

Towards a New Model of Accreditation

It seems to me that we need a new model of accreditation that is based on an understanding of the stages that exist in human development, as Ken Wilber, Susanne Cook-Greuter, and many others, have put forward.

We need to move past Postmodernisms' insistence of doing away with all hierarchy. Wilber and co have described well how the "Postmodern stage of consciousness" tends to reject all hierarchy. Its wonderful value is that it challenges all conventional sources of power, exposing all the ways that "power over" is used and abused throughout our societies. These "power-over" structures exist because of the trauma embedded in the previous "Survival", "Magic", "Ego", "Tribal", "Mythic", and "Modern" (e.g. medicalised) stages of consciousness (these are some of the label Wilber uses for what he calls the "First Tier" stages of development) ("Second Tier" stages are called "Integral" and the "Third Tier" stages are the transpersonal stages associated with "transcending and including the ego"). According to Wilber most people in Western democracies are at Tribal, Mythic, Modern and Postmodern stages of consciousness, with minorities at earlier or later Integral stages. (I am not particularly attached to Wilber's model, it is just that he used many of the existing and well researched developmental models in creating his summary, see "Integral Spirituality" 2006 for a full summary of his research sources)

Postmodernism's tendency is to chuck the organic and valuable aspect of hierarchy out with the bathwater. Hierarchy is after all real, it is an inevitable aspect of our developmental existence. The word Hierarchy come from the Greek "hierós" meaning holy or sacred. This aspect of our existence is inherent to our nature, it becomes increasingly present as we develop through the sequential stages towards integration, authenticity and then onwards towards levels of being that are extraordinary in their "beingness". It is clear to me that there is a profound depth of freedom and connection to the transpersonal dimension of life that underlies and defines human existence. The implication of this is that there must be some "Absolute", some "Godness", something embodying "Goodness, Beauty and Truth" that represents the ultimate destination of our journey. Even if any of us are far from being able to fully know or embody this Absolute, it is what "enlightened" people have been pointing to throughout history. It represents our potential as human beings. Over the last few decades an amazing coming together of the spiritual/transpersonal and scientific and postmodern perspectives has been emerging, which supports this perspective. Ken Wilber, Ian McGilchrist and Jude Currivan are just a few of the current exponents of this.

Obviously establishing any deeply authentic assessment process is a huge challenge, after all who is in a position to assess anyone else's "stage of development"? Yet this is what is happening anyway, as training courses and accrediting bodies give their blessing, or not, to counsellors and psychotherapists. So, what I am arguing for here is that these assessments be done as objectively as possible in line with understanding our developmental nature and how it proceeds through established stages. Perhaps it is not that difficult to establish if someone has really understood the depth of their insecurity, has done enough work on themselves to demonstrate a level of competence for a certain level of practice. Any assessment obviously has to be holistically based, it has to include the heart, head, body and spirit dimensions of a person. So ... has this person a real connection to their body? Do they know about their insecurity, are they in touch with it? Are they able to think for themselves, free from thinking that is compulsively driven by unconscious trauma generated feelings? What knowledge do they have? Do they have a understanding of, and ability to connect to the Transpersonal dimension of their being?

My recent re-accreditation with AHPP was an interesting exercise, and my sense was that all tried their best, including the attempt at an open peer group assessment process based on John Herons' advocacy of such. But reflecting on it now, I can see that it was not transparent or holistic as it could have been. The criteria for being acceptable were not stated or explained anywhere. (As an aside - I am not at all sure that this five yearly "re-accreditation" process is necessary or useful. People rarely undo their awareness, rarely go backwards in their competence.) However accreditation to a new levels of competence throughout a carrier as recognition of someone's transition from one developmental stage to another, is another matter, and something that might be very valuable.

I am absolutely against state regulation of the therapy professions. We need this understanding of human developmental stages, and how to assess them, to emerge organically from the ground up. This could be through current accrediting bodies working out and adopting a transparent, and as objective as possible methodology, based on this understanding of our stages of development. I can imagine that a consensus of interpretations could emerge from amongst all the modalities and stakeholders that make up the profession. Maybe even the current SCOPED process could be brave enough to include it?

I can also imagine a new completely independent accrediting body that was free of any ties to governmental, training or modality bodies, one which anyone could go to and apply to, for a kind of quality assurance certificate that stated the stage they are at and therefore what services they are competent to provide.

The obvious problem here is that this process could be seen as some sort of regressive return to the power of the "priesthood", after all, as above, which "superior being" is going to take the position of assessor? Because there is still so much trauma in people generally, there is still such a deep tendency towards judgementalism and attaching to false hierarchies. It seems that this is especially so within institutions where it is used as part of the tussles around power. But the fact that hierarchies are so abused must not lead to denying the reality of "vertical" development, and we need to remember that we are constantly assessing and judging anyway, in all sorts of ways. So lets base this on something real and compassionate, that is wide and deep enough in its understanding of our developmental nature to keep it connected to the Goodness, Beauty and Truth that underpins our nature.

What I hope this approach opens up is a way to assess people from this compassionate, open-hearted non-judgemental position that holistically sees where someone is in their development. The healthy ground, on which all this needs to stand, is our need to discern what is "Good, Beautiful and True", what is wise and common sense, what is towards health, openness, development, consciousness, understanding, from what is towards the opposite of these. From the negativity and destructiveness that inevitably flows from trauma.

One question though is, can people at a less developed stage of consciousness / awareness, assess people at stages that more developed than themselves? Wilber argues that people in all the stages, up to and including the Postmodern, (i.e. those within what he calls "Tier One" stages), tend to be identified with their stage as being the only right perspective. It is only towards the end of the Postmodern stage, and into what he calls the "Integral" (or "Tier Two") stages, that people are able to dis-identify with their stage and see that all of them are necessarily sequential, that they build upon each other in developing complexity, which provides ever wider perspectives. Each has its essential value and its limitations.

This points towards a negative answer to the above question. But, it also clear that people only start to embark on becoming therapists when they are in effect well into the Postmodern stage, at least in their cognitive development. At the “Modern” stage people tend to take a more materialistic and medicalised perspective that often dismisses therapy. This means that those involved in the therapy “profession” are usually at the Postmodern or Integral stage of development, and therefore are generally able to make more realistic assessments of others. Able to discern those who are wiser and more developed and that a peer assessment based system could work, where therapists, supported by an understanding of our developmental stages and our holistic nature, could make these finely tuned assessments. What I am advocating for is that this is done with as much openness, transparency and knowledge as possible, and that this “expertise” and “power” is always granted from the bottom up, from consensus. The practicalities of this obviously needs a lot of work!

The negative need is to identify those who would illegitimately claim an inappropriate level of competency. Whilst it is fairly easy to con people with one aspect of ourselves alone, an holistic assessment process that includes all parts of a person does I think reveal their genuine “centre of gravity” in terms of their overall stage of development. Wilber referred to this assessment process as establishing someone’s “psychograph”. This is an analysis that emerges from looking at what stage each part of them is at. Heart, head, body or spirit can all be at a different stages, but through such an investigation an overall sense of their stage can also emerge.

The fact is that the current assessment processes favours those with developed intellects who know how to jump through the required hoops. But are they in touch with their body and able to be grounded inside it? How deeply do they know their insecurity? How open is their heart? What do they know or experience about the spiritual / transpersonal dimension of our existence and can they access the support of this aspect of life?

Building a comprehensive practical model of these stages that could be used in an holistic assessment process is obviously an enormous task. I have made a tiny tentative start, but I am very aware that this is way too big a task for one person. I do believe that the bones of it are available and out there; it “just” needs all pulling together. Then it needs extensively testing to establish its credibility and robustness.

What I imagine could emerge from such a project is the articulation of a finer granularity within the Modern, Postmodern and first Integral stages which will reveal a sequence of steps that can be related to particular levels of practice / competence. What would also emerge clearly from any holistic assessment are a person’s strengths and weaknesses, revealing what part of them needs attention for their ongoing development. Holistic development is so important, because uneven development is always the result of our adjustments to trauma, which inevitably leaves us with blind spots, “default ways of being” which limit our ability to help others as well as hindering our own development. Healing ourselves is about undoing our habitual stuckness which is held in place due to some un-released and still active trauma. This inevitably has compulsive compensatory consequences in our heart, head, body and spirit. Whilst trauma is obviously firstly about our emotional centre, the compensatory defences are often focused in the head, body or spiritual part of ourselves. Healing is about evening up the development of our parts and re-connecting them together, then we have more access to our natural wisdom and intuition and our development flows organically.

For example, someone might be out of touch with their body, or some aspect of their feelings, or have insufficient knowledge, or be unaware of the transpersonal dimension of our existence,

any of which would mean that they might be assessed as not yet having the capacity to work with people wanting to work on healing their significant trauma. But such a sentence throws up multiple questions around what level of development is needed to be a counsellor and how is that different from being a psychotherapist, and are their different levels within both that need differentiating? I certainly think that too many newly qualified counsellors have not done enough personal therapy to really know their own insecurity, which means they will do harm. Then there is how we necessarily need to learn “on the job”. Perfection is impossible after all! (There are other obvious existing difficulties here - for example I know trainees / newly qualified counsellors, that whilst working at placements, have been thrown into working with clients that any experienced therapist would hesitate to work with in such a context.)

I hope this provides a useful introduction to how a stage development model might be developed that could be used as a basis for a new approach to accreditation.

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