WHAT CAN THE ASSIMILATION MODEL LEARN FROM THE IDENTITY POSITIONS INTERVIEW AND WHAT CAN IT TEACH? A COMMENTARY ON CUNHA'S "CONSTRUCTING ORGANIZATION THROUGH MULTIPLICITY"

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ABSTRACT. In this dialogue between the assimilation model and the Identity Positions Interview (IPI), the two theories make suggestions for how the other might be improved and how the two might become more compatible. The assimilation model points out that the IPI might gain a more differentiated view by incorporating a developmental sequence into its structure. The IPI responds by pointing out how the assimilation model could be studied systematically using IPI procedures. The IPI also presents case examples that pose theoretical puzzles for the assimilation model, such as the active and systematic avoidance of seemingly mild problems.

Theories and methods of studying the dialogical self must encompass continuity and transformation, and they must do so in a way that is developmental and relational. They must accommodate people's sense of consistent agency and yet contend with systematic growth and sudden shifts. They should be understandable in narrative terms, developing systematically over time, if perhaps not predictable, and in dialogical terms, emerging through spoken and unspoken interactions between and within people. These specifications set a formidable challenge, to which Cunha (2007, this issue) has risen admirably. She has sketched answers the questions of what keeps us consistent and how we change. And, most importantly, she has outlined a program of research that addresses these problems empirically.

The *Identity Positions Interview* (IPI, Gonçalves & Cunha, 2006) is designed to elicit dialogical processes surrounding a particular personal problem. It seeks to reveal the current state of and relations among key internal voices. And it probes their capacity for dialogue and change using a variant of the revealed differences technique, in which potential internal discrepancies are foregrounded by staging dialogues with the imaginal perspectives of other people and future selves.

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Cunha's (2007, this issue) microgenetic analysis of IPI text focused on development and organization as revealed in the flow of dialogue. Within the interview's structure, different, potentially conflicting internal voices could be seen to succeed, trigger, or suppress each other or build meaning bridges with each other though dialogue. In her words, the IPI seeks to describe "how the self achieves its dynamic structure, stability and consequent individual agency within this multiplicity brought to the foreground by the ever-changing flow of lived experience" (Cunha, 2007, p. 289).

The Assimilation Model

In these brief comments, I focus on what the *assimilation model* can learn from Cunha's (2007, this issue) paper as well some things that the assimilation model might contribute to understanding the sorts of results that the IPI yields.

The assimilation model (Stiles, 2002; Stiles al., 1990) is a member of the family of Dialogical Self theories. Using the metaphor of *voice*, it describes internal multiplicity and a process of change in psychotherapy through dialogue (e.g.. Brinegar et al., 2006; Stiles et al., 2004, 2006). Based mainly on a series of intensive case studies, assimilation researchers have constructed and refined a developmental account of psychological change, summarized in the Assimilation of Problematic Experiences Sequence (APES; Stiles, 2002; Stiles et al., 1991). The eight APES stages, numbered 0 to 7, describe a range of potential relations of a problematic experience, or *problematic voice*, to the person's dominant *community of voices*, which represents the person's accumulated experiences that can be smoothly employed as resources. The stage names characterize this relation as (0) warded off/dissociated, (1) unwanted thoughts/avoidance, (2) vague, painful awareness/emergence, (3) problem statement/clarification, (4) understanding/insight, (5) application/working through, (6) problem solution/resource, or (7) mastery/integration. The theory, supported by the case studies, suggests that in successful therapy, problems tend to advance through these stages, which are understood as points along a continuum. Clients may enter therapy with problems at any stage, and any movement along the continuum could be considered as progress.

There are many family resemblances and potential points of contact between assimilation model's case conceptualizations and Cunha's (2007, this issue). Both, of course, focus on manifestations of internal multiplicity; Cunha used the term *self-state* to do work similar to that done by *voice* in the assimilation model. These concepts articulate, in slightly different ways, the central, common observation of psychological continuity and agency within a polyphonic self. As in recent descriptions of the assimilation model (Stiles et al., 2006), Cunha described *positions* or *positioning* as the observable manifestations from which the internal sources of continuity were inferred.

That is, *voice* and *self state* describe the hypothetical internal agents of continuity, while *position-taking* describes what the person observably does.

In attempting to integrate different conceptual approaches, even such similar ones as these, I am mindful that there are risks. Technical terms get their meaning from their theoretical context and cannot be assumed equivalent simply because the words are the same or synonymous in natural language (Leiman & Stiles, 2002). I return to the issue of relations between theories in this commentary's concluding section.

What Can The Assimilation Model Teach?

I think that the analysis of the IPI could usefully incorporate a longer-term developmental sequence like the APES. This could (a) offer a more differentiated view of problems and, depending on the problem's degree of assimilation, (b) suggest different probes and expectations for change within the interview as a function of the problem's developmental stage.

The conventional meaning of the word *problem* in the IPI opening (*"a personal problem that concerns you in the present"*; Cunha, 2007, p. 291), probably pulls for problematic voices in the range of APES 1 (unwanted thoughts/avoidance) to APES 3 (problem statement/clarification). Theoretically, problematic voices at an earlier APES stage are likely to be inaccessible or too painful to confront. Voices at later stages are less likely to be described as problems. Even within the APES 1-3 range, however, problems have different relations with the rest of the person, according to the theory. At APES 1, problems are poorly specified or over-simplified and quickly avoided; probes are likely to be evaded or dismissed. At APES 2, problems are still vague, but they are painfully faced rather than avoided; probes may elicit strong negative emotions (sadness, anger, recriminations, despair). At APES 3, problems can be explicitly named and stated, and probes may stimulate emotional or practical problem-solving and work towards new understanding.

The assimilation model suggests that incremental progress on a problem (i.e., increasing assimilation) looks different depending on the problem's stage. For problems at APES 1, progress, paradoxically, involves increasing emotional pain, as the problem is acknowledged, faced, and more fully experienced (i.e., moving toward APES 2). For problems at APES 2, progress should involve naming and stating the problem. Only for problems at APES 3 would progress conform to the conventional notion of moving towards understanding, resolution, or insight.

Cunha's (2007, this issue) two case studies appeared to illustrate something of this range of APES stages. Antonio's problem (initially, "*The beginning of my professional life is something that makes me feel anxious [*perhaps in the sense of *yearning]*") appeared to be at APES stage 1. Cunha did a convincing job of highlighting Antonio's systematic avoidance of any contemplation of negative outcomes. Even

though Antonio suggested the problem initially, he subsequently avoided it and became more rigid and dismissive as the issue was pressed in the IPI. His descriptions became so monological as to be somewhat unbelievable for psychotherapists like me who are used to exploring problems.

Understanding Antonio's problem as being at APES 1 suggests that he would not be eager to work on his problem. Assimilation progress for Antonio would involve greater contact with the avoided problem and hence greater pain (Stiles et al., 2004).

Whereas Antonio's problem seemed to emerge casually, triggered by the opening dialogue, Maria's problem (initially, "*I feel powerless and alarmed about my father's health condition*") was unavoidable and highly salient. She was clearly distressed about it, and yet she did not attempt to avoid it. In APES terms, the problem appeared to be past the emergence stage (APES 2), which is the point of greatest pain in confronting the problematic experience. Early in the interview, she was able to give a very clear statement of the problem (APES 3), and she maintained contact with it, turning it over and viewing it from multiple internal perspectives. Maria's focused work in the IPI resembled psychotherapy clients' focused work searching for an acceptable solution to a stated problem, as observed in the interval between APES 3 (problem statement) and APES 4 (understanding; Brinegar et al., 2006).

During the IPI, Maria seemed to move toward accepting her situation. In effect, she made progress in the terms suggested by the serenity prayer:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference. (Attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr)

In the Future Projections section of the IPI, Maria said, "... there has been a growing [awareness] that control does not lead to anything and that powerlessness is part of our human condition." Such a resolution could be considered as approaching APES 4, a mutual understanding between the voices of her caring, affection, and sense of connection as a daughter on one hand and of the uncontrollability and inevitability of her father's illness and eventual death on the other. A germ of this resolution was already contained in her initial statement (feeling *powerless*). That is, at the start of the interview, the problem was already being stated in terms that allowed it to be solved, in the sense of accepting what she could not change.

Importantly, Maria's emerging resolution was not a matter of making the voice of powerlessness dominant while suppressing her caring and concern for her father. Rather, the work of assimilation required meaning bridges between Maria's continuing caring and optimism for her family and her father's inevitable mortality. The future projections section of the IPI showed how Maria was doing this; imagining positive futures both with and without her father.

Theoretically, from APES 2 onward, assimilation progress is accompanied by diminishing distress (Stiles et al., 2004). Maria's new formulations and images seemed to allow her to feel more relaxed in the present. She reported a reduced level of discomfort in the final evaluation procedure, which she attributed to talking about the situation and its future projections (theoretically, building meaning bridges; Brinegar et al., 2006).

What Can the Assimilation Model Learn?

Cunha's (2007, this issue) methods and findings offer useful lessons for the assimilation model. First and most powerfully, the IPI offers a systematic method for distinguishing internal voices that speak for and respond to a selected problem and for assessing the degree to which these voices have been assimilated to each other. The innovative technique of eliciting imaginal conversations with others and with possible future selves reveals present relations among internal voices and probes the participant's capacity for assimilation. In effect, it assesses the therapeutic zone of proximal development--the range of APES levels over which the participant can progress with the interviewer's help (Leiman & Stiles, 2001).

The substantive results of the reported cases also usefully set puzzles for the assimilation model. Although Antonio seemed to avoid confronting his problem (characteristic of APES 1), he showed little evidence that the problem caused him much emotional pain. In principle, the lack of pain could reflect successful avoidance of a potentially painful problem (Stiles et al., 2004), but in this case, it seems equally plausible that the problem (loss of his familiar, comfortable university style of life) was not so serious.

Except for his eagerness to avoid, there was little indication that Antonio was suffering. Should we consider his behavior as successful adaptation? His optimism might be considered as a strength (despite the protests of depth-oriented psychologists and existentialists). I suspected that Antonio would have been capable of assimilating his sadness; to me, it seemed much less serious than Maria's problem. However, circumstances and culture encouraged Antonio to avoid, whereas circumstances and culture confronted Maria with her father's illness in a way she could not avoid.

Antonio's avoidance of a relatively modest problem sets a puzzle for the assimilation model, in which avoidance has previously been explained as an automatic response to powerful negative affect (Stiles et al., 2004). The assimilation model has previously focused on the relatively serious problems presented in psychotherapy. Antonio's case raises the questions of when, why, and how mildly problematic voices are avoided.

Maria's IPI results look more familiar to a psychotherapist. Her productive work, even within this research interview, suggests that she could gain psychological strength

through her suffering. The IPI highlighted her ability to entertain multiple internal perspectives drawn from memory and fantasy and bring these to bear on the resolution of her problem. The microgenetic analysis, with its interconnecting timelines, nicely illustrated and explored of the benefits of internal polyphony in problem-solving.

The IPI can thus teach the assimilation model a potentially efficient and feasible approach to investigating and elaborating the details of the assimilation process. Cunha's results showed that using the IPI on non-distressed individuals can usefully challenge the assimilation model, suggesting new directions for theory and research. It also opens the possibility of further methodological elaborations--designing variants of the IPI for different assimilation stages. For example, if a problem is at an avoidance stage, like Antonio's voice of regret, the model suggests that the next step could involve unfocused negative affect. An IPI designed to assess assimilation might involve further probes that explore this possibility.

Can Theories Assimilate Each Other?

I understand scientific theories as the accumulation of observations. Each new observation is formulated into statements and logically integrated into the observer's theory, a process I describe as observations *permeating* the theory (Stiles, 2005). The theory changes to accommodate the new observations along with the old ones (e.g., some tenets of the theory are rephrased, strengthened, or qualified), and the new observations become part of the theory.

Another theory can be an efficient source of new observations. To draw on this source, it must be assumed that researchers working within it have made useful and unique observations and that these have permeated the theory and are represented in its formulations. One infers what observations might have led to those formulations and then represents the observations in one's own model's terms. In the case of assimilating Cunha's (2007, this issue) work to the assimilation model, the inference is not so great, as she reported relatively concrete observations, albeit inevitably cast in IPI-theoretical terms.

This theory-building project differs from the scholarly project of trying to understand precisely what particular authors meant or unpacking the subtle distinctions in different authors' uses of terms and concepts. For example, it would be possible to compare and contrast Cunha's (2007, this issue) notions of multivocality and developmental dynamisms with those described previously within the assimilation model, noting the subtle differences rather than seeking to resolve them. But this would primarily serve enriching purposes, not theory building (Stiles, 2006).

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