

Narratives of Self-Renewal: Looking for A Middle Earth In-Between Psychoanalysis and the Search for Consciousness

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Abstract : Contemporary psychoanalysis is increasingly acknowledging the existential demands of clients in psychotherapy. A significant aspect of the personal crises that patients face today is often rooted in the difficulty to find meaning in their own existence, even after working through or resolving traumatic memories and experiences. Tracing back to the correspondence between Freud and Romain Rolland (1927), psychoanalysis could not ignore that investigation of the psyche also encompasses the encounter with deep, psycho-sensory experiences, which involve a sense of "being one with the external world as a whole", the well-known "oceanic feeling", as Rolland posed it. Despite the recognition of Non-ordinary States of Consciousness (NSC) as catalysts for transformation in clinical practice, highlighted by neuroscience and results from psychedelic-assisted therapies, there is few research on how psychoanalytic knowledge can integrate with other treatment traditions. These traditions, commonly rooted in non-Western, unconventional, and non-formal psychological knowledge, emphasize the individual's innate tendency toward existential integrity and transcendence of self-boundaries. Inspired by an autobiographical account, this paper examines narratives of 12 individuals, who engaged in psychoanalytic therapy and also underwent treatment involving a non-formal helping relationship with an expert guide in consciousness, which included experience of this nature. The guide relies on 35 yrs of experience in Psychological, multidisciplinary studies in Human Sciences and Art, and demonstrates knowledge of many wisdom traditions, ranging from Eastern to Western philosophy, including Psychoanalysis and its development in cultural perspective (e.g, Ethnopsychiatry). Analyses focused primarily on two dimensions that research has identified as central in assessing the degree of treatment "success" in the patients' narrative accounts of their therapies: agency and coherence, defined respectively as the increase, expressed in language, of the client's perceived ability to manage his/her own challenges and the capacity, inherent in "narrative" itself as a resource for meaning making (Bruner, 1990), to provide the subject with a sense of unity, endowing his /her life experience with temporal and logical sequentiality. The present study reports that, in all narratives from the participants, agency and coherence are described differently than in "common" psychotherapy narratives. Although the participants consistently identified themselves as responsible agentic subject, the sense of agency derived from the non-conventional guidance pathway is never reduced to a personal, individual accomplishment. Rather, the more a new, fuller sense of "Life" (more than "Self") develops out of the guidance pathway they engage with the expert guide, the more they "surrender" their own sense of autonomy and self-containment. Something, which Safran (2016) identified as well talking about the sense of surrender and "grace" in psychoanalytic sessions. Secondly, narratives of individuals engaging with the expert guide describe coherence not as repairing or enforcing continuity but as enhancing their ability to navigate dramatic discontinuities, falls, abrupt leaps and passages marked by feelings of loss and bereavement. The paper ultimately explores whether valid criteria can be established to analyze experiences of non-conventional paths of self-evolution. These paths are not opposed or alternative to conventional ones, and should not be simplistically dismissed as exotic or magical.

Keywords : oceanic feeling, non conventional guidance, consciousness, narratives, treatment outcomes

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