

Row Row Row your Boat...Life is but a Dream: Introducing Process Oriented Psychology

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We are happy to be asked to write an article about Process Oriented Psychology for this edition of the Psychotherapist. We assume many of you reading are psychotherapists or in related professions, or committed to a path of bringing awareness along into your individual life and our collective interactions.

Awareness is hard to talk about even among fellow psychotherapists. It is a most extraordinary gift. It reminds us of the story of how fire was brought to humanity. In the field of psychotherapy, whether we look to the early pioneers, or to the ancient lineage of shamans, philosophers and healers, we might consider that a task has been passed along, a flame has been passed, to study and contribute a little something to the awakening of consciousness in us as individuals and collectively.

Each of us may know the experience of passing on the flame to a friend, family member, or client - or seeing the flame inside the person we are with begin to burn again. Awareness, like fire, brings warmth and life and defrosts our frozen states.

From school to school our methods differ, but in essence, we are each carrying this flame. In *Rivers Way*, Mindell cites Jung "... Thus we are faced in psychotherapy with a situation comparable with that in modern physics where for instance there are two contradictory theories of light. And just as physics does not find this contradiction unbridgeable, so the existence of many possible standpoints in psychology should not give grounds for assuming that the contradictions are irreconcilable and the various views merely subjective and therefore incommensurable."¹

The dreaming

Process Oriented Psychology or Process Work is a comprehensive theory and method oriented to bringing awareness along into the flow of nature, to unfold its inherent creativity. Its originator, Arnold Mindell was first a physicist, then training analyst at the Jung Institute in Zurich. His teachers were Franz Riklin, CG Jung's grandson, then director of the Jung Institute, Marie-Louise Von Franz, and Barbara Hannah, both long-time colleagues of Jung. During the 1970's while working with terminally ill clients who required non-verbal methods of communication, Mindell discovered that the subjective experience of body symptoms was mirrored in the night time dream.² An early example involved a man with a stomach tumour. When asked to feel his symptom carefully, he said he felt as if he would explode. He recalled that he had dreamed of fireworks. Arny then helped this man who always had been reserved to 'explode' with his feelings and passion.

Mindell used the term 'dreambody' in those days to describe this 'dreaming' dimension that manifests simultaneously in the visual night time dream, and in the somatic experience.

Mindell went on to track this dreaming dimension as it appears or is perceived in different channels - visual, auditory, proprioceptive (body sensation), and kinesthesia (movement), and in our experience of relationship and the world. He also observed how the dreaming appears in unintended and fleeting communication signals.³

As the work developed, process concepts were explored with people experiencing extreme states with diagnoses of psychopathology in inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care.⁴ The methods were also applied successfully to communicate with people in comatose states, leading to vital experiences for the person who was in coma and families, and essential research in this area.⁵

Mindell and colleagues went on to study the 'dreaming' dimension behind system dynamics in relationships and group life, including working with conflict. 'Worldwork' is the application of Process Work methods to facilitating large groups, organisations and communities and working with historic conflict, oppression, and conflict resolution.⁶

Theory as boat

This wide range of applications often raises a question how all this is possible. At the heart of Process Work is a spirit of researching the uncanny patterns of nature, as a process is perceived through dream or vision, sound, somatic experience, altered states, relationship troubles, and community interactions. We need awareness in all of these areas for the individual and collective to cook, evolve and transform.

In a personal conversation, Mindell told me, (Jean-Claude) that a theory was like a rowboat. If you go out in the bay and find that it leaks you might scoop the water out for a while and stay with your boat - but it would be more effective to come back to shore and either repair the boat or get a new one before going out fishing again. If your theory doesn't work, drop it, and study the process. Don't mistake the boat for the fish.

All of the theoretical structures and methods of Process Oriented Psychology are designed to support the facilitator to access a process, bring awareness along, and accurately unfold it in relation to context, and according to complex momentary feedback. The work remains similar, whether you work with a dream or body experience, facilitate an individual, couple, team or organisation, or whether you work in a pre-school, convent or war-torn community. While it takes many years for the practitioner to gain specific experience needed with a particular modality, context or culture, the work remains consistent across this wide range of applications.

We briefly outline here just some of the core concepts, lacing in a few examples.

The disturbance as a seed

What disturbs and bugs you carries the seed or pattern for your growth. This does not mean that you must accept terrible events or abuse, nor drink your cod liver oil. It is a continually surprising, but central paradigm of Process Work, that the seeds of the solution to the problem you are working on lie within the disturbance itself. From one perspective the disturbance is terrifying. From another, it carries essential new information.

Consider a client who stammers. While we understand his wish to rid himself of the symptom, we welcome the process within the symptom, by accurately following its

nature. We listen carefully, and ask him to listen to his stammer and to experiment with amplifying it or making it 'worse'. At the point he begins to stammer, we invite him to pause longer. His eyes go down and we invite him to go internal and carefully follow his feelings. He says it is liberating to stay close to himself, to not react, to follow a deeper timing. He practices the new pattern - staying connected to himself and when he chooses, communicating from here rather than adapting to us or anyone else. He is deeply relieved and his stammer subsides.

Edges and hot spots

The '**edge**'⁷ describes the perimeter between an identity defined by a belief system and an emerging new pattern. The belief system at the stammerer's edge said 'you must care for others by responding to their timing'. The pause in his stammer was the emerging pattern of going deep inside himself and following his own feelings and timing.

A **hot spot**⁸ is a moment when something sensitive or volatile is touched - it sizzles. There's a tendency to back off and lose energy, or to become agitated. At hot spots, conflicts cycle and escalate. But, noticing hot spots early, and carefully facilitating them, we discover they are doorways to resolution, transformation and creativity.

Fields and roles

One way to bring awareness into a field of interactions is to locate 'roles'.⁹ Roles occur within all levels of a system - intra-psychic (two roles within oneself), in relationship, within an organisation, or collectively. The purpose of representing roles is to bring awareness to interactions, rather than only being swept into polarized roles or positions.

In large group interactions, such as community forums, people readily grasp the notion that a role is bigger than an individual viewpoint. We may designate a physical spot for a role and say that it needs more than one person to speak for its different facets. As individuals, we are also more than a role. We will be drawn to a particular role, but as we speak that side, we differentiate from the role and may find ourselves interested to also speak for the other role.

A forum on minority-majority issues in Slovakia

Over the last few years, The European Multicultural Foundation EMF and ANNWIN, Slovakia, have worked with us on developing forums on human rights and social inclusion in Europe.¹⁰

In Slovakia, we opened a discussion about issues facing Roma (gypsies). A man said 'There are no problems for Roma in Slovakia, except they get too much attention and advantage.' This was a 'hot spot' and inflammatory in relation to the dire situation of Roma in Slovakia and Europe. The room went silent. Then a young Roma woman stood up and spoke out about the poverty and violence toward Roma, the rapes, murder and lack of protection the Roma community receives from police.

There are two basic roles here, the oppressed and the oppressor. The Roma in this case were in the role of the oppressed group, but it soon became clear that many Slovaks identified with their own painful thousand year history of oppression, making it difficult to also acknowledge being in the role of oppressing others.

A woman walked into the center of the room opposite the young Roma woman who had spoken. 'I know first-hand that everything you say is true.' 'I want to apologise to you personally.' Then she told her story. She, too, was Roma, but with light skin, her parents had hidden their identity to protect the children from discrimination. In her 20's, she learned she was Roma, sending her into a crisis of identity. She spoke of how she faced the part in herself that despised Roma, thought they were dirty and didn't want to be touched by them, nor to have to believe that she was one of them. Now, proud to be Roma, she was active in working with Roma groups and human rights.

Rank awareness

The two women embraced - the group was touched and shifted their awareness. The group's earlier silence reflected a feature of cycling conflict – Where we have privileges that give us 'social rank' 11 (based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, health and physical ability, education, class, language, political history, etc.), there is often a tendency to be unconcerned or unaware of these privileges in relation to others. It may also be difficult to recognise where we have been part, or are currently a part of a group that downstems others.

Conversely, it can help to resolve or transform conflict when someone personally acknowledges or takes accountability for the role that has created suffering in others. In this example, when others could not do it, it was the (elder) Roma woman who was able to speak about the role of oppressor inside her. She used her fluidity, self-knowledge and experience, sometimes referred to as 'psychological rank' 12, to lead the group forward.

Deep democracy

Deep democracy¹³ refers to the wisdom that evolves through the facilitated interaction among all parts of a system. It means welcoming diversity including those parts of our experience that are normally overlooked or kept out as too disturbing, subtle, emotional or extreme.

A forum in Croatia

We recently facilitated a forum for participants from 'Areas of State Concern' in Croatia. This project initiated by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees follows our long-term reconciliation work in Croatia from 1996, and supports recovery in those regions hardest hit by the war.¹⁴ The group was made up of Croats, Serbs, Muslims, and other ethnic/national groups, each with their own war experiences. One afternoon, a subgroup presented a problem. They were making a film about their community in order to attract tourists. They ran into problems representing Orthodox (Serb) and Catholic (Croat) monuments and festivities without alienating the other side. A mixed group of Serbs and Croats, they had attempted to be even-handed, but had met with hostility from both sides in their community. We appreciated their situation and attempts, while suggesting that we represent the disturbing attitudes they were trying to avoid. So we gave voice to the viewpoint that did not want Serbs and Croats together, and considered one and the other to be traitors. The participants joined in playfully, easily recognising the roles from their own communities, and clearly relieved to represent the hostilities they suffer from. There was then a shift in atmosphere, as a participant suggested the group go deeper into the antagonistic role, to understand why people were so hateful and afraid. This touched a chord in everyone, bringing compassion to

their own and others' war experiences and the real difficulty in recovering and moving on. By speaking now directly and personally about the most sensitive topic, the subgroup looked revitalized, as did the whole group that was fully engaged. A suggestion also emerged for the film, that it should not try to be 'even-handed' to avoid conflict, but rather say directly that there is a great pain left over from the war, and that as a community they are finding ways forward together.

Dimensions

Another useful concept in facilitating processes is to recognise the interplay of 'dimensions' of experience.¹⁵ We sometimes use the terms 'consensus reality' to refer to outer context, issues, content. The 'dreaming' refers to subjective experiences, dreams, body sensations, mythic figures, archetypal processes and the polarisation of roles underlying content. The 'sentient' dimension is experienced as a unity underlying the polarizations, or as a creative source from which process arises.

In the example of the man who stammered, the disturbance to his speech is the 'consensus reality' dimension. The 'dreaming' dimension is his subjective experience of timing and following himself, as he enters the pause. His experience of freedom reflected the 'sentient' dimension. In the story of the forum, the project and community issues are 'consensus reality'. The interaction of roles is in the 'dreaming' dimension. The sentient dimension was touched by going deeper – to where the polarisation of roles fell away, bringing the shared compassion.

Awareness and Eldership

Process Work is based on bringing awareness along into the very disturbances from which we suffer. You are less at the mercy of life events, and more engaged with your individual journey and your community. Jung said it best. 'You individuate one way or the other, but the difference is whether you can stand upright, and see the signposts.'

It is hard to bring words to the struggle involved in searching for solutions to reduce our pain, isolation, altered states, fear, and helplessness in meeting terrifying experiences - whether as individuals, communities, or as our nations involved in repeating waves of violence.

Awareness could help us to accompany ourselves and sometimes even free ourselves from the constant replay of our personal histories and collective traumas, and help us contact a creative source within us. As terrible as we are as human beings, we also have an urge towards becoming conscious. Methods of awareness are sorely needed throughout society, to support individuals, families, organisations, whole communities and nations to actively dream and shape our future. For this our society needs elders - to take a stand, take all sides, hold our hands, and hold us to the task. And some of those elders are us psychotherapists.

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