

THE INSTITUTE OF

Psychosynthesis

HUMANITY IN TRANSITION

What is
Psychosynthesis?

WHAT IS PSYCHOSYNTHESIS?

At the beginnings of modern psychology stands the discovery that human beings are conditioned by their childhood experiences. Freud and others spoke of the unconscious, a normally inaccessible realm of the psyche which contains our past experiences and which produces very real effects on present feeling, thought and behaviour. Thus psychoanalysis sought to treat psychological disorders by analysing their roots in the past.

In 1911, as a pioneer of psychoanalysis in Italy, Roberto Assagioli began developing the insight that even as the psychological past exists in the present, so too does the psychological future. In other words, just as childhood is affecting our present living, so too is our vast human potential for healing and change. Indeed, repression of this higher potential can lead to psychological disturbances every bit as debilitating as repression of childhood trauma.

Assagioli maintained that just as there is a lower unconscious, there is also a superconscious. He describes this as a realm of the psyche that contains our highest potential – the Self, the source of our unique human path of development. This is the realm of values and of peak experiences, later to be studied by Abraham Maslow, which gave birth to the field of Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology.

Assagioli formulated his discoveries into an approach he called psychosynthesis. This term of course distinguishes it from psychoanalysis, but Assagioli did not mean thereby to replace the insights of psychoanalysis, but rather to include the past within the context of the awakening of the Self.

Plumbing the depths of the past and healing childhood traumas is as crucial to psychosynthesis as it is to other psychological orientations. In psychosynthesis this uncovering work is carried out within the context of discovering and expressing the rich inner resources of the unfolding Self.

Psychosynthesis then is not simply a model of pathology and treatment, but a developmental approach which can help guide a person to understand the meaning of their human life within the broad context of synthesis – the drive towards the harmonisation of all relationships, whether intrapersonal, or interpersonal, between individuals and groups.

The Self and the 'I'

Assagioli recognised a powerful integrative principle acting within the human psyche – the Self. While in transpersonal psychology there is a well-defined personal and collective unconscious psychosynthesis as a psychospiritual psychology, adds the distinction of a 'spiritual consciousness' - that of the Self. This psychology regards the Self as a reality, a living entity, direct and certain knowledge or awareness of which can be had. It recognises that the Self is a Spiritual Being imbued with Love which can be present to us both in its immanent and in its transcendent state. The Self is seen to form ego structures within which the 'I' – personal identity – becomes conscious. The Self also continually invites and guides that 'I' to levels of healing and wholeness in the process of becoming conscious.

Psychosynthesis points to a Self which is distinct, but not separate from, any contents of the psyche. Thus the Self is a profound source of being which can be present to us in our brokenness as well as in our wholeness. This Self also stands on the boundary between the personal and the universal.

The Will

The Will is a central concept in psychosynthesis and is seen as an essential impulse towards wholeness and synthesis. At the personal level, the Will is that drive within us which coordinates the often conflicting parts of our personalities into self-expression. Here the Will functions as a sense of direction guiding us towards a personal integration.

At a deeper level, the Will of the Self invites us towards ways of being which express our own unique gifts in the world. The depth of this life direction is often only realised in its absence, when formerly meaningful interests begin to seem empty and meaningless. This state of confusion is not just an immature restlessness that comes from underlying neuroses, it is often a serious existential issue that many people appear to be struggling with in their personal and professional lives.

These existential crises or turning points do not respond to change of practice or technique, to a change of job, or even a change in relationship, because they derive from something deeper and less tangible. For many, these crises mean the start of an inner journey of self-exploration, as at the heart of this crisis comes a renewed call from a deeper source of being – from the Self. With that a new direction is gradually discovered.

Psychosynthesis describes both a model of Consciousness as well as the Will which creates that consciousness. At the same time, the practice of psychosynthesis engages in the awakening of the Self to the consciousness it has created in the journey of its expression. It is through the process of making meaning from ‘suffering’ that a bridge between the transcendent Self and the I – the incarnate or immanent Self – is built.

Awakening

Inherent in the nature of the human being exists the experience of separation or alienation, often seen as alienation from the ‘Divine’ or from one’s essential nature. In psychosynthesis, we refer to this as Self Realisation, the awakening of the embodied separated Self – the ‘I’ – to its true nature.

The purpose of the process of individuation has meaning beyond the realisation of Self. As the ‘I’ aligns with the Self, there is a shift at the level of causality and with that comes an imperative to act in relation to that which one ‘knows’ and hence to build an ethical consciousness. A quest for healing or ‘wholeness’ therefore can be seen as a sacred quest towards becoming a moral being.

Spirituality

Transpersonal psychologists see spirituality as a separate developmental line itself i.e. different from the development of ego structures with which the ‘I’ becomes identified. There is no continuum between the two, there is a separation - hence the separation is not from mother, but of self from Self. We cannot infer Self from within ego, since the ego is a self-referring structure and any psychological dynamics within it are self-referring maintaining cycles. What we do infer however is the penetration of spirit into ego so that the Being within – the ‘I’ becomes freed up to establish itself as an autonomous centre serving the spiritual Self.

The Soul and Human Suffering

The nature of the soul is understood as the great mediator or ‘middle principle’ between Self and matter, and as such is, on the one hand, the sentient factor in all substance; and on the other, is the particularised spiritual essence of the human being.

The journey of psychospiritual development understands suffering from a multi-dimensional perspective. For some the intense and sometimes appalling conditions of early childhood and family traumas have become deeply embedded in the psyche, through the denial of the inner child, through primal splitting and through the building of protective ego structures. These can usually only be worked through in transference relationships in psychotherapy.

There is also the desperate suffering of soul as individuals seek to understand deeper questions of meaning in their lives and as they regularly assess their inner values, question what they do and how they want to live.

The capacity to listen to soul is dependent on the ability to be responsive at the level of one’s feelings to the environment – both inner and outer – in which we are living. Living in the rational world as we do, particularly in the West, this ability is often lost and we therefore live our lives far from our essential self.

To recover this capacity, we need to learn to be psychologically minded, to learn to self-reflect and to recover a more soulful way of being in the world.

Thus we can reconnect to what is often a lost language of soul through imagination, through poetry and music. It is also through metaphor, story-telling and our dream world that we contact the meaning-making function of soul. Thus we call this journey a journey of soul and soulmaking.

Self Realisation and Psychological Disturbances

Assagioli's seminal work on Spiritual Emergence and Emergency in the second chapter of his book *Psychosynthesis* (Assagioli 1957) was far ahead of its time. In it he reframes our understanding of psychological disturbance when he shows that many apparently regressive symptoms emerge from a spiritual awakening rather than from a personality disorder caused by history. His contribution has since been validated by many others, and increasingly psychotherapists are beginning to embrace this context and see that religious spiritual events and experiences as psychologically relevant.

A psychosynthesis practitioner thus sees symptoms as an indicator from the Self that unconscious issues are emerging that require attention and transformation. The psychosynthesis practitioner thus holds the emergent as well as the regressive and understands symptoms as the clues to both.

Psychosynthesis – A Context for Today's World

We live today in an age of uncertainty and rapid change. We are educated to deduce absolutes, to 'know' the truth and to function within the parameters of right and wrong. Education rarely takes us through the passage of relativity, uncertainty and chaos; it teaches us to be sure rather than to doubt, to be right at all costs rather than suffer the frustration of the creative process.

A psychology such as psychosynthesis, with its emphasis on the inner process of education, guides the individual into the realm of the unknown so that the healing spirit – that which

lies beyond the world of 'right and wrong, good and bad' – can be evoked. In this sense, we are living through a revolution in consciousness.

We believe that psychosynthesis has a valuable role to play in the development of a new depth psychology because it has a theoretical framework which acknowledges the ambiguity of the journey of the soul in terms of the personal and the spiritual; of the past and the future and of the neurotic and the existential.

As we come to understand these different elements of our human existence, so we see the process of synthesis taking place – elements coming together to form larger and more unifying wholes. It is towards this purpose that psychosynthesis is directed: that is, towards the unique expression of individual life within the larger evolutionary context of humanity's destiny on earth.

