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Holistic Theory of the Mind



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Andras Angyal (1902–1960) was an American psychiatrist, born in Transylvania (then Hungary). Angyal proposed a holistic theory of personality, initially in 1941 and in a book edited by his colleagues in 1965 after his death.

Angyal's first principle was that the personality is an organized whole and not a mere aggregate of discrete parts. We cannot understand the mind simply by studying its parts. Angyal used the term *whole* for the concrete organized object and the term *system* for the organization (or arrangement) of the whole. The system principle is the basis according to which the whole is organized. Every system has one and only one system principle.

Of course, the whole can be conceptually divided into parts, subsystems, each of which has a system principle, and subsystems can be conceptually divided into subsystems, and so on. Thus, there is a hierarchy, all the way down to the individual elements of the mind – wishes, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

The Biosphere

The universe of life is called the biosphere. The biosphere includes the individual and the environment. In a holistic approach, the individual and environment are not really separate but merely different perspectives within the biosphere. Angyal proposed that we could always view an event from these two perspectives, the self or the environment – or the *subject pole* and the *object pole*. He proposed a set of terms for the forces viewed from either perspective. From the object pole, objects have relevance, valence, and demand quality; from the subject pole, the individual has attitudes, drives, and cravings. From both perspectives, these elements are organized into larger and larger sets, until we have a personal system principle for the subject pole and an environmental system principle for the object pole. There are forces in the biosphere, drives from the subject (individual) pole and valences from the object (environment) pole, but Angyal suggested that we need neutral terms to express what is going on from a holistic perspective. His suggestions were tension, readiness to tension, and interest.

From the subject pole, the attitudes, drives, and craving are organized into axioms of behavior,

systems of axioms, and finally, our system principle. From the object pole, the valences, relevances, and demand qualities are organized into axiomatic values, systems of values, and the environment's system principle.

The System Principle

People assimilate new material, for example, food at the physiological level and experience and information at the psychological level. People produce, mobilize energy, and create new behaviors and ideas. By drawing in foreign material, they grow at the expense of the environment. Life could be defined as a process of self-expansion, and Angyal called this the *trend toward autonomy*. Human life consists of a trend toward increasing autonomy.

People are not content with autonomous strivings. They seek to be part of a family, a group, a culture, and the universe, even to surrender themselves to this larger unit (a family or a culture) or to become one with God. These desires constitute the *trend toward homonomy*. Everyone has both trends, though one trend may be stronger and more obvious in one person as compared to others.

Angyal's *system principle* is this double trend toward autonomy and homonomy. Notice that this system principle is necessarily very abstract and very broad. Development for the individual involves the division, subdivision, and branching of the very general expression of the trends toward autonomy and homonomy into more and more specific attitudes, values, desires, and thoughts.

Angyal called the impact of the environment upon people *heteronomous forces*. Every event in the biosphere is a product of both of these components: autonomous/homonomous forces and heteronomous forces acting together to create an event. Some events have a stronger autonomous/homonomous component, others a stronger heteronomous component, and still others a balance.

Systems and Integration

Each item of behavior functions as part of several systems. Thus, each behavior has, or can have, many functions. *Plastic systems* are those in which the parts have variable functions. *Rigid systems* are those in which each part has a fixed function. A process in a rigid system is a localized happening, but a process in a plastic system can have an impact on neighboring parts. In a plastic system, an individual behavior may at one time be part of one system and, at another time, part of another system. This sharing of parts by different wholes is economical. At the physiological level, the processes of urination and sexual activity for males share the some of the same anatomical structures. At the psychological level, consider a kiss. It can indicate friendship, sexual love, familial love, subordination (e.g., kissing the hand of a Pope), a person to be killed (e.g., Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus), or simply respect (e.g., a gentleman kissing a woman's hand as a greeting).

As we develop, the parts become differentiated and reorganized. The different parts of the system become increasingly interrelated, and subparts differentiate from the parts that already exist. *Integration* has to occur to keep the whole intact. In *vertical integration*, the specific behaviors you manifest must be tied to your particular expressions of the trends toward autonomy and homonomy. Typically, the integration moves from the middle toward the depths and toward the surface. We know what we seem to have chosen to do, but is it what we really want to do, and are we doing it as well as we could?

Progressive integration refers to the process by which we attain particular goals through particular means. Sometimes people fail to achieve goals, which suggests that they are using inappropriate means.

Since we have several subsystems, and many subsystems, and so on, these parallel structures require *transverse integration*. These parallel structures must be coordinated (unless they are

completely independent of one another, a situation that is unlikely except perhaps in disorders such as multiple personality). Serious problems can occur with transverse integration. Particularly with plastic systems, it is important for the mind to be able to *set and shift set* easily and appropriately. When a psychotherapist becomes involved sexually with a client, the psychotherapist has shifted set inappropriately. When a professor comes home from work and lectures his or her spouse and children, the professor has become stuck in one set and needs to be able to shift set.

Psychopathology

If subsystems are not allowed sufficient time for release, that is, sufficient time in control of the mind, symptoms occur. If one subsystem is much stronger than and dominates the other subsystem, the subordinate subsystem can only inhibit the dominant subsystem rather than share control of the mind. This leads to *symptoms of pressure* such as tenseness and nervousness.

As the subordinate subsystem gets stronger, it can sometimes interfere with the functioning of the dominant symptom, leading to *symptoms of intrusion* such as obsessions, compulsions, and excessive fantasy. As the subordinate subsystem gets even stronger, it can fight the dominant subsystem on equal terms, and if the alternative sharing of control of some kind is not possible, then *symptoms of invasion* may occur in which the person's behavior is chaotically controlled by two systems at the same time without coordination, leading to symptoms such as indecision, ambivalence, states of confusion, and catastrophic reactions.

Biopositive and Bionegative System Principles

Angyal tried to maintain a holistic perspective when he considered disturbed behavior. His terms for health and disturbed states were biopositive and bionegative, but these adjectives referred to the organization of the mind, not to its

contents. For Angyal, the mind is either completely healthy or completely disturbed depending upon which system principle is organizing it. If the organizing system principle is biopositive, then the mind is completely healthy; if the organizing principle is bionegative, then the mind is completely disturbed.

How then can an individual be a "little disturbed"? Angyal saw this as a matter of the relative amount of time for which the biopositive and bionegative system principles were in control. In the healthy person, the biopositive principle organizes the mind for most of the time; in the disturbed person, the bionegative system principle organizes the mind for most of the time.

Bionegativity is, then, a way of life for Angyal. It is an organization with its own goals, attitudes, and motivations and may lead to symptoms of pressure, intrusion, and invasion as it competes with the biopositive organization. Personality (or our mind) is, therefore, by necessity, a dual organization, each of the organizations governed by a different system principle – the principle of universal ambiguity.

Each system defends itself against the rival system. Defense mechanisms are the tactics used by each system. The traditional psychoanalytic defense mechanisms (such as sublimation and projection) are ways in which the bionegative system tries to prevent the biopositive system from taking over control of the mind. Angyal noted that psychologists needed to define a set of defense mechanisms that the healthy system uses to prevent the unhealthy system from taking over. He suggested processes such as empathy and objectivity.

The biopositive system principle is the double trend – toward autonomy and homonomy. Angyal, proposed two patterns for the neurotic system principle.

The Pattern of Vicarious Living

The method of adjustment in the pattern of vicarious living is the systematic repression of one's genuine personality and an attempt to replace it with a substitute personality. This substitute personality has been called the social self or the façade self by other writers. It is the self we

present to others and by means of which we seek to hide our real self. The strategy leads to symptoms such as feelings of emptiness, a pervasive dissatisfaction with the way we are, and attempts to escape from these feelings by getting signs of approval for our façade self from others.

Why should such a strategy be adopted? Angyal suggested that it was because the person felt unloved and unliked as a child. If children feel unloved by their parents, then they typically assume that it is their own fault. Therefore, in order to receive love and approval, they must suppress (and eventually repress) their real selves and become what they think others want them to be. This pattern leads to hysterical neurosis (now called conversion disorder), the hysterical and histrionic personality, and when negativism is present, psychopathy (antisocial personality disorder).

The Pattern of Noncommitment

This pattern results in a person who is confused as to whether the world is basically good and friendly versus bad and hostile. This leads to uncertainty and ambivalence. Are people good and trustworthy or bad and untrustworthy, and how can this confusion be dispelled? This pattern arises when children are faced with an inconsistent world. Today Daddy is kind and friendly, but yesterday he was angry. Yesterday, Mommy laughed at what we said, but today she hit us. Other people are unpredictable, and ambiguity comes to characterize every situation that the child faces.

This pattern leads to anxiety and a search for ways to dispel the anxiety, frequently resulting in obsessive and compulsive behaviors and, in the extreme, obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Since it is impossible for our parents to accept all of our desires and behaviors, and since it is impossible for parents to be absolutely consistent in their reactions to and treatment of their children, every person develops both patterns to some extent.

Comment

Angyal proposed a holistic theory of personality. He starts with the integrated whole and then breaks down the whole into parts. He does not go too far. For example, he rarely talks about individual desires, thoughts, or behaviors. In contrast, atomistic theorists, on the other hand, start with these elements (desires, thoughts, and behaviors) and try to build larger structures from them. Despite being holistic, his theory does have two system principles, and each system principle has two parts. Many earlier and later theories are consistent, in part with Angyal's theory, from Carl Jung's analytic psychology (complexes) to Eric Berne's transactional analysis (ego states).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Analytical Theory \(Jung\)](#)
- ▶ [Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry \(Sullivan\)](#)
- ▶ [Object Relations Theory](#)

References

- Angyal, A. (1941). *Foundations for a science of personality*. New York: Commonwealth Fund.
- Angyal, A. (1965). *Neurosis and treatment: A holistic theory*. New York: Wiley.