

# Assagioli's theory of psychosynthesis



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## The I, the Self: Building the Bridge

*Only the development of his inner powers can offset the dangers inherent in man's losing control of the tremendous natural forces at his disposal and becoming the victim of his own achievements. —Roberto Assagioli*

### Introduction

Therapists use Assagioli's theory of psychosynthesis to help clients develop a complete and authentic identity that is fully able to access the true Self that pervades all levels of the conscious and unconscious mind. Because it is a common assumption that personality structures form by the time a child is five years old, transforming a fragmented consciousness into a whole identity is often a long and difficult process, especially in cases of severe trauma. This paper seeks to examine this process—in particular, how an individual can develop a new mental field that is freed from the past and oriented toward a hierarchy of values rather than specific affective events. The secondary purpose of this study is to examine which dynamics keep the individual locked into destructive personality patterns that no longer serve them and the solutions this method (psychosynthesis) offers to prospective clients.

### Soul Trauma

More than two thousand years ago, Siddhartha Gautama famously declared that 'life is suffering.' Indeed, very few people get through it without suffering some kind of trauma in their formative years. Quite often, these early traumas cause a breach between the personal self (I) and the Self.

When this connection is disrupted, the individual feels a palpable threat to his very existence. <sup>[1]</sup> When a child incurs the wrath of his caretakers, he feels the lack of connection more intensely. Because the caretakers are so instrumental to a child's survival, the child perceives displeasure as a genuine threat that the caretaker will hurt him or stop fulfilling his needs. The child then becomes sensitized to external threats. This overwhelming sense of a threat is what psychosynthesis theorists refer to as the primal wound that is responsible for the individual's fall from grace. Before this wound makes its indelible mark upon the soul, the individual has little sense of his own mortality—and the personal self is indistinguishable from the Self. Because this fracture is so painful to the psyche, people will create defence mechanisms to preserve the integrity of their being—even if it means splitting themselves into parts. <sup>[2]</sup> Shutting oneself off from the wound is tantamount to amputating a gangrene-infested leg—cutting off the poison in order to preserve the whole, even if it means causing it damage. Although this shutting off can contribute to maladaptive conditions later in life, these defence mechanisms help the individual cope in the present. However, when relationships begin to suffer or they are not accomplishing personal objectives, some people are aware that something is fundamentally wrong and seek professional help. The difference between psychosynthesis and traditional psychoanalytic therapy is a lessened emphasis on the past with more of a focus toward reorienting one's core values; however, prior events are not completely ignored because it can shed light on the fundamental assumptions governing the client's life and turn them in a more healthy direction.

## Repression, Denial, and Splitting

In most families, children conform to the rules and will of their parents, partially because it helps them survive and partially because these structures help them define themselves as individuals. However, some people will hold beliefs or thoughts that they know is not acceptable to their family of origin or culture and thus denying that part of themselves or part of the experience in order to retain that sense of belongingness. Causes and symptoms of this split include: a fundamentally weak sense of self, a fragmented consciousness where one's conceptual map has very few connections, in a clinical setting the therapist can never be certain what the client is thinking or feeling, the client believes that he or she is fundamentally a bad person and that no one could possibly love him or her after personal revelation, etc. [3] These attitudes often originate in clients with a past history of abuse, neglect, or a need to protect family members by creating a persona that is more to their liking. [4] This mechanism of repression is not without cause, as many people have been killed for deviating from cultural, social, and familial norms. However, in cultures that place great value on individual happiness and finding a purpose that is congruent with one's gifts and talents, this is a liability, as the individual must discover the S(s)elf before finding his path. Interestingly, some theorists believe that what lies at the root of the problem is not the experience, but the repression of it. ' Many people evidence the psychological symptom of denial, or *psychic numbing* . If denial has become a social norm, how can we use social norms to gauge a person's health or to set appropriate goals in therapy?' [5] The Institute of Psychosynthesis

encourages therapists to first build the strength of the ego and discover the personality while avoiding attacks on personal weaknesses, mirroring the client to encourage identification and connectedness, and possibly integrate the disowned parts of the client. [6] Another approach involves encouraging the client to move to the core of one of the sub-personalities in order to find something that is good—the root of its dysfunction is the non-allowance of the expression—i. e. a high achieving person needs love but cannot ask for it directly, nor can the critical person ask for the security of being in control. [7] In fact, this approach includes treating the sub-personality as one would a person, because distortions are most often found in this realm. ' Compassion can become pity; love can become dependency; humour can become sarcasm; strength can become rigidity. But the converse is also true, for these qualities can be elevated to or transformed into their essential nature.' [8] Using guided imagery, the therapist can contact each aspect of the individual; help bring its most beneficial aspects to the surface in order to facilitate the re-integration process.

### The Personal ' I': The Story of the ' Self'

Although the framework for transpersonal experience has existed for thousands of years, it is only within the past fifty years that it has become a respectable method of psychotherapy. Both the Eastern and Western religious traditions support the rediscovery of the Self—the part of the individual that is beyond the personal self even as it includes it. In the West, the Self (or the Soul) is the immortal part that is elevated above the dross of every day life. In the Eastern traditions, the Self is attempting to reintegrate

with the Cosmos by having multiple experiences. Native Americans undergo rigorous purification rituals such as body piercing, hours in the sweat lodge, and the Sun Dance in order to induce a trance state and to make contact with the spirit world. <sup>[9]</sup> In both religion and psychosynthesis, the Self is the culmination of a person's experiences and attributes. Until Assagioli had come up with the concept, this approach was unutilised by modern psychologists, as the dominant therapeutic approach was psychoanalysis where therapists and clients will discuss the client's past and analyse it in order to give the client a greater understanding of himself. While that is a good place to begin the journey of self-discovery, it does not take the client to the point of unification. Traditional psychoanalysis did not include an understanding of this higher Self, simply the tripartite ego structure and the basic drives that motivate humans. Assagioli makes use of Freud's model as the lower and higher unconscious functions correspond with the id and superego respectively, while the middle unconscious corresponds with Freud's conception of the 'preconscious.' <sup>[10]</sup> He also borrows from Jung's concepts by including the spiritual realms of the psyche. One practical application therapists may use in their practice is CEIS: Creative Exploration of Inner Space. It is a twelve-step application of Assagioli's theories that was developed after twenty-seven years of practice. <sup>[11]</sup> The first step is solitude. The client creates a 'sacred space' or an inner sweat lodge to begin his journey inward. Brown argues that this dissociation from the personal identity will lead to objectivity about day-to-day activities and concerns. <sup>[12]</sup> Solitude is encouraged because individuals have great difficulty maintaining a strong sense of self with pervasive influences such as the media or when

significant others (friends, family members, mates) have strong personalities and expect the individual to conform to their idea of what is correct. Next, the therapist will invite the client to relax for five minutes before progressing to the next step, which includes deep reflective thinking upon a subject for ten minutes (this is done in writing). This is followed by receptive thinking, visualization, mandala art, cognitive analysis, and inner dialogue. After this, the client arrives at step nine, the symbolic identification or psychodrama with which the Psychosynthesis School is concerned. ' Clients are instructed to take one step forward and enter the image; to become the image physically; and to allow movements or gestures to occur or postures that might help them connect, identify with, and become the image completely... Symbolic identification can lead to more expressive uses of the body, to new sensations, and to the development of empathy and compassion.' [13]

Ideally, after the experience is complete, the client will integrate the experience in their homework, attain closure, and share the experience with someone close to them. Brown had great success with this method because the session was infused with a meaning that is specific to the client, as opposed to categorizing him or her as an obsessive-compulsive, depressive, etc. and drugging the client accordingly.

### Crises of Meaning

Perhaps there was less mental confusion in the past because the ancients had rites governing each stage of life and people were more aware of what they were supposed to do. Today, there are so many choices and very few cultural traditions for the life cycle, especially in industrialised Western nations. This is where we observe the common crises at birth, adolescence

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and mid-life. When the individual is born, he leaves a warm environment where his every wish is granted to a place where he is cold, hungry, and *separate*.<sup>[14]</sup> The infant is distressed because it intuitively knows that separation is dangerous, and even the most attentive parents cannot provide the security the child is missing from the womb environment. As the infant grows, the psychological structures such as the Superego and Ego begin to gain strength, and this is where a child learns how romantic relationships work by observing the parental imagos. When relations between the parents (as well as the parent-child relationship) are dysfunctional, the child often grows up to project these issues onto a romantic partner. In ancient society, the onset of puberty signalled to the group that there was a new full participant in the social order. There was a ceremony where the individual would shed his status as a child and be welcomed into the group as an adult. There is no such phenomenon today because childhood is legally extended years past biological maturity, which would make the final transition to adulthood more difficult. At this point, the individual becomes emotionally separated from childhood and parents to embrace a new identity independent of childhood structures...this is a time of self-definition. In the mid-life crisis, the individual comes to face his own mortality and experiences the mental/personality separation. This is the time when people are most likely to seek therapy to resolve past issues as many are afflicted with severe depression out of a feeling of wasting their life and looking toward a future where death looms larger than safety. In sum, psychosynthesis proposes to unite the various and sundry portions of ourselves in order that we may be better equipped to confront the crises that will ultimately affect everyone.



## Bibliography

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## Footnotes

[1] John Firman & Ann Gila. *The Primal Wound: A Transpersonal View of Trauma, Addiction, and Growth* , (New York: SUNY Press, 1997) 89

[2] Firman and Gila, 90

[3] Joan Evans. *Institute of Psychosynthesis Manual*, 1990, 64

[4] Evans, 65

[5] Molly Young Brown. *Unfolding Self: The Practice of Psychosynthesis* , (New York: Allworth Press, 2004) 10

[6] Evans, 65

[7] Diana Whitmore. *Psychosynthesis Counselling in Action* . (London: SAGE Publications, 2004) 93

[8] Ibid.

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[10] Stanislav Grof. *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death, and Transcendence in Psychotherapy*. (New York: SUNY Press, 1985) 193

[11] Michael Brown. ' A Psychosynthesis Twelve Step Program for Transforming Consciousness: Creative Explorations of Inner Space, *Counselling and Values* , Vol. 45, No. 2, (2001) 113

[12] Brown, 114

[13] Brown, 115

[14] Evans, 210