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Alternative psychological scenarios for the coming global age

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Introduction

When considering the likely future effects of contemporary trends and events, most futurists focus on the macro-level. A general consensus exists among futurists that when viewed from this level, the world is experiencing an era of increasing turbulence that is expected to create unprecedented political, economic, technological, demographic and cultural changes (1, 2.). But whatever the effects on the macro-scale, it is on the level of the lives of individual people and their families that the human effects of these changes will be experienced. If history is any guide, we can expect that a cultural transformation of this magnitude will also bring changes at the psychological level-- the meso-level of the psycho-dynamics of institutions and organizations and groups, and the micro-level of the psychology of individuals (3).

It is now uncontroversial among psychologists that both in terms of mental “content”-- cognitive schemata, mental routines and representations of reality-- and mental “process” -- perception, mental operations, and conceptual strategies, the individual and collective consciousness develops as a function of an on-going dialogical interplay between the organismic givens and challenges made by the physical environment and the human-made cultural environment. The specific kind of mental organization developed by persons in any particular context is the emergent result of the history of the organism-environment dialogue. It is to be expected, then, that any massive transformations on the environment side of this interactive equation will bring with it corresponding changes in the inner world of the human psyche. Changes can be expected to occur in the typical patterns of mind, shared expectations of what is acceptable behavior, how a well-adjusted person should behave, what is worth striving for, and what are the most important psychological strategies for survival and self-realization. Much of this change or learning is gradual and cumulative, adding to experience and consolidating prior knowledge. But it is crisis situations--situations which cannot be addressed with the knowledge, mental skills and emotional equilibrium currently available--which lead to the largest and most

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radical shifts in mental structuring and processing. When people are confronted with a challenge for which they have not yet the capacities required to resolve, a situation of cognitive dissonance is provoked.

In psychological emergencies--whether personal or cultural-- psychological and physiological arousal increases, leading to an increase in mental activity. There is an internal push to resolve the crisis and return to a state of equilibrium as quickly as possible. In communities dominated by a western scientific worldview this push is often referred to as "anxiety". Both individuals and collectives develop culture-specific strategies through which to contain this anxiety and prevent it from overwhelming essential functions or undermining psychological stability and coherence. When the traditional "psychic containers" are adequate, threats to individual or group stability posed by challenges to habitual routines can be neutralized. When they are not, stability is compromised and radical and discontinuous change is likely. Whether that change is healthy and growthful or pathological and destructive will depend to a large degree on the support systems available at the time. Support may be in the form of economic resources--in general wealthier people survive crisis better than those in poverty, psychological resources; well adjusted people are more resilient in crisis than those who are psychologically vulnerable, and cultural resources--those who can draw on intact cultural traditions, religious institutions, family and kinship systems--are more adaptive to crisis than those who are more disconnected.

Growth and transformation

When adequate internal and environmental resources are present and the higher levels of arousal can be tolerated long enough for new capabilities to be discovered and developed, the response can be a movement towards higher levels of functioning. At the lower end of the growth continuum there is an increase in experience, and enlargement of available mental repertoire and consolidation of prior learning upon which future experiences can be based. At the most

expansive, however, there may occur a qualitative shift such that not only the contents of consciousness expand but the way in which experience is processed shifts to a higher order of complexity. Previously established routines and response patterns, accumulated knowledge, problem solving strategies, conceptual and epistemological frames of references become re-ordered into more highly complex mental capacity. This has been referred to me and by others as the *transformational response* and it can occur in both individuals and in groups (4, 5).

Reactionary defense

In the felt absence of the necessary conditions to support psychological growth or transformation, defensive efforts--both conscious and unconscious--will be mobilized to maintain equilibrium and the status quo. Defense strategies are as varied as they are essential, but they share one common feature, namely they are the individual's or community's attempts to avoid having to change in the face of some new complexity and to avoid a felt threat of annihilation and identity disintegration. Denial, avoidance, reaction formation, alienation, distortion, displacement, compulsion, obsession, dissociation, simplification are all special cases of psychological processes aimed at limiting the psychic threat attempting to limit awareness of novel challenges through simplification. While normal, creative and adaptive, when used to avoid unnecessary disturbance of previously successful routines, if the pressure to change remains constant then resistance eventually becomes a liability.

These reactionary efforts are costly in terms of individual and collective resources and frequently lead to high levels of stress, reduced vitality, diminished creativity and increased hostility. Enormous amounts of effort are sometimes required to bolster up defenses in the face of sustained psychic emergency. In individuals misused defensive strategies may lead to psychological symptoms. More serious individual effects might include psychological illness such as depression, personality disorders, narcissism, anxiety disorders, attention deficit disorders and identity diffusion. In groups and communities reaction takes the form of repressive social

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processes aimed at maintaining the existing social order. These processes often include intolerance of difference, political repression, social scapegoating, fascistic social movements, fundamentalism, an emphasis on enforcement of “law and order,” inter-group prejudice and conflict, and political and institutional conservatism. When the forces driving change reach a point where resistance becomes self-defeating, repetitive use of defensive strategies can be seen as a “neurotic” response (6, 7, 8). An important exception to this must be made when considering resistance to oppression or perceived injustice. In such cases even long-term and severely self-damaging refusal to change would not be characterized as neurotic. The distinction lies in the fact that such resistance is conscious and choiceful rather compulsive and automatic.

Chaotic breakdown

When psychic arousal is extremely high and there is insufficient capacity for either transformational change or maintenance of the status quo through “neurotic” suppression of the drivers of change, complete and catastrophic breakdown may occur. The psychic containers disintegrate leading to chaos and madness. In these “psychotic” states anxiety is neither transformed nor suppressed, but instead explodes in an orgy of cathartic expression the purpose of which is release of tension and annihilation of the offending threat even it means self-destruction. Psychotic states are incoherent, nothing makes sense, there is no perceivable order and no recognizable relationship between ordinary consensual reality and the inner psychic maps of individuals.

The deeper news

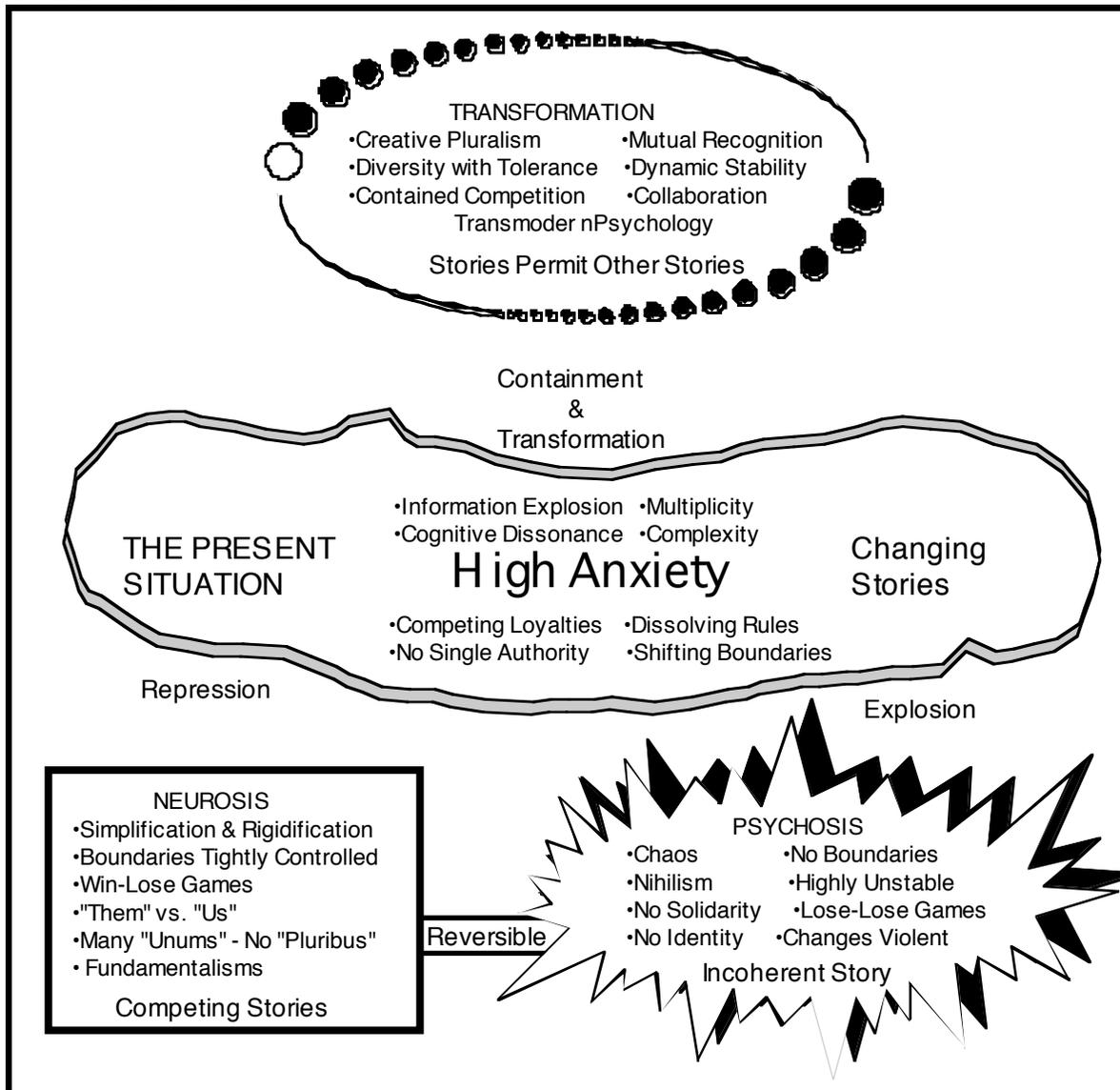
The radical shifts now occurring in the environmental contexts in which contemporary consciousness must survive and people thrive, clearly present an intensifying challenge to all existing patterns of mind. The experiential world of a child who learns about the rain forest by navigating the logic of her personal computer is qualitatively different from that of her mother

who read books and watched films, and different again from the child who lives in the forest and learns about it through navigating the logic of the forest itself. Life for the Oaxacan immigrants in New York City makes radically different developmental demands than does life in their village in Mexico. Migration back and forth between the two makes yet another kind of psychological demand. As the global change process accelerates and its influences widen to embrace the lives of everyone everywhere, individuals, groups and whole societies are being pushed beyond their previously established equilibrium and are being forced to respond. From those responses, repeated over and over again throughout a life time, is likely to come not only superficial changes in externalized actions, but in the deep structural mental patterns of how reality is experienced and how the self-concept is constructed.

Figure 1

Three possible scenarios for the psychology of the future

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Global identity crisis.

All societies develop their own traditional forms of life and social institutions through which people are successfully socialized to be at home in those traditions. These processes, which include child rearing practices, family and kinship patterns, education, work, religion, architecture, epistemology, forms of logic, metaphysics, cultural narratives and myths,

approaches to medicine, and relationship to the natural world, lead to the development of particular forms of local psychology may be highly adaptive adapted to particular lifeworlds but quite maladaptive elsewhere. In his ground breaking research comparing the psychology of people from different cultural contexts, Shweder (9) demonstrated that there are deep difference in both self-concept and in conceptual practices in across cultures.

In an earlier work (10) I summarized reports of characteristic self-configurations that while certainly not the case for every individual are nevertheless more or less modal for what Shweder terms “socio-centric” peoples--those who live in tribal or non-industrialized ways of life, and for “ego-centric” people who inhabit individualistic, urban, and industrialized worlds that have characterized Europe and European-dominated cultures since the eighteenth century. (See Table 1)

Radical change in the lifeworld inevitably results in the opening of an experiential gap between the existing sense of self and what is being demanded by the new world, frequently provoking an identity crisis for individuals and groups affected. Whether the crisis is caused by forced dislocation of people from their familiar surroundings and traditions--as in the case of refugees, migrants, victims of war, occupation or conquest by foreign forces, or from voluntary changes in that society as happens as a consequence of political, philosophical, technological or social revolutions, the changed lifeworld demands re-organization of the inner psychological world. The greater the discontinuity from familiar patterns the greater the degree of required change and the greater the anxiety to be managed.

The psychological, social, political and economic demands of the emerging global information society are so radically different from any to which either tribal or industrial peoples are accustomed, the rate of change is so rapid and the process so turbulent, that neither existent culturally specific self-configurations nor established socializing institutions can adequately prepare people to be at home in the new emerging contexts. The worlds we are collectively creating intentionally and unintentionally can no longer be navigated successfully, using the

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representations, epistemologies, patterns of life, ways of thinking and sense of self that we have aimed to develop in our various cultures.

Table 1

Tribal or socio-centric Psyche	Modernist/Industrialized Psyche
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedded in contexts & tradition • Accepts multiple realities but "ours is better" • Located in time and territory • Relational/sociocentric • Perceives patterns and gestalts • Ethics based on "preserve and care" -- conservative • Non-historical--"timeless wheel" • Holistic thinking-symbol, metaphor, & allegory pre-dominates • Reasoning synthetic, narrative and recursive • Organic explanations preferred • Trusts the body--no "mind-body" split • Trusts intuition as much as rationality • Empathic with human and non-human worlds • Collaborates with kin but competes with "others" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovative--overthrows traditions • Recognizes one "reality"--others are "belief systems" • Mobile "home is where the job is" • Individualist/ego-centric • Perceives linearities and parts • Ethics based on "universal principles"--liberal • Historical--"progressive" • Atomistic thinking--analysis and reduction predominate • Reasoning abstract, deductive and theoretical • Mechanistic explanations preferred • Distrusts body--splits "mind" from "body" • Distrusts intuition in favor of rationality • Empathy not a high priority, objective distance preferred. • Competes with friends and "others" and collaborates strategically
<p>ANXIETY CONTAINMENT</p> <p>Preferred strategies emphasize art, magic, tradition, story, ritual, attunement with nature, repetition, community, conformity</p>	<p>ANXIETY CONTAINMENT</p> <p>Preferred strategies emphasize reason, predictability, power, control of nature, self-mastery, science, order, entertainment</p>

Neither of the tribal nor the modernist psyche seems particularly well suited to the new postmodern world. According to development psychologists Robert Kegan the kinds of capacities required to hold a job in today's business environment, or successfully balance the world of work with the world of family and community life, for instance, do not feature particularly prominently in the modal modernist psyche aimed at in American education and socializing practices (11) [Kegan, 1994 #228]. From factory floor to board room, employees are routinely expected to be "self-starters" yet highly relational and collaborative, assertive yet empathetic, comfortable with "multiple tasking" but able to focus and meet deadlines, be at home in racially and gender diverse work-groups, be able to cooperate and collaborate, evaluate their own work, keep company secrets, cross-boundaries, cope with rapid change, know how to create emergent creative processes in groups, have an internal sense of ethics and work standards --and so on. Even in advanced democratic societies psychological demands have outstripped the modal level of psychological capacity. For dislocated tribal people the situation is even more dire. We are all, as Kegan puts it, "over our heads."

According to research conducted by Kegan's group, fully two thirds of late twentieth century Americans have not achieved the levels of mental capacity required by life in the late twentieth century. Mental distress is already very high and every indication suggests it is climbing. By 1987 over 18 million or 7% of Americans per year sought treatment for mental distress, and recent figures suggest that by 1998 that figure had grown to close to 11% (12). Rabasca quotes one clinical psychologist who specializes in phobias and other anxiety-related disorders estimates that "as many as one in every five Americans experience symptoms of anxiety." At least some of this increase can be directly correlated with macro-level events. In the same article Rabasca reports an increase in people developing phobias and anxiety-related symptoms stemming from fears about the so-called "millennium bug". In the industrialized nations leaders have not even begun to think about what happens to a society in which large

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numbers of the population have not the requisite minimal mental capacities to navigate the challenges of daily life, and there are neither formal nor informal systems by which these capacities might be deliberately developed. History evidence and reports from tribal peoples from many parts of the world suggest that the consequences can be catastrophic (13). In the case of tribal peoples, dislocation from their ancestral lands, disruption of their traditional ways of life and exposure to the alien worlds of contemporary urban life has been devastating. The annual “Conference on Suicide Prevention among Indigenous Peoples,” draws participants from all around the globe (14).

In the high-tech world of cybernation and in the rainforests of South America people are confronted with the same dilemma--how to cultivate in the population at large the higher orders of mental capacities and habits of mind required to thrive in the totally new contexts of the 21st century and how to design social processes through which the new self-configurations might become institutionalized. There are no experts here--no global shamans or psychotherapists who know what will be needed in the new reality. Whether village person or urbanite, we are all strangers in a strange land facing the same dislocation from our historical and contextual roots, and the same individual and collective anxiety and the same challenge of inventing healthy rather than pathological responses to it. It is important to say, however that we face them with vastly different levels of economic resources at our disposal.

A new psyche for new times

If it is true that both the tribal and modernist forms of psychology are ill-suited for the new era it might be useful to consider what kind of psychology might be more suited. One obvious necessity is for flexibility. In a rapidly changing context firm commitments to any patterns quickly become anachronistic and self-defeating. The ideal of a stable sense of identity or self, whether tribal or individualist, seems to be ever less viable anywhere. In its place a new kind of person might be emerging who can respond to the turbulence, complexity and large scale

cultural changes by developing new and multiple sources of identity and creative strategies for success. There is at least anecdotal evidence that new kind of psyche might gradually be emerging that is more fluid, emergent, contextual and relational than the modernist ideal yet more individuated than is typical in tribal selves (15, 16, 17). (See table 2)

Table 2

EMERGENT TRANSMODERN PSYCHE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovative & conservative • Multiple truths lightly held • Lives, thinks and acts locally & globally • Embraces spirituality • Thinks holistically & systemically • Tolerates ambiguity & difference • Reflexive learner • Contextual "self-in-process" • Ethics--"Right action" over fixed principles • Assumes personal responsibility and accountability • Particularist & generalist • Reasons abstractly & narratively • Trusts body--no "mind-body" split • Multi-epistemological, respecting rational non-rational ways of knowing • Boundary crosser, • Collaborates & competes in the service of whole • Empathic with self and "others"
ANXIETY CONTAINMENT
Relational connections, flexible social systems, relevant rituals, self-mastery, art & science

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This “transmodern” psyche--which is neither western-modernist nor non-western-tribal, neither socio-centric nor ego-centric--is inventing new hybrid ways of being that balance the kind of psychological strategies appropriate to a technologically mediated world of “individual rights and responsibilities” with the more basic needs for relational continuity, community, spirituality and connection to the natural world characteristic of non-modern consciousness. Although probably in short supply, these “persons of tomorrow”(may be more numerous among those who have learned to live in more than one world--refugees, colonized peoples, and immigrants, people marginalized from the mainstream culture for whatever reason, as well as those who deliberate practice consciousness expanding disciplines such as Sufism or Zen meditation, psychotherapy or philosophy, or who through advanced education have become “multi-epistemological,” or those who have experienced life changing crises and have been able to mobilize the psychological resources necessary to achieve a transformational rather than a neurotic or psychotic response.

These leaves a vast number of “people of today” who we can expect will be less adaptive to the polyglot worlds of tomorrow. It seems reasonable to assume that as the pressure from the macro-level intensify pressures on meso-and micro-levels, we will see a rise in both neurotic and psychotic responses. The worldwide rise in fundamentalism of many kinds, and the explosive nightmares such as those in Northern Ireland, Uganda or Kosovo, represent these pathological responses.

This is a moment that is pregnant with possibility and the emergence of a new transmodern psyche might be the first signs of a further step in the evolution of consciousness (19). More pessimistic observers warn that there are other more alarming signs that might signal a decline of consciousness and descent into a new dark age (20). Whatever scenarios unfold-- they are almost sure to be plural-- they will make their demands on social resources and the collective imagination. In the coming decades one of the most pressing tasks will be to help people recognize the dialogical links between the macro-level of large-scale social changes, the

meso-level of organizational and group psychology and the micro-level of individual psyches . We urgently need identify effective strategies and mobilize the necessary resources for ensuring that as many people as possible develop the psychological capacities to maintain their equilibrium in the changing contexts in which they will find themselves.

Part of that task is to invent and encourage the use of social forms that can serve as cultural containers to prevent the inevitably high levels of anxiety from turning destructive as they so often have done in the past. This will require the development of new transmodern governance structures, legal systems, educational processes, management approaches, art forms, spiritual and secular rituals. If these can be developed on a wide enough scale and in locally appropriate ways it is not inconceivable that psychological transformation might occur. In any case, however, also urgent will the need to develop new culturally appropriate approaches to mental health services for those who fall victim of the times. Investment in psychological services for casualties will have to be made not only for humanitarian reasons but also to head off the possible social catastrophe that could ensue should either the neurotic or psychotic scenarios predominate on a cultural scale.

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