

CHAPTER 52

Psychosynthesis

MARTHA CRAMPTON

Psychosynthesis refers to the theory and practice of a perspective on human development first articulated by Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli.

The approach is based on unifying one's personality expression with a deeper source of purpose in and direction to life, the transpersonal Self, which is seen as the integrating principle of the personality and as a source of wisdom, inspiration, unconditional love, and the will to meaning and service. The term "psychosynthesis" is also applied to the process of personality integration occurring within this framework, either through the individual's own efforts or with the assistance of a psychosynthesis practitioner.

HISTORY

The foundations of Psychosynthesis were laid in the second decade of the twentieth century by Roberto Assagioli, whose work was far ahead of its time. Assagioli was one of those rare persons who can truly be called a sage. His wisdom, his radiant love, his down-to-earth simplicity were appreciated by all who knew him. Psychosynthesis, for him, was not merely an abstract doctrine but a practical philosophy that he applied in his daily living. Assagioli died in 1974 at the age of 86.

When Psychosynthesis spread to North America in the 1960s, it attracted many people who had a background in the new ther-

way as well as adding to it. It was Assagioli's wish that the institutes remain autonomous and, to use his metaphor, relate to each other as the stars in a constellation rather than as satellites revolving around a central sun. He saw Psychosynthesis as needing to change and evolve with the times, as well as to adapt to the needs of different cultural settings. Founded in this spirit, the movement has avoided more than most therapeutic systems the tendency toward ossification. Psychosynthesis is practiced by an increasing number of human service professionals in North America, Europe, and South America. Areas of application include psychotherapy, counseling, medicine, education, religion, management and organizational development, and creative problem solving in a variety of fields.

Practitioners have generally been trained in one or more of the training centers that have been established in these countries. Training programs in Psychosynthesis vary somewhat from one institute to another, according to the particular emphasis of the center and the needs of the student. In the United States there are several training centers in California and Massachusetts, with other centers in Seattle, Washington; Lexington, Kentucky; Burlington, Connecticut; and in Walpole, New Hampshire. The centers in Boston, Massachusetts, and Walpole have a particular emphasis on educational applications of Psychosynthesis, while the others focus more on psychotherapy and personal growth counseling. In addition, individual practitioners are working in most areas of the country and sometimes offer training as well as counseling and consulting services. In Canada the major center is in Montreal.

The basic reference sources on Psychosynthesis are the two books by Assagioli: *Psychosynthesis: A Manual of Principles and Techniques* (1965) and *The Act of Will* (1975). A new book, *The Realization of the Self: A Psychosynthesis Book*, written by James Vargiu (1980) is in press at the time of this writing.

THEORY

Although Assagioli was a psychiatrist, his model of the human being was not based exclusively on the data of the psychiatric couch. He believed it was necessary to study the functioning of healthy individuals, including the most self-realized members of the human race, to gain a complete understanding of the full range and potentials of human nature. He deplored the tendency of diagnostic psychiatry to equate people with their illness. Instead, Assagioli viewed the person as a whole and considered pathological manifestations to be simply one aspect of the total person. As his perspective was one of growth, he tended to view symptoms not so much as something undesirable to be "gotten rid of" but rather as an indication of an energy blockage that needed to be explored. His emphasis was on releasing the constructive forces, on development of the person's positive resources, which he found would often cause symptoms to fall away.

Assagioli summarized his view of the human psychological constitution in Figure 1, which has come to be called the "egg diagram."

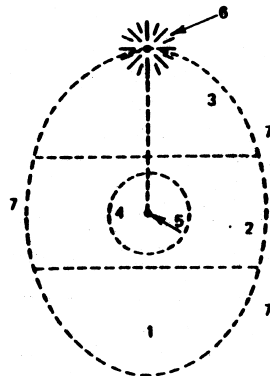


Figure 1 The egg diagram. 1. Lower unconscious; 2. middle unconscious; 3. higher unconscious or superconscious; 4. field of consciousness; 5. "I" (center of consciousness or Personal Self); 6. Self (Transpersonal Self or Higher Self); 7. collective unconscious.

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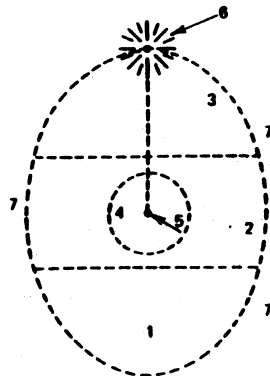


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becomes the "good boy." Such a child is usually praised for obedient behavior and threatened with loss of love for expressing his own will. To obtain love, he learns to conform to the wishes of his parents. He develops a desire to please, to do what others want him to do, even when this means ignoring his own needs, because it is the only way he knows of gaining acceptance. The same child may later develop a "rebel" or "bad boy" subpersonality, as subpersonalities often develop in pairs of opposites, with the tendencies of one balancing out the tendencies of the opposite pole. The child who is experiencing an inner compulsion to submit to authority will suffer from this restriction and may try to counterbalance this by a provocative and rebellious attitude, or by acting-out a tough, daredevil role. One "good boy" I worked with—a man in his thirties—still played an abjectly servile role toward his mother but attempted to create a more "manly" image for himself by "tough" behaviors such as car racing and heavy drinking. Each subpersonality has some valuable qualities that are important to preserve in the process of personality transmutation.

The "Personality Vehicles" Map

The term "personality vehicles" refers to the body, the emotions, and the mind. These three components, which make up the personality, are like "vehicles" for the Self because they are its media of manifestation on the material plane. It is important that each vehicle be adequately developed and coordinated with the others so that the personality expression is balanced and harmonious. Some people are so identified with one of the personality components that they are cut off from other aspects. Such a split is most common between the mind and the emotions. A person who has been rewarded in life primarily for mental performance may be very mistrustful of his or her emotions, thinking that they are dangerous and would completely take over if given a chance. A

mentally identified person will need help in accepting and in educating the emotional side of the personality. People who are strongly identified with their emotions, on the other hand, may reject the mind and fear that mental activity would eliminate the vitality of their emotional life. Such people are likely to be flooded with uncontrolled emotionality and will need help in accepting the mental side of their personality.

The "I"-Self Map

Psychosynthesis posits that the process of synthesis requires an integrating center around which the synthesis can take place. Two such centers are postulated within the human psyche: the "I" and the Self. The "I" is considered to be a projection within the field of consciousness of the Self and functions as its deputy at the personality level. Both centers have the dual functions of will and consciousness. They are capable of awareness within their particular domain and of action upon it.

The psychosynthetic process can be considered as involving two stages that are successive but not rigidly separated: the personal Psychosynthesis and the transpersonal Psychosynthesis. In the personal Psychosynthesis, the "I" serves as the integrating center around which the process takes place. During this stage, the subpersonalities and personality vehicles are harmonized and integrated so that the person becomes able to function effectively in the realms of work and personal relationships and develops a relatively well-integrated personality.

During the transpersonal Psychosynthesis, the focus of personality integration gradually shifts from the "I" to the transpersonal Self. The "I" continues to collaborate in the process, but the transpersonal Self increasingly assumes a primary role, becoming the new center around which integration takes place. The "I" is like the mayor of a city who at first believes that he has full power and autonomy in his area of jurisdiction. He happily proceeds in the governing of the "citizens"

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tributed to the development of cherished qualities and have prepared individuals for the part they are called upon to play in life.

METHODOLOGY

The Personality Assessment

Assessment of the client's personality, needs, and existential situation is the first step in Psychosynthesis after the initial contact has been established. It is an ongoing process that has value not only in terms of guiding the initial direction of the work but also for evaluating the progress and needs at various stages of the Psychosynthesis.

Unlike diagnosis, which is often something "done to" the client by an authority, the psychosynthesis assessment respects the client's perceptions of his or her own needs and goals. It also has a therapeutic value in that the ongoing aspect of the assessment process helps to keep the client's will aligned with the work that needs to be done.

Unfolding of the Process

The real guide of the psychosynthesis process is the client's higher Self that, at any particular time, is directing the person's attention in certain directions. With this in mind, the external guide, whose role is to support the client's inner process, is attentive to what seems to "want to happen" in the session.

The actual sequence in which the issues emerge may come as a surprise. It is important that the guide refrain from imposing preconceived structures on the situation, remaining open to allow the client's process to *unfold from within*. For one client the most urgent need may be to get more in touch with powerful emotions; for another client the need will be to step back from emotional reactions so that he or she can perceive them more clearly and better understand what they are expressing. One client will need to explore intra-psychically a conflicted relation-

ship, while another will need to work this out at the interpersonal level. Sensitivity to timing and to the level at which particular issues can best be resolved at a particular time is crucial.

Identification and Disidentification

The concept of disidentification is a central one in Psychosynthesis, and it is probably one of the most important contributions made by this theory to psychological thought.

Disidentification can be understood best in relationship to its polar opposite: identification. We are identified with something when we are unable to separate ourselves from that thing, when our sense of identity is bound up in it. Some men are so identified with their cars that, should the car be scratched, they experience it as though they had been personally defaced, as though they were diminished by the fact that their car was scratched. A woman who is identified with the appearance of her body may feel that her worth as a human being is lessened if she develops wrinkles on her face or gets gray hairs. It is as though these people believed "I am my car" or "I am my body."

In the work of integrating our subpersonalities, disidentification plays an important role. We must be able to "stand back from" our subpersonalities in order to see them more clearly and to find the vantage point from which we can do something to transmute them. A man who was identified with a manipulative "salesman" subpersonality always aroused defensive reactions in people until he was able to disidentify from the need to sell himself. When he saw what he had been doing, he found it very comical and felt motivated to change his way of relating to others. When he realized that he could now choose not to play this role, he experienced a great sense of relief and inner freedom.

In addition to the various forms of unconscious and blind identification with some partial aspect of the personality, there is a process of voluntary or conscious identifi-

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a first step and not the ultimate goal. It may be a necessary step if a person's feelings in these areas are blocked, but one must move beyond the negative feelings so that the energy bound in hatred and resentment can be released for creative purposes. Real healing only occurs when forgiveness and reconciliation take place.

Multiple Techniques

Many techniques are employed in Psychosynthesis, as no one technique fits all purposes or all persons. Some clients may work very well with certain techniques and not at all well with others. This depends both upon the psychological type and the level of development. A therapist who wishes to be fully responsive to the needs of a particular client must therefore be able to use a variety of approaches. It is important to bear in mind as well that new methods and techniques are constantly being developed in Psychosynthesis. Techniques are made to fit the person rather than the person being made to fit the techniques. Often the most effective approach is one that the guide develops on the spur of the moment to meet the needs of a particular situation.

A Holistic Approach

Psychosynthesis can be considered a holistic approach concerned with balanced development of the various aspects of human experience: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual (related to essence, purpose, values, will). In choosing techniques the therapist will bear in mind the development of these dimensions, stimulating those that are underdeveloped, using those that are well developed as entry points, and attempting to orchestrate them all in an integrated way.

The Processes of Integration and Synthesis

The process of Psychosynthesis, as the name implies, is one in which the conflicting and disharmonious elements of the personality

undergo a process of harmonization, integration, and synthesis. In the course of this they are brought into alignment with the person's higher Self, so that the personality becomes an instrument or channel through which the Self can manifest in the physical world.

Many polarities within the personality require integration. The exact nature of these varies from one individual to the next. Most can be related to the polarities the Chinese call *yin* and *yang*.

The entry points for therapeutic intervention can be at physical, emotional, or mental levels. In addition, the "I" or the Self can serve this purpose. This can be summarized in Figure 2.

Most current therapies tend to focus on the link between two of the three dimensions on the points of the triangle. Approaches like psychoanalysis, TA, and Rogerian Therapy emphasize the mental-emotional link; methods such as Gestalt, Bioenergetics, and Primal Therapy utilize primarily the link between the body and the emotions; and approaches like the martial arts, the Alexander technique, and the Feldenkrais method are based on the link between the mind and the body. Psychosynthesis recognizes all these links and uses whichever seem most appropriate to the situation. In most cases, there is an attempt to complete the circuit and to have the person work through the material at all levels, regardless of the entry point. Psychosynthesis differs from several other current therapies in that it values the

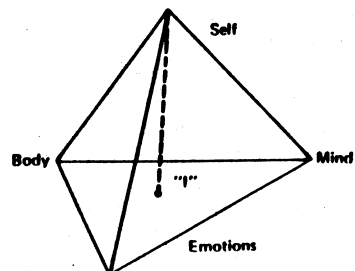


Figure 2 Entry points for therapeutic intervention

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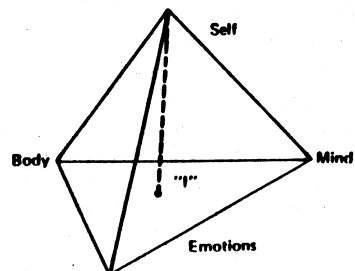


Figure 2 Entry points for therapeutic intervention

his or her ability to be with a client from a place of clarity, wisdom, and unconditional love.

APPLICATIONS

Psychosynthesis appears to be an effective approach for relating to a wide variety of human conditions. Its flexibility and lack of attachment to particular techniques or terminology allow it to respond to the needs of widely different clients and situations.

Persons trained in Psychosynthesis have applied this perspective to working with most kinds of clients in the mental health field—from “normal neurotics” to persons who are severely disturbed and who demonstrate antisocial behavior. The approach must, of necessity, be adapted to the individuals concerned. The most widespread field of application for Psychosynthesis to date has been in counseling persons who are relatively healthy. Such persons utilize the approach to facilitate their personal and spiritual growth and to enhance their creativity.

Psychosynthesis offers a perspective of particular value to individuals or groups who are seeking to orient their lives around a deeper sense of purpose and meaning, and who experience a need to include a spiritual dimension in their lives. It is also particularly effective in working with persons in “existential crisis” whose distress signals the need for reorientation to new, more inclusive values and/or new forms of life expression. Persons in transition, either in their careers or personal lives, benefit from the contact Psychosynthesis provides with deeper sources of identity and life direction. There is a special need at such times of outer flux for the experience of inner stability and contact with one’s own creative process. Persons faced with the need to make life choices may be helped by the psychosynthesis approach to open up a place of inner clarity from which to discern the path of greatest life meaning and growth.

Psychosynthesis has also been applied in

the field of education, particularly in teacher training and in the development of curriculum often in such neglected areas as self-understanding, imagination, creativity, intuition, and volition. Educational applications of this kind offer a significant opportunity for preventive mental health work. Other fields of application include religion, management and organizational development, interpersonal relations, and the facilitation of creative process in a variety of fields.

CASE EXAMPLE

Jeanne, a young woman in her late twenties, was referred to me by another therapist who had become discouraged by her refusal to speak in therapy sessions over a period of several months. Heavy-set and overweight at the time, with an expressionless face, Jeanne was a secretary and was functioning well on her job while supporting herself in a bachelor of arts program in psychology, which she had almost finished. She had been married for a short time to an abusive man and was now living alone. She had been raised in an orphanage by nuns since the age of three, when her father had abandoned her mother. Jeanne’s mother, later institutionalized as psychotic, was unable to take care of her and saw the girl only a few times while she was in the orphanage. Jeanne never saw or heard from her father again after he left home. She consulted a therapist because of depressive symptoms.

In our first session, Jeanne adopted the same stance as with her previous therapist. She sat in silence throughout, immobile as a statue, staring into space. At first I made some unsuccessful attempts at communication, both verbal and nonverbal, and finally realized that I needed to let go of the place within myself that wanted to “make something happen” in order that our communication could take place at another level. I needed to trust that, in allowing the deeper center within both of us to direct the process, what was needed would happen in its own

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In our first session, Jeanne adopted the same stance as with her previous therapist. She sat in silence throughout, immobile as a statue, staring into space. At first I made some unsuccessful attempts at communication, both verbal and nonverbal, and finally realized that I needed to let go of the place within myself that wanted to "make something happen" in order that our communication could take place at another level. I needed to trust that, in allowing the deeper center within both of us to direct the process, what was needed would happen in its own

came over to her and told her that she had a firm foundation now and no longer needed to be angry. She was at first unwilling to accept this, as she still felt resentment at having been pushed around by so many people in her life. He explained to her that it was natural for her to have had these feelings when she was small and powerless, but that she was strong now and it was no longer appropriate. He told her that to continue holding on to her anger would only be a waste of energy. He then showed her some sort of plan or model that demonstrated to her that she really did have a strong foundation. As she opened herself to this realization, she felt that she could love without fear. She felt that she could trust other people now that she was able to trust herself. After that she was able to forgive her father and no longer saw him as a threat. Jeanne's process illustrates the usual progression in working with the parental "images" from expression of negative feelings through to reconciliation and forgiveness. The Self, or integrating center of the personality (symbolized by the wise old man figure in the imagery), seems to know when the stage of expressing anger is completed and can guide the person to the next stage.

After this stage in our work had been completed, Jeanne was a changed person. She was much more warm and open, and her depression lifted. She began to ask herself what she really wanted to do with her own life and developed a much stronger sense of her own worth. We were only able to have a few sessions together after this because unexpected commitments on my own part necessitated transferring Jeanne to another therapist. The work that we did during this period was focused on her own life direction and the exploration of possible alternative futures. She felt that she needed more time to find out what she really wanted to do and took some positive steps to explore various areas of interest. She also changed her job to work for an agency where the values were more in line with her own. After a period of work with another therapist, she decided that

she wanted to lose weight and within three months had lost 40 pounds. Shortly thereafter she met a very nice man with whom she fell in love, and at the time of this writing is happily married and waiting for her first child.

Jeanne's case is of particular interest because of the rapid and dramatic changes that occurred. This seems to be a result of several factors: her ripeness for this work, the good contact she was able to establish with her transpersonal Self, and the strength of will she had developed through coping with the challenges of her difficult life alone. Just as she used her powerful will in a distorted way at first to remain mute, she was able to move forward with surprising alacrity when she chose to align her will in a positive direction.

SUMMARY

The psychosynthesis approach is founded on the basic premise that human life has purpose and meaning and that we participate in an orderly universe structured to facilitate the evolution of consciousness. A corollary is that each person's life has purpose and meaning within this broader context and that it is possible for the individual to discover this.

Psychosynthesis postulates that the sense of meaningful relationship to a greater whole is mediated through a transpersonal or spiritual center of identity, called the Self. It asserts that in learning to cooperate consciously with this deeper source of our being, we experience the fulfillment of human life. The Self is seen as having attributes of consciousness and creative, loving will, which seek expression through service in the world. Thus the Self finds consummation as we develop our gifts and discover our particular mode of contributing to the needs of the planet—our "calling," or unfolding vocation.

In line with this perspective, much of the work in Psychosynthesis is directed toward experiencing and expressing the life source from which one's most profound sense of

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the surrender) of one's hard-won individuality within a more inclusive and transcendent pattern. The term "co-creation" is an appropriate one to describe a person's experience at this stage. At first there is a sense of creating one's destiny in partnership with a deeper life source that provides the pattern and direction. Later, as the center of identity shifts from the "I" toward the Self, the person is increasingly in touch with the creative will of the Self and experiences the personality as his or her vehicle of expression.

One feature in the psychosynthesis approach to the will that deserves special attention is its balanced appreciation of the role of both conscious and unconscious levels of motivation. Psychosynthesis acknowledges, on the one hand, the importance of taking conscious responsibility for one's life and of attempting to actualize one's highest values. It recognizes, on the other hand, that unconscious dynamics exist that a person must come to terms with. These are seen to include both unresolved material from the past and emerging patterns from the superconscious that point to the person's next step. While the value of "positive thinking" and of conscious efforts to reprogram "old tapes" is recognized, Psychosynthesis does not make a simplistic assumption that this approach alone is sufficient. Thus it avoids the imbalances common to many systems that tend at one extreme to emphasize a passive, receptive attitude toward the unconscious or, at the other extreme, to focus on conscious control while they neglect the role of the unconscious.

In summary, the uniqueness and special contribution of Psychosynthesis might be said to lie in its radically integrative view of the human being. Its unifying perspective offers a theoretical framework and a practical methodology for reconciling many tradi-

tional pairs of opposites: conscious/unconscious; individual/collective; inner/outer; awareness/action; spirit/matter. As such it provides a point of view that can assimilate new findings from diverse sources as we move toward a more inclusive understanding of human nature and destiny.

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