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What Is a Person?

Roger N. Walsh, Frances Vaughan

What is a person? This is the most fundamental question confronting all psychologies. Different psychologies assume different perspectives and emphasize different dimensions. From these they construct what often seem to be radically different images of human nature. Usually these views are seen as oppositional, more likely they represent parts of a complex multidimensional whole. The transpersonal model presented here is not intended to negate other models, but rather to set them in a larger context that includes states of consciousness and levels of well-being not encompassed by previous psychological models.

The four major dimensions of this model are consciousness, conditioning, personality, and identity. Using these headings, we will sum-

marize what seem to us to represent the basic tenets of a transpersonal model, and compare them with traditional Western assumptions.

CONSCIOUSNESS

This transpersonal model holds consciousness as being a central dimension that provides the basis and context for all experience. Traditional Western psychologies have held differing positions with regard to consciousness. These range from behaviorism, which prefers to ignore it because of the difficulty of researching it objectively, to psychodynamic and humanistic approaches, which acknowledge it but generally pay more attention to the contents than to consciousness per se, as the context of experience.

A transpersonal model views our usual consciousness as a defensively contracted state. This usual state is filled to a remarkable and unrecognized extent with a continuous flow of largely uncontrollable thoughts and fantasies in accordance with our needs and defenses. In the words of Ram Dass, "We are all prisoners of our minds. This realization is the first step on the journey of freedom."¹

Optimum consciousness is viewed as being considerably greater, and potentially available at any time, should the defensive contraction be relaxed. The fundamental perspective on growth is therefore one of letting go this defensive contraction and removing obstacles to the recognition of the expanded ever-present potential through quieting the mind and reducing perceptual distortion.^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6}

The fundamental task which gives the key to many realizations is the silence of the mind. . . . All kinds of discoveries are made, in truth, when the mental machinery stops, and the first is that if the power to think is a remarkable gift, the power not to think is even more so.⁷

The transpersonal perspective holds that a large spectrum of altered states of consciousness exist, that some are potentially useful and functionally specific (i.e., possessing some functions not available in the usual state but lacking others), and that some of these are true "higher" states. Higher is here used in Tart's^{8, 9} sense of possessing all the properties and potentials of lower states, plus some additional ones. Furthermore, a wide range of literature from a variety of cultures and growth disciplines attest to the attainability of these higher states.^{10, 11, 12, 13, 14} On the other hand, the traditional Western view holds that only a limited range of states exists, e.g., waking, dreaming, intoxication, delirium. Furthermore, nearly all altered states are seen as detrimental and "normality" is considered optimal.

Viewing our usual state from an expanded context results in some unexpected implications. The traditional model defines psychosis as a

distorted perception of reality that does not recognize the distortion. From the perspective of this multiple-states model, our usual state fits this definition, being suboptimal, providing a distorted perception of reality, and failing to recognize that distortion. Indeed, any one state of consciousness is necessarily limited and only relatively real. Hence, from the broader perspective psychosis might be defined as attachment to, or being trapped in, any single state of consciousness.^{5, 15}

Since each state of consciousness reveals its own picture of reality,¹⁶ it follows that reality as we know it (and that is the only way we know it) is also only relatively real. Put another way, then, psychosis is attachment to any one reality. In the words of Ram Dass:

We grow up with one plane of existence we call real. We identify totally with that reality as absolute, and we discount experiences that are inconsistent with it. . . . What Einstein demonstrated in physics is equally true of all other aspects of the cosmos: all reality is relative. Each reality is true only within given limits. It is only one possible version of the way things are. There are always multiple versions of reality. To awaken from any single reality is to recognize its relative reality.¹⁵

Thus the reality we perceive reflects our own state of consciousness and we can never explore reality without at the same time exploring ourselves, both because we are, and because we create, the reality we explore.

CONDITIONING

With regard to conditioning, the transpersonal perspective holds that people are vastly more ensnared and trapped in their conditioning than they appreciate, but that freedom from this conditioning is possible.¹⁴ The aim of transpersonal psychotherapy is essentially the extraction of awareness from this conditioned tyranny of the mind. This is described in more detail in the section on identity.

One form of conditioning Eastern disciplines have examined in detail is attachment. Attachment is closely associated with desire and signifies that nonfulfillment of the desire will result in pain. Attachment therefore plays a central role in the causation of suffering, and letting go of attachment is central to its cessation.^{17, 18}

Whenever there is attachment
Association with it
Brings endless misery.¹⁸

Whenever we are still attached, we are still possessed;
and when one is possessed, it means the existence of something stronger than oneself.¹⁹

Attachment is not limited to external objects or persons. In addition to the familiar forms of attachment to material possessions, special relationships and the prevailing status quo, there may be equally strong attachments to a particular self-image, a pattern of behavior, or a psychological process. Among the strongest attachments noted in the consciousness disciplines are those to suffering and to unworthiness. Insofar as we believe that our identity is derived from our roles, our problems, our relationships, or the contents of consciousness, attachment is reinforced by fear for personal survival. "If I give up my attachments, who and what will I be?"

PERSONALITY

Personality has been accorded a central place in most previous psychologies and indeed many psychological theories hold that people are their personality. Interestingly enough, the most common title given to books on psychological health and well-being has been *The Healthy Personality*.²⁰ Health has usually been viewed as primarily involving a modification of personality. From a transpersonal perspective, however, personality is accorded relatively less importance. Rather, it is seen as only one aspect of being with which the individual may, but does not have to, identify. Health is seen as primarily involving a shift from exclusive identification with personality rather than a modification of it.

Likewise, the personal drama or story each person has to tell about him/herself is also seen in a different perspective. According to Fadiman,²¹ personal dramas are an unnecessary luxury and interfere with full functioning. They are part of our emotional baggage, and it is usually beneficial for a person to gain some detachment or disidentification from his/her dramas, as well as from the personal dramas of others.

IDENTITY

Identity is seen as a crucial concept and is conceptually extended beyond traditional Western limits. Traditional psychologies have recognized identification with external objects and have defined it as an unconscious process in which the individual becomes like or feels the same as something or someone else.²² Transpersonal and Eastern psychologies also recognize external identification but maintain that identification with internal (intrapsychic) phenomena and processes is even more significant. Here identification is defined as the process by which something is experienced as self. Furthermore, this type of identification goes unrecognized by most of us, including psychologists, therapists, and behavioral scientists, because we are all so involved in it. That is, we are so identified that it never even occurs to us to question that which it seems so clear that we are.

Consensually validated identifications go unrecognized because they are not called into question. Indeed, any attempt to question them may meet with considerable resistance from others. "Attempts to awake before our time are often punished, especially by those who love us most. Because they, bless them, are asleep. They think anyone who wakes up, or... realizes that what is taken to be real, is a dream, is going crazy."²³

The process of disidentification has far-reaching implications. The identification of awareness with mental content renders the individual unconscious of the broader context of consciousness that holds this content. When awareness identifies with mental content this content becomes the context from which all other mental content and experience are viewed. Thus the content become context now interprets other content, and determines meaning, perception, belief, motivation, and behavior, all in a manner that is consistent with and reinforces this context. Furthermore, the context sets in motion psychological processes that also reinforce it.^{24, 25, 26}

For example, if a thought "I'm scared" arises and this thought is observed and seen to be what it is, i.e., just another thought, then it exerts little influence. However, if it is identified with, then the reality at that moment is that the individual is scared and is likely to generate and identify with a whole series of fearful thoughts and emotions, to interpret nondescript feelings as fear, to perceive the world as frightening, and to act in a fearful manner. Thus, identification sets in motion a self-fulfilling, self-prophetic process in which experience and psychological processes validate the reality of that which was identified with. For the person identified with the thought "I'm scared," everything seems to prove the reality and validity of his/her fear. Remember that with identification the person is unaware of the fact that his/her perception stems from a thought "I'm scared." This thought is now not something that can be seen, rather it is that from which everything else is seen and interpreted. Awareness, which could be transcendent and positionless, has now been constricted to viewing the world from a single self-validating perspective. This is similar to the process that occurs with unrecognized models as described earlier. "We are dominated by everything with which our self becomes identified. We can dominate and control everything from which we disidentify."²⁷ "As long as we are identified with an object, that is bondage."²⁸

It may be that thoughts and beliefs constitute the operators or algorithms that construct, mediate, guide, and maintain the identificatory constriction of consciousness and act as limiting models of who we believe ourselves to be. As such, they must be opened to identification in order to allow growth. It may be that beliefs are adopted as strategic, defensive decisions about who and what we must be in order to survive and function optimally.

When it is remembered that the mind is usually filled with thoughts

with which we are unwittingly identified, it becomes apparent that our usual state of consciousness is one in which we are, quite literally, hypnotized. As in any hypnotic state, there need not be any recognition of the trance and its attendant constriction of awareness, or memory of the sense of identity prior to hypnosis. While in the trance, who we think we are are the thoughts with which we are identified! Put another way, those thoughts from which we have not yet disidentified create our state of consciousness, identity and reality!

We are what we think.

All that we are arises with our thoughts.

With our thoughts we make the world.

—The Buddha²⁹

We uphold the world with our internal dialogue.³⁰

The general mechanisms underlying the hypnotic nature of our usual state are probably similar for all of us, although the contents vary between individuals and between cultures. Within cultures common beliefs and realities tend to be powerfully inculcated and shared.^{31, 18}

What is unconscious and what is conscious depends... on the structure of society and on the patterns of feelings and thoughts it produces. ... The effect of society is not only to funnel fictions into our consciousness, but also to prevent awareness of reality. ... Every society... determines the forms of awareness. This system works, as it were, like a *socially conditioned* filter; experience cannot enter awareness unless it can penetrate the filter.³²

From this perspective, ego appears to come into existence as soon as awareness identifies with thought, to represent the constellation of thoughts with which we tend to identify, and to be fundamentally an illusion produced by limited awareness. This is a sobering thought both in its personal implications and inasmuch as our traditional Western psychologies are ego psychologies and hence are studies of illusion.

BEYOND IDENTIFICATION

The task of awakening can thus be viewed from one perspective as a progressive disidentification from mental content in general and thoughts in particular. This is evident in practices such as insight meditation, where the student is trained to observe and identify all mental content rapidly and precisely.^{33, 14} For most, this is a slow, arduous process in which a gradual refinement of perception results in a peeling away of awareness from successively more subtle layers of identification.^{34, 35, 36, 28}

Finally, awareness no longer identifies exclusively with anything. This represents a radical and enduring shift in consciousness known by various names, such as enlightenment or liberation. Since there is no longer any exclusive identification with anything, the me/not me dichotomy is transcended and such persons experience themselves as being

both nothing and everything. They are both pure awareness (no thing) and the entire universe (every thing). Being identified with both no location and all locations, nowhere and everywhere, they experience having transcended space and positionality.

A similar transcendence occurs for time. The mind is in constant flux. At the most sensitive levels of perception attainable by perceptual training such as meditation, all mind, and hence the whole phenomenal universe, is seen to be in continuous motion and change, with each object of awareness arising out of void into awareness and disappearing again within minute fractions of a second.^{33, 13, 17} This is the fundamental recognition of the Buddhist teaching of impermanence, i.e., that everything changes, nothing remains the same.^{34, 35, 38} This realization can become one of the major motivating forces for advanced meditators to transcend all mental processes and attain the changeless, unconditioned state of nirvana.

In this final state of pure awareness, since there is no longer identification with mind, there is no sense of being identified with change. Since time is a function of change, this results in an experience of being outside, or transcendent to, time. This is experienced as eternity, the eternity of the unchanging now, and from this perspective time is perceived as an illusory product of identification.

Time is of your own making
Its clock ticks in your head.
The moment you stop thought
Time too stops dead.³⁷

Mental contents and processes occur largely as a result of conditioning, a fact recognized by both Western and non-Western psychologies. Identification with these contents results in the experience of a self that is controlled by conditioning. Once their identification is transcended then so are the effects of conditioning. Conditioned thoughts and emotions still pass through the mind, but without identification with them awareness may now be experienced as unconditioned.

The experience of unconditioned pure awareness is apparently a blissful one, described in the Hindu tradition as comprised of *sat-chit-ananda*: awareness, being, and bliss. Without identification with painful thoughts and emotions there is no experience of suffering. Thus, from this perspective the cause of suffering is identification.

Freed of unconscious distorting and limiting identifications and contexts, awareness is now capable of clear, accurate perception. Hence, in Tibetan Buddhism it is called a "crystal mirror" because of its clear, faithful reflection of reality. Furthermore, with no exclusive identification, mirror and that which it perceives, subject and object, are perceived as one and the same thing. Awareness now perceives itself as being that

which it formerly looked at, for the observer or ego, which was an illusory product of identification, is no longer experienced as a separate entity.

Furthermore, since a person in this state experiences him/herself as being pure awareness at one with everything yet being no thing, each person also experiences him/herself as being exactly the same as, or identical with, every other person. From this state of consciousness the words of the mystics proclaiming "we are one" make perfect sense as literal experience. With nothing except one's self in existence the thought of harming "others" makes no sense whatsoever, and it is said that such thoughts may not even occur.¹⁴ Rather, the natural expressions of this state toward others are love and compassion.

Descriptions of the experience of this state make it clear that these experiences are known to most of us only in those moments of transcendent insight afforded by peak experiences.³⁹ Thus, our capacity for understanding is limited by the constraints of cross-state communication and lack of direct experience. Hence, it is apparent that descriptions of these states may be partially incomprehensible to the rest of us and may be uninterpretable from the frameworks of traditional psychology. It then becomes very easy to superficially dismiss such phenomena as nonsensical or even pathological, a mistake made even by some of the most outstanding Western mental health professionals. However, the transpersonal model attempts to provide for the first time a psychological framework capable of comprehending religious experiences and disciplines.

Inasmuch as people in the state of consciousness known as enlightenment experience themselves as being pure awareness, everything and nothing, the entire universe, unconditioned, unchanging, eternal, and one with all others, they also experience themselves as being one with God. Here, God does not imply some person or thing "out there," but rather represents the direct experience of being all that exists. In the utmost depths of the human psyche, when all limiting identifications have been dropped, awareness experiences no limits to identity and directly experiences itself as that which is beyond limits of time or space, that which humanity has traditionally called God. "To me, God is a word used to point to our ineffable subjectivity, to the unimaginable potential which lies within each of us."³⁹

Thus, at the highest levels of psychological well-being, the transpersonal model can only point to that which is beyond both models and the personal.

Notes

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