

TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOTHERAPY: CONTEXT, CONTENT AND PROCESS

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Transpersonal psychotherapy may be conceived as an open-ended endeavor to facilitate human growth and expand awareness beyond the limits implied by most traditional Western models of mental health. However, in the process of enlarging one's felt sense of identity to include transpersonal dimensions of being, the therapist may employ traditional therapeutic techniques as well as meditation and other awareness exercises derived from Eastern consciousness disciplines.

Since transpersonal psychotherapy is concerned with the attainment of levels of psychological health which surpass what is commonly accepted as normal, it is useful to define some goals of therapy. One goal is to develop the capacity for taking responsibility for oneself in the world and in one's relationships. It may also be assumed that the healthy person is capable of experiencing a full range of emotions while remaining relatively detached from the personal melodrama (Fadiman, 1979). Another goal is to enable each person to meet physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs appropriately, in accordance with individual preferences and predispositions. Hence, no one path can be expected to be appropriate for everyone. In transpersonal psychotherapy, impulses toward spiritual growth are considered basic to full humanness (Sutich, 1973). It is assumed that in addition to basic survival needs for food, shelter and relationship, higher needs for self-realization must be met for full functioning at optimum levels of health.

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goals of
therapy*

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From a transpersonal viewpoint, every client is seen as having the capacity for self-healing. In other words, the therapist does not cure an ailment for a patient, but enables a client to tap inner resources and allow the natural healing or growth process to occur. Furthermore, the human organism is seen as seeking to enhance and surpass itself in the process of self-actualization. This implies that it has potential for bringing into being those qualities and capacities that may be latent or undeveloped within the person experiencing conflict or stress. Beyond this is the possibility of self-transcendence or transpersonal realization in which the separate and isolated ego may be experienced as illusory, while the underlying oneness of existence is experienced as real.

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balanced
integration
of
physical,
emotional,
mental,
spiritual
aspects*

The therapist need not share the client's views of reality in order to acknowledge them as subjectively valid. Since any point of view is necessarily relative and limited, the underlying ground of being remains indescribable to some extent. By recognizing the subjective nature of his/her own beliefs and subjecting them to closer examination, the client may break out of self-imposed limitations and constrictions of awareness. As partial identifications with limited views are discarded or transcended, the process of healing imaginary psychological splits, reintegrating disowned parts of the psyche, and resolving internal conflicts may be accelerated. Ideally, a transpersonal psychotherapeutic orientation supports a balanced integration of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of well-being. Given the above orientation, it is useful and necessary to make a distinction between transpersonal *content* or experience that may emerge in psychotherapy, and a transpersonal *context* within which the therapy is conducted. Since transpersonal psychotherapy may work directly on consciousness in order to alter the context in which life is experienced rather than attempting to change the contents of experience, defining these terms in relation to therapy is essential.

CONTEXT

A transpersonal *context* in therapy is determined entirely by the beliefs, values and intentions of the therapist. For example, if a therapist intends to communicate attitudes that facilitate trust, and is comfortable with his/her own transpersonal experiences, the client may gain confidence in exploring these realms. What can take place in therapy is inevitably limited by the personal fears and beliefs of the therapist, just as it is limited by the readiness of the client to explore these realms. Therefore, in order to establish favorable conditions for transpersonal exploration, the therapist must be willing to handle

any obstacles to self-awareness that may arise in the process. When, for example, a therapist identifies with an expanded sense of the self as the source of experience, the potential for healing in the therapeutic relationship is enhanced.

A transpersonal context also implies that the therapist is aware of the centrality of consciousness in determining the outcome of therapy. In transpersonal therapy, consciousness itself is both the object and the instrument of change. Thus the process is not concerned with problem solving *per se*, but in creating the conditions in which problems can either be solved or transcended as appropriate. In other words, the therapist is primarily concerned with having the client learn to handle problems and situations as they arise rather than resolving a particular situation in the client's life. The metaphor of the fisherman teaching a hungry person how to fish rather than simply providing a fish, is fitting. A transpersonal approach enables each person to tap his or her own inner resources, rather than providing insights, solutions or predetermined goals. The therapist's assumption here is that, given the opportunity, the inner wisdom of the organism will emerge as an integrating, healing force that the client can trust. Learning to recognize and trust those inner impulses toward wholeness and transcendence is part of the process—a task which may be popularly identified as getting in touch with the inner gum, guide, or higher self. The direction of searching in transpersonal psychotherapy, as in all enlightenment teachings, whether religious or psychological (Metzner, 1979), is inward.

*the
centrality
of
consciousness*

Acknowledging the centrality of consciousness in psychotherapy implies that the state of consciousness of the therapist has a profound and far-reaching effect on the therapeutic relationship. For example, the relationship may be deepened by the therapist's awareness of the underlying oneness of all beings and his/her essential connectedness with the client. Recognizing the illusory nature of limited perceptions of reality and the infinite possibilities of expanding inner vision, the transpersonal psychotherapist may well view therapy as a process of awakening. Attaining an expanded state of consciousness as well as an expanded sense of identity and a transformed world view is implied as a possibility, depending on the client's willingness to let go of constricting beliefs and identification. Frequently this expansion may be facilitated by reversing customary patterns, *e.g.*, an overly assertive person may need to learn to be more compliant, whereas a very compliant person may need to learn to be more assertive. The person who believes "I have to make it on my own," may need to relinquish control and learn to accept support, whereas the person who is always seeking external support may need to come to

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therapist's
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terms with aloneness and learn to take responsibility for him! herself.

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ended
belief*

In a transpersonal context the therapist realizes that, although no particular method will necessarily lead to a transpersonal awakening or personal transformation, there is much that can be done to remove the obstacles to such experience. Clearly, if the therapist does not believe such change is possible, disbelief itself becomes an obstacle. Similarly, if the therapist believes that such a change takes years, it probably will. It seems, however, that the attainment of illumination or liberation, according to both Eastern and Western mystical teachings, can occur in an instant. It is therefore recommended that the therapist examine his/her beliefs about what is possible in order to prevent any unnecessary limitations from interfering with potential awakening.

The therapist creates a transpersonal context for psychotherapy by working with open-ended beliefs about the process. One such belief is the assumption that all thoughts, beliefs and values directly affect this process, regardless of whether they are expressed overtly or not. It is common knowledge that people in Jungian analysis have Jungian dreams, while those in Freudian analysis have Freudian dreams. In transpersonal psychotherapy clients are given the opportunity to experience transcendence and awakening. One psychiatrist, after becoming personally involved in a spiritual practice, noticed that his clients, for the first time in twenty years, began to voice their spiritual concerns, even though he did not mention his interest.

Establishing a transpersonal context may thus facilitate the exploration of transpersonal *content* but does not require it. The content of therapy is generated by the client and consists of whatever problems, experiences and concerns the client brings. The therapist may use dream work, guided imagery, inward focusing or any number of techniques useful for evoking transpersonal content, but the techniques themselves do not define either the context or the content as transpersonal,

CONTENT

Transpersonal *content* refers to any experience in which an individual transcends the limitations of identifying exclusively with the ego or personality. Transpersonal content also includes the mythical, archetypal and symbolic realms of inner experience that can come into awareness through imagery and dreams. Although the therapeutic value of transpersonal experience has been explicitly acknowledged by Jung (1973) and

other Western psychotherapists, the attainment of transpersonal experience is not the aim of transpersonal psychotherapy *per se*. Such experiences, though not valued as ends in themselves, are accepted as healthy and potentially valuable for human development. They are particularly useful in facilitating disidentification from superficial roles and distorted self-image. When transpersonal experiences are affirmed, validated and integrated as meaningful aspects of the totality of oneself rather than being repressed or avoided, they tend to bring up fundamental questions concerning the nature of reality and one's true identity. Thus a person who comes to therapy concerned about a personal relationship that is unsatisfactory may be encouraged to examine the beliefs that limit awareness of options for change within the existing structure as well as exploring the possibility of creating new forms that would allow for fuller self-expression and mutual growth. Working in depth with clients, therefore, cannot be divorced from questions of values. Belief systems may be subjected to intense examination and discarded or revised as appropriate. Nevertheless, transpersonal psychotherapy does not attempt to establish the validity of any particular belief system. Indeed, the willingness to question all beliefs and assumptions concerning our essential nature is fundamental to expanding our knowledge of this field.

*a
willingness
to
question
beliefs
and
assumptions*

The content of therapy is never exclusively transpersonal, since it invariably reflects the full spectrum of the client's life experience. When defined by its content, therapy may be addressed to different levels of consciousness, according to the predominant themes. Thus therapy at the ego level addresses problems of coping with life and getting what one wants in the world, while therapy at the existential level is predominantly concerned with questions of authenticity, meaning and purpose. At the transpersonal level therapy approaches the possibility of transcendence.

PROCESS

From a transpersonal perspective the *process* of moving from one stage to another, although clearly not a linear progression in time, may be conceptualized as follows (Vaughan-Clark, 1977).

Psychotherapy at the ego level may be considered as a stage of development concerned with *identification*. At this stage the client is likely to be concerned with developing ego strength, raising self-esteem, and letting go of negative patterns of self-invalidation. Bugental (1978) has observed that most

*identification,
responsibility,
and
self-
determination*

people operate out of unexamined ideas of their own identities. He therefore attempts to bring these self-conceptions to consciousness, and says, "... many of my interventions are designed to challenge existing self-pictures and to suggest enlarged awareness of being." As one begins to identify and own feelings, thoughts, and previously rejected or projected parts of the self, one can assume responsibility for who one is and for the consequences of the choices one has made. The successful completion of this stage implies an awareness of freedom and a shift from other-directedness to self-determination.

*dis-
identification,
ego-death,
and
liberation*

A second stage in the process of transpersonal awakening is one of *disidentification*. As Assagioli (1965) noted, "We are dominated by everything with which our self becomes identified. We can dominate and control everything from which we disidentify." Wei Wu Wei (1970) says, "As long as we are identified with an object, that is bondage." Work at this stage corresponds to work at the existential level, where the individual confronts basic questions of meaning and purpose in life, and begins to disidentify from roles, possessions, activities, and relationships. At this stage success in terms of ego goals or personal gratification is often felt to be meaningless. A confrontation with the existential reality of death and aloneness may lead to despair or resignation. At this stage the self is experienced as an independent entity confronting a world devoid of meaning. Resolution of this level in transcendence involves a kind of ego death, which means further disidentification from both outer and inner definitions of oneself. While owning that one has a body, feelings, thoughts and points of view, one recognizes that one is no-thing. When one begins to disidentify from the ego and identify instead with the transpersonal self or the detached observer of one's psychological processes, the process of inner liberation is set in motion.

*self-
transcendence
and
transpersonal
awareness*

When the transpersonal self is recognized as the context of all experience, a distinction can be made between consciousness and the objects or contents of consciousness. Thus changing thoughts and emotions may be observed as contents of consciousness, and all experience may be held as the content of pure unchanging transpersonal awareness. When this occurs, one reaches the stage of *self-transcendence*, wherein the whole personal melodrama becomes less significant. At this point one no longer experiences oneself as totally isolated, but as part of something larger, inherently connected, and related to everything. The realization that one exists as a web of mutually conditioned relationships and that one is absolutely connected with all of existence may be, as Leonard (1978) suggests, the next step in human evolution. With this realization a significant shift in the sense of identity may take place, and this shift

may be incomprehensible to one who has no experiential understanding of this phase (Vaughan, 1979).

This transpersonal world view is supported by both modern physics and Eastern mysticism (Capra, 1975), which describes the universe as a dynamic, intricate web of relationships in continuous change. As one becomes aware of the transpersonal dimension of being, values and behavior tend to change. Problems that remain insoluble at the ego level may now be transcended. For example, inappropriate behavior motivated by fear, regardless of whether it be fear of loss, rejection, failure or whatever, changes automatically when one begins to see such fears as founded on the illusory identification with ego as a separate self-existent entity.

*transpersonal
awareness
and
changes in
values
and
behavior*

Fear itself may be held as a *content* or object of consciousness. Only when one becomes identified with it does it appear insurmountable. In acknowledging the transpersonal self as *context* rather than content, any content may be perceived as acceptable and useful in the process of evolving consciousness. Thus a client working at the transpersonal level in therapy learns to witness his/her experience and state of mind, letting it be and accepting it as part of a process in which he/she willingly participates.

*transpersonal
self
as
context*

Reflecting on the changes she observed as a result of her work in transpersonal therapy (preceded by considerable experience with more traditional therapy), one client wrote, "I no longer examine *every* action and its motives in order to justify it and myself. I no longer *continually* measure my worth in terms of accomplishments or defined roles. I am no longer *frantically* involved in changing myself.... I have begun to gain a sense that my life (fate) is my path and to own the choices I have made on my way.... Two changes are: a much lowered anxiety level as I have developed a capacity for inner quiet, and a loss of my obsession with death and meaninglessness as I have realized birth and death as one." The Buddhist teaching that clinging and attachment cause pain and suffering is often relevant to such insight. The attachment to any particular experience or attempts to change one experience for another, *e.g.*, the frantic pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, invariably results in continuing frustration and disappointment.

*insight
and
attachment*

Even when a person has succeeded in disidentifying from ego roles derived from position in the world and from various mind states, he/she may still be subject to archetypal identifications such as healer, wise man, teacher, *etc.* As symbols which point beyond themselves, the archetypes are the fi-

*symbols
as
pointers
and
barriers*

nal pointers and also the final barriers to the direct imageless awareness of transpersonal consciousness (Wilber, 1977). Nonetheless, the symbolization of experience can be the means by which the self is released from constricting identifications. Although such symbolization facilitates this release by increasing awareness of the transpersonal potentials of the psyche, the symbols themselves can become obstacles if the ego mistakenly identifies with them. Writing about his own journey from traditional medicine to transpersonal healing, Brugh Joy (1979) says, "Initially, dreams, the Tarot and the *1 Ching* are to make one more self-aware. As with any good teacher, they fall away as one enters more deeply into the states of direct knowledge."

*the
expanded
sense
of
identity*

The successful outcome of transpersonal psychotherapy may be described as an expanded sense of identity, in which the self is viewed as the context of life experience, which in turn is held as content. This shift in identity is frequently associated with a shift in motivation from self-enhancement to service, implying less investment in the achievement of specific ego goals and a predominant motivation for participation and service in the world. One is likely to be more accepting of all life experience and develop increased tolerance for paradox and ambiguity. Inner and outer experience becomes harmonious and congruent.

*transcendent
experience
and
awakening*

Although there is no way of measuring increased compassion, generosity, inner peace, and the capacity for love and relatedness in the world, these qualities of being tend to be manifested as a result of transpersonal work. Once a person has awakened to the transpersonal dimensions of existence, life itself may be held in a different perspective. A new sense of meaning may well be the content derived from the newly experienced transpersonal self as context. Although a transcendent experience *per se* is not necessarily required for the development of this awareness, it frequently seems to accelerate the process of disidentification and awakening.

For example, one woman who was in therapy during a mid-life transition, described the following experience while focusing on inner imagery:

I am ready for the inward journey and I see myself on a country road walking through meadows. The weather is clear and sunny. There appears to be above me a sort of capsule interpenetrating the view of the country landscape as if two films were being simultaneously projected on a screen. I get into the capsule but I don't like the feeling. I feel apprehensive. It lifts me up and appears to pierce through a membrane, only it doesn't really pierce the membrane. The membrane seems to open from the

other side. On the other side there is nothing—just clear radiant space. I am no longer in a body or a capsule. I am pure awareness of space.

This particular person had no previous experience of contentless consciousness, nor was she acquainted with Eastern traditions that describe the self as emptiness or no-thing. Yet her imagery was profoundly moving and allowed her an unexpected glimpse of transpersonal experience.

Paradoxically the experience of disidentification and transcendence and the awakening to the transpersonal self also tends to be accompanied by a sense of personal freedom and a renewed sense of inner directedness and responsibility. The actual process by which these desirable outcomes in therapy are attained flows out of the context established by the therapist, and is equally determined by the content of the sessions provided by the client. Thus the process may be said to be mutually determined in the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client. The therapist serves the client best by establishing the broadest possible context, allowing the client to handle any content that may emerge. Thus the transpersonal psychotherapist attempts to provide the optimum conditions for the client to explore as deeply as possible the wellsprings of transpersonal consciousness.

*mutual
determination
in the
therapeutic
process*

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