

DOUBLING AND DISSOCIATION

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of "doubling" used by Lifton (1986) to explain the brutal behavior of Nazi doctors who tortured and killed concentration camp prisoners in the name of medical experimentation. Lifton explains "doubling" as follows:

The key to understanding how Nazi doctors came to do the work of Auschwitz is the psychological principle I call "doubling": the division of the self into two functioning wholes, so that a part-self acts as an entire self. An Auschwitz doctor could, through doubling, not only kill and contribute to killing but organize silently, on behalf of that evil project, an entire self-structure (or self-process) encompassing virtually all aspects of his behavior. (p. 418)

Lifton lists five characteristics of doubling that are generally present in those engaged in the process:

1) A Dialectical Division and Connection.

For the individual doctor, the Auschwitz self could function in an environment totally antithetical to the doctor's previous ethical standards. At the same time, he needed to remain connected to his prior self to preserve a self-image as a humane physician, husband, father, etc.

2) Doubling Follows a Holistic Principle.

The Auschwitz self can usurp and replace the original self until it "speaks" for the entire person. Lifton cites Otto Rank noting that, "Rank's work also suggests that the potential for an opposing self, in effect the potential for evil, is necessary to the human psyche: the loss of one's shadow or soul or 'double' means death." (p. 420) For Lifton, doubling is part of the universal capacity "for what William James called the 'divided self': that is, for opposing tendencies in the self." (p. 420)

3) Doubling Has a Life-Death Dimension.

The Auschwitz self was seen by the perpetrator as a form of psychological survival -- the killing self was created for one's own survival.

4) A Major Function of Doubling Is Likely to be Avoiding Guilt.

The second self is evil, and the requirements of conscience were transferred to the "evil" self, relieving the original self of the consequences of moral choice.

5) Doubling Occurs Outside of Conscious Awareness and Involves a Significant Change in Moral Consciousness.

Lifton writes that doubling is an active process, a means of adaptation to extremity. Yet, he does not consider doubling to be splitting or dissociation as splitting was originally called by Pierre Janet. Lifton is very careful to distinguish doubling from multiple or "dual" personalities stating that the radical dissociation and ongoing separateness of multiplicity does not occur in doubling. Although he agrees that intense psychological or physiological trauma, extreme ambivalence, and severe conflict can be instrumental in creating doubling as in MPD, he writes, using the metaphor of a tree that, "doubling takes place... higher on a tree whose roots, trunk, and larger branches have previously experienced no impairment; of the two branches artificially separated, one grows fetid bark and leaves in a way that enables the other to maintain ordinary growth, and the two intertwine sufficiently to merge again should external conditions favor that merging." (p. 423)

At this point, we disagree with Dr. Lifton's analysis of doubling. Our thesis is that previous impairment at a very low level does exist in the tree and that all large societies instill a strong tendency in children through covert and overt threat, force, and injury to be heavily predisposed to what Milgram (1974) calls a state of agency or a readiness to obey irrational authority. Thus, doubling is a special case of that predisposition, and the larger branches of the tree will not merge under more favorable conditions but will require extensive psychotherapy to undo the damage. We do not mean to diminish the ongoing Hobson's choice experienced by the doctors nor will we go into the gruesome details that are well documented elsewhere. The task of selecting who lived or who died, the practice of vivisection, the pathetic rationalization that prisoners, by virtue of being in the camp, were already dead and so could not feel the effects of medical mutilation, drastically affected the physicians, many of whom tried to find solace in alcohol, surreptitious healing of prisoners, or in some cases suicide. However, our original thesis stands that the sense of agency forced into children is the essential causative factor in bringing about post-traumatic stress in the trauma experienced in apparently unrelated later life episodes of doubling.

References

Lifton, R. J. (1986). The Nazi doctors. New York: Basic Books, Division of HarperCollins.

Milgram. S. (1974). Obedience to authority. New York: Harper & Row.