

HEALING THE FRAGMENTED SELF

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While the therapeutic is often seen as a cultural ethic, Joseph Davis focuses on one form of clinical practice, the recently developed therapies for adult child abuse survivors. These therapies provide a window on contemporary identity questions, he argues, because they explicitly address identity fragmentation, a central theme in much current discussion of the self. Davis identifies a conceptual disjunction between the treatment process and the new client self-narrative to which it builds. He considers what this self-narrative might suggest about the nature of identity and the question of self-fragmentation as a form of personal liberation.

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IN AFFIRMING THE “decentering of the subject,” and even the “death of the subject,” many seem to suggest that the question of personal identity is no longer important. Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that they have been sorely disappointed. For, despite predictions to the contrary, questions of subjectivity and multiple identities have reemerged with a new force and a new urgency.

We should not have expected otherwise. The destabilizing and uprooting social forces that created the “homeless mind,” that pervasive uncertainty about how to place oneself in an increasingly pluralistic environment, have, if anything, only intensified. The social conditions of advanced capitalist society have rather served to accentuate the plurality of authorities, the de-institutionalization of private life, the multiplicity of role expectations, the disembedding from geographical place, and the loss of overarching systems of meaning that so strained the task of establishing and maintaining a coherent sense of self in modern times. While by no means affecting everyone equally, many well-documented features of contemporary life, from consumerism to new technologies, can have a powerfully fragmenting and relativizing effect on personal experience and on the continuity and content of the self-narrative.

Of course, some celebrate self-fragmentation and malleable identities as a form of personal liberation. Many postmodern thinkers champion a self characterized by variation, by change, by flux, by an irony toward life and a free-floating approach to work, ideas, attitudes, and feelings. This self is not stable and centered but multiple, and can, like Proteus, the sea god who could change his form into many shapes, resymbolize itself, linking disparate identity elements in a constant stream of new combinations.¹ For many in the postmodern

¹ See, for example, Robert Jay Lifton, “Protean Man,” *Partisan Review* 35 (1968): 13-27, and *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic, 1993); Connie Zweig, “The Death of the Self in the Postmodern World,” *The Truth About the Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York: Putnam, 1995) 145-150.

avant-garde, freedom is precisely the ability to transcend and reconstitute one's self. Similarly, players in multiple-user fantasy games testify to the fulfillment enjoyed by the virtually limitless identities they can adopt on-line, and one segment of the multiple personality literature applauds the ability of some multiples to dissociate creatively, and, thus, in part, applauds multiplicity itself.² Though what is meant by terms like "identity" and the "self" is not always clear in these discussions, the celebrated belief is that a fragmented "self" allows one at some level the experience of freedom.

Despite the celebration, however, fragmented selves are often seen to constitute a disability, and in more extreme cases, a mental disorder. Nowhere is this more evident than in the proliferation of programs, shows, books, teachers, counselors, and guides on how to consolidate and hold the right identity. Whole movements with high rates of participation, including the New Age and recovery movements, have arisen over the past few decades to attend to tribulations of the self arising from the insidious and fragmenting discontinuities of everyday life. Closer to the mental health mainstream, new categories of disorder and new therapies have proliferated that explicitly attend to fragmented selves. Multiple personality disorder (now called dissociative identity disorder) and post-traumatic stress disorder are but two of the more outstanding examples. Together, they would seem to have replaced narcissism, a blurring of boundaries between the self and what is not self, as the characteristic psychological disorders of our time.

The new therapies for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse are based largely on one or both of these disorders, and are addressed, in principal part, to self-fragmentation in the clients' lives. With some fringe exceptions, there is no celebration of fragmentation here. Dissociation and identity-splits are postulated to result from

² See sources in Michael F. Brown, "The New Alienists: Healing Shattered Selves at Century's End," *Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy as Explanation*, ed. George E. Marcus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 137-156.

serious childhood trauma, and their resolution is central to the healing regime. Rather than discarding overarching narrative frameworks, as with the postmodernists, the therapeutic goal is to construct new ones. However, considered from their endpoint—the attitudinal signs of health—survivor therapies would appear to share a vision of the normative self largely consistent with the conceptualization offered by the postmodernist. In much the same terms, clients in these therapies are encouraged to take an open and contingent view of the self and personal relationships, to be skeptical of all social conventions, and to be self-defining. But if the endpoints can be so similar, then how can the views of fragmentation be so different? Here we come to the paradox in the practice of survivor therapies that, I suggest, challenges the postmodernist idea that fragmented selves are liberating.

The paradox in survivor therapies is the disjunction between the endpoint self and the means used to produce it. According to survivor therapists, the endpoint self, the “true” self, is self-discovered by clients. The therapist tells clients that he or she is merely a guide, helping them to strip away the painful emotional baggage that has kept them from fully developing and recognizing their true autonomy and capacity for self-direction. As each client comes to discover his or her true self, the therapist continues, he or she will find that it flourishes when unencumbered, realizing its potential in freedom of choice, growing and developing in many possible and simultaneous directions, always capable of revising itself as the need arises. The therapeutic means, by contrast, involve an expert persuading a client to tell the story of his or her life according to a preexisting narrative template, legitimated with scientific findings, and presupposing essentially universalist rules about individual development, responsibility for life outcomes, and the nature of normality. One version of the self-narrative, the client’s, is effectively pathologized by linking it to trauma, systematically deconstructing it, and then substituting another version in its place. This is not a coercive process as its critics have claimed, nor is it the mere emancipation and recognition of a hitherto silenced voice as the therapists have claimed.

The paradox in the means-ends disjunction is not limited to survivor therapies. Many within the vast network of “anonymous” groups, for instance, seek to produce a self rooted in much the same therapeutic ethic by employing a medical model of addiction not for biochemical dependencies but for excessive behaviors ranging from gambling to shopping to caring for pets.³ The discourse of identity politics is another, and important, example. Using a social constructionist methodology, activists and academics challenge all claims to objectivity, truth, and rationality by arguing for the social origins of knowledge and its service of political ideologies and structures of power. Yet, as otherwise sympathetic critics have noted, the social critique worked out within identity politics is itself typically grounded in discourses filled with realist, essentialist, and foundationalist assumptions about the marginalized.⁴ The objectivity, and thus authority, of one version of reality is deconstructed as inherently biased so as to be replaced with the marginalized alternative, which is then privileged as a truth beyond cultural standpoint.

The means-ends inconsistencies in survivor therapies, and in these other examples, may simply represent a cultural lag. Survivor therapy, from this angle, might be seen as an example of a transitional form of therapy, leading clients toward a form of postmodern sensibility, yet still rooted in modern warrants of science and the tendency to universalizing presumptions. Over time, if this view has merit, we should expect the means to “catch up” and conform more closely with the ends (or, as in identity politics, the ends to catch up with the means). The future direction of such therapies would be towards some form of constructivism, which, as noted earlier, does not view old self-narratives as objectively wrong but simply as subjectively undesirable.

³ See John Steadman Rice, *A Disease of One's Own: Psychotherapy, Addiction, and the Emergence of Co-Dependency* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1996).

⁴ See, for example, Kenneth J. Gergen, “Social Construction and the Transformation of Identity Politics,” *Social Construction in Context* (London: Sage, forthcoming).

A second possibility, and it seems to me the more persuasive for the means-ends disjunction in survivor therapies, concerns not a cultural lag in the means but a largely unspoken premise in the ends. Survivor therapies aim to help clients jettison impediments from the past and resolve a fragmented sense of self by guiding them to reflexively construct a new self-narrative. The new self-narrative, however, would appear to require a foundation, a moral evaluation of victimization, that is not itself reflexively constructed by the client (so likewise with the moral indignation at the heart of identity politics). Therapists use all their rhetorical tactics precisely to prevent clients from taking a contingent or morally uncertain view of their pasts. Moreover, the therapeutic ethic that informs the reconstituted endpoint-self embodies moral ideals about what is good, what is worthwhile, and what has meaning. Despite an ostensible process of clients liberating their own true selves, then, survivor therapies reorient them according to new moral frameworks. While not described by therapists in this way, it would appear that if clients come away with a more unified sense of self, it is because they now possess a moral orientation toward the past and toward the future that infuses identity with continuity and coherence.

The identity-framing work of therapists suggests that personal identity rests on a moral foundation, a point which the philosopher Charles Taylor has been making for some time.⁵ Seen in this light, it would appear that the celebration of identity fragmentation is not about identity at all. Adopting different personas in on-line games, for example, while exhilarating for players, may in no way challenge the unity of the moral frameworks that help define who they are. A moral foundation to personal identity challenges the postmodernist claim that the self can be truly decentered without at the same time being in crisis. As Anthony Giddens has argued, rather than succumbing to fragmentation, a range of cultural options are available for engaging the tribulations of the self in nonpathological

⁵ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

ways.⁶ But without some orientation in moral space, however achieved (a point recognized by the therapists), the self is adrift and the meaning of personal experience remains undetermined. It is hard to conceive of how such an experience could be liberating. Perhaps, as some have noted about assertions that “everything is relative,” behind claims to a liberation in nonfoundations lies an unacknowledged foundation nonetheless.

Given the increasingly fragmenting tendencies of contemporary social experience, problems of identity are here to stay. So too, if identity fragmentation or decentering is in fact intolerable, is the need for expert guidance and overarching narratives. Reports of their demise or transcendence, it would seem, have been greatly exaggerated.

⁶ See Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).