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## The Psychodynamics of the Postmodern „I-am-me“ Orientation

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→ **Note by the author: The term “I-am-me orientation” as translation of the German “ich-orientierter Charakter” was later replaced by “Ego-oriented character” by the author.**

In the following contribution I would like to explore what productive orientation and mental health mean against the background of a new, non-productive social character orientation, which first developed after Erich Fromm's death. I call this the „I-am-me orientation.“<sup>1</sup> Certain character traits that are also typical of the „marketing orientation“ described by Erich Fromm<sup>2</sup>—for example, the ability to be flexible, spontaneous, and creative—are also present in the „I-am-me orientation.“ The person with an „I-am-me orientation,“ however, is not interested in being successful and in selling himself or herself through proper marketing. His or her basic striving—that is, the *orientation* of his or her character—is a different one (which is why what his or her character traits inherently strive for is something else). In the first section of my paper I will describe this new character orientation in order to show which unconscious dynamics leads to this striking „I-am-me orientation“ and why it is detrimental to mental health.

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1 See R. Funk, *Ich und Wir. Psychoanalyse des postmodernen Menschen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005). – An initial discussion of this new social character orientation in English is found in R. Funk, „Young People and the 'Post-modern' Character,“ in *Fromm Forum* (English edition) 8/2004, Tuebingen (privately published) 2004, pp. 15-20.

2 See above all E. Fromm, *Man for Himself* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1947) pp. 67-82, and E. Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 147-151.



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## 1. A New Social Character Orientation: The Postmodern I-am-me Orientation

In the following description of the forms of this new character orientation I have restricted myself to observations and deliberations that I and numerous social scientists have made in recent years. The findings of an empirical study focusing on the postmodern character orientation and its incidence in different social contexts, which I also was and am involved in, will be presented by Professor Meyer tomorrow.

The „I-am-me orientation“ is most strongly represented in those age groups and social classes, professions, and lifestyles informed by the so-called postmodern mindset. This is in turn enormously influenced by the new digital technologies and the boundless possibilities offered by the new media. These make it possible to create a reality that is new, different, and better than pre-existing reality. The allure of an ego-specific lifestyle, an ego-specific orientation, is a central aspect of the postmodern revision of reality.

What actually constitutes this new and impassioned social character orientation? The I-am-me oriented person strives passionately to determine himself or herself freely, spontaneously, and autonomously, unconstrained by provisions or conditions, driven by a desire for a fabricated or artificially produced reality. The decisive motivation is a *desire for a self-determined, I-am-me oriented fabrication of reality*, more specifically, of the surrounding reality that is self-created as well as the reality that one is through self-creation—according to the motto „If you don't make something of yourself, you are nothing!“ The typical desire for an I-am-me oriented fabrication of reality is the reason why this social character orientation is called a postmodern *I-am-me orientation*.

According to this description the I-am-me oriented person is neither egotistic nor egocentric nor narcissistic nor subjectivistic nor histrionic. His or her main interest is not to profit nor to exploit others. Occasionally he or she displays strong egomaniacal traits. But the I-am-me oriented person is definitely not narcissistic. He or she is not interested in self-inflation nor in the demonstration or perpetuation of grandiosity.

The conviction informing the person with an I-am-me orientation is: „Don't let anyone tell you who you are. You are who *you* are.“ Only in the radical I-am-me orientation of spontaneous and free self-affirmation and self-dramatization can the authentic and the individual be experienced in a postmodern way. Everything is arbitrary. Everyone and everything can and should be taken lightly, be handled playfully. There is nothing that there isn't, so anything goes. And if anything goes, everything is okay. Nothing exists that isn't in a state of flux. No one



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has the right to prescribe what is good or evil, right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy, authentic or false, reality or illusion. The only thing that counts is the I-am-me oriented fabrication of reality, according to the motto: „I am myself.“

There are two variants of the postmodern character orientation with its ardent desire for an I-am-me oriented construction of reality: an active and a passive type. Similar to Fromm's distinction between an active (sadistic) and a passive (masochistic) aspect in the authoritarian character orientation, I differentiate between an active postmodern personality type, the man or woman of action, who conceives and stages lifestyles and realities as events, and a passive personality type, the person who passionately participates in staged realities and mass entertainment and spectacles, as a form of association or togetherness with others.

The active person with an I-am-me orientation wants to create and proffer a new reality himself or herself; the passive-participative person with an I-am-me orientation wants to take part in fabricated reality in a self-determined way. He or she chooses the social context, the lifestyle, and the events and experiences appropriate for him or her. The experience of self that is sought differs correspondingly. The passive-participative type wants to be himself or herself by being a part, by being associated, and by having a sense of belonging. Being a part, having a sense of belonging frees the individual, as Jeremy Rifkin has formulated in his book *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism Where all of Life Is a Paid-for Experience* (New York: Tarcher Putnam, 2000). As much as the I-am-me orientation and commitment are mutually exclusive, as important and central is the experience of being associated, of being a part for the I-am-me oriented person.

There is not only a new way of saying and experiencing „me,“ but also a new way of experiencing „we,“ a new form of sociality and public spirit which expresses itself in a new sense of „we-ness.“ Regardless of whether a person advocates me-ness or we-ness, both are characterized by a deep striving to spontaneously, freely, „in-considerately“ yet in affiliation with others, determine himself or herself as well as reality. This is what is meant by the „I-am-me orientation.“

This new character orientation is not only realized in a particular way of life but in other values and images of oneself, of the other, of the social environment, the future, and of one's own possibilities and limitations as well. An I-am-me oriented person even develops other forms of thought (namely, associative thought instead of causal and argumentative thought) as well as other patterns of perception, which can be called kaleidoscopic. To better illustrate this new character orientation I will briefly outline several of its most prominent charac-



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ter traits in a second section before presenting the psychodynamics involved in a third section.

## 2. Selected Character Traits of the Postmodern I-am-me Orientation

### a) Action to the extreme

An initial character trait is an obvious zest for activity, a delight in „doing,“ particularly with the *active* type. He or she understands professional activities as a series of projects to be undertaken, carried out with a high degree of motivation. Moreover, he or she wants to realize himself or herself through work and more often than not totally thrives on work.

What he or she wishes to achieve can also be self-related. His or her typical qualities as a man or woman of action are revealed in the fact that he or she „makes something of himself or herself“ and literally creates a new self, personal appearance, image, a new sense of masculinity or femininity through exercise programs, bodybuilding, cosmetic surgery, and personal development courses. The active type also stands out through an inexhaustible fantasy in the stylization of his or her wardrobe.

The *passive-participative* I-am-me oriented person is attracted by everything that is fabricated. One possibility of fabricated activity is that everything takes on the character of an event: the vacation becomes a travel event, the art exhibit an art event, the shopping excursion a shopping event, the church service a religious event, pedagogy a pedagogy of events, etc. Another aspect is the constant need for entertainment. Still another possibility of being attracted by what is made or fabricated is evident in the participative type's dependency on stimulants. Nothing is going on without visual or acoustic stimulation, without sparking sexual fantasies, without tempting the tastebuds. Only with the help of such stimulants am I me and do I belong.

### b) Creativity

A second character trait of the person with an I-am-me orientation is his or her creativity. Here the concept of creativity has acquired a different meaning. For the *active* type it does not mean actually creating something entirely new from one's own unique reservoirs of ability and imagination but to make a design, to stage something, with the aid of software, new techniques, and materials to construct reality, and to adorn and fashion oneself, one's own body, apartment, lifestyle. For the I-am-me orientation creativity connotes a self-determined, all-encompassing aestheticism in the personal world and in daily life.



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The creativity of the active person with an I-am-me orientation is expressed in his or her „self-celebration,“ that of the *passive-participative* type in an imparted creativity. Here „imparted“ denotes a „made“ creativity. The teacher must be creative or the artistic technique. Creativity is then an attribute of the design of the piece of clothing or its material. The brand name of the chair or the furniture is creative.

### **c) The quest for the dissolution of boundaries**

A particularly typical personality trait of the I-am-me oriented person is his or her striving for the dissolution of boundaries and the experience of boundlessness. The *active* type clearly demonstrates the wish to liberate himself or herself from all possible restrictions; he or she loves everything that is risky, borderline, boundless, unconventional, extreme, impossible—whether in recreational sports, literature, film, or in vacation activities. Above all he or she wants to experience himself or herself as being sovereign over time and space. The active type stays up all night and sleeps all day and thrives on being „on the go“—both literally and figuratively. Mobility is his or her home; the goal of being underway is being underway to nowhere. His or her motto is taken from Heraclitus: „panta rhei „(„everything is in flux“).

Boundaries are there to be overcome. Religion and spirituality are means of opening the self toward the inner realm or the realm beyond. Psychotherapy, too, is given a similar significance, since it can overcome inner boundaries, or, with the assistance of a „transpersonal psychotherapy,“ also overcome boundaries to the beyond. The only dimension of time which is recognized is the moment, the present, the here and now. Everything of duration is deplorable, and the most terrible punishment imaginable is boredom. Another form of positing the ego through the dissolution of boundaries is the staging of illusionary and fictive realities, in which time and place, finiteness, distress and suffering, failure, and disappointment are things of the past.

The *passive-participative* person with an I-am-me orientation also seeks experiences involving the blurring of boundaries yet prefers mass events like open-air concerts, techno parades, or mammoth sporting events. Drugs like alcohol or ecstasy (MDMA) play an essential role when boundaries are blurred in experiences enhancing we-ness.

### **d) The need to exercise control**

A further character trait of the I-am-me oriented person is his or her need to exercise control and to direct or exert influence. Today not only the organiza-





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tion of business, administration, and social services is impacted by the appropriate directional measures; the fervent striving of an I-am-me oriented person, too, is strongly impacted by the urge to exercise control and exert influence. Knowledge of how something functions and how one can direct, operate, program, influence, control, and utilize something has a tremendous significance for both the *active* and the *passive-participative* character types. Without the appropriate know-how one is a nobody. Only the person who has everything under control and at his or her disposal in an I-am-me oriented way is considered competent.

The urge to direct and control also plays an increasingly important role in relationships and upbringing. Whenever people turn to advisors, experts, consultants, manuals, and management techniques this wish to direct and to control is implicit—whether it is a matter of childraising „management,“ conflict „management,“ time „management,“ or relationship „management.“ Some people even go as far as to admit that they would prefer having a domestic partner who is at their disposal however and whenever they please—whom they „can turn on and off just like a television set.“

### **e) Emotional intensity and sentimentality**

Another typical personality trait concerns emotional life. Feelings are in vogue again; the individual lives emotionally and gives free rein to his or her feelings, whether produced or appropriated—occasionally to such a degree that we can speak of a histrionic incontinence of emotions. The active postmodern person does this differently than the passive-participative person, however.

The *active* person reveals his or her „I-am-me“ orientation by displaying his or her emotional intensity, his or her capacity to be sensual and sensitive. Particularly in situations where he or she appears as the director and producer of entertainment, communication, and overdramatizations in everyday life the active person is successful in manipulating emotions and generating a sentimentality that moves fans to tears, causes them to panic, or to go into raptures. Today whoever hopes for top coverage in the media—as a politician, an actor or actress, a musician, a scholar or scientist—has to show as well as arouse emotions.

While the active person with an I-am-me orientation is a „supplier“ of feelings, the *passive-participative* person is the consumer and user of fabricated feelings. The ultimate marketing opportunity in the contemporary production of culture is the offering and selling of emotions in the fictively staged worlds of soap operas and musicals, in heart-rending love stories, in the gossip columns and scandal sheets portraying celebrities, or in the features of yellow journalism. Horror



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films and action films also manipulate emotions. Above all it is the shared and mutually experienced feeling that is important to the participative type. When people feel the feelings offered to them, instead of actually feeling themselves, they are *sentimental*. Sentimentality is thus a trademark of people with an I-am-me orientation.

## f) Sociability

A final character trait to be mentioned here is the sociability of the person having an I-am-me orientation. The *active* type is distinctly gregarious, entertaining, interesting, and almost always in a good mood; he or she can talk about others or about himself or herself effortlessly and endlessly, and constantly wants to be the center of attention. Sociability takes the place of what has generally been understood as relationship. In actuality, the active person does not comprehend relationship in the sense of emotional commitment and the corresponding feelings of longing, considerateness, obligation, closeness, faithfulness, and togetherness but in the sense of casual encounters, convenient or temporary contacts for leisure activities, sexual gratification, or companionship.

Occasionally the desire for human contact develops into a „relationship project,“ which is approached unseriously, playfully. Relationships are conceived and experienced as eventful and unconventional, or they are organized like business contacts. Since the cultivation of contacts replaces traditional emotional commitments, one prominent characteristic of the I-am-me oriented person is a lack of enmity and, despite the failure of an acquaintanceship, the capacity to remain friends. Jealousy is usually not an issue. Sexuality means feeling free and being attuned to one's own inclinations and pleasure. Anything and everything is allowed, even sexual abstinence.

Wishes for relationships and contacts that could lead to obligations, expectations of reliability or desires for sustained closeness and intimacy are taboos. This intentional noncommitment entails, on the one hand, a high degree of tolerance and respect for the other as well as of cooperativeness and fairness in dealing with him or her, but, on the other hand, a disinterest in and indifference towards everything that is personally inappropriate or irrelevant.

The *passive-participative* person with an I-am-me orientation designs and experiences relationship chiefly as the need to be associated through contacts and to have access to the other in a self-determined way. He or she, too, does not wish to commit himself or herself but merely to be loosely associated. Here, too, relationship predominantly means being in contact with as many people as possible, independent of time and space, and securing this private network of poten-



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tial contacts. This is exceedingly obvious in the different media preferred for the surrogate relationship experience: cellular telephone, Internet, instant messaging (IM), e-mail, and wireless text messaging (SMS). Relationship is always replaced by the contact; the shaping of relationship is replaced by the shaping and securing of associatedness through the cultivation of contacts.

Here this brief description must be sufficient to give some idea of what is to be understood by the active and the passive-participative I-am-me orientation. I have consciously tried to remain on the descriptive level. In the following I would like to look behind the scenes of this new character orientation and explore its operative inner psychodynamics.

### **3. The Psychodynamics of the I-am-me Orientation**

Common to all psychological theories of development is the conception that the human being, in the course of his or her physical, psychic, and intellectual development, develops abilities and competencies that are attributes of an inner entity structuring and directing thought, feeling, and action. Whether we explain this inner entity with the aid of Freud's structural model as ego, id, and superego, or comprehend it as differentiated representations of the world of objects and of various aspects of the self, or see it as the highly differentiated „ingrained“ synapses of neuroscientific theory or whatever—such theoretical models are always linked with the conception that a differentiated inner structure influences the relationship of the human being to the self and the social environment and leads to specific human abilities and competencies. Depending on the degree of the differentiation and the complexity of the inner structures different stages of development and maturity can be distinguished. Verification of such a view of human development and maturity is offered, for example, by the neuroimaging techniques in neurobiology.

This consensus supports the position also held by Erich Fromm that the developed and mature human being is the human being who forms his or her life out of his or her own inner powers, which make him or her relatively independent from external means of dealing with life and from other human beings. Fromm calls these personal inner powers of growth the human being's „own human powers“ or „productive forces“ because they can only be „led forward“ (producere) from the human being through practice. Through their use, that is, through their practice either a productive orientation or a syndrome of growth arises; if, however, they are not regularly practiced or if their practice is discontinued, a nonproductive orientation or a syndrome of decay arises.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See E. Fromm, *Man for Himself*, pp. 82-107, and E. Fromm, *The Heart of Man* (New York:





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As much as these individual inner powers enable the human being to be free, independent, rational, loving, capable of experience, daring, trusting, and open for the new, and as much as they enable the human being to recognize not only the positive but also the negative aspects, to learn to live with criticism and disappointment, and to think, feel, and act given the forces and constraints of reality, these inner powers are just as contingent on being used or put into practice. Whoever is unwilling to face a disappointing reality and constantly chooses to flee into illusionary virtual worlds loses the ability to think, feel, and act in accordance with reality. And only someone who „practices“ his or her ability to love and actually approaches the other, can grow in his or her capacity for love and prevent himself or herself from becoming incapable of love.

The individual inner powers of determination make the human being independent yet their existence and intensity are in turn dependent on being practiced. The consequence of this autonomy is that psychic development and psychic maturity are not entities which, like physical development and maturity, run parallel to age. Psychic development is much more greatly endangered by fixations and regressions, and psychic maturity is never attained permanently. There are people, for example, who were more mature at the age of thirty than they currently are at the age of fifty, and there are other people who, at the age of eighty, realize their own psychic and intellectual powers so intensely that they are in the prime of life.

Mental health, according to Fromm, is a question of the intensity of the productive orientation, which in turn is dependent on the utilization or practice of the productive inner powers. I must emphasize, however, that Fromm speaks of a productive or nonproductive *orientation*—that is a tendency of the human being that reveals whether the human being is proceeding in a direction where he or she practices his or her own inner powers, or whether he or she alienates himself or herself from these by preferring external powers and becoming dependent. Thus the concept of mental health must also be seen relatively. It always defines itself from the prevailing productive or nonproductive orientation of human thought, feeling, and action, and concretizes itself differently depending on whether it is a two-year-old child, an adolescent, an adult, a frail senior citizen, a disabled or a nondisabled person. Or, to put it differently: for Fromm the concept of mental health is situation-specific and determined by each possible practice of the individual inner powers and the accompanying productive orientation.<sup>4</sup>

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Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 113-114.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the critical discussion of this understanding in conjunction with the evolutionary status of societies and the problem of freedom in E. Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart,



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Against the background of this understanding of productive orientation as the practice or utilization of human inner powers the question naturally arises how postmodern persons with an I-am-me orientation actually use these individual inner powers. Do they practice the use of their own capacity to love, to care for others, to grieve, to be happy, or to empathize with others? How do they deal with their abilities to fantasize, to perceive and to resolve conflicts, to accept limitations and to overcome their own limitations, to face reality, and to hope for a better future? What significance does the practice of their human abilities have for them?

For many people the main attraction of the postmodern art of living lies in being able to shape a surrounding reality and individual realities that are new, different, more impressive, more competent, more exciting, more colorful, and more entertaining, however, not through the utilization of our own human abilities but through the utilization of the products that we have created. This possibility of reliance on fabrications has increased infinitely through digital technology and the electronic media. Today the human being is capable of achieving much more if he or she does not rely on his or her individual human abilities but on the abilities of his or her products, that is, the capabilities of technology and techniques, operational devices and measures, manuals, and programs.<sup>5</sup>

Using „fabricated“ ability instead of practicing “human” ability and strengthening the productive human powers risks increasingly alienating oneself from one's own human powers. The psychically relevant changes occur above all in areas which up to now were exclusively or almost exclusively regulated through the implementation of *human* abilities: in the area of the individual personality and in the area of social existence. Digital technology and the electronic media

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and Winston, 1955), pp. 70-72: „We have reached a state of individuation in which only the fully developed mature personality can make fruitful use of freedom; if the individual has not developed his reason and his capacity for love, he is incapable of bearing the burden of freedom and individuality, and tries to escape into artificial ties which give him a sense of belonging and rootedness. Any regression today from freedom into artificial rootedness in state or race is a sign of mental illness, since such regression does not correspond to the state of evolution already reached and results in unquestionably pathological phenomena.“ (p.72)

<sup>5</sup> This fundamental change can be illustrated on the concept of „technical ability“ itself. According to the Brockhaus encyclopedia, the concept „techne“ still had the meaning of „art“ and „skill“ for the Greeks, and denoted human „artistic skillfulness to achieve something specific.“ When „technical ability“ is spoken of here and now it no longer denotes a human skill or ability but the competencies or „skills“ of products created by human beings. „Techne“ has become know-how in dealing with products. We no longer must be able to do something ourselves; instead, we must merely know how to use these products in order to utilize their competencies. The human subject is no longer able or capable but the personal computer or the software or the management system.



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have also made totally new developments in *psychotechnics and sociotechnics* possible. Following the widespread collapse of traditional systems of order these offer, so to speak, the urgently required „operating systems“ and „software“ for personality development and the organization of social life.

Courses in personality development and similar programs in management assist in the optimization of self-perception and personal willpower, the refinement of social competencies, the improvement of perception and communication, the ability to resolve conflicts, the capacity to learn, and the appropriation of leadership qualities.

What psychotechnics achieves in the area of personality development is what sociotechnics make possible in the area of social existence and the organization of the social. Today almost everything is somehow linked with the concepts „direction,“ „program,“ or „management.“ The inflationary use of the concepts „management“ and „program“ makes clear that the human being is no longer the directing subject in the construction of reality but that it is the programs and the directional and operational measures and their intrinsic ability which direct the human being. Even the managers of a company are rarely its „directors“ anymore. Their power and responsibility generally exist in the selection of the directional and operational measures and the administration and coordination of their implementation.

In order to demonstrate this consequential change in subject in the postmodern construction of reality, I will not only speak of „technical“ as opposed to „human“ ability but also of „fabricated“ or „made“ ability. What I mean is an ability that actively arises from the product. The double meaning of both fabricated and made is intended and welcome: whoever relies on fabricated or made ability corresponds to the postmodern I-am-me oriented person displaying an extreme preoccupation with „doing,“ „making,“ or „acting,“ yet his or her modes of expression additionally have the semblance of the „fabricated“ or the „made,“ the suggested, the synthetic, the artificial, the simulated. Whoever counts on „fabricated“ ability has „fabricated“ feelings as well. He or she impresses with a „fabricated“ personality; his or her experience of relationship is directed by „fabricated“ interactions, and the children's upbringing is not that of the father or the mother but that „fabricated“ by child-rearing manuals (and carried out by the parents).

The conflict between „fabricated“ and human possibilities for constructing reality today mainly results from pressures to conform to a capitalist economic system, which offers and sells realities (in the guise of lifestyles, eventful experiences, and means of coping) in the intention of making the use of human powers superfluous by suggesting the total superiority of fabricated and appropriat-



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ed reality. The more successful it is, the more likely it is that postmodern persons will try to live according to an I-am-me orientation and will try to use „fabricated“ reality to conceal their weak points. Such an economy has succeeded in determining the fate of the human being: bound in networks, bound umbilically, and bound and fed intravenously with „fabricated“ ability.

Before presenting a psychoanalytic interpretation of the postmodern I-am-me orientation, I would like to mention a possible misunderstanding that may arise given my critical stance toward this new character orientation. Although society and economy require the psychic structure of the I-am-me oriented person in order to function and thus attempt to influence the human being to deny and replace human ability with made ability, „co-existence“ and cooperation between made and human ability are also conceivable. Here I mean that a person can very well make use of the fascinating possibilities of made ability in order to substantially increase and expand (and not to replace) his or her own human ability.

Such a use of made ability can be observed, for example, with many artists and in creative professions as well as elsewhere. Whoever rejects computer technology or the artistic possibilities of synthesized music or the digitalized operation of production processes also rejects captivating possibilities for broadening his or her human abilities. Whether one employs made ability for the heightening of his or her human ability or replaces human ability with “fabricated” ability can be established relatively easily. We only have to imagine what happens if we cannot make use of made ability because the personal computer has crashed, the television set has given up the „ghost,“ or the electronic technology in the car goes on strike.<sup>6</sup> Whoever feels like a nobody or is bored to death has obviously sacrificed his or her human ability to “fabricated” ability.

#### **4. A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of the I-am-me Orientation**

This leads me to an attempt at a psychoanalytic interpretation of the postmodern I-am-me orientation. I will begin with a number of striking observations made in dealing with persons having this new character orientation.

- Initially, the overemphasis on the spontaneous, totally independent, and self-determined production of reality is noticeable, the most precious commodity of the I-am-me oriented person. The at times almost manic rejection of provisions, conditions, restrictions, and dependencies belongs to the

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<sup>6</sup> These expressions betray that the technical achievements or devices have become the bearers of human ability: a television set does not have a „ghost,“ and only human beings can go on strike.



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- creed of the I-am-me orientation and contrasts starkly with the real but unconscious dependency on „made“ ability.
- Also prominent is the fact that all feelings of personal weakness and limitation—that is, feelings of helplessness, passiveness, powerlessness, and isolation—are avoided and denied by the person with an I-am-me orientation. My personal observation is that the unawareness of such negative feelings toward oneself corresponds with the prevalence of dreams dealing with these denied feelings—for example, unbearable helplessness, passiveness, weakness, isolation, and powerlessness—in the form of nightmares.
  - I would like to call to mind the problem of commitment, which is accompanied by an increasing loss of individual feelings of love, longing, faithfulness, closeness, affection, etc., and is compensated by an increased need for contact, on the one hand, and by „fabricated“ feelings, on the other hand.
  - The problem of commitment for people with an I-am-me orientation also corresponds to a clearly recognizable problem with separation. Conflicts as well as critical and aggressive feelings arising from conflicts are to a great degree intentionally overlooked and eliminated but not resolved through misrepresentation, positive thinking (respectively feeling), or „painless“ separation (with compensation).
  - Equally striking is the decrease in important ego functions such as the ability to control impulses, to test reality, to tolerate frustration, to perceive ambivalences, often leading to the escape into illusionary realities—according to the motto: choose another project and enter a new reality.
  - Another unique feature of the I-am-me orientation is the generally counterphobic reaction to the structural affects fear, guilt, and shame. Instead of being afraid, the postmodern person seeks thrills; instead of admitting weaknesses, he or she displays excessive self-confidence; instead of being ashamed, he or she takes delight in staring at the object of his or her shamelessness.
  - Since these affects are not available for superego and ego ideal formation, central functions of the superego and the ego ideal are weakened. This is why persons with an I-am-me orientation feel threatened when they have to stand up for predetermined norms and obligations. It is no surprise given the lack of internalized ideals that German high school students, for example, celebrate the successful completion of their academic education at this level as a liberation from „bondage,“ yet have absolutely no idea what they want to major in at the university or what profession or occupation they want to pursue. The dependency of many I-am-me oriented persons on in-





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ternalized norms and ideals is not only evident in their proverbial cynicism but in a compensation through increased dependency on groups and institutions proffering ideals and norms as „fabricated“ ability (for example, in the form of ethics boards or political correctness).

There is no doubt that the striking observations named above indicate that the I-am-me orientation actually reduces ego strength and weakens the psychic powers for growth. For these reasons it can be classified as a nonproductive social character orientation. The more obvious the I-am-me orientation is in persons with a postmodern lifestyle, the more probable the conclusion that the new construction of reality from an I-am-me perspective averts the experience of individual ego weakness and the accompanying threat of experiencing a loss of identity.

In the following I will attempt to verify this by analyzing the unconscious experience of relationship by the person with an I-am-me orientation dependent on „fabricated “or “made” ability. The concept of projective identification would seem to be particularly useful for this psychoanalytic verification.

The experience of relationship typical for a projective identification was first described in the therapeutic setting, namely, where it is a matter of aggressive aspects of the self belonging to the client but perceived by the therapist. The way that a therapist reacts to this projection is of decisive significance for the client. In this situation if the therapist directs his or her attention more closely to the ego experience of the person from whom the aggression proceeds, a strong denial of his or her own aggression is observable as well as a heightened interest in how the person identified with the aggression deals with the aggression projected onto him or her: whether he or she can direct it, or tries to conceal it, or even reacts to it in a devastating manner (by discontinuing the client's therapy), or whether he or she can interpret it.

If the therapist affords the projection a „psychic space,“ he or she gives the client the opportunity to observe how he or she deals with that aspect of the self generally experienced as extremely threatening—whether he or she fears it in the same way, or whether he or she can exorcise it. If the therapist is successful in doing the latter, he or she demonstrates a less threatening reaction for both, establishing the preconditions for a re-introjection in the client.

The particular self-interest of the client in this type of projection exists in his or her placement of something which he or she cannot accept in himself or herself onto the therapist, in order to monitor how he or she handles it. This moment of monitoring on the part of the client is essential, because it causes him or her to recognize that he or she is in control and can observe how the therapist is



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fighting against this projection. In this way the client's ego no longer experiences itself as being passively threatened but as actively controlling, resulting in the „role reversal“ typical of the projective identification.

In the meantime the significance of projective identification has also been described as a mode of communication and is also applied to other areas of complicated interactions extending even to management consulting. The process of projective identification is thus able to explain what actually goes on psychically when a person with an I-am-me orientation replaces his or her human ability with „fabricated“ ability.

Because the contemporary human being is constantly confronted with the inadequacy and disgracefulness of his or her own powers and ego competencies in comparison with the greater effectiveness of „made“ ability, he or she denies his or her human ability and projects it onto objects capable of greater achievement—onto capabilities and techniques or technologies created by the human being. Now he or she concentrates totally on discovering how the machines, the (software) programs, the operational mechanisms, the staging techniques, the program for customer relations, personality development courses, media-assisted presentations, etc. can construct and shape reality for him or her.

In utilizing the competencies of his or her products the postmodern human being causes them to be creative and to construct reality, a creativity that does not have anything more at all to do with his or her own human ability. In a projective way he or she has „housed“ his or her human ability in „made“ ability, and can then, as observer and agent, as user and as man or woman of action, experience what „made“ ability can do.

The implementation of the projective identification impacts the intended role reversal: the person with an I-am-me orientation is neither preoccupied with discovering his or her own human ability in the „fabricated“ ability nor with coming into contact with his or her ego competencies through the use of „fabricated“ ability (as is the case with the projection of the individual powers onto authorities in the authoritarian character orientation). On the contrary, his or her striving is aimed at having nothing more to do with his or her much more modest productive powers in the long run.

The nonproductive consequences of such an alienation are all the more evident: the person with an I-am-me orientation must focus all his or her attention on the direction and control of the „made“ ability. He or she doesn't really mind doing this at all; otherwise people would not spend hours engrossed in trying to find out what their cell phones or a specific software is capable of doing. Except,



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of course, if he or she is deprived of the possibility of control when the „made“ ability fails to function.

Closely related is the second nonproductive consequence: I-am-me oriented persons may not under any circumstances allow themselves to become aware of their extraordinary dependence on „made“ ability. This is why they emphatically reject all provisions and conditions and live spontaneously and with an I-am-me orientation. The true threat, of course, does not come from the (under certain circumstances crumbling) resistance against experiencing dependency but from an unconscious experiencing of the Ego [Ich], in which persons with an I-am-me orientation, due to a lack of individual productive powers, to a large degree feel helpless, powerless, passive, deserted—just like they actually experience themselves in nightmares.

The „striking“ characteristics of the person with an I-am-me orientation listed at the beginning of this section—his or her extensive inability to endure feelings of dependence and limitation, feelings of fear, guilt, and shame, feelings of failure, feelings of distress and other feelings of negative self-experience; his or her greatly reduced ability to deal with conflicts; the factual weakening of important ego functions such as suppression, control over reality, tolerance of frustration, etc.—reflect the unconscious reality and perception of I-am-me oriented persons.

This unconscious reality is so threatening that it can only be kept at a distance with the help of the projective identification. Only this form of defense allows a role reversal from the passive person to the active person, from the powerless person to the person of action, from the helpless person to the expert, from the isolated person to the „associated“ person, from the uncommunicative person to the entertainer, from the bored person to the creative person, from the unsociable person to the sociable person, from the unfeeling person to the sentimental person, from the dependent person to the director, from the ashamed person to the shameless person.

The psychoanalytic understanding of the postmodern I-am-me orientation unquestionably shows that what is good for an economy and a society, namely, the offering and selling of „fabricated“ ability, is not at all good for the human being and his or her mental health. Like all nonproductive social character orientations the postmodern I-am-me orientation also supplies each individual with the „medications“ enabling him or her to avoid perceiving his or her socially produced illness. The medication for the I-am-me oriented person is called „made“ ability. As long as he or she has this at his or her disposal, he or she can function relatively symptomless and without distress in daily life. He or she only suffers from a „pathology of normalcy.“ Neither he nor she must sense his or



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her existential dependence on the medication of „fabricated“ ability as long as everyone else lives the same way and does not feel „addicted“ to the medication.<sup>7</sup>

Precisely this „pathology of normalcy“ is what makes a psychoanalytic viewpoint on the I-am-me orientation so unpopular among the general public; a psychoanalytic perspective comprehends the I-am-me orientation as a nonproductive character orientation detrimental to mental health. And it is precisely this „pathology of normalcy“ which makes it increasingly difficult for an understanding of mental health based on the „practice“ or use of the productive inner powers to continue to be understood and to be socially plausible.

In conclusion I would like to return to the question what productiveness means in light of the gradual dominance of the nonproductive I-am-me orientation.

## 5. What Productiveness Means Given the I-am-me Orientation

I do not think that it is possible to conceptually express productiveness in Erich Fromm's sense so that what productiveness means is understood by most people in the same way.<sup>8</sup> This is simply not possible because of the distortions of perception and the differences in comprehension accompanying every „pathology of normalcy.“ Fromm's various attempts to capture productiveness in the concepts of love, reason, biophilia, or the being mode of existence merely tend to circumvent the problem; every human being understands something different under love, for example, because such highly valued concepts can easily become „contentless formulae.“

Following many futile attempts I personally see only two possibilities for more closely defining the concept of productiveness. The first possibility would be to focus on the *effects* and to ascertain and compare the different effects of productive and nonproductive orientations. An „activating“ effect of productive „practicing“ and a „passivating“ effect of nonproductive „using,“ for example, can be established. Another possible parameter is an effect giving energy and an effect consuming energy.<sup>9</sup>

A second possibility for more specifically determining productiveness and pro-

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7 In an interview shortly before his death Fromm even said that „the sick are the healthiest“ (See E. Fromm, „Die Kranken sind die Gesundesten,“ in *Die Zeit*, Hamburg, 21 March 1980). For a more differentiated discussion see E. Fromm, *The Sane Society*, pp.17-18.

8 For a thorough discussion of this problem see R. Funk, „Was heißt 'productive Orientierung' bei Erich Fromm?“ in *Fromm Forum* (German edition), Tuebingen (privately published) 7(2003), pp.14-27.

9 See R. Funk, *Ich und Wir*, pp. 221-225.



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ductive orientation is the use of psychoanalytic concepts to discover which fate the productive powers of growth suffer with which type of nonproductive social character orientation. In the case of the authoritarian character orientation we can say that the authority will lead the human being to project the individual powers that make autonomy and independence possible onto the authority, to make this strong and determining, the individual, however, submissive, dependent, and weak. Here productiveness and the strengthening of the productive orientation mean, against a dominant authoritarian social character orientation, encouraging the individual human being and shaping his or her circumstances in such a way that his or her own will, strength, striving for independence and autonomy, and capacity for disobedience are strengthened in order to cancel the projection of his or her own powers onto the authority. To do the same with an I-am-me oriented person would be senseless, and would probably even lead to a reinforcement of this mindset. What productiveness means concretely depends on the type of nonproductiveness preponderant in a society.

What, then, do productiveness and strengthening of the productive orientation mean for the social character orientation that is I-am-me directed and becoming all the more dominant? My reflections on psychodynamics and on the psychoanalysis of the I-am-me orientation suggest the following summary.

The *general goal* is always to counter the I-am-me orientation assisted by „made“ ability with an experience of the ego assisted by human ability and to recognize and gradually reduce the dependency on „made“ ability. This does not require the rejection of „fabricated“ or „made“ ability but its implementation for the preservation and multiplication—and not the replacement—of human ability. Whoever fights against „made“ ability (and for that reason never watches television or uses a personal computer) is still concerned with „made“ ability, comparable to the priest who condemns sex in movies in order to allow a preoccupation with sexual fantasies. The goal is thus to be able to deal with „made“ ability in such a way that the human being does not experience himself or herself as powerless whenever it is unavailable. To achieve this goal a number of painful steps toward the strengthening of the productive orientation are imperative.

To strengthen the productive orientation of a human being with a postmodern mindset means *specifically*:

- To encourage and promote everything that stimulates and leads to the utilization of individual thought, individual feeling, and acting enabled by individual competencies, and to avoid everything that hinders or attempts to replace the awareness of individual human powers.





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- Productiveness means above all to be open to the aspects of one's own experience of the ego denied by the I-am-me orientation: one's own limitedness, one's own helplessness, one's own failure, one's own weakness, one's own experience of powerlessness, one's own conflictual and aggressive tendencies, one's own depressiveness and insensitivity.
- In order to give the productive orientation a chance it is not, however, sufficient to be open to these negatively experienced aspects of the ego; one must also be able to subject oneself to them and be able to remove the masks of the I-am-me orientation: the mask of fearlessness, the mask of the person who can do everything, and the mask of shamelessness with which I-am-me oriented persons try to deny their feelings of fear, guilt, and shame.
- Subjecting oneself to negatively experienced feelings toward the self particularly offers persons with an I-am-me orientation the opportunity to make the experiencing of personal feelings at all possible again—of contentious and aggressive feelings as well as loving, longing, affectionate, respecting, attracting feelings. This is the only way to overcome the loss of one's own emotional capacity and the dependence on sentimental „reanimation“ typical of the person with an I-am-me orientation. And the only way to revive the ability to make emotional commitments and to sever emotional ties.
- Productiveness is also a matter of not fleeing from an external reality that is disappointing and limiting—neither into an illusionary fantasy world nor into a virtual community nor into a consumeristic shopping world nor into a childlike world of innocence nor into a sentimental world of love nor into an exciting world of megaevents, nor into a world of exclusively positive thinking and feeling.
- A particular difficulty in strengthening the productive orientation in order to overcome the nonproductive I-am-me orientation is, on the one hand, to be able to admit to oneself that one is in many respects dependent, and, on the other hand, to be able to live without acting, doing, determining, directing, and being in control. The need to exercise control is the best kept secret of many people with an I-am-me orientation—not only kept from others but also from themselves. How determinative it is becomes obvious as soon as contact breaks off or the subordinated spouse or child or operational program is no longer under control and no longer at one's disposal.
- An equally important aspect of the promotion of the productiveness of persons with an I-am-me orientation by psychotherapists, social workers, and educators is the phasing out of auxiliary egos, auxiliary superegos, and auxiliary ego ideals. This process can only be carried out gradually and should not



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overtax the persons involved, yet a clear and challenging concept must be proposed, with the goal that I-am-me oriented persons themselves assume responsibility for their strong and weak egos, their personal ideals, and the accepted norms as well as discontinue utilizing the responsibility of the therapist, the social worker, or educator and exercising control over these.

The last word belongs to Erich Fromm: „Productiveness is man's ability to use *his* powers and to realize the potentialities *inherent in him*.“ (E. Fromm, *Man for Himself*, p. 84)