Medicine of the Person
76th International Meeting
29th July – 1st August 2026
F – ISSENHEIM

Conference ***4***

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31/07/2026

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Personality development of young people in a self-centred world

Let me begin with a preliminary remark: we humans tend to romanticise the past. It can be a relief to gradually forget difficult situations with the passage of time and to remember more of the beautiful things one has experienced over the course of one's life. However, such a shift in perception constitutes a distortion, and it can lead us to perceive current events as far worse than they used to be, possibly far worse than a less distorted perception might suggest. You will be familiar with Socrates' lament about how morally corrupt the youth of today are compared to earlier times.

By raising this point at the outset, I wish to make it clear that my contribution is not intended to convey how bad everything has become, nor that our society is headed for disaster if one looks at today's young people. Rather, I wish to show that young people's personal development is embedded within the changes taking place in society as a whole, which these young people cannot or can barely escape. That said, I do believe there is cause for concern as regards young people's development.

Children and young people today are exposed to significantly different social influences than was the case 20 or 30 years ago. First and foremost, these include the advent of the internet, the launch of the iPhone in 2007 and the subsequent rapid development of social media that has taken place since then. I would like to discuss the significance of social media for young people's development in greater detail later. First, I would like to shed light on social developments as depicted by sociologists in their research over recent years. An example is shown on the following slide. This illustrates the results of a study which was based on a very simple idea: analysing the frequency with which certain words appear in pop songs. The study counted how often the words 'I', or 'we' appeared in songs between 1980 and 2007, and how frequently social issues relating to families or children were the subject of the lyrics. As you can see, over this period of just under 30 years there has been a dramatic increase in the use of the first-person singular, whilst at the same time the proportion of the first-person plural has significantly decreased – in other words, 'I' is used instead of 'we', 'mine' instead of 'ours'. Themes relating to families and to children have also declined over time. These pop songs are written by adults, but it is primarily teenagers and young adults who listen to them and are thus drawn into an increasingly self-centred world.

The world around us is changing, and we are changing with it and within it. I would like to illustrate this with an example: in 1975, when I took my "baccalauréat" (final school exams), you might have heard this type of remark: 'I don't buy Chiquita bananas because the United Fruit Company exploits the plantation workers.' Solidarity with disadvantaged groups in society was held in very high regard. Fifty years later, in 2025, I'm more likely to hear young

people say the following: “I don’t buy Chiquita bananas because I’ve heard they’re sprayed with pesticides, which could be harmful to my health.” The perspective and the rationale behind one’s actions have shifted from a perspective focused on others to a focus centred on oneself, in which the important thing is that I feel good as do the people in my immediate circle.

In 2017, the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz published his book *The Society of Singularities: On the Structural Transformation of Modernity*. In it, he addresses a topic that is of particular significance for my talk today. By the term ‘singularisation’, Reckwitz refers to a social system of evaluation that emphasises the distinctiveness and uniqueness of individuals. Reckwitz identifies economic, technological and socio-cultural factors as the causes of this development. Here, I would like to focus particularly on the role of the internet in this development, where two forms of singularity are particularly prominent. On the one hand, the selection of what is presented to us by search engines or social media platforms is controlled by algorithms, so that we are provided with an individualised selection of information tailored specifically to us. Secondly, we ourselves – and this applies particularly to teenagers and young adults – have control over how our own persona is presented publicly. Reckwitz describes this in the following terms: ‘The late-modern self is defined above all by the fact that it presents itself to others as successful.’ We know that the battle for attention on the internet is won far more effectively through emotionally evocative content – whether entertaining, fascinating or outrageous – than through pure information. So, anyone who wants to be noticed should not “bore” people with facts but rather present themselves as someone very special and unique; the more bizarre, the better.

I would like to briefly illustrate just how much social conditions have changed over the last 75 years by referring to a sociological study from the USA done in the 1950’s. The American sociologist Riesman and his colleagues examined a representative cross-section of the population at that time to see how they saw themselves in relation to society. Most frequently, the researchers found a personality type they termed the ‘other-directed character’. By this they meant behaviour in which a person tries, in the presence of others, to attract as little attention as possible and thereby conform as closely as possible to existing social norms. What a contrast to the ‘late-modern subject’, who wishes to demonstrate their distinctiveness through their profile! This gives rise to a paradox: the pressure to be ‘myself’ as far as possible can, in a strange way, lead to the emergence of ‘a façade’, in which one attempts to reproduce exactly the image which corresponds to one’s own ‘ideal self’, without this truly reflecting one’s own personality.

According to Reckwitz, a way of life based on a single idea – intended to achieve the goal of successful self-realisation – corresponds to the lifestyle of the new middle class in our Western societies. The aim is to develop one’s full potential whilst simultaneously achieving social recognition and success. Of course, there are still countercultures today on the margins of society which devote themselves to a form of self-realisation apart from mainstream society. The majority tendency, however, is moving towards a worldly form of self-realisation, for which a wealth of opportunities is available in our globalised world. Examples include adventure holidays, extreme sports or attending an elite university. Another example: if I want to take a tango course, I should ideally plan to do so in Argentina, because I’ve been told that the best tango teachers are there. Opportunities for individual self-fulfilment come in many and varied forms: in fine dining, in where we live, in travelling, in looking after our bodies, or even – and this is of particular importance to our topic today – in bringing up our children. Eating has now evolved from mere food consumption into an art form. One no longer simply orders a wine but wishes for a Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough in New Zealand, because the climatic conditions there are simply the best for this grape variety. In the past, there were sommeliers specializing in

wine; nowadays, there are sommeliers for a wide variety of drinks, from whisky to gin via beer and coffee. Our homes, too, must be personalised. Very few of us will ever live in a truly extraordinary house. But if one does suffer the ‘sad’ fate of having to live in a terraced house, then one should at least furnish that terraced house with such personal taste that it becomes distinctive once again.

But let us now turn to another aspect of the singular way of life, namely what Reckwitz calls ‘intensive parenting’. According to this approach, it is the parents’ task to nurture their child’s individuality as best they can from birth onwards. The ideal of this type of upbringing is an autonomous, self-motivated child with strong self-esteem and wide-ranging interests, which are to be intensively nurtured in all their individuality. Parents’ investment in their child’s early personality development is intended to pay off in the long term in ‘human capital’, thereby seemingly ensuring success later in life. For professional success, even if a high level of specialist education is seen as necessary, personality is regarded as the decisive prerequisite.

When we hear this, the term ‘narcissism’ very quickly springs to mind for many of us. A Dutch research group led by Brummelman has investigated the origins of narcissistic traits in children and adolescents. In their longitudinal study, they studied 565 children aged 7–12 and their parents four times at six-monthly intervals, looking at the children’s personality (qualities of narcissism and self-esteem) as well as the parents’ parenting behaviour (qualities of affection and overvaluing). I need not explain the term ‘affection’ any further, but what is meant by ‘overvaluing’? I would like to illustrate this with the following example: when a young child draws a picture, their parents and relatives are delighted and praise the child for it; this is normal and promotes the development of healthy self-esteem.

However, if they comment on the circles on the page by saying, ‘Even Picasso couldn’t have done better!’, this corresponds to what the Dutch researchers refer to as ‘overvaluing’. Or, as someone once succinctly said: ‘My child is God’s gift to humanity!’. What were the findings of this longitudinal study? Narcissistic tendencies in children were found primarily among parents who tended to overvalue their children (‘you’re better than the others’; ‘you’re really someone very special!’). This type of overvaluing of their children was found particularly among parents who themselves exhibited narcissistic traits. Such parents often view their children as an extension of themselves; in other words, the children’s aggrandisement enhances the parents’ own aggrandisement. It was noteworthy that these children, who were so overvalued by their parents, were neither more intelligent nor did they perform their tasks better than other children; it was therefore a case of perceptual distortion on the part of the parents, which later led to an inflated sense of self-worth in the children. No link was found between pronounced parental affection and narcissistic development in their children. In contrast, this parental affection was positively correlated with higher self-esteem in the children. It is important to emphasise at this point that having narcissistic traits does not necessarily mean suffering from narcissistic personality disorder. However, when we see that parents with narcissistic personality traits overvalue their children more frequently than other parents, we can deduce that a recognised personality disorder is not even necessary for narcissistic attitudes to become increasingly entrenched in society.

I would now like to examine in more detail the role of social media in relation to personal development. To do this, it is important to consider the concept of ‘upward’ comparison. I would like to illustrate the meaning of this term using two diagrams. Let us take a 13-year-old girl; in this example, let us call her Lucy. Let us assume that Lucy has experienced a certain degree of excessive praise during her upbringing, resulting in a significant gap between her expectations of what life should offer her and the reality she faces every day. This is frustrating and leads to massive disappointment. This is then significantly

exacerbated by comparisons with other girls her age. It is, in fact, a widespread tendency to compare oneself with those who are doing better than oneself – that is, those who are better off financially, prettier, slimmer or more athletic. However, what the other girls post about themselves, or what so-called celebrities or influencers put out there, does not usually reflect a realistic picture, but rather what is regarded as an 'ideal me'. When Lucy compares herself to these others, her frustration increases considerably. In my view, the extent to which this kind of 'upward' comparison causes massive harm to the development of teenage girls in particular cannot be overstated. The marked increase in psychological issues, ranging up to more severe mental health disorders, particularly amongst girls, speaks volumes in my opinion.

This is also reflected in empirical studies. Daily use of social media is linked to negative emotional states and low self-esteem, as the findings of an empirical study demonstrate. In another internet-based study entitled *Is Social Media Use Changing Who We Are?*, which involved over 11,000 young people, a range of basic personality traits were assessed alongside the extent of social media use, including 'neuroticism' – which refers to a tendency towards emotional instability, vulnerability and anxiety. The following results emerged: young people who had shown a higher level of neuroticism at the baseline assessment exhibited a higher level of social media use. At the same time, high levels of social media use over time led to increased neuroticism. The more honest or humble the young people described themselves as being in the baseline assessment, the lower their social media use was. Conversely, however, it became apparent that high social media usage subsequently led to less honesty and less humility.

Can we really blame the young people for this? They are growing up in a world that is very different from the one in which we all grew up. If you ask young people shortly before they leave school what they want to do later in life, it's not at all uncommon to hear the reply 'I don't yet know' – along with the suggestion that, after such an incredibly stressful time at school, they first need a year to find themselves and be able to decide which degree subject, for example, might suit them. At the same time, the options are becoming ever more diverse, and when the choice becomes too vast, something known as 'choice paralysis' can arise, which means they are unable to make any decision at all. The Canadian researcher James Marcia has developed a model to describe the development of identity among young people today. The two key parameters of this model are exploration and commitment. Healthy development is characterised by a young person first trying out various possibilities (exploring) to see what suits them best, before committing to vocational training or a stable relationship. In earlier times and in Eastern societies, so-called 'foreclosure' is much more common, whereby an identity is determined by the parents – for example, which profession or spouse one chooses – without the opportunity to explore different options beforehand. Nowadays, in Western societies, we are increasingly seeing what is known as a 'moratorium' or paralysis of decision-making, where young people take many years, well into adulthood, to explore extensively without committing themselves. This approach is fostered by our material prosperity and should not be regarded as pathological in itself. A pathological condition arises when one is unable to either explore or commit, which can lead to a loss of identity associated with the risk of developing a personality disorder.

Finally, let me share a few concluding thoughts. Excessive self-centredness not only leads to interpersonal problems but also restricts the development of one's own personality. In her contribution last year, Susanne referred to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who sees the origin of humanity in the direct encounter with another person. It is only in such an encounter that the 'I' comes into being at all. It is therefore a question of the contrast between self-centredness and what Levinas calls 'thinking on behalf of the other'. Martin

Buber developed a very similar concept with his principle of dialogue, which he elaborates on in his magnum opus *I and Thou*. And at this point, I would also like to return to the social psychiatrist Klaus Dörner, who Susanne mentioned last year, who posits that half of the people seeking psychotherapy would not need it if they were important to someone else even if it was just once a day. This is a concept that is put into practice within the Diakonie (a charitable organization of protestant churches in Germany) as service for one's neighbour. Can one imagine a greater contrast to self-centredness than this form of Christian charity, which is geared towards serving others?

It also raises the fundamental question of what we wish for our children and grandchildren. Do we want them, first and foremost, to lead a happy life, or a meaningful and purposeful one? Ideally, of course, the two should go hand in hand, but unfortunately there seems to be only a partial overlap between them. Satisfying one's own needs and desires can increase one's sense of personal happiness, but it rarely leads to a greater sense of purpose in life. In a study by Baumeister and colleagues, the feeling of happiness was more strongly linked to the attitude of 'preferring to receive rather than to give', whilst the opposite was true for the experience of meaning in life. Reflecting on the past or the future was associated with a greater sense of meaning, but a lower sense of well-being. Greater worry, stress and anxiety were linked to a greater sense of meaning in life, but to lower levels of happiness. If we cannot have it all at the same time, how are we to decide our priorities?

Thank you very much for your attention!