcissistic defenses is normal in the construction of one's identity; pathology comes into play when narcissistic defenses are the patient's attempts, often sorrowful and at times desperate, to care for and defend one's image as protection for an identity felt as excessively fragile. The theme was explored in depth by the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, who presented afresh Freud's metaphor of the solidity of the ego in terms of cohesion and self-legitimation of identity.

A narcissistic defense consists not only in the more or less anxious safeguarding of the image that we want to have of ourselves, but also in a certain kind of relationship with the external world; in this case we are dealing with an object relation of a narcissistic type, namely, a link with situations, things or persons that serve as symbols to help reassure ourselves about our identity. Now, in narcissistic personality disorders, the feeling of identity is so precarious (the self is so scarcely cohesive, Kohut would say) that the patient finds it difficult to feel existent and is afraid of completely losing contact with himself or herself if deprived of such reassurances. These include what Kohut calls "self-objects",

namely, objects of a narcissistic type that are experienced as neither internal nor external with respect to the bounds of the identity of the person. The psychoanalyst writes about a patient (Mr. W.):

> It was at such times, when his unsupported childhood self began to feel frighteningly strange to him and began to crumble, that he had in fact surrounded himself with his possessions – sitting on the floor, looking at them, checking that they were there: his toys and his clothes. And he had at that time a particular drawer that contained his things, a drawer he thought about sometimes at night when he could not fall asleep, in order to reassure himself.[51]

In a category of clinical cases less serious than full-blown narcissistic personality, the individual who suffers from an insufficient sense of identity, while not being forced to adopt a defensive style that can give rise to pathological problems, can lead a normal life only by placing himself within a situation of dependence, and hence by eschewing positions of affiliation and responsibility. This is an indication that narcissistic problems, in attenuated forms, are ubiquitous, and thus rather than narcissistic personalities, we should address the more or less effective ways in which each of us comes to deal with the difficult problem of our narcissistic equilibria.

6 The interweaving of individual and collective defense structures

The idea of the human subject underlying the psychodynamic inquiry confirms De Martino's reflections on the theme of presence and its crisis. A person knows that she exists insofar as she knows that she exists in a certain way, as a describable identity, constant over changes. But self-consciousness as finding oneself again as a known identity, as a feeling of biographical continuity, is a precarious acquisition, continuously constructed by the person and continuously threatened by critical events such as grief and affective loss, crises in the life cycle, economic and social crisis, natural disasters, alienation and loss of subjectivity, i.e., of one's ability to act on the world rather than simply to be a passive object of action.

These moments of crisis are adumbrated by a "total reaction" that is *anguish* – it «underlines the risk of losing the distinction between subject and object, between thought and action, representation and judgment, vitality and morality – it is the scream of someone tottering on the edge of the abyss».[52] Sometimes a fragment of that anguish can lurk in the folds of everyday life, for example in the bewilderment that each of us may feel on waking. De Martino refers to the opening passage of Proust's *Recherche*, where the author tells us how he happened to wake at midnight not knowing where he was, not even who he was, lost in an existential abyss in which he felt «more bereft than a cave-dweller». But soon the crisis calms down:

> [...] the memory – not yet of the place where I was, but of several of those where I had lived and where I might have been – would come to me like help from on high to pull me out of the void (*néant*) from which I could not have got out on my own; I passed over centuries of civilization in one second, and the image confusedly glimpsed of oil-lamps, then of wing-collar shirts, gradually recomposed my self's original features (*les traits originaux de mon moi*).[53]

The path that Proust elegantly describes – from the total disorientation to the recovery of himself and of the world – illustrates the reverse of the delusional experience of change that announces the psychotic event, for, in this case, the backdrop of domesticity gets destructured against any effort of recovery:

> Thus, a painful inversion of sign is in the process of gaining the most obvious and

familiar perceptive areas, which now appear to be strange, bizarre, artificial, theatrical, unreal, mechanical, out of joint, absurd: and that inversion of sign, that eccentric motion involving the backdrop of the operable and destabilizing any support to continue to be a real operative center, reflect the fall of the presentificating energy on all the fronts of the possible valorization.[54]

In the psychopathological crisis, anguish expresses the resistance that presence opposes to its disruption. In experiencing the extreme risk of the disintegration of the person's unitary being, disordered people try to exert control over such a risk by suspending becoming within themselves; i.e., they strive to carry out «a total escape from the historicity of existence».[55] Such dehistoricization can be noticed, for example, in the catatonic stupor:[56]

> A schizophrenic [...] was realizing, with growing anguish, that insurmountable difficulties thwarted his action: any movement that he was about to make seemed to present the perilous possibility of committing a harmful or ineffective act; and thus this mental patient, dominated by anguish, chose not to eat, dress, or wash, finally reducing himself to the absolute immobility of catatonic stupor.[57]

And yet this search for total absence is an unproductive strategy, an inadequate defense mechanism, to the extent that it is not able to carry out the redemption of presence, i.e., to reintegrate it into the historical reality. Thus, the psychopathological condition turns out to be a merely private "individual drama" of escape from history, which is unable to «reestablish the spiritual dialectic».[58] The disordered person then fails to «retake possession of the alienated psychic realities, putting them once again into the cultural circuit, redisclosing to them their values».[59]

In contrast with the psychopathological ("irrelative") dehistorification is the dehis-

torification that is put to use under cultural control. In order to resolve the critical moments of becoming only culture can offer «an organic system of vital techniques of defense», which are all particular forms of the fundamental technique of "institutional" dehistorification, i.e., the suspension of becoming in the pure iteration of myth and ritual:

> Magical protection [...] is carried out thanks to the institution of a metahistorical level that absolves two distinct protective functions. Above all, this level creates a stable and traditionalized representative horizon in which the risky variety of possible individual crises finds a moment of coming to a halt, configuration, unification, and cultural reintegration. At the same time, the metahistorical functions as a place of the "de-historification" of becoming: a place in which, through the repetition of identical operative models, the historical proliferation of happening can from one time to the next be reabsorbed, and thus amputated of its actual and possible negativity.[60]

Thus the risk of the loss of the self enters into a dynamic of recovery and reintegration. The crisis of grief is a case in point. Like anxiety, shame, and guilt, grief can be characterized as a "foundational emotion", i.e., an emotion that is constitutive of human selfhood and subjectivity.[61] And De Martino views the crisis of grief as the paradigmatic exemplification of one the two main parameters of feeling in crisis, the *temporal* one.[62] In the loss of a beloved person there is a temporal fracture, i.e., a traumatic breakdown of the expected continuity. Due to this disruption of biographical continuity, the bereaved have the sensation of losing themselves, which – as in the case of the person who enters the state of olon (or latah etc.) or Laing's schizophrenic – foreshadows an ego dissolution experience. In this perspective, funeral rituals serve to bring the mourners back into their particular history by assimilating the

crisis of grief to a metahistorical pattern:

> The chaotic *planctus* of the crisis is transformed into a ritual *planctus* in which alienated psychic realities (melancholic inaction, self-harming impulses, and the like) are rediscovered, retrieved, and concentrated in the hypnoid state of the ritual presence of lament. In such a state, these psychic realities are disciplined according to an anonymous and dreamy "measure"; in the "this-is-how-one-mourns" stereotype of tradition.[63]

Thus, when individuals face a mournful event, culturally controlled dehistorification offers them a route along which the risk of the disintegration of the person's unitary being is experienced, but at the same time overcome, i.e., in which there is the crisis (the mourner's experience of the disruption of the sense of self-continuity) but also redemption from the crisis (the ritual mourning that supports the re-establishment of the sense of self-continuity). This is a path that can be characterized as a process of mythico-ritual reintegration: «a descent (*catabasi*) toward psychic realities at risk of alienation», but with the knowledge that there will be «the ascent (*anabasi*) toward values».[64] An itinerary stretching into a world that is no longer the historical world (the world of everyday uncertainties and of great crises of existence) but rather the timeless world of myth (a body of scriptural and oral narratives and symbols) and its ritual repetition. A world in which there is *death* but also *life after death*, and in which one pursues the narrative of death and life after death because this narrative allows one to tell oneself that death can always be overcome.

The institutional dehistorification is thus a reintegrative technique that generates self-protective structures by means of a repertoire of actions (rite) that embed critical events into a broader, metahistorical cultural order encoded in myths. This cultural intervention can support individual self-protective mechanisms such as the afore-mentioned autobio-

graphical reasoning.

Consider the case of the persistent complex bereavement disorder, defined as a disorder characterized by «severe and persistent grief and mourning reactions».[65] Due to the disruption of biographical continuity, individuals suffering from this disorder experience an emotional numbing since the time of the loss, detachment, a diminished sense of identity in which they feel a part of themselves has been lost, a fading of the coherence of their life stories that is in danger of leading to a fragmentary and inarticulate self narrative. In these moments, autobiographical reasoning can subserve an active process of meaning reconstruction in the wake of loss. But here's the thing: a thorough understanding of the grieving process requires taking account of both the individual and the social levels of analysis of self-protective mechanisms. The bereaved cannot get by alone, mourning cannot be done without an itinerary that is already culturally structured and pursued in interaction with the broader community concerned with the loss.[66]

7 Conclusions

In this article we explored the defensive nature of personal identity in its individual and collective aspects under the guidance of Ernesto De Martino.

We drew on the psychological sciences to put forward a conception of the constitution of ourselves as persons in terms of the establishment of a process of self-description that is a unifying, integrative, synthesizing "selfing" process. This is a (non-Kantian) psychobiological synthetic function that originates the subject's narrative identity, which is the key ingredient in a developmental account of the identity of the person as a continuity across time and space, interpreted reflectively by the agent.

Our focus was on Dan McAdams' neo-Jamesian theory of narrative identity and Tillman Habermas' construct of autobiographical reasoning. The intrinsically defen-

sive nature of these two constructs confirms and boosts De Martino's theorizing on the crisis of presence. Self-consciousness as finding oneself again as a known identity, as a feeling of biographical continuity, is a precarious acquisition, continuously constructed by the person and constantly exposed to the risk of disgregation. As Giddens puts it, personal identity is «something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual».[67] This precariousness is the key to understanding the defensiveness immanent to the selfing process. The need to construct and protect a subjective identity that is valid to the greatest extent possible is rooted in the primary need to subsist subjectively, and thus to exist solidly as a describable ego, as a unitary subject.

Thus, the identity of person constitutes itself as a repertoire of composite psychological maneuvers, of activities that take pains to cope with its lack of ontological guarantee, constructing itself on the edge of its original "non-being", as it were. The construction and defense of identity, however, is not only a psychological theme, but it is also an anthropological one since defense mechanisms fall along a spectrum that stretches from the individual to the collective level. At a social and collective level, defenses consist in the construction of De Martino's system of techniques designed to protect the unity of self-consciousness, namely «a system of references – in part symbolic and ritual – which give perspective to living, domesticity and meaning to one's own being-in-the-world».[68] Unlike what De Martino thought, however, the individual mind, as portrayed by psychodynamic research, is no longer the place of an unproductive "irrelative dehistoricization"; rather, it is the cunning sphere of «the intrapsychic defenses and the interpersonal manoeuvres to which each of us appeals, in relationship with other people and our own environment, to defend our self-describability and, indissolubly, the solidity of our own self-conscious being».[69]

The case of the persistent complex be-

reavement disorder was taken as a model of the interplay between individual and collective defensive structures.

Notes

[1] This essay adds to a series of Demartinian investigations into the defensive nature of self-consciousness: M. MARRAFFA, *De Martino, Jervis, and the self-defensive nature of self-consciousness*, in: «Paradigmi», vol. XXXI, n. 2, 2013, pp. 109-124; M. DI FRANCESCO, M. MARRAFFA, A. PATERNOSTER, *The Self and its Defenses*, Palgrave-Macmillan, London 2016, pp. 147-177; R. GUERINI, M. MARRAFFA, *Lockean persons, Self-narratives, and Eudaimonia*, in: «Teoria», vol. XXXVII, n. 2, 2017, pp. 65-80; S.F. BERARDINI, M. MARRAFFA, *Cognitive Anthropology of Religion: A Psychodynamic Critique*, in: «Paradigmi», vol. XXXVI, n. 2, 2018, pp. 299-316.

[2] Cf. R. BODEI, *Dissolution of the Subject in 19th Century Culture*, in: R. BODEI, G. CANTILLO, A. FERRARA, V. GESSA KUROTSCHKA, S. MAFFETTONE (a cura di), *Ricostruzione della soggettività*, Liguori, Napoli 2004, pp. 255-272.

[3] J. LOCKE, *An essay concerning human understanding* (1694), Clarendon Press, Oxford 1975, pp. 151-152.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[5] E. DE MARTINO, *Il mondo magico* (1948), Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2007, p. 158.

[6] Cf. M.M. NOUR, L. EVANS, D. NUTT, R.L. CARHART-HARRIS, *Ego-dissolution and Psychedelics: Validation of the Ego-Dissolution Inventory (EDI)*, in: «Frontiers in Human Neuroscience», vol. X, 2016, Art.Nr. 269 – doi: 10.3389/fnhum.2016.00269.

[7] E. DE MARTINO, *Il mondo magico*, cit., p. 159 (Engl. transl. in C. GINZBURG, *Momigliano and De Martino*, in: «History and Theory», vol. XXX, n. 4, 1991, pp. 37-48). Ginzburg sees here the influence of those passages of the second volume of *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen* where Ernst Cassirer speaks of the limited validity of the "unity of the feeling of self" in mythic thought and of the relationship between the I and external reality conceived as a process rather than as a given.

[8] E. DE MARTINO, *Il mondo magico*, cit., pp. 158-159.

[9] Cf. G. JERVIS, *Ricordo di Ernesto de Martino*, in: C. GALLINI, M. MASSENZIO (a cura di), *Ernesto de Martino nella cultura europea*, Liguori, Napoli 1998, pp. 315-319.

[10] From 1959 to 1963 Jervis collaborated with De

Martino in a team study of the ecstatic healing cult of tarantism in the Salentine Peninsula of southern Italy. Cf. E. DE MARTINO, *La terra del rimorso*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1961 (Engl. transl. *The Land of Remorse*, translated by D.L. ZINN, Free Association Books, London 2005).

[11] G. JERVIS, *Il mito dell'interiorità*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2011, p. LI.

[12] Cf. W. JAMES, *The principles of psychology* (1890), Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1981, vol. I, pp. ch. 10.

[13] Cf. M.R. LEARY, J.P. TANGNEY, *Handbook of self and identity*, Guilford, New York 2012, p. VII, 2nd edition.

[14] Cf. G. JERVIS, *Il mito dell'interiorità*, cit.

[15] Cf. K.J. GERGEN, *The saturated self*, Basic Books, New York 1991.

[16] Cf. D.P. MCADAMS, *The case for unity in the (post)modern self: A modest proposal*, in: R.D. ASHMORE, L. JUSSIM (eds.), *Self and identity. Fundamental issues*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, pp. 46-78.

[17] D.P. MCADAMS, *Personality, modernity, and the storied self: A contemporary framework for studying persons*, in: «Psychological Inquiry», vol. VII, n. 4, 1996, pp. 295-321, here p. 302.

[18] *Ibidem*.

[19] D.P. MCADAMS, K.S. COX, *Self and identity Across the life span*, in: R.M. LERNER (ed.), *The handbook of life-span development*, vol. II, Wiley, New York 2010, pp. 158-207, here p. 162.

[20] Cf. D.P. MCADAMS, *The case for unity in the (post)modern self*, cit., p. 56.

[21] Cf. R.M. RYAN, *Psychological needs and the facilitation of integrative processes*, in: «Journal of Personality», vol. LXIII, 1995, pp. 397-427.

[22] D.P. MCADAMS, K.S. COX, *Self and identity across the life span*, cit., p. 169.

[23] *Ibidem*.

[24] As Shoemaker notes, «[i]t was not until John Locke that there was an explicit attempt to connect personal identity with broader ethical concerns» (D. SHOEMAKER, *Personal identity and ethics*, in: E.N. ZALTA (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, Winter edition 2019, URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/identity-ethics/>, §1). Locke famously called "person" a forensic term, «appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness, and misery» (J. LOCKE, *An essay concerning human understanding*, cit., pp. 50-51).

[25] Cf. M. SCHECHTMAN, *The constitution of selves*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1996; M. SCHECHTMAN, *Staying alive: Personal identity, practical concerns, and the unity of a life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

[26] Cf. C.M. KORSGAARD, *Personal identity and the unity of agency: A Kantian response to Parfit*, in: «Philosophy & Public Affairs», vol. XVIII, n. 2, 1989, pp. 101-132.

[27] J.W. SCHROER, R. SCHROER, *Getting the story right: A reductionist narrative account of personal identity*, in: «Philosophical Studies», vol. CLXXI, n. 3, 2014, pp. 445-469, here p. 460.

[28] Cf. J. BRUNER, *Acts of meaning*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1990; A. MACINTYRE, *After virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1984; C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the self: The Making of the modern identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1989.

[29] Cf. D.C. DENNETT, *Consciousness explained*, Little Brown & Co, Boston 1991; M.S. GAZZANIGA, *Who's in charge? Free will and the science of the brain*, HarperCollins, New York 2011; P. CARRUTHERS, *The opacity of mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011. This is not a new complaint, of course: it is presumably «what Habermas was getting at when he remarked that Dreyfus treats *Being and Time* as if it had just washed up as flotsam on the shores of some Californian beach» (C.B. CHRISTENSEN, *Getting Heidegger off the West Coast*, in: «Inquiry», vol. XLI, n. 1, 1998, pp. 65-87, here p. 84).

[30] Cf. G. JERVIS, *La psicoanalisi come esercizio critico*, Garzanti, Milano 1989.

[31] Cf. P. RICŒUR, *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud*, Le Seuil, Paris 1965.

[32] P. RICŒUR, *La question du sujet: le défi de la sémiologie*, in: P. RICOEUR, *Le conflit des interprétations*, Le Seuil, Paris 1969, pp. 233-261, here p. 237.

[33] H.F. ELLENBERGER, *The discovery of the unconscious: The history and evolution of dynamic psychiatry*, Basic Books, New York 1970, p. 537.

[34] For a discussion of this approach to "the mark of the mental" issue, cf. M. DI FRANCESCO, M. MARRAFFA, A. PATERNOSTER, *The Self and its Defenses*, cit., pp. 43-46.

[35] Cf. E.H. ERIKSON, *Identity, youth and crisis*, W.W. Norton Company, New York 1968.

[36] Cf. D. ELKIND, *Egocentrism in adolescence*, in: «Child Development», vol. XXXVIII, n. 4, 1967, pp. 1025-1034.

[37] Cf. T. HABERMAS, S. BLUCK, *Getting a life: The*

emergence of the life story in adolescence, in: «Psychological Bulletin», vol. CXXVI, n. 5, 2000, pp. 748-769.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 749: «This conceptual framework is partially rooted in the Piagetian tradition and therefore shares some features with cognitive-developmental theories. The central thesis of the development of the life story in adolescence is the emergence of a new quality. This quality, the global coherence of the life story, however, may be attained to varying degrees, comparable with the gradual emergence of the story format during childhood».

[39] Cf. T. HABERMAS, C. DE SILVEIRA, *The development of global coherence in life narratives across adolescence: Temporal, causal and thematic aspects*, in: «Developmental Psychology», vol. XLIV, 2008, pp. 707-721. Participants from age 8 through 20 were asked to narrate seven personally significant events and then to place them on a personal timeline. Although the 8-year-olds scored above chance on this task, it was not until age 12 that children began to link single events causally, and causal and biographical reasoning used increased in complexity and coherence across age.

[40] Cf. C. KÖBER, F. SCHMIEDEK, T. HABERMAS, *Characterizing lifespan development of three aspects of coherence in life narratives: A cohort-sequential study*, in: «Developmental Psychology», vol. LI, n. 2, 2015, pp. 260-75.

[41] Cf. T. HABERMAS, C. KÖBER, *Autobiographical reasoning is constitutive for narrative identity: The role of the life story for personal continuity*, in: K.C. MCLEAN, M. SYED (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of identity development*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 149-165.

[42] These arguments may help to bridge personal discontinuity by learning a lesson ("After that I told myself, when I fall in love the next time, I must take care that school doesn't suffer") or abstracting a general insight from a specific event that may also cover other events ("I was missing him for many months. Probably it's always like that, when it's the first kiss"), or by localising an event in a larger concept of normal development ("At the time I wasn't aware of any of that, after all I was still too young for that"). Cf. T. HABERMAS, C. KÖBER, *Autobiographical reasoning in life narratives buffers the effect of biographical disruptions on the sense of self-continuity*, in: «Memory», vol. XXIII, 2015, pp. 664-674.

[43] Cf. M.A. CONWAY, J.A. SINGER, A. TAGINI, *The self and autobiographical memory: Correspondence and coherence*, in: «Social Cognition», vol. XXII, n. 5, 2004, pp. 495-537.

[44] T. HABERMAS, C. KÖBER, *Autobiographical reasoning is constitutive for narrative identity*, cit., p. 155.

[45] D.P. MCADAMS, K.S. COX, *Self and identity across the life span*, cit., p. 164.

[46] It is important to note that here Erikson takes what Freud calls "*das Ich*" to be a synthesizing process, thus coinciding with the selfing process. Cf. D.P. MCADAMS, *The case for unity in the (post)modern self*, cit., p. 57.

[47] Cf. M. BALINT, *Early developmental states of the ego. Primary object love* (1937), in: M. BALINT, *Primary love and psychoanalytic technique*, Tavistock, London 1965, pp. 90-108.

[48] E. DE MARTINO, *Storia e metastoria. I fondamenti di una teoria del sacro*, Argo, Lecce 1980, p. 101.

[49] Cf. R.D. LAING, *The divided self: An existential study in sanity and madness*, Tavistock, London 1960.

[50] Cf. M. BALINT, *The basic fault. Therapeutic aspects of regression* (1968), Northwestern University Press, Evanston (Ill.) 1992.

[51] H. KOHUT, *The restoration of the self*, International Universities Press, New York 1977, pp. 167-168.

[52] E. DE MARTINO, *Crisi della presenza e reintegrazione religiosa*, in: «Aut Aut», vol. XXXI, n. 6, 1956, pp. 17-38 (Engl. transl. *Crisis of presence and religious reintegration*, in: «HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory», vol. II, n. 2, 2012, pp. 434-50, here p. 439).

[53] M. PROUST, *In search of lost time, vol. 1: The way by Swann's* (1913), Penguin Classics, London 2002, p. 9, quoted in E. DE MARTINO, *Apocalissi culturali e apocalissi psicopatologiche* (1964), Argo, Lecce 1997, pp. 143-144.

[54] E. DE MARTINO, *Morte e pianto rituale* (1958), Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2008, p. 143.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[56] Stupor is a complete lack of motor responses. Cf. AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th Edition, American Psychiatric Association, Washington (DC) 2013, p. 88.

[57] E. DE MARTINO, *Morte e pianto rituale*, cit., pp. 32-33.

[58] E. DE MARTINO, *Crisis of presence and religious reintegration*, cit., p. 436.

[59] *Ibidem.*

[60] Cf. E. DE MARTINO, *Sud e magia* (1959), Don-

zelli, Milano 2015 (Engl. transl. *Magic. A theory from the South*, translated by D.L. ZINN, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2015, p. 94).

[61] Cf. S. BRINKMANN, *The grieving animal: Grief as a foundational emotion*, in: «Theory & Psychology», vol. XXVIII, n. 2, 2018, pp. 193-207.

[62] The other being the *spatial* or *geographic* parameter of feeling in crisis, what De Martino called "territorial anxiety", namely the difficulty of leaving the "domestic zone". Cf. E. DE MARTINO, *Crisis of presence and religious reintegration*, cit., pp. 443-444. This notion is akin to what the psychoanalysts Leon and Rebeca Grinberg called "protective deficiency" (cf. L. GRINBERG, R. GRINBERG, *Psychoanalytic perspectives on migration and exile*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2004).

We thank an anonymous referee for this reference.

[63] E. DE MARTINO, *Crisis of presence and religious reintegration*, cit., p. 445.

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 444.

[65] AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*, 5th edition, cit., p. 289.

[66] Cf. R.A. NEIMEYER, D. KLASS, M.R. DENNIS, *A social constructionist account of grief: Loss and the narration of meaning*, in: «Death Studies», vol. XXXVIII, n. 6-10, 2014, pp. 485-498.

[67] A. GIDDENS, *Modernity and self-identity*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 52.

[68] G. JERVIS, *Il mito dell'interiorità*, cit., p. 92.

[69] G. JERVIS, *Ricordo di Ernesto De Martino*, cit., p. 31.

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