



**MYSTIFYING**



# SELF-MYSTIFICATION

*Billy Ehn*

It has been said that when strangers begin to accept each other because they experience themselves as strange, they start a promising development. This is a rather surprising thought. If I do not understand myself, how should I be able to understand other people? But since understanding and acceptance are not necessarily intertwined, social life may work anyway, in spite of the value and function that “understanding” has for the definition of cultures. Non-understanding is often perceived as one of the ways to demarcate the boundaries between different cultures. The Other is not regarded as of the same kind as you, since his or her behaviour is unintelligible. But this is too simple. Maybe it is also possible to see non-understanding as an essential part of every society, even among friends and relatives, and in that case what we call “culture” could be analysed as a universal way of disguising strangeness and make it endurable.

Many people have of course noticed that the mysterious Other is actually present in each person. When you confront the experience of non-understanding in relation to yourself, in the form of confusion, misbelieve or mystification, you are enacting on a personal level the same cultural processes of social estrangement. Feelings of shame and guilt are also, as personal expressions of self-critical view-points, confronting the individual with public norms.

In everyday life most people probably want to be like other people, i.e. “normal” and not conspicuous. In other situations they wish to be seen as unique indi-

viduals and receive positive social attention for being different. Normality and uniqueness are two social poles in the everyday search for a meaningful self, hard work that may be analysed from social, cultural and psychological view-points. This is a well-known human paradox, which takes varying form in different settings.

But the paradox has a dimension that is not so obvious. There seems to be a point of intersection in which people look at themselves with wonder, as if they were somebody else. Who the hell am I? Why do I think and act in this way? They just do not understand the person they are used to. This intersection is an ongoing *dilemma of self-mystification*, a well known experience in everyday life, but perhaps not as a cultural process. On the surface the dilemma looks like a psychological phenomenon of little interest for cultural analysis, but that is quite mistaken.

Self-mystification is really as cultural as any elaborated rituals or meaning-loaded symbols, despite its individualistic appearance. The secrets we keep about our inner life are more common than we fear. When you open your eyes and shake your head because of your own unintelligible behaviour, you are not as alone as you feel. It is of course not unusual to smoke cigarettes and at the same time know perfectly well how dangerous it is, or to drink too much alcohol or eat junk food. Lots of things that people do they know perfectly well is not good for them. They act irrationally and sometimes ask themselves why. I include myself among these people. They have

sexual and other fantasies that they do not dare to tell anybody else about (see Pyburn, this volume).

If you could get inside people around you, you would most likely hear the same confused questions again and again, at least in our times and in our Western countries. Why do I do, feel, and think this way? What is wrong with me? Silently or loudly, people are having discussions with themselves that are as full of conflicts and misunderstandings as public debates. If that is a general human condition, or if it is a circumscribed tendency, depending on time and place, I do not know, but I think that it would be interesting to analyse self-mystification as a cultural process in varying symbolic and expressive forms.

Self-mystification is not only ignored as cultural work in everyday life, it is also a social arena for inner debates on practical morality and borders of decency. There you communicate with yourself, in a language and with arguments that you have learned from others – and what is communication if not cultural? The experience of being in conspiracy with your worst aspects of self is far from uncommon.

During a lecture for five hundred students, I dared to ask them in what way they see themselves as odd or strange. I asked them to write the answer anonymously on a slip of paper, which I later collected. Some of the answers I read out loud and commented upon. At an earlier lecture I had put the same question in a more open manner, and then almost all the students mentioned other people as strange, not themselves. They thought that other people behaved like idiots, in traffic and other public places, as parents or work mates, as bosses or customers. The answers often started with a “why?”. Why have so many car drivers stopped using their signal when they turn? Why are young girls carrying water bottles everywhere? Why do dog owners want other people to play with their animals? Weird, is it not? The way I put the question evidently directed the answers away from self-reflection.

But when I asked them about themselves, I was surprised to find that these young men and women frankly admitted that they do not understand a lot of the things that they do, think, and feel. They ap-

peared as strangers to themselves. I cannot tell if that is promising. But there was an evident touch of relief in the disclosure of personal secrets that may be interpreted as a wish to unmask oneself. Confessions, however intimate they are, function as symbolic messages of belonging.

These self-critical revelations demonstrated a great variety of human weaknesses that create a kind of symbolic bond between anonymous writers. The students wrote among other things that they do not understand what they do to themselves or other people, why they keep on smoking and drinking too much alcohol, why they are jealous without reason, unnecessarily greedy or too suspicious. They are dominated by strange habits, in constant fright and worry, having feelings that they do not recognise.

The students are evidently mystified by their inability to do what they know is best, to learn from their mistakes, to know what they really want and to make clear decisions. They seem to be afraid of themselves, and to long for a more secure and predictable Ego. No one expressed fascination with their own mysteriousness. Neither did they seem to be delighted in the strangeness of other people.

Self-mystification and faulty self-knowledge are old themes in Western Civilization, but the common apprehensions of our time have heightened insecurity, and demand extraordinary personal qualities. People often behave as if they are on show, and they express a strong need to catch the attention of others, to be assured of their own personal worth. At the same time they claim not to know that self on the scene. An escape from that dilemma is to stop the inner communication and turn to others for reassurance. Surely I am as ordinary as you?

In cultural theory the idea that we create ourselves, at least our so called identities, is popular. But far from all people think that they are manufacturing their individuality by choosing among alternatives. To understand what is going on in the “identity-market” we should also pay regard to less rational aspects. Self-mystification goes public as a culturally formed micro-process when people tell each other about their relation to themselves. As a secret mysti-

fiction is only potentially part of the cultural flow. If you are prepared to be more open-minded and do not try to hide behind ready-made clichés, you have to work out a reasonable explanation of your feelings and behaviour, in a language that de-privatizes your experience and gives it a form that other people can relate to and work with.

I am odd, the students complain, I am strange, eccentric, and queer, I do not understand myself, so how can I possibly understand other people? Why do I act like this, and who is determining my will and thoughts? I am scared by my feelings and reactions. Why do I want to change other people so that they become more like me, even though I do not know myself?

In front of the mirror, which is one of the most influential tools for seeing oneself as both a strange Ego and a somewhat recognizable person, they confront a familiar stranger. I have seen that person before, many times, but who is she and what is she thinking right now? Some of the students told me that they had broken more than one mirror with their hands, when they could not stand the wondering eyes in front of them. Nobody else looks at me like that, they complained. Some young women compared this experience with destroying the bathroom scale when it shows a weight they cannot accept.

These observations are, as I said, not only about the psyche of other people, but also about communication of shared meanings: how people speak of and symbolize the dilemma of being mysterious in social life, and alone with their thoughts. My somewhat impolite question enacted an emotional drama where people conveyed a painful message about their inner private life, only to find that it evidently is very common to be full of contradictions.

The message is clear. Now you have an opportunity to see your own confusion in the face of others. It is like reading a novel about the inner life of a person

and wondering how the author can know so much about my own thoughts and feelings.

In situations like this, self-mystification becomes a moment to detect that other people are as eccentric as I am, which is not always a comforting discovery. By telling others about our own oddities, we are connecting to each other, and drawing a line between the strangeness of oneself and that of other people. Maybe the expression of self-mystification in some way contributes to lower the walls between individuals, people who would otherwise be scared of each other.

But I am not sure. In the human search for meaning, value, identity and love, self-mystification may also rip off any feeling of security in social interaction and make people isolated, unable to accept themselves as just one more contradictory individual. If I cannot trust myself, how can I trust anyone else?

I do think that it could be fruitful to analyse this odd micro-process as a way to see how psychological reasoning in everyday work is transformed into culturally formed ideas of self. As a mostly hidden and numb activity, self-mystification is otherwise easy to overlook in the discussion of what is happening in culturally complex and “multiethnic” societies with their official demands for mutual understanding between strangers.

My idea is that the more we know and tell about the weird things that we think and do, the less reason we have to condemn other people for their strange behaviour. This is a slightly different way of expressing the often misused concept of cultural relativism. The faint hope of respect between people with different values and perspectives does not have to build only upon faith in mutual understanding, something which we may never be sure of reaching. This may be hard for researchers of cultures and social relations to accept.