Identity, maturity and freedom: transpersonal and existential perspectives

Identidad, madurez y libertad: la perspectiva existencial y transpersonal

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Abstract

This article summarizes stages of adult development as characterized by existential and transpersonal world-views. The contributions of existential and transpersonal perspectives to our understanding of psychological wholeness and maturity are regarded as complementary rather than incompatible.

Key Words

Transpersonal, psychology, existential, spiritual, development

Resumen

Este artículo resume los estados de desarrollo del adulto, caracterizados por los puntos de vista existencial y transpersonal. Las contribuciones de las perspectivas existenciales y transpersonales a nuestro entendimiento de la totalidad y madurez son considerados como complementarios más que incompatibles.

Palabras Clave

Transpersonal, psicología, existencial, espiritual, desarrollo

The spectrum of development

In transpersonal psychology adult human development can be defined in terms of growth toward wholeness that includes a balanced integration of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual capacities of the adult person. This implies that growth continues throughout life.

Human development can be divided into three major phases: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional, or pre-personal, personal and transpersonal (Wilber, et.al., 1986). This applies to the development of cognition, morality, faith, motivation and the selfsense. The infant enters the world unsocialized, at a pre-conventional stage, and is gradually acculturated into a conventional world-view, whether it be religious or secular. A few individuals develop further into post-conventional stages of post-formal operational cognition (Pfaffenberger, et.al., 2009), post-conventional morality (Sinnott, 1994;), universalizing faith (Fowler, 1995), self-actualizing and self-transcending motives (Maslow, 1971), and a transpersonal self-sense (Cook-Greuter, 1994; Wilber, 1980, 1983, 20001).

As a sense of identity evolves during childhood a child identifies first with the body. When the child differentiates body from environment, he or she can act on the environment and learns to manipulate it. When the child learns language, he or she transcends exclusive identification with the body and is able to delay gratification. The child then becomes increasingly identified with feelings expressed as "*I want,*" or "*No, I don't want.*" This is a preconventional level of development where the universe revolves around *I, me and mine.* As development unfolds, a person may become increasingly dis-identified from body and feelings, identifying primarily with a separate, isolated ego and self-concepts determined by social roles. When the adolescent becomes increasingly involved in peer relationships, he or she may suppress personal feelings in order to fit in, whether as a conformist or a rebel.

This is a conventional level of development where social conventions of either parents or peer group are uncritically accepted. Pathology ensues when the self-sense dissociates from body and emotions instead of integrating body, emotions and mental self-concepts in a larger whole. Assuming that a person had successfully navigated the challenges of adolescence and arrived at adulthood with a relatively well-integrated sense of personal identity, he or she faces the task of finding meaningful work and establishing intimate relationships. In many contemporary schools of psychotherapy, mental health is defined by the absence of pathology and the ability to achieve a modicum of satisfaction in love and work.

From a transpersonal perspective this is only part of the picture. While satisfying work and relationships provide an important foundation for psychological health and wellbeing, they do not provide ultimate satisfaction or optimum psychological health. The search for meaning, the impulse to grow and express oneself creatively, and eventually to transcend oneself and contribute to the common good, continues.

The mature person discovers that ego gratifications are ultimately unsatisfying. They can be viewed as temporary substitutes for awakening to Spirit, or the transcendent dimension of being (Wilber: 1980, 2000). The process whereby a sense of identity evolves from a separate, skin-encapsulated ego to a mature, creative, and self-aware participant in the evolution of consciousness involves a continuing process of differentiation, integration and transcendence. Transcendence does not deny previous identifications or self-concepts, but includes them in a larger more encompassing whole.

Although each stage of development is replaced by a subsequent stage, the basic structures of consciousness remain intact (Wilber, 2000). The evolutionary process from matter to life to mind to soul to Spirit is reflected in the evolution of self-concepts derived from body, emotions, mind and soul (Vaughan: 2000). The evolution of consciousness offers greater freedom at each stage and an expanded awareness of self and world. For example, when the infant differentiates the body from the environment he or she can act on the environment. When the child learns to control emotions, he or she can interact

more effectively in a social environment. When a person learns to control the mind, he or she may begin to attain a sense of inner freedom that is reflected in self-actualization and self-transcendence.

Identity and self-concept: Existential and transpersonal

Differentiating existential and transpersonal perspectives on maturity and freedom is useful in recognizing the relationship between them in healthy adult development. The healthy existential self presupposes an integration of body, mind and emotions and demands authenticity and autonomy. It also calls for coming to terms with aloneness, impermanence, freedom and death. As socially adaptable creatures identified primarily with the rational mind, people can learn to present an acceptable façade to the world, but the price of adaptation may be alienation, a loss of self, or a feeling of not knowing who one really is. A sense of being *real* is commonly associated with a commitment to authenticity and personal freedom. Whereas the egocentric hero sets out to conquer the world, the existential hero seeks to face reality and conquer fear through attitudes such as resoluteness and authenticity.

Authenticity, which implies free choice and inner directedness, is not conveyed by membership in a group. Personal integrity at this stage is not a function of either social conformity or nonconformity. A person identified with being a rebel or non-conformist may be dominated by collective role models just as much as the person who feels compelled to conform. Integrity and authenticity are characteristic of a person who has moved beyond conventional to post-conventional stages of development.

Studies of moral development indicate that capacities for moral judgment, like cognitive faculties, develop with maturity (Smetana and Killen, 2005). Pre-conventional morality is concerned only with personal survival and self-interest. Conventional morality is governed by societal rules. Post-conventional morality is self-determined, based on personal reflection and assessment of the rules of convention. The morality of the healthy existential self is postconventional. No longer strictly bound by social rules and roles, a healthy person at this stage freely chooses ethicality as an expression of personal integrity.

From a transpersonal perspective, as human beings mature, the sense of self expands. The autonomous, existential self-concept is based on personal experience of mind-body integration and wholeness. Self-observation at this stage may differentiate the observer or inner witness from the contents of consciousness, i.e. images, thoughts, feelings and sensations. Recognizing the interdependence of observer and observed, mind and body, organism and environment can lead to a more broadly encompassing self-concept (Vaughan, 2000).

At each stage, transformation of self-concept proceeds through a process of differentiation, transcendence and integration. Once mental, emotional and physical representations of self have been differentiated, the self transcends or dis-identifies from them. The more inclusive representations of self include the more subtle perceptions of spiritual awareness (Vaughan, 2005). While it is appropriate for a child to be primarily identified with the body and for an adolescent to be identified with the verbal ego-mind, identifications that fall short of the larger spectrum of possibility can be regarded as arrested development. Likewise, while mental and existential identifications represent essential stages of human growth, optimum wholeness calls for growing beyond them (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993).

Developing a more inclusive, healthy transpersonal identity depends on differentiating genuine transpersonal states from regressive, pre-personal states. Wilber has named the confusion of the two the *pre/trans fallacy*. He says:

> *The essence of the pre/trans fallacy is easy enough to state. We begin by simply assuming that human beings do in fact have access to three general realms of being and knowing—the sensory, the mental and the spiritual. Those three realms can be stated in any number of*

different ways: subconscious, self-conscious, and super-conscious, or prerational, rational and trans-rational. The point is simply that, for example, since prerational and trans-rational are both, in their own ways, non-rational, they appear quite similar or even identical to the untutored eye. In other words, people tend to confuse prepersonal and transpersonal dimensions (Wilber, 1983).

Growing beyond ego does not mean regression to infantile oceanic oneness (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993). This misconception contributes to fear of transcendence. It is therefore essential to differentiate a regressive disintegration of personal identity from transcendence that results in an expanded, more encompassing self-sense.

Similarly, in healthy personal growth, early dependency evolves through independence to interdependence. It is not difficult to differentiate interdependence based on self-reliance from dependency, although neither is identical with independence. Thinking of the self as an open living system existing within a larger ecosystem can facilitate the shift from imagining the self to be a separate, independent entity, to recognizing its interdependence and embeddedness in the totality. Just as it is necessary for individuals to go through independence in personal development before arriving at genuine, healthy interdependence, existential identity must be established before it can be transcended.

The self need not be exclusively identified with any particular stage or component of psychological development. It may be experienced in moments of unitive consciousness as being one with a larger wholeness of which it is an integral part. Whatever we think we are, we are continually engaged in a process of relational exchange at all levels of awareness: spiritual, existential, mental, emotional and physical.

Identifications that are transcended are not lost or discarded, but subsumed in a more complex and inclusive organizational structure. However, the exclusive identification with a component part of the self as totality must be relinquished for continuing growth and fulfillment. Just as a child in transcending exclusive identification with the body must give up a desire for immediate sensory gratification, the adult transcending egocentric identifications must give up the desire for immediate egocentric gratification. This does not imply deprivation. It does mean learning to recognize desires without being driven by them. Ultimately, spiritual awakening calls for surrender of claims to specialness or exclusive separate identification, while acknowledging both uniqueness and separation. Wholeness implies an integration of both personal and transpersonal definitions of self.

Differentiating existential and transpersonal worldviews

I will begin by differentiating these two views, and then explore some of the similarities between them.

For the existentialist, being-in-the-world defines experience. The existentially oriented Gestalt therapist, for example, might ask, "Where are you?" The question implies, "Are you present here and now or are you off in some fantasy in your head?" The existentialist would not ask, "Who are you?" as many spiritual exercises encourage the seeker to ask. For the existentialist it is a nonsensical question. You are what you do. How you respond to the existential givens of life determines whether you will be authentic or fraudulent as a human being. There is nothing apart from what you are experiencing at this moment. For example, years ago there was a popular injunction in Gestalt therapy: *Lose your mind and come to your senses.* Later it was revised to: *Use your mind and come to your senses.* The focus was always on the felt sense of being in the here and now.

A transpersonal orientation, on the other hand, might invite reflection on the question, "Who are you?" as a form of spiritual inquiry (Vaughan and Wittine, 1994). Life may be perceived as a journey of

awakening, a process of learning for the soul, a chance for enlightenment or an opportunity for service, as in karma yoga. Being authentic is part of the process of personal spiritual development, but it is not enough. In addition, the transpersonal seeker may try to cultivate qualities such as wisdom, compassion and loving kindness. Whereas the existentialist is likely to think of the self as a skin encapsulated ego doomed to alienation and mortality (Yalom, 1980), the person who identifies with being a soul rather than an ego may take a different view of separation and death. We may experience ourselves as separate *and* connected, feeling alone at times, yet recognizing that we are embedded in the natural universe, connected to all life on earth (Vaughan, 2002, 2005).

From an existential perspective, we are condemned to freedom in a materialistic universe (Yalom, 1980). Freedom is perceived as a burden rather than as liberation, and inevitably connected to dread (Fromm, 1994; Yalom and Josselson, in press). On the other hand, a person identified with being a soul may feel connected to others who are also perceived as being on a spiritual journey of liberation.

A transpersonalist who has explored a spiritual path or has had a direct experience of pure consciousness devoid of objects may or may not use these explorations as a means to avoid the stark realities of existence. From an existential point of view, a person who identifies with being a soul rather than an ego may be lost in illusion, believing in a spiritual reality in order to avoid the painful realities of death and aloneness in a meaningless universe. The existentialist might view such experiences as illusory and escapist.

A transpersonalist is much more likely than an existentialist to have had some type of mystical experience, whether described as being at one with nature, a sense of being a soul on a journey, an experience of union with God, or complete self-transcendence. Those who have found experiences of emptiness *(shunyata)* to be ecstatic are more likely to interpret their experiences in a spiritual context. Emptiness in the context of a spiritual path may be a result of letting go, of purification, or purgation. In psychological terms this could be described as releasing guilt and resentments about the past, and letting go of fear of the future. In the appropriate context an experience of emptiness can be both healing and liberating. Perceiving life events as learning experiences leading to the possibility of enlightenment or liberation imbues them with meaning. This is a transpersonal response to the existential challenge of creating meaning in the world.

Both existential and transpersonal psychotherapists address issues of ultimate concern, including meaning and purpose. However, for the transpersonal therapist this includes questions pertaining to spiritual beliefs and spiritual practice, while the existentialist stops short of spiritual inquiry, focusing primarily on the confrontation with mortality and the responsibilities of freedom in a universe without inherent design. The underlying assumption is that life is groundless and we alone are responsible for our choices. (Yalom and Josselson, in press).

Transpersonal and existential worldviews overlap in their emphasis on personal responsibility for choice and behavior. Neither one supports the view that we are nothing but products or victims of early conditioning. In terms of moral development, both may be postconventional, assuming that one behaves ethically out of one's own convictions rather than unquestioning obedience to external rules. This implies recognizing that some attitudes and behaviors are more beneficial than others, i.e. some reduce suffering while others increase suffering, and taking responsibility for one's experience.

Both existential and transpersonal worldviews point to the importance of integrating mind and body and emotions. However, in transpersonal development this is a foundation for further awakening. As awareness of a spiritual dimension of existence deepens, who and what we are becomes a mystery that transcends limited self-concepts. As we mature, self-concepts evolve, and each one conveys more freedom than narrower, more limited ones. The earlier ones are not obliterated, but included in a more encompassing view of wholeness.

Both existential and transpersonal approaches to identity emphasize awareness. Whereas the existentialist often relies on a phenomenological description of experience, the transpersonalist recognizes that certain experiences are ineffable and trans-conceptual. The freedom that the existentialist experiences in being-in-the-world is seen as relative from a transpersonal perspective that perceives freedom as a function of one's state of consciousness.

Individuals who gain insight into the fetters of egocentric habits of mind, may struggle valiantly to let go of control and attachments, but usually fail, no matter how hard they try. The essence of transcendence is effortlessness, non-attachment, and radical openness.

Training in spiritual practice, meditation, or meta-awareness is necessary for individuals to develop subtler, more differentiated stages that may result in hitherto undreamed of levels of freedom. Freedom can be actualized only when it is recognized, claimed and consciously exercised. Both the existentialist and the transpersonalist may characterize psychological maturity as claiming freedom to be who we are, and mature behavior as being consonant with ethical principles. Both may practice mindfulness and may witness thoughts and feelings without judgment. However, in addition to a realistic self-image that is neither grandiose nor selfdeprecating, transpersonal maturity demands awareness of the influence and function of spiritual experiences.

Mature thought is characterized by accurate, non-distorted self-assessment and presumably by the ability to distinguish reality from illusion. The latter, however, is open to interpretation. What seems real to the separated existential self is considered illusory by the transpersonalist, and vice-versa. The existentialist believes the transpersonalist lives in a world of spiritual illusions, since nothing in his or her experience validates the claim of those who have seen through the illusion of a separate self-sense.

While the existential analysis of reality is rational and empirical, the transpersonal analysis tends to be meta-rational and post-representational, derived from the practice of contemplation. The eye of the senses (empirical knowledge), the eye of reason (rational understanding) and the eye of contemplation (direct intuitive knowledge) cannot be collapsed or reduced one to another (Wilber, 1983). No amount of empirical data will reveal meaning, and no amount of rational analysis will reveal contemplative experience. Those who want to understand the transpersonal must be willing to undertake the requisite training if they wish to evaluate the conclusions of those who have done the work.

With regard to death awareness, both the existentialist and the transpersonalist deplore the conventional denial of death, recognizing the necessity of facing death for living fully. Existentialists observe that people generate immortality projects (Becker, 1974) and tend to view with suspicion those who believe in the continuation of consciousness after biological death.

Transpersonalists, on the other hand, may or may not hold specific beliefs about the hereafter, but remain open to the possibility that there is more to human experience than the brief incarnation between birth and death. Perhaps it suffices to say that where an existentialist might say, *This is it!* a transpersonalist might respond that reality is more that what you have imagined, and death remains a mystery. Whatever you *think,* you are more than that (Bugental, 1999).

With regard to intentionality, there is also a distinction to be made between the existentialist who sees personal intention as the final expression of freedom and the transpersonalist who sees surrender to God's will, the *Tao* or the *Way,* or one's true nature as a more compelling vision of freedom. In the face of recognizing the limitations of a separate self, one may experience a contraction of anxiety, or alternatively, a release and inner peace. Identifying with soul as witness of all experience can also contribute to freedom from fear. A transpersonalist might argue that only mystical experience can overcome fear and the drive to power. This would imply an emphasis on self-mastery and non-attachment

rather than willfulness. Furthermore, the creation of meaning is no longer a central concern. From a transpersonal point of view, meaning may be discovered through insight, but personal existence may also be described as *meaning free,* as in Zen meditation. Psychologists are now becoming increasingly aware of the need for a psychotherapy that is sensitive to spiritual issues, particularly spiritual growth and development (Vaughan, 1991; Sperry, 2010).

Spiritual inquiry

The task of spiritual inquiry in adult development includes coming to terms with existential realities, seeing things as they are, and facing death and aloneness. Tibetan Buddhism differentiates four levels of understanding: Intellectual, direct experience, stabilization, and final liberation.

In my own life I have been both an existentialist and a transpersonalist. My own path has never been a straight line in one direction. It seems more like a labyrinth that winds in and out, in and out, before reaching the center. The way in calls for letting go of preconceptions, and quieting the mind. The way out requires assuming self-responsibility and intentionality. Being in-the-world brings out the existentialist. Being in solitude and silence awakens the transpersonal. Finally, the challenge lies in connecting the inner life of mind and spirit to the outer life of service in the world. To live authentically, to find satisfaction in love and work, and to serve the common good without losing touch with the deep wellsprings of spiritual renewal that can be found in spiritual practice seems to be a lifelong task.

As we awaken to a transpersonal identity that includes existential authenticity, we tend to outgrow being purely egocentric. We may expand awareness to being ethnocentric, world centric and beyond, recognizing our interconnectedness with all being. Today we are well aware of the devastation of the planet caused by egocentric exploitation and ethnocentric conflicts. As people become increasingly world centric and aware of our interdependence, they also tend to be motivated to care for the whole and to make a difference by relieving suffering.

In my work as a clinician, I have found a transpersonal orientation very useful. However, the reality of personal experience is always more complex and messy than our theories. Nothing is ever clear-cut. People develop at different rates along different lines of development (Wilber, 2000).

Serious spiritual inquiry may be awakened by life events such as loss, a close encounter with death, or a spontaneous mystical experience. The awakening may be gradual, as in meditation practice, or sudden, as in a near death experience. It may also happen in depth psychotherapy, showing up in dreams, visions, or other inner experience. The importance of having a guide that is familiar with inner work cannot be over-estimated. My clients have demonstrated to me over and over again that it is possible to transcend early conditioning and claim freedom in the present. Our present may be largely determined by the past only to the extent that we believe this is true. The possibility of awakening to a greater reality is always present.

Wherever we may be on a path of awakening, skillful spiritual inquiry that invites an examination of beliefs and assumptions about reality, identity, life and death, is valuable.

Paradoxically, an existential perspective that challenges our defenses and illusions offers a good foundation for spiritual growth. From a transpersonal perspective, there is always more to learn and more to be discovered.

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