Funk_R_2023b

Human Relationships and Mental Health

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1. Society and mental health

From what we know today, Erich Fromm's first public appearance in Mexico was his participation in the Fourth International Congress of Mental Hygiene, which took place in Mexico City from December 11th to 19th, 1951. Fromm gave a lecture on the contribution of the social sciences to mental hygiene (Fromm 1952a). More specifically, he was concerned with the question of what influence cultural and social conditions have on the mental health of human beings.

Especially when it comes to severe mental illnesses, namely psychiatric illnesses in which people develop schizophrenic, paranoid or manic-depressive conditions and suffer from hallucinations or obsessive thoughts, it seems obvious to see the illness as a deficient adjustment to the requirements of social coexistence and to see the goal of therapeutic measures in a better adaptation to society.

Fromm disagreed with this assessment. For him, the focus lies on the influence that society has on the development of mental capacities. By mental capacities he means, above all, the ability to think realistically and reasonably, to be able to relate to other people and also to oneself in a solidary and loving way, and the ability to be creative as a result of one's own interests, ideas and intuitions. Whether these mental capacities develop optimally or are impeded by the requirements of the economy, the organization of work and social coexistence can lead to mental illnesses – that is the decisive question for Fromm when dealing with mental health.

> «From these premises the conclusion follows that mental health is primarily a social, economic, political and ethical problem and hence one which can be properly approached only by the cooperation of all social scientists.» (Fromm 1952a, p. 39.)

Even if other factors such as genetic dispositions, brain injuries or traumatic events play a role in psychiatric illnesses, then, according to Fromm, the influence of society on mental health is a crucial question. Therefore, it is not a case of a better adaptation of the individual to society but of the pathogenic influence that economic and social conditions have on the individual.

This perhaps surprising position of Erich Fromm has good reasons and is of great importance regarding our present problems, not least for how we experience the pandemic. Therefore, Fromm's theory of relatedness, i.e., his attachment theory, will be examined in more detail in a moment.

But before I speak about this, I would like to quote a sentence Fromm said at the end of his lecture in 1951. He shows with simple examples how much the other Mexican culture influences the question of society and mental health.

> «Mexico», he says, «is also a country in which an old, traditional culture is still alive – a culture in which people can allow themselves to be 'lazy' because they are able to enjoy life; where a carpenter still enjoys making a good chair, rather than to think how to make it quick and cheap; where a peasant may still prefer to have free time instead to have more money.» (Fromm 1952a, S. 42.)

Presumably, most of you will now say, "yes, that's how it was 70 years ago. But today this is no longer the same." That's exactly the point: technical, economic and social developments are leading to major changes for many people, which are also resulting in changes in mental health.

2. The human need for relatedness

The next major publication in Fromm's Mexican time was the book *The Sane Society* in 1955. The original English title (as well as the Spanish) deliberately speaks of a «sane» society, whereby «sane» is the opposite of «insane,» meaning a psychiatric illness. In this book Fromm argues in detail that the psychological well-being of a human being does not depend, as for Sigmund Freud, on the satisfaction or frustration of innate drives but on the nature of man's relatedness to his natural and human environment and to himself.

This alternative explanation of psychic phenomena (and also illnesses) had indeed already been developed by Fromm in the mid-1930s, and he had therefore abandoned the Drive theory of Sigmund Freud. However, it is presented nowhere as detailed and clearly as in this book, which was written in Mexico. It seems obvious that it is also the different and more intense way of relatedness of Mexican people that made Fromm realize that the need for relatedness is the core mental problem of human beings.

The starting point for Fromm's new approach is actually easy for psychiatrists to understand: If the most severe mental illnesses are manifested in a schizophrenic or paranoid relatedness to reality, to others and to oneself, then the basic psychological problem of a human must be the question of his relatedness – and not the question of the satisfaction or frustration of drive desires that can be derived from the sexual drive.

The psychological necessity to be related in order not to get crazy is a result of the reduction of instinct, which has already led to new forms of relatedness in primates. With the development of the brain – and here especially with the ability to be aware of oneself and fantasize about a reality independent of sensual stimuli – completely new possibilities of being related to the environment arise in humans. These new cognitive, imaginative and affective-emotional abilities of the human species thus play a decisive role in how the needs for relatedness are satisfied.

In order to remain psychologically able to survive in this situation, humans must internalize experiences of being related so that – in the case of experiencing trust and reliability – something like a secure attachment and a basic trust in oneself, in other people and in the reality surrounding us can come about. Fromm calls these internalized experiences «individual character» if they are valid only for this one person – for example due to family circumstances – or «social character» if it is about internalized experiences of relatedness which result from social and societal interactions and lead to uniform character strivings in many people. Only in this way can the phenomenon be made psychologically plausible that people of a social group think, feel and act similarly.

However, following Fromm, it is very important that we have experiences that also promote the positive developmental capacities and do not impede or even thwart them. Thus, it is mainly about repeatedly made personal and social experiences of relatedness that influence our psychological development positively or negatively. Therefore, these experiences lead to humanly productive or non-productive character strivings.

3. The need for a sense of belonging to a social grouping

In his book *The Sane Society*, Fromm further clarified the existential need for relatedness by naming the most important objects to which every human being must be related: He must be related to reality, to other people, to his own body and person, to – as he says – «a framework of orientation and to an object of devotion» (Fromm 1955a, p. 63).

It seems of particular importance to me that Fromm explicitly mentions the

need for a «sense of rootedness and belonging» (Fromm 1955a, p.41). In plain language, this means that people only feel belonging when they belong to a social group and develop a sense of social identity. This need for belonging is the reason why every human being must also adapt to the requirements of living together and must form a social character. With regard to the dependence on a social group, there are differences depending on the degree of individualization. Still, even the autistic or schizoid demarcation is a response to this existential need for social identity.

Erich Fromm does not explain this existential need in a sociobiological way with the fact that already primates could survive only in groups. Instead, he explains the need in a psychological and psychiatric way with the fact that the greatest fear of humans is the fear of social exclusion and isolation. This fear was the main subject in his first book, *Escape from Freedom* (1941a). There, he describes that with individualization, a modern human experiences not only individual freedom but also a profound fear of being suddenly left alone, even outcast and isolated. Fromm's argument in this book is that this fear is so unbearable that people «voluntarily» surrender to new dependencies. And at the time Fromm wrote the book, people escaped this fear by seeking dependency on fascist and authoritarian leaders.

Fromm's sensitivity towards this existentially threatening fear may be related to his own life, which was marked from the beginning by the fact that Jewish people still felt socially marginalized. This was true for Jews even after the ghettos had been dissolved, especially if they lived in a strictly orthodox way, as the Fromms did in Frankfurt. A completely different kind of isolation was experienced by Fromm in 1931 when he fell ill with active tuberculosis, forcing him to live in quarantine in Switzerland for months. Shortly thereafter, Hitler came to power in Germany, so Nazi anti-Semitism forced him to emigrate. Fromm had to leave behind everything he had known and had been rooted in until then; he could not even bring his books.

Discussing what the strongest motive for repression is, Fromm expressed this sense of social isolation very clearly:

> «For man, inasmuch as he is man (…) the sense of complete aloneness and separateness is close to insanity. Man as man is afraid of insanity, just as man as animal is afraid of death. Man has to be related, he has to find union with others, in order to be sane. This need to be one with others is his strongest passion, stronger than sex and often even stronger than his wish to live. It is this fear of isolation and ostracism.» (Fromm 1962a, p. 126)

I have emphasized this aspect of Erich Fromm's theory of needs specifically be-

cause it is of great importance for the question of the mental health of contemporary individuals. Only when we understand how important the need to feel belonging to a social group is, will we better understand social problems and pathogenic social developments in the present.

4. The identity crisis of the contemporary individual

There are many elements that today weaken the sense of belonging to a social group and cause the experience of identity to be in crisis. For example, the globalization of production, the flexibilization of the economy and work, scientific research, information in seconds about processes occurring on the planet of which one might not have known anything in the past, migratory movements, intercultural exchanges that familiarize us with completely different ways of living, and technological developments that enable people to do everything in a new and different way. These and other elements contribute to the fact that the need for a sense of identity that provides security is becoming increasingly difficult to satisfy. Due to the increasing flexibility of the experience of identity, some sociologists have even developed the thesis that there is no longer any need for something like a definable identity and a sense of social belonging.

I want to illustrate that this is not the case with Fromm in regard to two urgent problems. The first is the new nationalism in terms of right-wing populism. It shows a threat to the peace of entire nations and points to the pathology of an entire society.

a) The escape into one's own grandiosity:
Nationalism and right-wing populism

At present, we are observing a growing right-wing populist trend, especially in countries that are democratically organized and have achieved a comparatively high standard of living as a result of industrial modernization. More and more people are trying to secure their social identity experience with ideas of their own national grandiosity in order to silence and repress feelings of insignificance and exclusion within themselves. This became most obvious under the presidency of Donald Trump, who satisfied such nationalistic needs of many Americans with the slogan «Make America great again». The need for social belonging is preferably satisfied with self-centered narcissistic notions of greatness, which are always linked to a devaluation of everything that is different. That is why it was only logical for Trump to build a wall between Mexico and the US.

The crucial point in this kind of narcissistic satisfaction of the need for belonging

and the search for social identity is the devaluation of everything that does not belong to one's own. Therefore, if patriotism is accompanied by bogeymen and hostility towards everything that could limit one's own grandiosity, then we are dealing with narcissistic nationalism, which is characteristic of most right-wing populist movements.

b) The psychic suffering of uprooted people

The other example by which I would like to illustrate the importance of social identity experience for mental health is the frequent mental suffering of people who have lost their roots in their own family, clan, culture, or society due to flight, migration, or other reasons. In this regard, it is primarily the group of refugees and asylum seekers who, according to the statistical surveys, are considered to be at risk. Among them are also those who have been traumatized in their home countries or while fleeing. A recent study in Sweden, for example, found that refugees are three times more likely than the native population «to develop schizophrenia or other non-affective psychoses,» whereby the researchers explicitly point out that «postmigratory factors also play a role» (*Deutsches Ärzteblatt*, March 16, 2016, with reference to Hollander et al. 2015).

Other international studies «suggest that migrant subgroups with visible minority status diverging from the prevailing ethnicity of the host country's population are under higher risk for psychotic disorders.» (Bergman et al. 2021)

5. The Ego-oriented social character

I referred earlier to the fact that, according to Fromm, the social character has the task of regulating the need for a social home. It influences thinking, feeling and acting and makes many individuals want to behave the way they are supposed to behave in a certain culture and society. Erich Fromm has identified a whole range of such social character orientations; best known are his descriptions of the authoritarian and the marketing character.

Now I would like to refer to a social character that has only developed in the last 40 years and has positively and negatively influenced our behavior during the pandemic. An empirical study showed that dominant traits of this new social character could already be detected in almost 20 percent of adults in Germany in 2006 (see Frankenberger 2007).

I have analyzed and described this character according to Erich Fromm's method and called it the «ego-oriented social character» (Funk 2005; 2011; 2018, pp. 129–143). Ego-oriented people want to do everything in a self-determined and a new and different way; they do not want to let their behavior be determined

by any specifications and measures of others.

Its emergence owes this character to the achievements of digital technology, networking technology and electronic media. A great deal that previously seemed limited by technical, natural and social constraints is now suddenly possible. The digital revolution, with its fantastic computing, staging and simulation techniques, has opened up unimagined possibilities to create reality in a new and different way, physically and virtually.

Therefore, more and more people develop a striving to eliminate all limitations and dissolve all bonds. Their relationships with other people, but also with themselves, avoid anything from which emotional ties could arise. They want to be connected in a noncommittal way. Instead of cultivating relationships, they cultivate contacts. Instead of feeling their emotional connectedness with their own feelings of longing for closeness, trust or even missing, they prefer to be connected via social media because they, in this way, can control their contacts in a self-determined way.

Thus, ego-oriented people develop a different way of satisfying their need for relatedness. They want to be boundlessly free and self-determined and, above all, they don't want to be bound but rather always flexible. From a psychological perspective, this new way of being related results in shaping their lives less and less from their internalized experiences of relatedness, but with the help of medial connectedness.

There are two types that can be distinguished: The *active* ego-oriented person reinvents him or herself by experiencing oneself with new characteristics, for example, as an avatar in virtual worlds or prefers to spend time in the metaverse. At the same time, he or she also tries to reinvent himself or herself in real life by simulating a different way of being related and, for example, by always being friendly, in a good mood, appreciative, inspiring and entertaining.

The *passive* ego-oriented person wants to have self-determined access to real and simulated worlds, personalities, and offers of experiences in order to be animated by them. Instead of feeling one's own feelings, which are often not pleasant at all, he or she prefers to sympathize with the feelings offered everywhere in times of emotionalization in all areas of life.

In both cases, the grown inner bonds are de-activated as far as possible. Ego-oriented people can therefore only experience themselves creatively, vividly and relationally if they reinvent themselves and their world and have access to social media.

The last sentences are not to be understood in a way that everyone who uses

electronic media and is enthusiastic about virtual worlds is an ego-oriented person. However, there are more and more people who can no longer live without these new and fantastic possibilities because they no longer practice and exercise their own powers to think, to feel, to fantasize, to be interested and creative.

6. Social character and pandemic

In conclusion, let us look from here at the pandemic to ask what role the social character played in coping with it and in terms of mental health. In doing so, it should be recalled once again that, for Fromm, the experience of being related to other people and a social group is one of the prerequisites for the *mental survival* of the human being and that only a relatedness in which the loving, reasonable and creative powers of the human being are practiced leads to *mental health* of human beings as well as of society.

The pandemic, with its contact restrictions and massive limitations in the world of work and many service professions, but also in mobility, consumer behavior, celebrations and encounters with family, in clubs and sports, in education and culture, etc., has greatly impeded the satisfaction of the above-mentioned needs of relatedness.

The following conclusion can be drawn: If today's possibilities of electronic connectivity had not existed, the consequences would have been quite different. The pandemic would have cost the lives of many more people because the mental suffering would have led to fewer people adhering to the contact restrictions. But if the restrictions had been enforced with heavy-handed state violence, there would have been massive protests right away, not two years after the outbreak of the pandemic, as was the case in Ottawa or Paris. Not only would all intensive care units in the hospitals have been overcrowded, but the already limited places in the psychiatric hospitals would not have been able to accommodate the many mental decompensations.

Thus, the restrictions have primarily affected those people who most need direct contact through touch, facial expressions and gestures, eye contact, and joint action: young and old children, many adolescents, but also those old and lonely people who were also refused the few encounters they had and who, in some cases, had to die totally isolated. What the pandemic has triggered in children and young people in terms of psychic symptom formation can already be empirically ascertained, and the figures are frightening.

According to a Canadian meta-analysis of 29 empirical studies, about twice as many young people developed generalized anxiety disorders and depression

during the pandemic. The authors conclude:

> «The COVID-19 pandemic, and its associated restrictions and consequences, appear to have taken a considerable toll on youth and their psychological well-being. Loss of peer interactions, social isolation, and reduced contact with buffering supports (e.g., teachers, coaches) may have precipitated these increases.» (Racine et al. 2021, p. 1148.)

In view of people with a dominantly ego-oriented social character, who do not want to be patronized by anyone or anything and who want to live their lives in a self-determined way, the massive restrictions on individual freedom rights were completely unbearable. Their resistance was partly determined by their refusal to be vaccinated (whereby the invasive nature of vaccination itself was felt to be a violation of their own integrity); above all, however, their resistance was expressed in a sometimes completely exaggerated fear of a new dictatorship and the end of democracy, as well as in absurd conspiracy theories. In Fromm's perspective, such misperceptions articulate an ego weakness of ego-oriented people. This, in turn, results from a lack of experience of the resistance of reality and, in this way, weakens the capacity to reason and the sense of reality.

In the end one last thought: All of us who have moved from online meeting to online meeting in recent years have noticed how exhausting, but above all, how humanly unsatisfying this media-based connectedness is compared to real-life and direct sensual and emotional interaction. The omnipresent longing for «normality» today is a longing for forms of relatedness in which the whole human being communicates, as Erich Fromm expressed it with the need for relatedness. Therefore, the pandemic is also a lesson about the limits of media relatedness. Even in the digital age, mental health requires a holistic human interrelationship.

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