

Identification Today

We learn from Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* that what holds groups together is the existence of an emotional tie, both among the group members themselves, and between the group and the leader¹. The earliest expression of this emotional tie is that of identification, which is ambivalent in nature, oscillating from affection to aggression. We can trace this ambivalence back to the oedipal situation whereby the child identifies with one parent but then finds, in them, a rival who they wish to be rid of. Freud outlines three ways that the subject can identify – oedipal identification and object choice, identification that is partial and borrows a single trait from the object and, lastly, a different type of identification termed ‘mental infection’ that is absent of object choice.² In outlining the libidinal tie in identification, we must attempt to understand the essential nature and stages of the Oedipus complex or what Lacan terms the ‘internal knot’.³

Identification with the Father

Identification is ambivalent from the very first in the sense that, at the oedipal stage, the subject experiences both tenderness towards their parent, and conversely, a wish for their removal.⁴ This is reminiscent of the oral phase, wherein the longed for object is assimilated and destroyed, leading Freud to name it the ‘sadistic-oral’ stage⁵. At the oedipal stage the subject is also faced with the choice of whether to be or to have, to identify with the subject or the object of the father. In the simple Oedipus complex the little boy identifies with the subject of his father and “identification endeavours to mould (his) own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model”.⁶ The little boy takes his father as his ego ideal, aspiring to be like him in the future. Lacan states:

¹ Freud, S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (1921) Standard Edition XVIII, London, Hogarth Press, p. 100.

² *Ibid.*, p.107.

³ Lacan, J. Book IX (1961-1962), https://www.lacaninireland.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-IX-Amended-lby-MCL-7.NOV_20111.pdf,. p.138.

⁴ Freud, S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (1921) Standard Edition XVIII, London, Hogarth Press, p.105.

⁵ Freud, S. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) Standard Edition VII, London, Hogarth Press, discussed in the summary p. 198.

⁶ Freud, S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (1921) Standard Edition XVIII, London, Hogarth Press, p.106.

“It is essentially the following: a relationship between a demand which takes on such a privileged value that it becomes the absolute commandment, the law, and a desire, which is the desire of the Other, the Other involved in the Oedipus complex. This demand is articulated as follows: Thou shalt not desire her who has been my desire. Now it is this - which founds in its structure - the essential, the beginning of the Freudian truth.”⁷

The taking on of this paternal law, also sees the emergence of the super ego in the form of conscience that keeps the subject in check... Whereas this super ego is often understood as an assuming of parental authority, in *Civilisation and its Discontents* Freud clarifies this, stating that the superego is not an internalisation of the external reality, rather it is an internalisation of the aggression felt towards the one who has prohibited him from satisfying his drives, usually the father; “conscience arises through the suppression of an aggressive impulse”.⁸

The Ego and the Id

Turning to another pivotal Freudian text *The Ego and the Id* (1923) where Freud again addressed the question of setting up the lost object within the ego, a process that he had described in depth in *Mourning and Melancholia* as “the shadow of the object falling upon the ego”.⁹ However, at the time of writing that text in 1917, he admits that he was not aware of the widespread significance of this process. He now sees that it has a crucial part to play in establishing the subject’s ‘character’. ‘The Character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and (that) it contains the history of those object choices’.¹⁰ We become like the lost object, the object we have given up and, in this way the ego is ‘forcing itself on the Id as a love object’ This transformation of object-libido into narcissistic libido involves a ‘desexualisation, abandoning of sexual aims and is at the root of all sublimation’¹¹ It is worth keeping in mind this idea of desexualisation.

Freud goes back again to the subject’s first identifications and warns us that things get complicated for two reasons – 1. the triangular nature of the Oedipus complex, and 2. because of the inherent bisexuality of the subject.¹² Taking the simple Oedipus complex for the boy which we have already described above, Freud outlines that the boy dissolves this conflict by intensifying his identification with his father and

⁷ Lacan, J. Book IX (1961-1962), https://www.lacanireland.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-IX-Amended-lby-MCL-7.NOV_20111.pdf, p. 138

⁸ Freud, S. *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) Standard Edition XXI, London, Hogarth Press, p. 130.

⁹ Freud, S. *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) Standard Edition XIV, London, Hogarth Press, p.249.

¹⁰ Freud, S *The Ego and the Id* (1923) Standard Edition XIX, London, Hogarth Press, p. 29

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

retaining an affectionate relation with his mother. But what of the introjection of the lost object which Freud had outlined would occur? He states that this may also take place and is easier to observe in females. After a little girl has had to give up her father as love object, she will often identify with him, bringing her masculinity into prominence¹³. Freud states here that the prominence of a female or masculine disposition for either sex is important to bear in mind as having an influence on which parent they identify with. Again, here we are reminded of the inherent bisexuality of the subject which Freud had identified as far back as 1899, stating in a letter to Fliess: “I am accustoming myself to regarding every sexual act as an event between four individuals”.¹⁴

The simple Oedipus complex which we have described in relation to the boy, is not, in fact the most common – rather what we see is both a positive and negative Oedipus complex which is the complete (Oedipus) complex. The boy shows affection to his mother but also behaves in a feminine way and shows love towards the father and a rivalry with his mother. We should assume in most cases, that this complete Oedipus complex is what we are dealing with. It is worth remembering that when Freud was treating Dora, he was focussing on the simple Oedipus complex and that the resolution to her symptom lied in the accepting of a ‘normal’ sexual union with Herr K. Taking in the broader complete complex which would look at her homosexual trend would have allowed him to see her fascination for Frau K¹⁵. Freud confirms his theory in his later works including the *Introductory Lectures* from 1933 where he states that femininity is characterised by the introjection of the sexual object into the ego.¹⁶ Therefore the masculine is always inherent in femininity as exemplified by Dora’s case but only fully comprehended and explicated by Freud after the fact.

If all this seems complicated, that is because it is, and what we see today is a very complex, fluid, inter-changing picture of sexuality, (supposedly open to all, supposedly not subject to repression, supposedly with manifold and ever-changing manifestations). But these complications are all acknowledged and worked through in Freud’s analytic theory. As Helen Sheehan states in her paper, ‘The New Psychical Economy’ which examines Charles Melman’s paper from the year 2000: “*Today’s sexual liberation is no longer of the order of desire. Contemporary man treats sexual desire like*

¹³ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁵ Freud states in a footnote to the case: “ Behind the almost limitless displacements which were thus brought to light, it was possible to divine the operation of a single simple factor – Dora’s deep-rooted homosexual love for Frau K” in Freud, S. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) Standard Edition VII, London, Hogarth Press, discussed in the summary p. 105.

¹⁶ Freud, S. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1932) Standard Edition XXII, London, Hogarth Press, p.63.

a simple bodily activity, but with an added disdain and looks forward with all the new techniques to a future of asexual reproduction.”¹⁷

It is important to look at identification and how it is set up at this early oedipal stage both in spite of, and because of these rapid changes and issues that prevail in modern day society regarding sexual relations and sexual identity. It is fundamental to understand something of what is happening for the subject. Because, by virtue of the fact that children are dependent for so long on their parents, we cannot underestimate the importance that the object cathexis and identification play in their psycho-sexual development. In addition, the repression of the Oedipus complex is no easy task. The task that faces the ego is complicated and with consequences. The Id can be inherited and contains residues of countless egos. The struggle between the ideal and unconscious drives is compared, by Freud, to Kaulbach’s painting of the Battle of the Huns where dead warriors continue their fight in the sky.¹⁸ This analogy illustrates the ferocity of the battle and what is at stake.

A Single Trait/ Common Quality – Einzigir Zug

Having dealt with the first type of identification, Freud moves on to the second which involves the process of identifying on a single trait. Lacan describes this as the ‘*einzigir zug*’ or ‘*unary trait*’¹⁹. This may appear in the imitation of a parent’s symptom – Freud gives the example of the little girl who develops a cough like her mother, symbolising her wish to take her place. The identification is partial. It also signals that the object choice has regressed to identification and the ego may be copying either the object who is loved or who is unloved. Lacan asserts in his seminar on Identification:

*“This to introduce you to what constitutes the essence of the signifier and which it is not for nothing that I will illustrate best in its simplest form which is what we have been designating for some time as the *einzigir zug*. The *einzigir zug* which is what gives to this function its value, its act and its mainspring, this is what makes it necessary...”²⁰*

Dora presented from the beginning with a symptomatic cough which, as with all symptoms, Freud analysed as being overdetermined with numerous motives contributing to its development. Freud knows that this symptom has everything to do with her father even though he did not realise until after the case the extent to which

¹⁷ Helen Sheehan, Seminar on The New Psychical Economy delivered on 11th October 2025 to members of the MLA in Dublin. Dr. Melman’s New Psychical Economy was published in 2000 in French.

¹⁸ “In this dead warriors are represented as continuing their fight in the sky above the battlefield...” in Freud, S The Ego and the Id (1923) Standard Edition XIX, London, Hogarth Press, p. 39.

¹⁹ Lacan, J. Book IX (1961-1962), https://www.lacaninireland.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-IX-Amended-lby-MCL-7.NOV_.20111.pdf

²⁰ Ibid., p.32.

Dora was identifying with him.²¹ Remember we saw that the girl will often, having given up her father as object, follow up by identifying with him? The symbolic and linguistic components are important here and Lacan points out that the symptom is making something absent, something repressed – present. He also highlights that the unary trait supports difference.

“ I demonstrated, designated it for you the last time in this unary trait, in this function of the stroke as figure of the one in so far as it is only the distinctive trait, the trait precisely all the more distinctive in so far as there is effaced from it almost everything which distinguishes it, except the fact of being a trait by accentuating this fact that the more alike it is, the more it functions, I am not saying as a sign, but as a support for difference...”²²

Third form of Identification

The third and last form of identification outlined by Freud is that of identification through a symptom or mental infection and in this case the object relation to the person being copied is of no consequence. Rather it involves the subject putting himself in the place of another; ‘one ego has perceived a significant analogy with another upon one point’.²³ It marks the beginning of a new tie.

Freud gives the example of girls in a boarding school – one girl receives a love letter and reacts with a fit of hysterics and her friends then wish to copy her. The origin of imitating the symptom lies in the fact that they wish to be in the same situation as the one receiving the letter, the object of someone’s affection.²⁴ Due to the desire to have a similar love affair, they then experience guilt and accept the suffering involved – the cough. This is a new perception of a common quality.

Feelings of sympathy do not cause the identification but rather come after the fact. Identification through a symptom becomes a mark of coincidence between two egos. This ‘mental infection’ is a phrase worth considering in light of the way that groups are formed today. We live in an era where ideas spread at a rate of noughts on social media, we live in an era of egos and image. The identity and culture wars’ we witness spark impassioned and, aggressive debates and to continue the analogy, perhaps these mental infections do spread like a virus on platforms where things go ‘viral’ – bear in

²¹ Freud, S. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) Standard Edition VII, London, Hogarth Press.

²² Lacan, J. Book IX (1961-1962), <https://www.lacaninireland.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-IX-Amended-lby-MCL-7.NOV..20111.pdf>, p. 43.

²³ Freud, S. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (1921) Standard Edition XVIII, London, Hogarth Press, p. 107.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.107.

mind that the etymology of this word goes back to poison. What will be our antidote to these symptoms of identification, these mental infections, this poison?

Being in Love and Hypnosis

Having looked at the three forms of identification outlined by Freud, in chapter 7 of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, it is helpful to also review some of the comments he makes in the following chapter. In Chapter, 8, Freud deals with the question of Being in Love and Hypnosis. He has already made the case that within identification, we are dealing with the object being lost and then set up in the ego, making an alteration to the ego itself.

Why then does Freud take the example of hypnosis? Because it is an example of the group, albeit a small group of two and it highlights the relationship between the group member and the leader.²⁵ It is also different to the love relation in that the sexual drive is excluded and, therefore the group is held together for longer.

Freud highlights the libidinal constitution of a group in his chapter on being in love and hypnosis and he describes this as the situation where individuals have put the same object in the place of their ego ideal, thereby identifying themselves in their ego.²⁶ So object is retained in a sense in the ego ideal. This holds true when we consider the Oedipal situation where the object in the form of the parent is held for the subject as part of their ego ideal.

Having just elected a new President in Ireland where the ideals and affiliations of all two candidates were discussed and dissected ad nauseum in in-depth debates, we can see how the object of the person (the candidate) can be put in the place of the ego ideal. This allows individuals to identify with each other at the level of the ego and form a coherent, consistent group with each other, thereby identifying with each other as part of the group. As Breda O'Brien commented recently in *The Irish Times*: "*Relatability apparently matters more than accountability.*"²⁷ Can we say this is the case for all relations of power and politics? This relatability is a fundamental element of identification that we can trace back to the Oedipal situation.

Conclusion

From what we have looked at thus far, it is impossible to deny the importance of the process of identification as the first emotional tie that exists for the subject. We see that

²⁵ Ibid., p. 115.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 116

²⁷ <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2025/11/02/breda-obrien-vibes-based-politics-that-elected-catherine-connolly-are-powerful-but-rarely-sustainable/> . Accessed 12/12/2025.

Freud outlines three ways that the subject can identify and, Lacan, in his ninth Seminar on *Identification*, takes up the second form as having crucial significance. The second form is based on the unary trait, a partial identification, an identification on a signifier, a Symbolic identification. The other two forms carry significant importance also. In his conclusion of the Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis Lacan urges us to read Chapter 7 and 8 of Freud's Group Psychology text which helps us explain the paradoxical nature of love due to the oral drive mentioned earlier²⁸.

The ambivalence between love and hate that inheres in the process of identification is well explained by Freud. ²⁹ Today we are witness to the oft termed 'culture wars' that spark impassioned and, at times, angry and hateful debates in the multitude of media outlets that are now available to us. Freud's clear definition and analysis of identification assist our understanding of what is really at play in these cultural shifts and changes.

Stephanie Metcalfe

²⁸ Lacan, J. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (1973). Reprinted in 2004. Edited by Jacques Alain Miller., p.267-268

²⁹ Freud, S. Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works (1921) Standard Edition XVIII, London, Hogarth Press, p.107.