

Introduction to Part 1: Ordinary Magic

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The first section of this volume demonstrates the power, utility, and applicability of Descriptive Psychology (DP) concepts by addressing a broad range of meaningful and important real-life phenomena and problems. As a comprehensive intellectual discipline, DP concepts provide compelling perspectives for comprehending significant aspects of the human condition and practical strategies for solving human problems. By precisely describing, distinguishing among, and explicating the fundamental concepts of important phenomena, DP effectively increases the behavior potential of persons engaged in these phenomena. The clarity that these explications provide improves the understanding of the phenomena, which in turn enhances the competence with which persons can engage in these important endeavors. The particular endeavors addressed in this first section are: (a) enhancing a person's core competence, which is the competence of being a person "in a world of persons and their ways" (Ossorio, 2006), (b) teaching clinical psychology doctoral graduate students to become culturally competent psychotherapists, (c) making forensic evaluation of persons more responsive to matters of essential concern to the court, (d) improving the rehabilitation of disabled persons with moderate to severe traumatic brain injuries and/or spinal cord injuries, (e) gaining a clearer understanding of a core life problem characterized by the diminished meaningfulness of persons who are acutely aware of their inevitable death, and providing several specific therapeutic interventions, and (f) understanding the complexities and ordinary mysteries in the process of dying, and the ways in which a person can facilitate a personal death.¹

Ordinary Magic: What Descriptive Psychology Is, and Why it Matters²

Anthony O. Putman demystifies the seemingly “magical” nature of human competence, especially in cases of extraordinary competence as demonstrated by highly skilled athletes, actors, and performance artists. Human competence refers to the competence at being a person in a world of persons and their ways. The enactment of this core competence as persons is “invisible” to us, in that we regard such personal enactments just as unremarkable as we regard persons speaking their native language. The ability to speak one’s native language competently is acquired and developed naturally during the course of normal human development. Putman aims to elucidate ways of increasing one’s core competence from the level of being merely unremarkable to the highest level of “ordinary magic”. In order to accomplish such an aim, the “invisibility” of human competence must be made “visible”, thereby describable and improvable, maybe even to extraordinary levels.

Putman applies certain key DP concepts to accomplish his endeavor. He begins by providing a brief background and history of DP. For the sake of clarity, he specifies three aspects of human competence—performance, relationship, and living. As a foundational concept, he describes the DP formulation of verbal behavior, which consists of concepts, locutions, and behaviors. From this, he proceeds to explain the Intentional Action paradigm to elucidate our understanding of human behavior per se. In order to increase relationship competence, we must understand the following: (a) where the relationship begins (which calls for understanding the Standard Normal Relationship), (b) what we want the relationship to be (which calls for understanding Status Dynamics), and (c) what we do to build the intended relationship (which calls for understanding the Relationship Formula and the Relationship Change Formula). In the final section on living competence, he introduces the distinction of the Observer’s world (which is what

we see around us) and the Actor's world (which is what we create as we go along living) in order to understand how persons engage in the world. In the final section, he explains how persons change their worlds by explicating the notions of possible, actually possible, and real. With these distinctions, he eloquently describes how we are all competent in changing how we see our world, and thereby enhancing our core competence and enriching our world.

Teaching Culturally Competent Psychotherapy: A Descriptive Psychology Approach

Fernand Lubuguin continues his work on applying DP to advancing multiculturalism and diversity by focusing on the pedagogy of training culturally competent psychotherapists. In his current role as a faculty member, he applies key relevant DP concepts and methodologies to the courses he teaches on multicultural psychology. To contextualize this academic endeavor, he begins by describing the guidelines for cultural competence, which involves self awareness, understanding culturally different persons, and having skills to implement culturally-appropriate interventions. He then describes the two multicultural psychology courses that he currently teaches.

In his course on Racial/Ethnic Identity Development, Lubuguin applies the following relevant DP concepts: (a) person, (b) paradigm case formulation, (c) parametric analysis, (d) person characteristics, (e) pathological state, (f) status, (g) developmental formula, (h) culture, (i) basic human needs, (j) parametric analysis of culture, (k) standard normal person, and (l) cultural displacement and acculturation. In his course on Culturally Competent Psychotherapy, he utilizes the following concepts and methodologies: (a) part-whole relationships, (b) task analysis vs. process descriptions, (c) sensitivity and judgment, (d) significance and implementation, (e) behavior formula, (f) justification ladder, and (g) emotions. He concludes his chapter by expounding on the power and advantages of DP as a conceptual framework (versus a theoretical orientation) in minimizing cultural insensitivity and ethnocentrism.

Guilty or Not: A Descriptive Psychology Analysis

Jane R. Littmann offers several distinctive DP concepts to the legal community for the sake of improving the assessment and evaluation of persons in the context of determining their guilt or innocence of a criminal act. In order to contextualize these salient concepts, she presents facts of a problematic case, the possible verdicts of this case (i.e., guilty of murder, guilty of manslaughter, not guilty by reason of self-defense, and not guilty by reason of insanity), and the essential questions that must be answered in order to determine the appropriate verdict. She introduces the following DP concepts in order to understand the behavior in question and the basic facts of this particular case: Maxims 1 and 5, Person, Deliberate Action, Emotional Behavior, Emotional States, and The Face in the Wall.

With these useful and elucidating concepts, she conducts a case analysis that effectively makes sense of the facts independently and as a coherent set of circumstances. Furthermore, this case analysis does not extend beyond the facts and effectively minimizes conjecture in order to generate a comprehensible and cogent explanatory narrative. She effectively demonstrates how the DP conceptual framework can be helpful in analyzing, understanding, and describing the relevant legal and psychological points to be made, while avoiding common pitfalls that often result in erroneous presumptions and misconceptions.

Oriental Martial Arts Rehabilitation

Laurence Saigo Aylesworth integrated his experience and knowledge as a student-teacher of Oriental Martial Arts (OMA) and as a rehabilitation psychologist, to develop Oriental Martial Arts Rehabilitation (OMAR) for disabled persons with moderate to severe traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and/or spinal cord injuries. OMAR combines the techniques of OMA (i.e., posture, breathing, meditation, stretching, kiai, tai chi, manners, etiquette, aesthetics,

and conduct) with the Status Dynamics concepts derived from DP in order to increase the behavior potential of these particular disabled persons. Aylesworth described the development of OMAR by (a) providing a thorough rationale for utilizing OMA in the rehabilitation of persons with TBI and spinal cord injuries, (b) describing the therapeutic practices that are based on DP Status Dynamics principles, and (c) presenting preliminary data that supports the efficacy of this treatment program.

After describing the world of the newly injured person and relevant aspects of his own personal history, he describes the essential components of OMAR. In turn, he applies Status Dynamics principles to explain the ways in which the components of OMAR can be utilized to increase the behavior potential of these injured individuals. Pragmatically, the aim of OMAR includes enabling these individuals to actually engage in behavior that they were incapable of doing prior to treatment, changing their self concept and status from someone who was primarily a disabled and incapable person to one who has some real sense of agency, and learning ways of maintaining these transformations by reconstructing their world. Procedurally, these goals are accomplished through the accrediting status assignments provided by the therapist, which in turn are made real by enacting these new status assignments through the action-oriented techniques. The status reassignments include changing from one who is merely a disempowered “Helpless and Hopeless Invalid” to one who is an empowered “Wounded Warrior”. The outcome data from a modest sample indicates the effectiveness of this treatment program, and as such, is consistent with the DP maxims “a person becomes what he acts as” and “a person becomes what he is treated as being” (Putman, 1998).

The Tolstoy Dilemma: A Paradigm Case Formulation and Some Therapeutic Interventions

Raymond Bergner extends his earlier extensive work on clinical topics by addressing a core life problem faced by a small but significant number of psychotherapy clients. Specifically, these are clients who suffer from an existential dilemma in which they are gripped by a sense that their inevitable death renders everything in their lives meaningless—a sense that “what’s the point of doing or accomplishing anything if in the end I must die?” Bergner has labeled this state of affairs the “Tolstoy dilemma”, since it is precisely the personal dilemma that famously caused a tremendous crisis in the life of Leo Tolstoy.

Bergner uses a paradigm case formulation (PCF) to capture this clinical phenomenon. In this instance, the paradigm case person would be one who entertained five component beliefs: (1) “Being immortal would guarantee meaning for my life.” (2) “Meaning cannot be found in the temporal world that must ineluctably end in our deaths.” (3) “The only meaning is instrumental meaning.” (4) “The key to human happiness is to be a special person in the eyes of other persons.” (5) “My actions make no difference in the long run since, ‘in 100 years, it’s all the same.’”

Following the presentation of this paradigm case formulation, Bergner provides five therapeutic strategies for addressing this Tolstoyan syndrome. First, the clinician can help the client to identify and to question the beliefs just articulated, and to realize more adaptive alternative ones. This can be accomplished through such established forms of interventions as those arising from the cognitive restructuring, existential, status dynamic, strategic, and solution-focused schools of therapy. Second, the therapist, in appropriate cases, might employ a status dynamic paradoxical intervention that involves the client generating and enacting a fantasy experience in which he or she fulfills fantasies of grand personal triumph. Third, the therapist might employ certain

status dynamic interventions that focus on the element of low self esteem present in many cases. Fourth, the clinician, where appropriate, may redescribe the client as having already attained achievement, recognition, and meaningfulness, and thus no longer in need of feverishly pursuing such ends. Finally, Bergner notes that the clinician may discuss explicitly the disadvantages to being a separated and exalted special person set apart from “lesser” others, and the advantages of claiming the status of “one of us”—that is, an ordinary person among other persons in the human community.

An Accomplice’s Tale

Mary K. Roberts extends her work on applying DP to understand a range of world reconstructive phenomena, including dreams, imaginary companions, and worlds of uncertain status. In her current work, she addresses the question of what persons fall back on when they lose attachment to the real world as they approach death. In particular, she applies concepts and ideas from DP to the endeavor of being an accomplice to a person who wants to die in his own way, and not in accordance with conventional manners of dying.

As the overarching structure, Roberts applies the Dramaturgical Model to describe how those who are dying are scenario creators, thereby creating the last scenes of their lives. She utilizes additional DP concepts to develop her thesis. These concepts include: (a) relativity formulations, (b) boundary and boundary conditions, (c) the real world, (d) reality, (e) dreams, and (f) ordinary mysteries. She then synthesizes these concepts to address the problem of understanding a person’s death. Roberts points out that in order to fully understand the significance of the final scenes of a person’s life, we must see them in the context of the person’s entire life. By doing so, we can then realize that during the final stage of one’s life, a person may be replaying old patterns, rewriting history, and/or doing something different. She concludes her chapter by providing a set of reminders for successfully being an accomplice to the dying

person for the sake of understanding and legitimizing the unique, meaningful, and idiosyncratic ways in which a person chooses to die.

Footnotes

1. Because the contributors to DP come from so many and such diverse disciplines as computer science, business, linguistics, theology, and psychology, we do not enforce a strict adherence to APA style. Rather, authors have the freedom to express themselves in the stylistic manner most authentic for them.
2. Based on his 2008 Presidential address for the Society for Descriptive Psychology. The first person style of presentation was maintained for consistency with that address.

References

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