

# **Introduction to Psychosynthesis and its Application in Psychotherapy**

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The theory and practice of Psychosynthesis began with Roberto Assagioli's doctoral thesis in 1910. A brilliant Florentine psychiatrist, Assagioli was interested in the higher aspects of human nature and the development of the will. Assagioli's work was pioneering in that he anticipated much later developments in his field. His work was a synthesis of eastern and western thought and is transpersonal in nature. Its techniques have broad applications in contemporary psychology.

## **Historical Context**

Maslow named five forces now recognized in psychology: 1. Psychoanalysis, 2. Behaviorism, 3. Humanistic Psychology, 4. Transpersonal Psychology, 5. Transhuman Psychology. Assagioli utilized aspects of the first four in his theory and practice. The fifth force, he called Psychoenergetics, the study of all experiences as energy. Psychosynthesis is primarily a fourth force psychology although it is inclusive of the first three. (Russell, 1981).

Assagioli first studied with Freud and then proposed a growth model versus a disease model for the treatment of neuroses. He was influenced by Jung and was similar to him in some ways. The most important difference was Assagioli's insistence that the soul is a reality. Jung stated that mystical and spiritual states were purely subjective. Assagioli declared that the "Self" was an ontological reality, a being which radiated energies. The personal self or the self-conscious "I" is a reflection of the Self onto the human level, similar to the relationship of the sun to the earth.

Assagioli was also influenced by Raja Yoga (the development of the mind and the need for meditation), Karma Yoga (translating our intentions through will into grounded action) along with Theosophy and the writings of Alice Bailey. A scholar who spoke five languages, including Sanskrit, he was also influenced by Plato's description of the Socratic method, Dante's Divine Comedy as a story of synthesis, as well as Buddhism and Jewish and Christian mysticism.

With William James, Assagioli shared the belief that all phenomena of psychological life, including altered states of consciousness are worth investigation through open-minded scientific inquiry. He died in 1974, having written numerous monographs and two books, "The Act of Will" and "Psychosynthesis". He never declared a formal school of psychology or an exclusive method. Psychosynthesis is an open system which aims to resolve opposing tendencies and achieve integration and synthesis. Its application extends to psychology, relationships, education, parenting, organizations and our relationship with the environment.

### **Structure of the Psyche**

Psychosynthesis views the self as a center of consciousness and will. Assagioli helps us understand them through his model of the psyche. He first published a map of the unconscious in the 1930's. The diagram he used is in the shape of an egg with three main parts divided by horizontal dotted lines which indicate permeable boundaries. The lower third represents the lower unconscious or the basic psychological activities which direct the life of the body, the co-ordination of bodily functions, fundamental drives and primitive urges, emotionally charged complexes, dreams and images of an inferior nature, uncontrolled psychological processes, phobias, obsessions, compulsive urges and paranoid delusions (Assagioli, 1973).

The middle unconscious contains our waking consciousness where we process easily accessible memories and daily activities. In its center, described by a circle of dotted lines, is the conscious self or I. The circled area is the Field of Consciousness which contains that of which we are directly aware; the stream of thoughts, images, sensations and feelings, desires and impulses. Assagioli suggested that an unreflective person might never go beyond this state of awareness. The I, or the self, is pure self-awareness.

The upper section of the egg map is the Higher Unconscious or the Superconscious. It is from this realm that higher feelings, such as compassion, come from and higher aspirations and intuitions occur, such as illumination, contemplation and ecstasy.

At the top of the egg is a star which represents the Higher Self, which is not affected by the mind stream or the body. It is our synthesizing center. The personal self is said to be its projection in the field of personality (Assagioli, 1965).

Surrounding the egg is the Collective Unconscious which is similar to Jung's conception. Assagioli described processes of "psychological osmosis" with other human beings and with the general psychic environment through the edge of the diagram, analogous to the membrane around a cell (Assagioli 1965).

### **Subpersonalities**

Inherent in Assagioli's view of the personal self is the concept of subpersonalities and the process of identification and disidentification. Subpersonalities are core aspects of the middle unconscious, parts of the self which play various roles, have specific traits and identifiable behaviors. When one is unaware of these disparate parts, one behaves unconsciously. There is a need to recognize and accept them through increasing awareness through the observing self, the I, defined as a center of consciousness and will.

Subpersonalities arise throughout our development, based on our early experiences with our families and with what has been described as primal wounding, yielding a survival personality (Firman and Gila, 1997). Subpersonalities develop also as a reflection of traits from many other sources, including genetics, culture, race, religion, social class, and various influences and experiences in the course of our development.

Our dilemma is that we identify only with parts or aspects of the self, yielding an illusory reality and rendering us prey to warring and antagonistic unconscious forces. Thus, Assagioli offers a three part process of identification and disidentification: 1. I have a body. I am not my body. I am more than my body. I am a center of consciousness and will. 2. I have emotions. I am not my emotions. I am more than my emotions. I am a center of consciousness and will. 3. I have a mind. I am not my mind. I am more than my mind. I am a center of consciousness and will. He suggested that this be said daily, upon awakening. Through this process, we invoke the observing self and learn that we are more than the story we have made of our selves.

## **Will**

Will has not often been given attention in other modalities. Assagioli did not view will in a Victorian sense but rather as an invocation of intention. Three types of will must occur simultaneously; strong will, skillful will and good will. There are seven qualities of will: 1. energy, 2. mastery, 3. one-pointedness, 4. determination, 5. persistence, 6. courage, 7. organization. The ability to freely choose and accept the responsibility of self-determination is a key to the process of human development and evolution. Will is crucial for overcoming the lower drives, desires and impulses in the process of personal synthesis and ultimately, to attain transcendent states. He describes six stages of the volitional act: 1. Purpose-Aim-Goal-Valuation-Motivation-Intention, 2. Deliberation, 3. Choice-Decision, 4. Affirmation-Command, 5. Planning and Programming, 6. Direction of the Execution (Assagioli 1973).

These stages can be applied in therapy to the client's aspiration to overcome both inner and outer obstacles. Assagioli has classified various psychological functions in relation to the self. They are: 1. Sensation, 2. Emotion-Feeling, 3. Impulse-Desire, 4. Imagination, 5. Thought, 6. Intuition 7. Will.

He devised a six- pointed star diagram, with Will and self or the I in the center. The opposing arms of the star show Intuition vs. Sensation, Imagination vs. Emotion and Impulse-Desire vs. Thinking. These functions, revealed in complexes and subpersonalities, find ways of achieving their goals without our awareness, and often against our conscious will.

Since will is the primary function of the self in the system, it is needed to direct, harmonize, and integrate the personality. If we consciously change or modify any of the functions, we begin to change the person.

For example, one can stop an impulse and modify behavior through thinking and use imagination to achieve goals .

### **Applications**

A vast array of techniques can be drawn from treatment modalities such as Cognitive-Behavioral, Gestalt and Reality therapies in the service of synthesis. Despite its transcendent goals, Psychosynthesis is practical in its application. Grounding the client is frequently mentioned. Assagioli was aware of human suffering and the effects of neuroses, complexes, trauma, anxiety and depression. He encouraged exploration into new terrain by his successors both with psychotherapy clients and in application to new realms of human experience. Explicit is the responsibility to others in the process of individual evolution, the universality of human experience, and the need for synthesis on a planetary level.

Let us now consider some practical working tools. Visualization is preliminary training for other techniques because it teaches concentration and allows for creative imagination. It is understood to be necessary for action since images have a motor-tendency. Preliminary visualizations might be as simple as imagining letters or numbers on a chalk board. The client can progress to more complex imagery. It is used effectively in the desensitization process, it allows unconscious material to become conscious and allows catharsis. Planning of visualizations is done with the client toward identifiable goals, first working on negative situations and then visualizing desirable situations and qualities (Assagioli 1965).

Guided imagery or active imagination is important in working with subpersonalities. One such visualization is entering a courtyard to meet ones subpersonalities and become acquainted. Another involves climbing a mountain with a subpersonality and having a conversation at the top, then returning and reporting to the therapist. Some prefer to articulate their experiences along the way or may need additional guidance.

This writer recently used the technique with a client, yielding a breakthrough during which she accessed her wounded inner child whom she called Bratinella. She began to understand her needs and the seeds of compassion were planted. It helped her begin to own and integrate a rejected part of herself which had caused self-hatred and impaired relationships throughout her life. It encouraged awareness of the observing self so she could notice when that subpersonality was “up”. Assagioli was a pioneer in working with the “inner child”.

A simpler way of introducing subpersonalities is to ask the client to recall a difficult situation and to notice what traits were used to resolve it. Another method is the twenty-four hour review. One can reel back a day at any time, noticing without judgment ones emotions and behavior. This develops concentration and awareness. The therapist can also point out and name behaviors and attitudes in clients such as the “victim” and ask them to access a more functional part such as the “warrior” without even introducing the concept of subpersonalities. Inner dialogue can be used to converse with an inner spiritual guide or selected subpersonality.

Other techniques include free writing and free drawing especially after visualization. Contemplation of transpersonal qualities such as compassion or joy tends to evoke them. Meditation is encouraged. In his books, Assagioli expounds on techniques at length. Ferruci (1982) and Brown (1983) have further elaborated on their uses for the individual and the counselor. Yeomans (1996) has offered a new group process where diversity is important and the facilitator serves as a guide rather than an authority. It is group work in a spiritual context.

### **Summary**

Psychosynthesis can enrich and deepen the counseling experience. It is useful in short term or long term therapy and provides valuable tools for the individual to use in self-therapy on a life-long basis. Subpersonality work can shorten therapy, especially with personality disorders. Its tools complement and extend those of other modalities and its concepts can be creatively adapted. It is truly a universal psychology.

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