

Consciousness and Mental Health. Comparing and Holistically Integrating Several Psychotherapy Perspectives

Enrico Cheli

(*University of Siena*, Tuscany, Italy and *The Graduate Institute*, Connecticut, USA)

Premise

Since I am new in the Society for Consciousness Studies, I would like to start my presentation introducing myself and my work.

I am an Italian psychotherapist and transpersonal psychologist as well as a core faculty member at the University of Siena (Tuscany), of which I have been vice provost as well as founding director of several graduate and post graduate programs on positive psychology, emotional intelligence, conscious relationships and relational counseling. I have also designed and directed a Ph.D program on interpersonal conflict resolution and an interuniversity research center for peace studies and conflict resolution, the only ones on these topics ever existed in Italy. I have authored or co-authored more than two hundred articles and 27 books, some of which just translated into English and looking for a USA publisher (any help is welcome).

Besides being an academic scholar and clinician, I am also a spiritual seeker and teacher, having studied and regularly practiced for more than 30 years various oriental disciplines, from Raja Yoga to Kriya and Kundalini Yoga, from Tantra to Zen and Sufism, attending a lot of workshops, courses and retreats run by Indian and Asian spiritual teachers and masters and living for several periods in ashrams and monasteries. During this very intense and very effective pathway I have also studied mantra and overtones chanting as well as Tibetan bells and bowls, applying them in some of my therapy sessions and meditation and personal development workshops. In this field I have also authored 3 CDs of relaxation and meditation music, published in Italy by Xenia, one of the best Italian publishing companies of transpersonal and spiritual books, of which I direct a book series titled "Pathways of Awareness".

I have always been very much committed in integrating science and spirituality, West and East, being aware that each perspective is just a part of the whole, so I have dedicated a large part of my work to this task, not only on a research and teaching level but also on an institutional one. I have been working for many years to create a sort of holistic outpost at the University of Siena, and when in 2010 I realized that it could not grow up any longer and rather was losing ground due to antibodies and homeostatic defenses I established a private scientific foundation named HOLIVERSITY whose main goal was to establish a private holistic university. Unfortunately, less than 2 years later, Italian government, pushed by a lobby of a dozen of online universities recently established, changed the entire body of laws regarding university system and made impossible to establish new ones (at least until another government shall change this law). Anyway, if on one side this setback put in stand by a big part of my institutional activity on the other side it gave me the time to resume and - with the help of my colleague and partner Cristina Antoniazzi - to refine and write down the holistic integrative work I had done in the previous two decades and of which I would like to speak now.

Towards a Holistic Integration of Western and Eastern Psychotherapy and Personal Development Methods

In the early years of my eastern pathway I ingenuously believed that eastern methods, focusing directly on self awareness and consciousness, were better than western ones, but, as I later understood, you can't develop your consciousness beyond a certain extent without facing and solving your egoic constraints and distortions, on which western psychotherapy focuses and works much more specifically and often effectively than eastern methods. Therefore I understood that east is no better than west as well as spiritual and psychological pathways should not be considered competitive adversaries but complementary allies. Though I was not the first one to have understood this, it was a very important step of my personal development pathway and the starting point of a research work aimed to outline a Holistic Integration of Western and Eastern Psychotherapy and Personal Development Methods.

At the time I began this work, integrative psychotherapy was going through a phase of expansion and at first I adopted its perspective and tools, but later I understood that in order to really integrate different methods and above all to include consciousness and spirituality in psychology something more was needed, something which I now call *holistic psychotherapy*. Although holistic psychotherapy and integrative psychotherapy might seem synonymous, in my opinion they are not, because while the former always and inevitably implies an integrative approach, the latter does not necessarily follow a holistic approach, remaining substantially within the dominant mechanistic-reductionist paradigm, consequently adopting a summative approach and obtaining a syncretistic product. Holistic psychotherapy instead considers that paradigm as the main obstacle to integration and firmly distances itself from it, basing on the systemic principles of the emerging holistic paradigm, thus substantially redefining the epistemological framework within which to recompose the various fragments and the modalities by which interconnecting them. Having said this, I am aware that the holistic approach in psychology is just at the beginning and there have been few contributions on the subject mainly characterized by approaches that belong to what I call a *restricted holism* i.e. a holism that integrates just a few contributions/models/levels among many (see Cheli, 2010). For example, Reich and (later) Lowen had the merit of discovering the interdependences between character traits and postural, respiratory and muscular patterns, but there are many other factors and interdependences that they have not taken into consideration and that have been identified by other authors, who in their turn have not recognized those discovered by Reich and Lowen. Berne was among the first to have pointed out the close interdependences between intrapsychic processes and interpersonal ones, but did not include in his model neither Reich and Lowen's hypotheses, nor those of other authors. Rogers, Maslow and other exponents of humanistic psychology, although they explicitly claimed themselves holistic, did not really include in their model many contributions of other authors. Hal and Sidra Stone admirably linked Jungian concepts of polarity and shadow with Skinner's concept of operant conditioning and with Perls' chair technique, but they too haven't gone over, not incorporating other contributions in their approaches. I do not say this to criticize these authors, whom on the contrary have all my admiration and gratitude, but simply to show that their works represent just the first stage of holistic integration – indeed a restricted holism – thanks to which (and also to some important discoveries in the field of neuroscience and PNEI) it is now possible to take another evolutionary leap forward, outlining a more general holistic metamodel.

Anyway in more recent times have emerged, though few, also models based on a wider holistic perspective, among which Ken Wilber's deserve a special mention, particularly his *Integral Psychology*, which I appreciate a lot and consider quite in tune with my approach. Under some respects our approaches are similar, but mainly they can be considered complementary. Not having the time to explain in details why and how they are so, I would say that like Wilber I am interested in comparing, connecting and integrating different models, but instead of making such a wide overview in the way he does, considering a lot of aspects of a lot of different models, my purpose – since I am a therapist and a transformational facilitator/teacher - has been more restricted and practical, addressed to outline a *holistic metamodel of mental health and psychopathogenesis* which can be applied both for counseling/psychotherapy purposes and for personal and transpersonal development processes.

I will now give you some hints of this metamodel, that considers 1) *personality distortions*, 2) *incomplete or imbalanced personal development* and 3) *consciousness numbness* as the key factors of any mental disorder, including those which western culture considers as normal psychic functioning and eastern spiritual traditions refer to as ego, maya, illusion of being separate and alone etc. Let me explain shortly these 3 concepts.

1) Regarding personality my hypothesis is that although the original causes of mental diseases and disorders lie mostly in the past - traumas, associated microtraumas, prolonged affective deprivation, internal or external conflicts, learning mistaken beliefs or dysfunctional relational models etc. - the current sufferings and disorders should not be ascribed to those past factors but to the *persistence* of distorted personality traits that in the past the individual learned and applied for adaptive purposes but in the present they are ineffective and counterproductive, owing to the changed internal and external conditions. Among these distorted traits I highlight *wrong and limiting beliefs, self-deceptive strategies, manipulative strategies for attaining affective surrogates etc..* Other important aspects that in this respect the model takes into consideration are: a) the *enneatype*, which I consider a sort of resume of an individual's distortions, and b) *subpersonalities imbalances* (of which I will speak ahead). The persistence of these strategies, although they are maladaptive, mainly depends on the *flywheel role* played by personality that I consider the *structural memory* of the psyche, comparable with the "operative system" of a computer. Once they are formed (I should say deformed), the various personality traits tend to remain stable and without some powerful outside event (for example a counseling/psychotherapy treatment or some drastic event such as a sudden bereavement, an accident, a serious illness or an existential crisis), there is no further development and the distorted traits remain so throughout life, unless they worsen due to ageing.

2) For what concern *personal development* I define it as the process through which personality - starting from a set of potential traits which I call *potential self* and other approaches call "essence" - reach its full, incomplete or distorted development. I like to imagine the potential self as a necklace of coloured seeds as in figure 1. The gray sketched circles represent the fully developed trait that each seed – if properly nurtured and cared - is destined to become

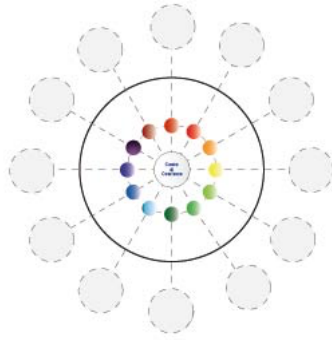


Figure 1

The following three figures show different results of personal development process, from a fully and harmoniously developed personality (figure 2) to partly developed personality (figure 3) or fully developed but very distorted personality (figure 4).



Figure 2

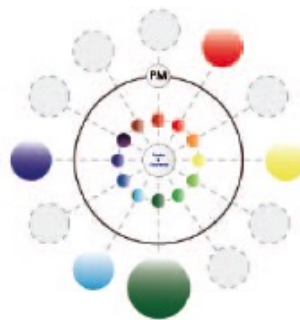


Figure 3

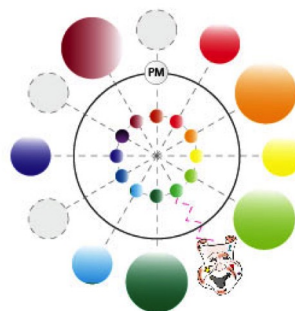


Figure 4

According to my approach, what many spiritual traditions call “ego” and some psychotherapy approaches call “false self” or “mask” is not something to be killed, abandoned or transcended but rather to be rebalanced. I say rebalanced because I see personality as a *multilayer fractal system* composed by a set of *bipolar traits* and *subpersonalities* each of them can be *latent*, *ipodeveloped*, *fully developed* or *hyperdeveloped*. In this respect what other approaches call ego, false self, maya, illusion etc. are just the consequences of a personality imbalance that produces a distorted perception/interpretation of yourself, the others and the world, therefore determining disfunctional intrapsychic processes and interpersonal behaviours. One of the significative aspects of my metamodel is that it integrates the concepts of *subpersonality*, *polarity* and *polarity balance* (typically transpersonal) with the concepts of *defense mechanisms*, *limiting beliefs*, *transational games* etc. coming from more traditional psychotherapy approaches. To me a part of human psychological suffering and diseases can be explained in terms of personality distortions like *defense mechanisms*, *limiting beliefs*, *transational games* etc. while another part (often interwoven with the previous one) is due to personality imbalances and related intrapsychic conflicts. The negative influence of both factors is worsened (and in a certain respect co-caused) by the numbness of consciousness, which is the third key factor above mentioned.

3) Indeed consciousness is meant in my metamodel to play not only the role of correctly perceiving inner and outer reality but also the role of harmoniously coordinating the different subpersonalities, deciding which one is more adapt to a certain situation, task, pourpose, person. That’s why I refer to consciousness as “Center of Consciousness”, metaphorically locating it at the center of a cobweb whose wires represents both the *sensory channels*, receiving perceptive informations from the periphery to the center and the *effactory channels*, transmitting messages of coordination from the center to the periphery i.e. in my model the *subpersonalities* (figure 5). Another important function of the center of consciousness should be to identify outdated and/or uneffective beliefs and patterns and to delete, update or substitute them (a function that is very much related with the neocortical brain).

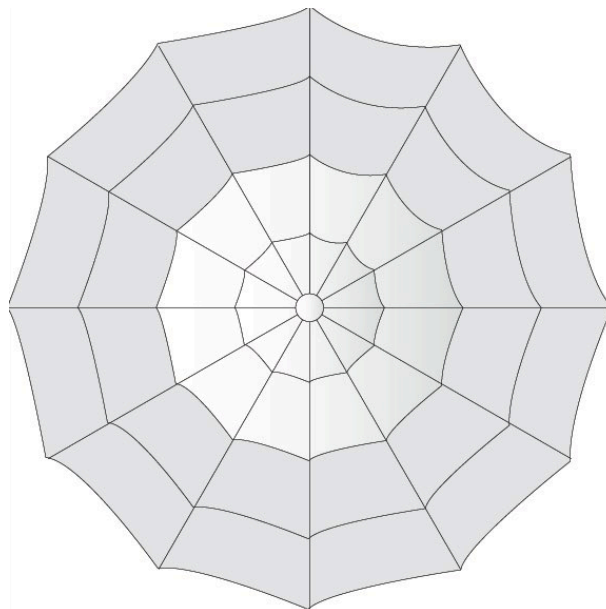


Figure 5

It is well known that achieving a greater consciousness is considered a primary objective by almost all psychotherapy and personal development approaches. However there is not the same agreement about what is meant by consciousness and how it may be developed, issues about which the different authors and schools have very different and often antithetic stances. For example, the cognitive therapy approaches, focusing on beliefs, develop mainly cognitive consciousness, while they neglect or ignore the corporeal/energetic, emotional, interpersonal and transpersonal dimensions. In general, what is lacking in one method can be found in another, which often lacks the features that are present in the former. For example, the development of corporeal/energetic consciousness that is missing in cognitive approaches is strongly present in reichian and bioenergetic ones, which however are not very attentive to cognitive elements (as well as to interpersonal and transpersonal ones). The attention to interpersonal consciousness that is lacking in reichian and bioenergetic analysis is present in transactional analysis and in systemic-relational therapy, which however give very little importance to bodily and transpersonal consciousness; and so we could continue for all the other psychotherapy approaches, but I prefer to address the reader to the schematic description in table 1 (were 0 means not considered, 0/+ marginally considered, + considered and ++ fully considered).

Table 1 – Areas of consciousness considered (or ignored) by various psychotherapy models

PSYCHOTHERAPY APPROACHES \ AREAS OF CONSCIOUSNESS	PSYCHODYNAMICS	COGNITIVE	ROGERSIAN	TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS	SYSTEMIC - RELATIONAL	BIOENERGETIC ANALYSIS	GESTALT THERAPY	PSYCHOSYNTHESIS	VOICE DIALOGUE
1. INTERIOR CONSCIOUSNESS	+	+	+	+	0	+	+	+	+
1.a body - energy	0	0	0	0/+	0	++	+	0/+	+
1.b emotions	+	+	+	+	0	+	+	+	+
1.c thoughts beliefs, values etc.	+	+	+	+	0	+	+	+	+
1.d transpersonal & impersonal Self	0	0	0	+	0	0	+	++	++
2. EXTERIOR CONSCIOUSNESS	0	0	0	++	++	0	+	0/+	+
2.a environment	0	+	+	0	0	0	+	0	0
2.b other people	0/+	0	+	+	0/+	0/+	0/+	+	+
2.c interactional processes	0	0	0	++	++	0	+	0	+
2.d sociocultural processes	+	0	0/+	0/+	+	0	0/+	0	0

I think that those who adopte a holistic perspective cannot be content with this fragmentation and partiality and should rather tend towards a global vision of consciousness and towards its equally global development, which should take into consideration all the areas and sub-areas described earlier. One of the characteristic features of the holistic approach is to consider the individual as a multidimensional being, whose wellbeing or disease highly depends on

harmoniously feeding and developing his different dimensions, as well as on preventing or conciling conflicts among them. Therefore, his consciousness should embrace as many dimensions as possible: corporeal/energetic, emotional, cognitive, personality/identity, interpersonal and transpersonal.

Those who have studied different psychotherapy models or even those who have simply watched the above tables might have the impression that there are different kinds or forms of consciousness. To me this is not so, being consciousness a unique phenomenon with many ramifications; this is the reason why in the table I refer to “areas of consciousness” instead of “kinds/forms of consciousness”. As I previously said, from a holistic point of view consciousness should be considered the core of human being, the center of a *perceptive web* composed by many different sensory channels focused both outside and inside (figure 6). Depending on the sector of the web on which your awareness/attention is focused (and on the grade of sensitivity of your senses) you can be conscious or unconscious of what belong to that sector and/or of the phenomena and processes that are happening on it.

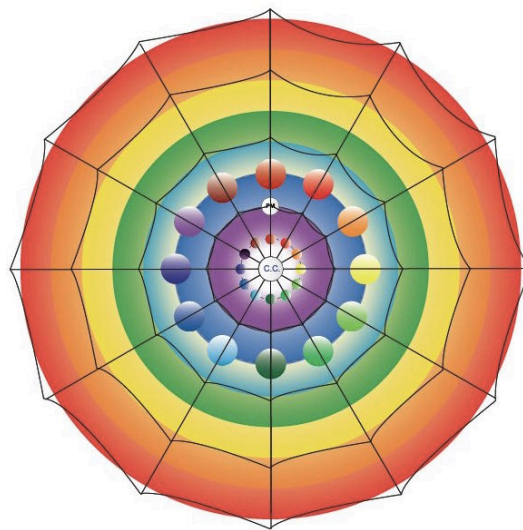


Figure 6

Let's now return to the topic of personality distortions, about which I have taken many concepts from several authors, while I have identified and theorized a few others by myself (at this regard I would like to clarify that most of these authors have never considered their concepts as personality distortions, which is my own categorization). Once identified the main categories of personality distortion (which I cannot describe here) I related them to the different dimensions which characterize human being - bodily, energetic, emotional, cognitive, personal, interpersonal, transpersonal – and to locate them in a multilayer model, as shown in figure 7.

The green circle represents the body, whose skin is the border between the outside and the inside; therefore I included in this level all bodily distortions (postural, muscular, respiratory), locating outside the green circle all those distortions pertaining interpersonal and sociocultural processes: interpersonal manipulative strategies for achieving surrogates and for self-defending, dysfunctional interaction rules, prejudices, taboos and other sociocultural wrong assumptions/beliefs. Finally I located inside the green circle those distortions pertaining the intrapsychic processes that are, from the external towards the center: cognitive and emotional distortions, intrapsychic defense strategies, polarities imbalance, consciousness numbness.

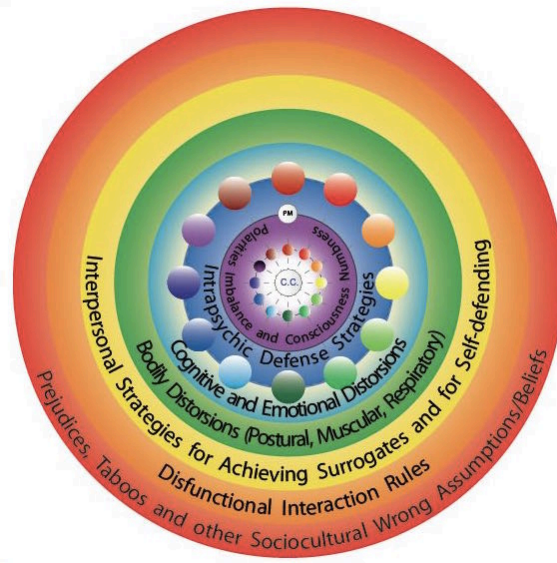


Figure 7

These factors are not equally considered by the different psychotherapy models, each of them focus just on some (often only one) of them, ignoring or underestimating the others. Therefore each approach has an elective level of understanding (and therefore of operative efficacy), while on the other levels it is blind or so.

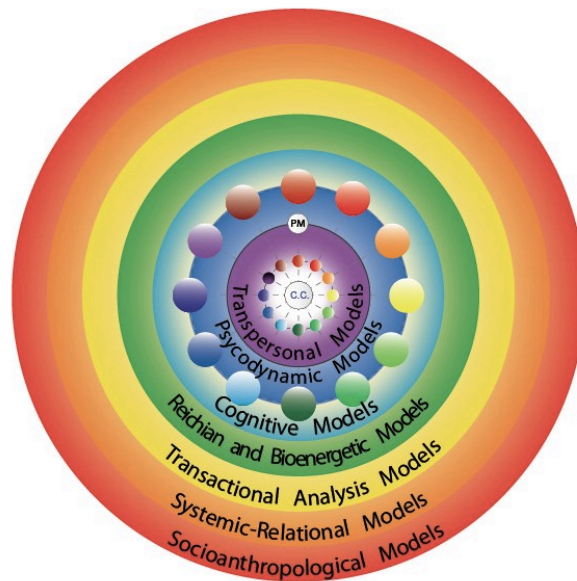


Figure 8

I would like very much to go on in my presentation and give you further informations about my approach but, as said in premise, I would need a trilogy. Anyway those who are interested can send me a E-mail and I will be glad to answer questions and provide more material.

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E-mail: enrico@enricocheli.com Web site: www.enricocheli.com

NOTE: This paper is an excerpt of the following forthcoming books of the author:

Cheli E., *Holistic Psychology for Integral Health. A Integrative perspective on Psychophysical Health, Socio-Emotional Well Being and Personal Development*. Volume I of the trilogy to be published.

Cheli E., *Mental Health and Personality Distorsions. A Holistic Model that Reconciles and Integrates Concepts and Tools Coming from Different Psychotherapy Approaches*. Volume II of the trilogy to be published.

Some other publications of the author pertaining the topics illustrated in this paper

(The titles have been translated into english, and below each one you find the original italian title and full bibliographic references)

- *Worlds In Transformation*

CHELI E., *Mondi in trasformazione. Riflessioni su conoscenza, politica, società alle soglie della nuova era*, Arezzo, collana "Lavori in corso" del Dipartimento Studi storico sociali e filosofici dell'Università di Siena, 1993.

- *Meditation and how to do it (1997)*

CHELI E., *Meditazione: istruzioni per l'uso*, Impruneta, Compagnia degli Araldi, 1998.

- *Behind The Masks to Self-discovery*

CHELI E., *Dietro le maschere alla scoperta di se stessi*, Impruneta, Compagnia degli Araldi, 1998.

- *The Age Of Inner Awakening*

CHELI E., *L'età del risveglio interiore. Autoconoscenza, spiritualità e sviluppo del potenziale umano nella cultura della nuova era*. Franco Angeli, Milano, 2001.

- *Intrapersonal communication: Intrapsychic Processes seen as communication with ourselves*

CHELI E., *La comunicazione intrapersonale. I processi intrapsichici visti come comunicazione: spunti per un ampliamento dei modelli teorici delle scienze della comunicazione*. in Bechelloni G., Vassallo M. I. (eds.) *Dal controllo alla condivisione*, Mediascape, Firenze, 2002.

- *Preface to the Italian edition of the volume of H. Stone and S. Stone: Embracing Each Other*

CHELI E., *Prefazione all'edizione italiana del volume di H. Stone e S. Stone "Tu & io. Incontro, scontro e crescita nelle relazioni interpersonali*, MIR Edizioni, Montespertoli (FI) 2003.

- *Communication as an Antidote to Conflicts*

CHELI E. (ed.), *La comunicazione come antidoto ai conflitti*, Punto di fuga, Cagliari, 2003.

- *Relationships in Harmony. Developing Emotional Intelligence and Communicative Skills to Feel Better with the Others and Yourself.*

CHELI E., *Relazioni in armonia. Sviluppare l'intelligenza emotiva e le abilità comunicative per stare meglio con gli altri e con se stessi*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2005a.

- *Diversity, conflictuality, communication. For a holistic approach to constructive conflict resolution,*

CHELI E., *Diversità, conflittualità, comunicazione. Per un approccio olistico alla risoluzione costruttiva dei conflitti*, in Benci V., Buccioni I., (cur.) *Cultura della pace e gestione dei conflitti interpersonali*, Roma, Aracne, 2005b.

- *Preface to the Italian edition of the volume of H. Stone and S. Stone: Partnering*
CHELI E., *Prefazione all'edizione italiana del volume di H. Stone e S. Stone La coppia viva. Come prendersi cura di sé e dell'altro per crescere insieme*, Spigno Saturnia, edizioni Crisalide, 2006.

Pathways of Awareness. A Holistic Method for Inner Consciousness and Self Realization
CHELI E., *Percorsi di consapevolezza. Metodi olistici per la conoscenza interiore e la realizzazione di sé*, Xenia, Milano, 2009.

- *The Cultural Creatives Worldwide. New People and New Ideas for a Better World*
Cheli E., Montecucco N., Laszlo E., Ray P.H. *I creativi culturali. Persone nuove e nuove idee per un mondo migliore*, Xenia, Milano, 2009.

- *Holism the Science of the Future. For an Ecological, Peaceful and Mindful Civilisation*
CHELI E., *Olismo la scienza del futuro. Verso una società pacifica, ecologica e consapevole*, Xenia, Milano, 2010.

- *Systemic Interdependencies between Communication, Relationship, Cognition and Emotion. Ideas for a Holistic Integration of Psychology And Sociology*
Cheli E. *Le interdipendenze sistemiche tra comunicazione, relazione, cognizione ed emozione. Spunti per un'integrazione olistica tra psicologia e sociologia*. In F. Bottaccioli (a cura di) *Mutamenti nelle basi delle scienze. L'emergere di nuovi paradigmi sistemici nelle scienze fisiche, della vita e umana*, Tecniche Nuove, Milano, 2011.