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ABSTRACT

Psychosynthesis provides a coherent theory for framing the self assessment and career exploration process. It helps clients understand their conflicting needs and assists them in clarifying and responding to their inner callings. This paper presents an overview of the aspects of Psychosynthesis theory and practice found to be most relevant when working with clients in both individual and group sessions as they explore their vision and move towards decisions for their future. The counselor's role in Psychosynthesis is to guide clients through the process of clarifying their inner wisdom and to help them distinguish it from other internal messages they receive. Clients can learn to respond to their true self, which will take them into new territory when exploring the world of work and their evolving place in it. (JDM)

Integrating Psychology and Spirituality During Career Exploration

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Integrating Psychology and Spirituality During Career Exploration

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Psychosynthesis provides a coherent theory for framing the self assessment and career exploration process, and helps clients understand and honor their conflicting needs and desires, develop their connections to intuitive wisdom, and actively respond to calls that draw them toward more authentic worklives.

For the past five years, we have worked to integrate the theory and techniques of Psychosynthesis, which we studied in a 5-year formal training program, into our work as career counselors in private practice. This paper presents an overview of the aspects of Psychosynthesis theory and practice that we have found most relevant and useful in our work with clients in both individual sessions and groups, as they crystallize their visions and translate them into reality.

Psychosynthesis is an approach to personal growth that integrates psychology and spirituality. First set forth in 1910 by Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli, it involves a conscious attempt to cooperate with the natural process of human development – the tendency in each of us to harmonize and synthesize the aspects of our lives at ever higher levels of organization. Assagioli noticed that a great deal of psychological pain, imbalance, and meaninglessness are felt when diverse inner elements exist unconnected side by side or antagonistically within us. He also observed, however, that when they work synergistically, we experience a release of energy, a sense of well-being, and a greater depth of meaning to our lives (Ferrucci, p. 22). He also observed that this process is often blocked, and developed Psychosynthesis as a process for clarifying the internal elements which may be in conflict, and facilitating our conscious acceptance and synthesis – the individuation process.

The conceptual framework and techniques of Psychosynthesis allow us to guide clients in moving away from the distractions of everyday reality into a more sacred frame of mind, to listen and respond to “callings” from their inner wisdom, from that which is greater than themselves. Specifically, we have found it useful in helping clients address three questions:

- How do I listen to my inner wisdom, and recognize a “calling?”
- How do I distinguish it from other messages from voices, both internal and external?
- How do I handle internal and external obstacles?

In Psychosynthesis, the counselor’s role is that of a guide who follows the client’s inner wisdom. This is the basis for respecting and clarifying the boundaries between career counseling and psychotherapy. This approach has been especially useful for people who already have some exposure to guided imagery work, although this is not necessary. It is not appropriate for clients experiencing severe depression or personality disorders. We have used these techniques in one-

on-one sessions with a wide range of clients, and in workshops with 6-10 participants. The approach can be very effective for clients who are concurrently seeing a therapist with whom they share their exercises, but few of our clients have been in this situation.

Psychosynthesis involves four important concepts especially relevant to career counseling:

1) We have multiple voices within, or *sub-personalities*, which represent different facets of our personalities, and can often give us habitual or conflicting messages. Each sub-personality has a style and motivation of its own, within the overall medium of our personalities. For example, my high-achieving sub-personality might urge me to work overtime to finish a project and make a great impression in the meeting the next day. My nurturing sub-personality might urge me to leave work at 4:30 PM to play soccer with my child. This multiplicity within can usually be recognized if we recall the ease with which our outlooks can change – the world may appear full of promise and adventure one day, and the next, a dull treadmill or even a nightmare. Psychosynthesis involves honoring and listening to all parts of ourselves.

2) The personal self, or identity (called “I”) – the one who observes and responds. According to Ferrucci (p. 61), the self is the only part of us which remains forever the same. The personal self is the one who can step outside one’s different sub-personalities and observe them. This process is called “dis-identification,” and is central to Psychosynthesis. It refers to the tendency we all have to identify with – or become one with – our dominant sub-personalities. We can believe we *are* a sub-personality when it is activated. Dis-identification returns us to our true self, our core individuality. Our conscious awareness of self makes it possible for us to love, to be aware of past and future, to plan and be conscious of our own evolution, and to develop a relationship with something greater than ourselves.

3) The transpersonal Self is a presence or power greater than oneself. The Self lives at the level of universality, and each of us may conceive of this in different ways, with different names. As counselors, we carefully attune to each client’s language and sense of Self, and use that language where it feels appropriate. If it is not apparent, we use phrases such as “intuitive wisdom” to point toward this larger presence. The personal self is a reflection of the transpersonal Self. The conscious experience of relationship between I and Self is the experience of being “called” to something larger than oneself. This is the classic meaning of the word “vocation,” an age-old phrase referring to a religious calling. However, calls from the Self can also be held as calls to a more authentic way of life, fulfilling the destiny that James Hillman refers to as “the soul’s code” — the invisible mystery at the center of every life that speaks to the fundamental question “What is it, in my heart, that I must do, be, and have? And why?” (Hillman)

4) A unifying center is a thing or person through which transpersonal Self reaches toward the individual self. As children, anyone who can see us for who we truly *are* (a parent, teacher, neighbor, etc.) can serve as a unifying center. A unifying center could also be a place in nature or a pet. As we mature, developing a unifying center which is internal brings a more certain sense of one’s own center and inner wisdom. As career counselors, we often serve as external unifying centers for our clients, since the empathic

relationship between client and counselor is vitally important. However, as counselors our goal is to support the client in strengthening their own internal unifying center, with the counselor facilitating the relationships between sub-personalities, individual self, and transpersonal Self.

Work with clients using Psychosynthesis involves progression through four stages of development, which may not be sequential. Much of our work involves use of the client's active imagination to focus inward and get in touch with a "felt sense." This ability to engage active imagination takes practice, and one way we begin is to ask them to close their eyes, or allow them to move into soft focus on the floor, relax, and imagine holding a lemon. "Notice how it feels in your hand, how it looks, its texture and color. Squeeze it gently and smell the lemon oil. Imagine cutting it open and tasting it.... When you're ready, return to the room and open your eyes." The ability to step into active imagination, ask questions, and listen for responses is vitally important and seems to be possible for most people, when done carefully and with respect for their experiences. Taking time to write or draw experiences from guided visualization before talking helps the client process the experience

Stage One

This stage involves gaining a thorough knowledge of one's personality and the multiplicity of voices, or sub-personalities, within. This means turning inward to listen to, identify, and accept them. In career counseling, we usually ask the client in a guided visualization to attend to "those voices within you which have something to say about your worklife."

Common techniques include recalling dreams, creating a collage of parts of oneself, writing an autobiography, or constructing a lifeline. A simple technique can involve asking the clients to close their eyes, imagine a quiet place in which they feel completely themselves, and to ask for the parts of them selves that have something to say about their worklives to be with them. Invite them to notice each part carefully, what it is saying, how it looks and acts. Ask them to check for parts that may be in the shadows. Then ask the clients to open their eyes and draw themselves and each part, or sub-personality. We usually give clients a small box of crayons for drawing, explaining that this drawing is not about fine art, but a way to gain a window to their inner world. Crayons remind most of us of our childhoods and elicit less self-consciousness about our artistic abilities. After the client describes each part, we may ask "What does this part want?" "What does it need?" "What positive quality does it bring to your life?"

All sub-personalities are expressions of vital elements of our being and our hidden potential, however negative they may seem at first. Taking actions in our lives which are intended to meet the needs of a sub-personality lets them know you are taking them seriously, and builds trust. For example, a client with a strong need to be appreciated by a critical supervisor can begin to find ways to give himself this appreciation, or perhaps ask for it in a different way, as in positive feedback in a performance review, that might work better with the supervisor's style.

Deeper work with sub-personalities can point toward unresolved childhood wounds, which tends to move into a therapeutic direction and suggests referral to a psychotherapist. Since the client leads the process and goes to the level that feels appropriate within the career counselor-client relationship, and with the guidance of the client's intuitive wisdom, we have found this boundary to be clear-cut.

Stage Two

The second stage involves dis-identifying, stepping back from the parts of our personality into our sense of "I am," distinct from these parts, or sub-personalities. When we can identify with this witnessing core, or self, we are less likely to be pulled around by parts of ourselves, or driven primarily by a dominant part. Techniques in this stage involve discussing the witnessing self, and using guided imagery to evoke it. One guided visualization exercise involves imagining one sub-personality with something to say about a particular issue on the client's right. Ask them to step into that part and notice how it feels...what it needs. Then suggest stepping back into "self" and notice how that feels. Do the same for another part that may be in conflict with that part, on their left. Then again ask clients to step back into "self" and notice how each part appears now. Ask what each has to say to the other, and then listen. Conclude by asking them to "notice anything else that needs to happen between the three of you, before taking your leave, knowing you can return anytime." This exercise tends to work best when clients physically assumes the position of each sub-personality.

Stage Three

This stage involves connecting to our inner wisdom, or deeper Self. We begin to engage in a dialogue with Self, and become aware of Self calling us in a direction or pulling us upward to resolve and transcend conflict or roadblocks within. We often ask clients to close their eyes and imagine the wisest, most loving being or figure of wisdom they can. This can be a real person or imagined being. We then suggest that they ask this Wise Being a question about the issue or conflict they are addressing, and then silently listen for any kind of response - verbal, a "felt sense," an image, whatever happens is fine. Other techniques to access this inner wisdom can include prayer or meditation, encouraging the client to design a ritual or build an altar, working with dreams, and journal writing. Important questions to suggest are: "How do I wish this situation to be?" "What am I called to express in the world?" An equally important question is "What's in the way of my doing this?" After taking time to engage with the roadblock, or fearful sub-personality that appears, ask the Wise Being for guidance, or perhaps suggest asking "What do I need to develop in myself to move past this?"

Stage Four

Stage four involves learning to honor and respond to calls of the Self. This includes developing the will to take action. Asking clients to ground the work you have done together is vitally important. Useful questions are: "What would your life be like if this vision took shape?" "What can you do in the next two weeks to explore this idea (or to make more space in your life for this part of you)?"

It takes time to discern the true voice of the higher Self, to perceive the larger patterns of our lives, and understand what we need to do to live more authentic lives, and help our spirits grow. Supporting clients to develop their own simple rituals or practices which can connect them to transpersonal Self over time is vitally important.

We have found that growth happens not only during the self assessment phase but often more intensively during the career exploration phase, as we support clients to pursue their vision, listen deeply to themselves and to others, address obstacles, and take action. More linear approaches to problem-solving and goal-setting definitely have their place in the career exploration phase. However, we have found that using Psychosynthesis concepts and techniques to facilitate clients in attending to their inner world, facing inner obstacles, and attuning to their inner wisdom, facilitates their growth into new areas. They learn to distinguish calls from the Self from the conflicting, habitual voices of their inner sub-personalities, they can respond from their true self, which will take them into new territory exploring the world of work and their evolving place in it.

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