

Speaking Ourselves Whole: One View of Transpersonal Psychology

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To introduce you to my approach to psychotherapy let me share the story that this tradition has told itself of its emergence as a “Fourth Force” in modern psychology. The story begins not so very long ago...

Near the end of the 19th century, psychotherapy emerged as a secular profession. With the powerful impact of a couple of centuries of empirical science and the advanced reasoning and scholarship of the humanities, human unhappiness began to be considered an issue that no longer was to be exclusively (or even most accurately) addressed by religion. Based on the insights that the arts and sciences could bring to the study of the self through the field called psychology, new forms of therapy emerged. Freud, Jung and other “Depth Psychologists” integrated a perspective founded in medicine, biology, and evolutionary theory with the discovery of ways of contacting aspects of the mind that were beyond our usual consciousness. Treatment depended in large part on making what was unconscious conscious.

Meanwhile, other theorists wanted psychology to restrict its knowledge to what could be objectively measured. These Behaviorists studied the processes of learning that could be observed through the study of an individual’s behavior. Cognitive approaches supplemented these approaches by insights into the large role played by how we interpret and evaluate our experience through thoughts (cognitions). The model of psychology developed by Behavioral and Cognitive Psychologists (the Second Force) suggested a different set of treatments for human unhappiness and confusion.

In the 1950’s, there came an idealistic turn against the earlier two streams of psychotherapy which were now criticized for focusing exclusively on what goes wrong in people and for approaching human unhappiness as a disease to be cured. This new movement, Humanistic Psychology (in this schema, the Third Force), was interested in the most actualized human beings as they indicated the furthest reaches of human potential. Psychotherapy became more focused on the power of an authentic, empathic relationship in the present moment between client and therapist. However, by the late ‘60’s, Abraham Maslow, arguably the most prominent of these psychologists, began to realize that even this orientation in psychology was still limited by the scope of human experience it considered. Inspired in part by research that was being done on altered

states of consciousness, and a fascination with the frontiers of consciousness that had been explored for millennia by mystics in the world's wisdom traditions, Maslow joined with several other psychologists to found a new movement in psychology identified by the name "Transpersonal."

In simple terms, Transpersonal Psychology considers that a full, accurate understanding of human consciousness and experience must include the spiritual as well as the bodily, emotional, and mental aspects of human beings. The term *trans-*, beyond or through the *personal*, was used as a reminder that we haven't grasped our totality so long as we are only regarding an individual as a separate person. Though we generally think of ourselves as each an isolated being, separate from the rest of life, this is a kind of "optical delusion of consciousness" (as articulated by Albert Einstein). Transpersonal Psychology understands your consciousness as ultimately founded in and connected to a dimension that extends beyond that which is bordered by your skin and the events of your biography. A Transpersonal Psychotherapist will approach any distress that a person brings into therapy by considering first the ways that symptoms make sense in the life of the person on all levels of their being including that of their spirit. In response to this understanding, treatment can consider the habits you live by both as a physical-organic being (for example, diet and exercise) and as a thinking-feeling-spiritual being (your relationships with various communities and larger cultural identities including your relationship to Life itself). Such a multi-layered approach could be overwhelming except that Transpersonal Psychotherapy puts great trust in the guidance available in the present experience of both the therapist and the client. In the moment-by-moment experience of our meeting will emerge our primary guidance as to which issue or theme from which level of your being needs our shared attention.

The guiding metaphor that more than any other organizes how I think about personality and its development is that of dialogue. Each individual constitutes its self through composing its story, and that story is always a compilation of more than one point of view. As early as conception, you were inserted into a myriad of ongoing "conversations" ranging from the biological to the historic-cultural conversations of selfhood carried forward by your parents and teachers as well as the larger political, social, and cultural setting into which you were born. All of these conversations present you with bits of "stories" about who you are, where you are heading, what you need, and how you might best satisfy your needs given your interpretation of the apparent "rules" of the world. In the center of this polyphony of voices, there is also a "still soft voice" of

Spirit or Inner Wisdom that is able to be heard when the regular chatter of the mind is sufficiently quieted.

I trust the ability of your conscious and unconscious mind to show up with important guidance for the therapeutic journey we take. That guidance may show up as persistent thoughts, images or feelings, the ever-changing steam of what truly concerns you, or in the form of dreams, uncanny coincidences, bodily symptoms, or relationship problems – all different channels wherein parts of you that do not think of as “me” can attempt to get our attention. One of our chief tasks will be to attend to these calls no matter how subtle or in which “language” they call out. Mindfulness is my way of naming the capacity to lower the “white noise” of our typical inner world, so that one can hear ever more subtle signals from the excluded, often wounded parts of the self. Once these are heard, the heart is invited to expand to include and regulate the “family relations” amongst one’s whole community of voices.