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Transpersonal Psychology: An Introduction to Psychosynthesis

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Introduction

By and large, Americans believe in God and in various other religious and spiritual perspectives (Harper, 2005). Given that this is the case, the transpersonal (or spiritual) dimension, is, almost inevitably, part of a counselor's possible arena of concern. It is therefore important that all counselors have a working knowledge of a transpersonal orientation in counseling, simply to keep pace with their client's concerns. And the field of psychology itself has validated the importance of this, most notably by the inclusion in the 1994 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* of the category (v code) of Religious or Spiritual Problem (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

It seems clear from the research, that counselors do, in fact, share an interest in and concern for the transpersonal dimension in their clinical work (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002; Winston, 1990). What is also likely to be true is that counselors are not trained to work in that dimension nearly as thoroughly as they are trained, for instance, to work in family of origin issues (Boorstein, 1996; Shafranske & Malone, 1990).

In this country, the movement to rectify this and bring transpersonal psychology into the mainstream and into research and training officially started in 1969, with the advent of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* and the first definition thereof. Sutich (1969), editor for that first journal, defined transpersonal psychology.

The emerging Transpersonal psychology ("fourth force") is concerned specifically with the *empirical*, scientific study of, and responsible implementation of the findings relevant to becoming, individual and species-wide meta-needs, ultimate values, unitive consciousness, peak experiences, B-values, ecstasy, mystical experience, awe, being, self-actualization, essence, bliss, wonder, ultimate meaning, transcendence of self, spirit, oneness, cosmic awareness, individual and species-wide synergy, maximal interpersonal encounter, sacralization of everyday life, transcendental phenomena, cosmic self-humor and playfulness, maximal

sensory awareness, responsiveness and expression, and related concepts, experiences and activities. (p. 16)

In that same issue was an article, “Symbols of Transpersonal Experience,” by Roberto Assagioli, founder of the psychological theory and methodology of psychosynthesis (1969). Assagioli’s own work towards the creation of a transpersonal psychology began much earlier. He had coined the term *psychosynthesis* as early as 1911 (Hardy, 1987) and by the advent of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, he had published hundreds of articles and the book *Psychosynthesis* (1965) to be followed in a few short years by *Act of Will* (1973). Now 100 years later, psychosynthesis continues in the world of psychology as one of the most comprehensive transpersonal theories.

Psychosynthesis, a Transpersonal Psychology

Psychosynthesis was at the forefront of the transpersonal psychology movement, not only by its early theoretical orientation in that direction, but even more importantly by the creation of a methodology by which a transpersonal orientation could be put into place. Battista (1996) in his article, *Abraham Maslow and Roberto Assagioli: Pioneers of Transpersonal Psychology*, states Assagioli’s prominent role quite simply:

Whereas Maslow explored fundamental issues in transpersonal psychology, Roberto Assagioli pioneered the practical application of these concepts in psychotherapy. Assagioli proposed a transpersonal view of personality and discussed psychotherapy in terms of the synthesis of personality at both the personal and spiritual levels. He dealt with the issue of spiritual crises and introduced many active therapeutic techniques for the development of a transcendent center of personality. (p. 52)

Psychosynthesis concerns itself first and foremost with a consideration of meaning, purpose and values in the individual’s life. This defining characteristic of the practice of psychosynthesis points to the whole spectrum of psychotherapeutic inquiry, since the accessing and manifesting of purpose, meaning and values is as likely to take the client back to family of origin issues as it is into transpersonal content areas. Psychosynthesis expects the practitioner to work within this whole spectrum. A transpersonal orientation, then, will have benefit in classical areas of concern such as trauma; current and present centered concerns, such relationship, work, etc.; and spiritual concerns, including issues of religion, existential questioning, g(G)od, and life purpose.

Assagioli refers to the first stage of psychotherapeutic engagement as a period of gaining knowledge of the personality, which by and large conforms to most therapeutic perspectives. But he goes further and sets the stage for an orientation that is inclusive of all human experience.

Psychoanalysis generally stops here but this limitation is not justified. The regions of the middle and higher unconscious should likewise be explored. In that way we shall discover in ourselves hitherto unknown abilities, our true vocations and our higher potentialities which seek to express themselves but which we often repel and repress through lack of understanding, prejudice or fear. We shall also discover the immense reserve of undifferentiated psychic energy latent in every one of us; that is,

the plastic part of our unconscious which lies at our disposal, empowering us with an unlimited capacity to learn and to create. (Assagioli, 2000, p. 19)

Interestingly, this orientation resonates with the more recent resiliency theories and positive psychology. “The aim of Positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 2).

In looking at the template of movement in the counseling relationship, psychosynthesis has articulated the stages of work that client and counselor may move through. The stages are not considered to be a simple, linear, ladder-like progression, but a synthetic movement between stages and through all stages, in a multi-layered experience of self-inquiry. The second stage is considered the period of gaining understanding of and right relationship to these same elements that the client has come to discover in the first stage. Simply put, first, the client looks closely at who he or she is, the gifts and the obstacles, the problems and the possibilities. This is self-awareness. Secondly, the client steps into the position of learning how to change. This is choice.

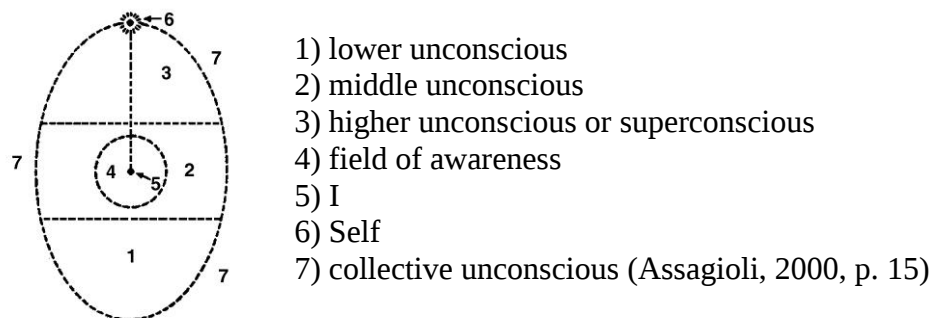
Where psychosynthesis begins to show its transpersonal colors most vividly is in the ‘last’ stage of work. Firman and Gila (2002) note that these stages “describe how we may then become conscious of, and respond to, the deeper motivations and meanings in our lives, the source of which is termed the *Self*” (p. 45). Assagioli (2000) referred to this stage as “Realization of One’s True Self” and “psychosynthesis ” (pp. 21-23). Self-awareness, choice, and an orientation towards the unfolding of *Self* are the broad stroke stages of psychosynthesis work.

It is the consideration of *Self* (the transcendent center of the personality, as Assagioli framed it); an emphasis on meaning; and the ultimate goal of synthesis of the various aspects of the psyche that anchors psychosynthesis deeply into the tradition of transpersonal psychology.

Map of the Psyche

Psychosynthesis posits a division of the psyche into its component levels of unconsciousness. These are the lower unconscious, middle unconscious and higher unconscious or superconscious. Similar to Wilber’s prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal (1982, 1983), these states point to the wide experience of humanness from family of origin wounding (and subsequent splitting, repression, denial, or dysfunctional development), to the life of the personality, (both conscious and unconscious) in present time, with real-life concerns (“house, car, job” as Wilber describes it) to the arena of meaning, purpose and values, spirituality, and the realm of the transpersonal dimension.

Figure 1. Map of the psyche.



All clients will potentially need to work at all levels. Key here is the counselor's ability to see with wide vision, what is called *bifocal vision* in psychosynthesis (Whitmore, 2004). Bifocal vision invites the practitioner to see clients' presenting issues and diagnoses or problems, while at the same time seeing each person as a soul in search of realization. As such, counselors invite clients to bring to the therapy encounter all the qualities of their essential, unwounded natures; all the unique aspects of their being; and all of their transpersonal qualities and potential. The requirement to hold bifocal vision involves the counselor in a willingness to see beyond diagnoses, beyond difficult or dysfunctional behavior patterns and beyond the client's own limiting sense of identification. At the same time, the practitioner will need to understand diagnoses and be able to treat dysfunctional behaviors. In other words, the counselor is asked to consider the client in all aspects of the above *map of the psyche* (Figure 1).

The completed description of the map of the psyche points to the remainder of the key psychosynthesis concepts. The *I* is defined as a center of pure awareness and will, independent of any content of consciousness. And it is this *I* that is, most certainly, a key to all work in psychosynthesis, for *I* is the resting place of one's experience. It is the "who" that each person is, beyond the specific story of an individual life. The *Self* is the same *I*, anchored at the border of the transpersonal and the universal. *Self* has been said to be distinct, but not separate from *I* (Firman & Gila, 2002).

The outer dotted line indicates the collective unconscious, a significant nod to Jung's seminal work in that field (1938, 1971) and an indication in Assagioli's understanding, that the individual is not only connected transpersonally to the larger universe, but collectively and archetypally, as well. Both Jung and Assagioli (1967) envision this realm as the large and all encompassing unconscious from which stems much of human creativity, experience and connection. It is in Jungian work that this element is most profoundly explored and used as a therapeutic construct.

Identification and Disidentification

As the practitioner conceives of clients as more than their "problems" and views them through the lens of purpose, meaning, and values, techniques and strategies must support that orientation. One of the key therapeutic principles and active techniques in psychosynthesis is the principle of *disidentification*. Literally the principle is a practice of identification (noting one's experience... *I am angry*), disidentification (stepping back from that experience to an observing place... *I have that anger and I am not that anger*) and Self-identification (anchoring into *I*, the experience of awareness and will... *I am more than this*). This process points to the experience of contentlessness and disidentification (or non-attachment).

In the reality of people's lives, the way identifications are known can be enduring or transient. The most difficult identifications are scripted messages from childhood that stick through thick and thin as the way people know themselves. These nearly intractable self-concepts can define a lifetime, eliminating possibilities that inherently exist in that person, by the sheer weight of the (limiting) experience of *this is who I am*. The power of early identifications is the hardest to step beyond. But when a client has the experience of knowing, *I have that wounded child and I am more than that child*, that person moves one step closer to Self-identification and becomes incrementally more connected to the experience of being *I*. The client, in this moment of disidentification, is *more*.

The *I am more* is a key theoretical underpinning of psychosynthesis. It points to the assumption of *I* and *Self*. This essential concept implies a potential way of self-knowing that is not simply defined by personal history. The principle of identification (disidentification and Self-identification) aims towards that end point. The exercise, practice or ongoing assumption looks something like this: *I have content, personal history, trauma, strengths, weaknesses, personality inclinations. I have this body, this age, this sex, this race. And I am more than that.* Or as this principle was first articulated by Assagioli, *I have these things but I am NOT these things* (2000).

The implications for this orientation are profound both philosophically and psychologically. To know oneself beyond content, is to transcend or experience oneself outside of the story of one's life. Disidentification (*I am not this*) steps one back from content and story. Self-identification points to the experience of being the one who is aware (and the one who chooses).

Classic meditation practices, especially those using mindfulness-based techniques (Goleman, 1977; Hayward, 1987) lead to this same point of reference. But in psychotherapy, the potential of this experience is that the client, having accessed the experience of being the one who is aware (*I am*), has immediately (and especially with support) the possibility of being identified as well as the one who chooses (*I will*). The experience of *I* or *Self* is the identification with contentless awareness and will. It is both transcendent: more than, outside of, and beyond content and story; and immanent: embedded in the exact here and now (Firman & Gila, 2002).

When clients experience themselves as *I*, they see a larger world and have more choice. But accessing that experience is not easy. So much fills up consciousness that is not *I*.

Subpersonality Theory

Psychological theories abound for why adult human beings experience themselves in a split fashion. The inner world of adults (in Western culture, to be sure) is full of dialogue—often conflicted: a world of polarities. Good and bad, light and dark, this and that, and most poignantly and dangerously, *us and them*, leave the client with numerous identifications which are termed *subpersonalities* in psychosynthesis.

Subpersonality theory, a concept quite commonly known in the field at this time, is most colloquially noted in language like *inner child*, *victim*, *critic*. Rowan (1990), in his book, *Subpersonalities* mentions the role of psychosynthesis, noting that “one of the first people to have started really making use of subpersonalities for therapy and personal growth was Roberto Assagioli” (p.72). That this concept is now so recognizable is a testimony to its relevance for not only therapeutic work, but also for general self-knowledge. Subpersonalities, in psychosynthesis theory, have been defined as “structured constellations or agglomerates of attitudes, drives, habit patterns” (Crampton, 1981, p. 712) and “learned responses to our legitimate needs: survival needs, needs for love and acceptance, and needs for self-actualization and transcendence” (Brown, 2004, p. 41). They are, most simply stated, the *parts* of every individual, that may or may not be in service of the whole. They are the parts that often take over, leaving the owner of these parts at their mercy. Identification, as noted earlier, is the process of recognizing the subpersonalities as the limited ways one knows oneself. Recognition of a subpersonality,

(*Oh, there's that wounded part of me!*) immediately moves the knower outside of the content or story line of the subpersonality.

Work with subpersonalities is often a key element in psychosynthesis counseling, because it is always an invitation to expansion of consciousness. Allowing for the extreme complexity of counseling work and making it clear that subpersonalities are not to be mistaken for any of the dissociative disorders, the process can be immediately relevant to the counselor and accessible as a technique. Recognition of a subpersonality creates a disidentification into *I*, which creates an opening for acceptance. From that moment, the possibility of integrating that subpersonality—in a healthy way—exists. *There's that wounded part of me*, invites *How can I heal and integrate that part into my life?* A simple stage process is noted in psychosynthesis: recognition, acceptance, coordination, integration and synthesis (Vargiu, 1974). The last three stages mark the movement from negotiating the needs, actions and healing of various subpersonalities, through the more seamless stage of having access to, but not being controlled by various subpersonalities, to the ideal end point as a unified, non-dualistic human being.

The I and Self

The *I* is the internal unifying center that guides a lifetime, in the face of trauma and wounding, cultural and familial norms, and the inner chaos that is so often brought into the counselor's office. It is the experience of not being in a subpersonality. Reflecting back to the concept of *I*, the defining characteristic is that it is contentless. As *I*, one has access to all content, but knows itself otherwise. When Assagioli was interviewed by an American writer, she asked him how old he was. His answer, "My body has 85 years" (Besmer, 1974). Thinking his English was limited and thus the odd answer, the interviewer was surprised to find that, in fact, his English was perfect and that Assagioli's lived experience was of a *Self* that is not a body, an age, a race, a religion, a sex or a story-line. *I have a body and I am not my body* or *I have a body and I am more than my body*.

I, then, is the center of awareness and will. Awareness and will, like the in-breath and out-breath, are the very lifeblood of this work. One without the other is a half-hearted attempt to be whole. What then is the *Self*? Assagioli made it clear that there is only an apparent duality between the *I* and *Self* (2000). *Self* has been called: "pure essential beingness" (Whitmore, 1986, p. 22); "our true essence beyond all masks and conditionings" (Ferrucci, 1982, p. 45); "a permanent centre" (Kowalski, 1993, p. 110); "a source of wisdom and guidance" (Firman & Gila, 2002, p. 38).

The *Self* looks through the transpersonal or spiritual dimension while *I* looks out at the world through the lens of the personal. Both are *I am*: one at the kitchen sink, one on the mountaintop. A metaphoric description that has often been used is that *I* is the conductor of the orchestra, *Self* the composer of the music, and of course, the musicians are the subpersonalities, playing a powerful and unique piece of music, in harmony, under direction of *I*, in service of the inspiration of *Self*. This, of course, is on a good day. The orchestra may sound like a group of contentious, angry, confused adolescents given loud musical instruments, while *I* naps and *Self* moans. And so the need for counseling arises. And an assumed goal of psychosynthesis counseling is the process of Self-realization—the orchestra playing harmoniously.

Self-realization does not imply the concept of enlightenment, the experience of transcendence of earthly concerns into a more ethereal or universal reality. It simply implies the ongoing experience of being responsive to the call of *Self* towards the evolutionary movement through a lifetime. This movement will take the individual through dark and light, through the practicalities of life and the miracles of life, through birth and into death.

The Will

Psychosynthesis brought the concept of will to the front line, particularly with Assagioli's book *The Act of Will* (1973). The field had, until that time, relied heavily on the awareness side of the coin or the more external aspect of the will, behavior. Awareness and will go hand in hand in psychosynthesis and thus the orchestra is brought into harmony. With the initial stages of counseling; gaining a thorough knowledge of the personality, the work of being a *willer* is birthed. *I have this part and I am more than this part*, creates the possibility of choice. The concept of will; the stages of will (purpose, deliberation, choice, affirmation, plan, action); and the elements of will (strength, skill, and goodness) offer a comprehensive orientation towards client as *willer*. However, it is important to note that, theory abounding, will is an easy concept to bring to life in the office. In-breath and out-breath, awareness and will are all part of this. When a client (or the counselor for that matter) has an awareness, an *ah ha*, or even a curiosity born of awareness, that awareness needs to move into willing. Psychosynthesis has a bias against relying simply on awareness as a means to change.

The work of building the experience of will, work that spotlights the reality of ongoing choice points, is some of the most powerful work that can be accomplished. As a client comes to know the pulls of the inner world; the subpersonalities that have drives of their own; the feelings that come from a younger place; the impulses manifest by the conditioning of past experience, the anchor into *I* is also an anchor into choice. This simple concept of choice point is an important element in the conversational and practical domain of the client and counselor. It is not enough to be aware. It is not enough, even, to know why (historically, causally). It is enough to have choice and to continue to fine tune oneself as a *willer* until the life lived is one that is resonant with the deepest purpose, meaning and values of the client, in that individual's most centered, internally unified *Self*. Working with the client, as *willer*, is working to free the client from being simply the outcome of personal history and into being the author of the future.

That said, it would be naïve to assume that this is an easy task. The conscientious counselor will know the real, external, historical and present limitations that each client faces. These may be biological, circumstantial, or commonplace. They may be economic, social, cultural, and political. They may be limiting in minor and inconvenient ways. They may be life threatening. Naïveté is not the invitation in this work. The invitation is to help each person who enters the field of the counselor's influence to be as fully human and realized as they can be, as fully aware and as fully willing as they can be.

The Psychosynthesis Counselor

Psychosynthesis does not set itself outside of the bounds of traditional psychotherapy and counseling. Like any therapeutic orientation, it has its own theories,

techniques and strategies. And yet, in the end, the psychosynthesis counselor will be, like any good, caring, and present therapist, a guide, in the best sense of the word. Bifocal vision, referred to earlier, points to the major mandate for the counselor in psychosynthesis. The belief in the essential nature of client as *Self*, requires that same work and realization in the counselor. The counselor is not a technician or a theorist. Like the client, a soul in search of realization, the counselor travels the same path. That is, the counselor travels the path that is uniquely his or hers and in so doing, finds that this work of healing, of witnessing, of caring for another in a skilled and impersonal (or transpersonal) way, is a path that is resonant.

When the counselor is on the path of meaning, purpose, and values, there is revealed, in that professional role, an underpinning of *Self* that truly allows for an *I-thou* relationship. Few would disagree that the relationship between counselor and client, beyond theory and technique, can, in itself be healing. This idea, the core mandate for the psychosynthesis counselor, has become, so many years later, the common wisdom of the field (Duncan, 1997).

The *I*, so buried in most adults, is brought into awareness by the empathic holding environment of the counselor. For children, the authentic nature of the child (the *I*) should have been (in the best of all worlds) supported by the parents, giving way over time, to the ownership, by an emerging adult, of his or her own *I*. The role of any good unifying center is to orient the other back towards him or herself. The good-enough parent is the holding environment and external unifying center, organizing the child's world to create safety and permission to flourish, all the while preparing the child to take over that role (Firman & Gila, 2010). The good-enough counselor does the same—not as a parent, but as the empathic other who sees, first and foremost, that this other, sitting in the office is a *Self* in search of realization: bifocal vision. The problems are known, validated, and worked with. The *I* is a given and it is to this *I* that the psychosynthesis counselor speaks, whenever possible. The alliance that is created, when it can be, is one between the *I* in the client and the *I* in the counselor, each in a different role, both moving from authenticity (Firman, 2009).

It is often the counselor who helps the client first note that the subpersonality that takes temporary ownership of the client's voice is NOT the whole of that person. That counselor sees qualities hidden behind distortions, sees essential *Self*, hidden behind survival personality, sees meaning, purpose and values in the whole history and current reality of the client. The context that the counselor holds inevitably defines for the practitioner a worldview that assumes a process of unfolding, carries a faith in human nature and embraces the client as another soul. The mandate is to see and speak to the *I* of the client and not to be pulled into the story, whatever it is, as the whole truth. Instead of seeing only wounding, the therapist sees more. *I have my wounding and I am more than my wounding*, is, for the counselor, an underlying assumption about each person who enters the office. *You have your wounding and you are more than your wounding*, is the message always given.

Issues of transference and countertransference, biological bases for mental disorders, deeply rooted pathologies, uniqueness of cultural differences, specific disorders and the general complexities of the field of counseling and the world of the counselor are assumed. Ethical guidelines are mandated. Good training and best practices are the bottom line. Add to this simply the vision that comes from having a transpersonal

orientation, while inviting and respecting that in the client, and there sits the transpersonal counselor.

Conclusion

All practitioners, trained however they may have been trained, may easily open to a transpersonal or spiritual dimension, both by their own personal inquiry into the dimensions of purpose, meaning, values, and spirituality and by the simple exploration of these same things with their clients.

There are simple yet profound practices and orientations in psychosynthesis to support this process. Disidentification; work with subpersonalities; accessing the experience of *I* and *Self*; revitalizing the will; and focusing on purpose, will be the touchstones for moving towards a transpersonal perspective in the counselor's office. Of course, there is more to the theory and practice of psychosynthesis, but these core elements are offered as an invitation to counselors to include the transpersonal dimension, as it is appropriate in their work.

The work of counseling is often difficult and even grasping an image of desired outcomes may be hard. A technique common in psychosynthesis is the *Ideal Model*. It simply assumes that imagining, thinking about, acting in relationship to one's ideal, will help build that possibility. "Images...tend to produce the physical conditions and the external acts that correspond to them" (Assagioli, 1973, p. 51). As an ideal model of the desired outcome for all human beings, the sentiment expressed by a student of Assagioli, seems apt:

In essence, this experience of the spiritual dimension is one of connection to all Life, a powerful sense of participating in the Universe as oneself, a unique being, and of having a place and part in the whole of the living world. From this core experience flow many attributes, such as, courage, wisdom, power, creativity, perspective, joy, and the ability to live fully one's chosen life with vitality and grace. And this is an experience, not an idea—it is the experience of being fully alive as oneself on earth. This very human experience highlights simultaneously the universality and particularity of our existence and the paradoxical fact of our differences from, and union with, all other life forms. It joins us to all others, while at the same time affirming our unique being. Everyone is capable of this connection, though it may be impeded in any number of ways, and it is the birthright we share as human beings. (Yeomans, 2004, pp. 4-5)

It is in service of this birthright that psychosynthesis exists as a therapeutic modality.

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