

PRIMARY IDENTIFICATION

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PRIMARY IDENTIFICATION

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1. Core Definition

Primary Identification represents the earliest and most fundamental psychological mechanism through which the nascent ego relates to its environment, particularly the maternal figure. Within the framework of Psychoanalysis, this concept is designated as the initial form of identification, preceding the formation of clear subject-object differentiation. It is characterized by an absolute lack of awareness on the part of the infant that he or she is a separate, autonomous being from the nurturing caregiver, typically the mother. This state of non-differentiation implies a profound psychological fusion where the boundaries between the self and the other are nonexistent or highly permeable. This initial state is critical because it forms the bedrock upon which all subsequent identifications, personality structures, and relational patterns are built.

The core process underlying primary identification is often linked to the mechanism of oral incorporation. During the oral stage of psychosexual development, the infant's primary interaction with the world is through the mouth, centered on feeding and sustenance. When the infant nurses, the act of taking in nourishment is psychologically translated into the act of taking the object--the mother or breast--into the self. This psychological incorporation is not yet introjection, as introjection implies the recognition of a loss or separation, which has not yet occurred. Instead, primary identification reflects a primitive, immediate assimilation of the object into the undifferentiated self-state. This fusion state is essential for psychic survival, providing the infant with the illusion of control and omnipotence over the source of comfort and need gratification.

The source content highlights that this state is strictly limited to infancy, emphasizing that "only infants can experience **primary identification**." This limitation underscores the developmental specificity of the concept. Once the infant undergoes significant developmental milestones, particularly the awareness brought about by weaning and the increasing mobility that facilitates separation, the pure state of primary identification dissolves. The dawning awareness that the mother is a separate entity capable of absence forces the infant out of this fundamental fusion state and initiates the long, complex process of forming the self as a distinct subject. The pure, non-differentiated nature of primary identification is thus considered a transient, albeit formative, phase of early life.

2. Theoretical Foundations in Psychoanalysis

The concept of identification itself is central to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, serving as the primary mechanism for the formation of the superego and the internalization of cultural and parental norms. Primary identification, however, stands apart as the earliest iteration of this

process, predating the Oedipus complex which typically triggers secondary, or neurotic, identifications. Sigmund Freud initially discussed identification in relation to mourning and melancholia, viewing it as a defense mechanism where the ego attempts to reclaim a lost object by incorporating its features. Primary identification pushes this concept back to a pre-ambivalent phase, where the "object" is not truly lost but is experienced as continuous with the self.

The placement of primary identification within the oral stage (roughly birth to 18 months) links it directly to the developmental primacy of the mouth and the drive toward incorporation. This stage is defined by dependency and the immediate satisfaction of needs. The theoretical importance of this phase lies in establishing the infant's first psychological relationship--a relationship defined by merging rather than relating. Subsequent psychoanalytic thinkers, particularly those focused on ego psychology and object relations (such as Melanie Klein and Margaret Mahler), built upon this fundamental concept, using primary identification as the baseline against which they measured subsequent separation-individuation processes and the development of internal representations of others (or 'objects').

The framework necessitates understanding identification as a dynamic process crucial for the eventual emergence of an organized ego. If primary identification establishes the initial internal template for what the self *is* through fusion with the caregiver, then the subsequent developmental task is the painful recognition of separation, forcing the infant to relinquish the illusion of being one with the object. This relinquishing paves the way for the establishment of boundaries and the capacity for mature, non-fused relationships. Without this initial, all-encompassing bond, the foundational structure for later relatedness and internalization would be absent.

3. Developmental Phase and Mechanism of Incorporation

Primary identification is inextricably tied to the characteristics of the oral stage. This stage is marked by the predominance of the oral cavity as the primary zone for pleasure, exploration, and tension reduction. The infant's world is initially defined by the presence or absence of the breast, and the psychological experience of being fed transcends mere physiological satiation; it is experienced as a primal connection to the mother. The mechanism by which primary identification operates during this time is often termed "incorporation," reflecting the physical act of taking in and the psychological consequence of fusing with the source of life.

In psychoanalytic terms, **oral incorporation** is the primitive psychic operation whereby the infant symbolically swallows and assimilates the object. Before the ego is sufficiently organized to differentiate between "me" and "not-me," the object providing satisfaction is experienced as part of the self. This symbolic ingestion is the most primitive mechanism of identification, serving to maintain an internal representation of the satisfying object, thereby mitigating the distress caused by the object's periodic absence. This mechanism is crucial because it ensures that the infant

internalizes not just the mother's presence, but the qualities associated with that presence--safety, warmth, and sustenance.

The shift away from primary identification is catalyzed by developmental pressures, most notably the biological necessity of weaning. Weaning introduces frustration and the stark reality of separation. The mother is no longer perpetually present or immediately responsive to every need, forcing the infant to acknowledge her as a separate, external entity. This recognition shatters the state of primary identification. The loss of the merged state compels the development of more complex defenses and mechanisms, ultimately leading toward the establishment of an internal psychological space independent of the external object. However, the influence of the initial incorporative bond remains a powerful, often unconscious, determinant of future relational patterns.

4. Relationship to Primary Narcissism

Primary identification is frequently referred to as **primary narcissistic identification**, a term that emphasizes the deep connection between this initial mechanism and the state of primary narcissism. Primary narcissism, as formulated by Freud, describes the initial state where all the libido, or psychic energy, is directed inward toward the self. The infant is self-contained, experiencing an illusion of omnipotent self-sufficiency; the needs of the external world are either ignored or perceived as extensions of the self.

The identification that occurs at this stage is narcissistic precisely because it reinforces this illusion of omnipotence. The infant identifies with the caregiver not out of a desire to emulate a separate, admired figure (as in secondary identification), but through a merging process that keeps the object internally available, thereby maintaining the infant's narcissistic gratification and self-sufficiency. If the mother is experienced as part of the self, then the infant is never truly dependent on an external, unpredictable source, preserving the highly fragile early ego organization.

This narcissistic component explains why the identification is so fundamental. It is not a choice or a defensive reaction to loss (yet); it is the default mode of relating in the absence of a structured ego. The fusion inherent in primary narcissistic identification ensures psychological continuity and safety. The eventual necessity of directing libido outward toward external objects and reality testing requires overcoming this highly protected, narcissistic state, a developmental task often associated with great psychological difficulty and the subsequent emergence of anxiety and frustration.

5. Primary vs. Secondary Identification

To fully appreciate the uniqueness of primary identification, it must be contrasted with **secondary identification**. Secondary identification occurs later in development, most famously during the resolution of the Oedipus complex (phallic stage). In secondary identification, the child has already

formed a stable sense of self and recognizes the parents as distinct, external individuals. The identification is a response to external reality, typically involving the introjection of parental values, morals, or roles after the object is recognized as separate and potentially lost or rivalrous.

The distinction lies primarily in timing and mechanism. **Primary Identification** is a pre-objectal mechanism--it occurs before the subject can reliably distinguish between self and object. Its mechanism is fusion and incorporation, aimed at psychological continuity. Conversely, **Secondary Identification** is a post-objectal mechanism--it involves modeling after an object that is recognized as separate. Its mechanism is introjection and modeling, aimed at minimizing conflict, replacing a lost object, or acquiring desirable traits from an admired figure. For instance, a boy identifying with his father's strength and moral code is a secondary identification, dependent on the recognition of the father's separateness and power.

The difference between the two forms is profound in terms of psychological maturity. Primary identification is involuntary, automatic, and foundational to the earliest self-experience, reflecting a blurring of boundaries. Secondary identification is a more structured, mediated process, reflecting the ego's increasing capacity for reality testing and defensive maneuver. While primary identification establishes the primitive internal mold, secondary identifications refine and overlay this mold, shaping the socially acceptable ego and superego structures necessary for functioning in the world.

6. Significance for Ego and Object Relations Development

The successful navigation through the stage dominated by primary identification is paramount for the development of a cohesive ego and the capacity for mature object relations. The initial state of fusion provides a protective environment that allows the infant's rudimentary ego to begin organizing itself. The internalized good experiences derived from the reliable caregiver, experienced through identification, serve as the initial template for self-soothing and basic self-regard.

The gradual dissolution of primary identification, forced by external reality and separation anxiety, marks the true beginning of Object Relations. The infant must transition from perceiving the mother as an extension of the self to perceiving her as a separate, complex object. This transition requires the construction of "internal objects"--mental representations of the caregiver that can be relied upon even in her absence (object constancy). If primary identification is too intense or too abruptly terminated, it can lead to lifelong difficulties in boundary setting, manifesting in later psychopathology characterized by intense fusion anxiety or difficulties distinguishing self from others.

Furthermore, the primitive identification patterns established in infancy can persist as unconscious residues, influencing adult behavior, particularly under stress. In states of extreme regression, such

as psychosis, the ego boundaries may collapse, and individuals may experience a return to a state akin to primary identification where the self and external world merge, demonstrating the enduring psychological power of this fundamental mechanism. Thus, primary identification is not merely a transient stage but the architectural blueprint for all subsequent intrapsychic and interpersonal structures.

7. Critiques and Subsequent Revisions

While primary identification holds a crucial place in classical psychoanalytic theory, subsequent developmental psychologists and psychoanalytic schools have offered critiques and significant revisions, primarily challenging its abrupt nature and the simplicity of the subject-object boundary concept. Theorists like Margaret Mahler, with her work on separation-individuation, posited that the differentiation process is far more nuanced and gradual than a simple shift from fusion to separation. Mahler described a symbiotic phase preceding true separation, which, while similar to primary identification, emphasized the behavioral and experiential aspects of the mother-child unit rather than just the internal psychic mechanism.

Daniel Stern, focusing on infancy research based on direct observation rather than retrospective reconstruction, argued that infants possess an inherent sense of self and agency much earlier than classical theory suggested, potentially challenging the idea of a truly undifferentiated, fused initial state. Stern suggested that infants are "hard-wired" for social relatedness and interaction, implying that some level of subject-object distinction may exist even in the earliest weeks of life, thus diminishing the absolute nature of primary identification as pure fusion.

Despite these revisions, the core theoretical utility of primary identification remains: it provides a powerful conceptual tool for understanding the profound difference between the infant's initial, boundary-less psychological state and the differentiated, autonomous ego that emerges later. Modern psychoanalytic thought generally incorporates the insights of ego psychology and object relations, viewing primary identification as the theoretical endpoint of absolute merging, even if empirical data suggest that the infant's psychological experience is more complex and less perfectly fused than originally theorized by Freud.

8. Further Reading

[Psychoanalysis \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Object Relations Theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Primary Narcissism \(Wikipedia\)](#)