

Introduction to the Self/World Schema Assessment

The Self/World Schema Assessment (S/WSA) is a tool whose design was inspired by the need to readily appraise adaptive psychological capacities in study subjects participating in psychiatric research projects. It is an instrument whose utility may extend into more purely clinical arenas as well. It can provide an index of functioning in cross-sectional, longitudinal, and comparative contexts, is modest in its time demands upon the observer, is based on (and meant to help organize) the observer/interviewer's impressions and experience of the subject/patient, and requires no specific list, routine, or algorithm of investigative actions on the interviewer's part.

The S/WSA draws upon the idea of the Self/World Schema. This is an integrative conceptualization of a person's working capacity to generate and apply (in communication and/or action) meaning-constructs that adaptively relate self and world. Simply put, the Self/World Schema Assessment provides an estimation of a person's ability to adaptively make meaning out of experience.

The 20-item instrument, used by the clinician/investigator during and/or after an encounter with the patient/subject, employs terms and concepts drawn from overlapping and converging fields of psychological thought, with implicit emphasis on ego-psychology, self-psychology, object-relations, attachment theory, and neurocognitive science. The arrangement of items weights the assessment toward inferences about the subject's representations of self and world, and the integration of these representations in affect-imbued relational narratives.

At present, it is likely that further evolution and refinement of this instrument is called-for, as it is only now being tested. The S/WSA remains as yet unproven, but in that it is based on understandings across multiple current categories of discourse and research, it is likely to be readily useful in many hands and in a wide variety of settings. The simple procedural design is a potential asset. The clinician/observer is called-upon to record a 1-through-5 rating for any or all of the items listed. It is anticipated that not all items will necessarily be rated in any given use of the instrument. If most items are scored, and no grouping of items (such as Self-representations) is left out, then a valid assessment is likely. The scored items are simply averaged, carried to one decimal point beyond the integer.

From a brief review of the 20 items, it can be seen that the weighting, toward self- and world/other/object-representations, the affects involved, and the narratives organizing these, is accomplished through a breakdown of these dimensions into characteristics such as coherence, consistency, and complexity. These facets themselves may be understood in somewhat differing ways by different observers, and there is probably some conceptual overlap, even redundancy, in this design. This may actually help to capture more of the

available data of experience, contributing to a profile with bolder relief, so to speak.

The current working assumption is that the S/WSA will be a reliable assessment of capacity for adaptive meaning-making in the hands of clinicians and researchers who first familiarize themselves with its design, and who have the expectable requisite background of learning and understanding that will inform the terms and concepts employed with definition and relevance. Beyond this, some actual practice use of the tool is likely to make it more reliably applicable in the user's setting. A discursive "key" to the terms used in this instrument is offered below.

It will be interesting to see, upon further testing, refinement, and application, how the S/WSA proves applicable in clinical and research settings. It is hoped, for example, that clinicians might apply this instrument as a means of longitudinal assessment of developmental progress over the course of psychotherapy. It is also hoped that as a research instrument, the S/WSA will be found useful in efforts, for example, to correlate neuroanatomical findings with functional coping capacities, as in a current project assessing adaptation among subjects with fetal alcohol exposure.

Interest in application, testing, and refinement of this tool is invited. Clinicians and research investigators are encouraged to make exploratory use of the S/WSA, and lively communicative exchange about these experiences would be optimal for the further evolution of this instrument.

Key to Terms

Below is a key to the terms that are the rating indices on the S/WSA. It is assumed that a 1-through-5 rating estimate, with lower adaptive capacity toward the 1 and higher capacity toward the 5, can be made on most if not all indices based on an average interview/encounter with a subject (or patient/client) involving enough open-ended questions and invited responsive narrative.

Ego defenses: Here, the emphasis is on whether ego mechanisms appear to be more or less evolved, the more archaic modes of organization of experience being denial-based, and including repression and projection, and the more developed modes involving capacities for reflection, entertaining multiple or alternative perspectives, and the sense of the other's subjectivity we call mutuality. In listening to your subject, where on this spectrum would you place your estimate of his/her ego capacities?

Externalizing/Internalizing: This is a related spectrum upon which to place your estimate of the subject's capacities. It is assumed that a strong predominance of either externalizing or internalizing attributions of agency or causality would be relatively psychosocially maladaptive, and that a

flexible capacity to see multiple or mutual contributions to events in the subject's narrative would be consistent with healthier functioning.

Self representations: This is closely related to the concept of sense of self, and here, is broken out into coherence (vs. fragmentary), consistency (as in internally relatively consistent, as opposed to implicitly self-contradictory), continuity (stable over time as suggested in the narrative, vs. unstable, discontinuous), complexity (as in multifaceted, multidimensional, involving, for example, images of self in private and public contexts, secular and spiritual meanings of self, self as agent, observer, and reflector...), and affective coloration/valuation (concerning the emotional tone involving self-representation or self-experience, whether realistically, or magically positive, or harshly negative, or constructively self-critical, or dramatically, reactively shifting, or relatively self-equilibrating). Where on the scale of 1–through–5 would you place your estimate of each of these based on the available narrative?

World/other/object-representations: This roughly parallels the above set of indices related to self-representations, but includes an estimate of predictiveness, as in the exercise of a capacity to assign hypothetical anticipations to the actions of others, including as they might respond to our actions, and hence this involves an internal sense of how others might experience one's own actions. This anticipatory sense may be relatively simplistic, stereotyping, or suspicious, or innocently optimistic, or empathically realistic.

Affect awareness: Subjects will vary in their ability to identify and name or describe subjective states of experience, to cite these states' connections to stressors or other environmental or internal precipitants, and to reflect on these feelings as meaningful. We will see subjects who apparently must transduce affects into inexplicable or concretely-explained somatic states, and others who consistently apply unnamed affects to judgments or actions upon their environments. Where would you estimate the level of affect awareness in your subject to be on the 1–through–5 scale, based on the narrative available?

Affect tolerance. Closely related to affect awareness, but emphasizing the apparent level of capacity to allow a feeling experience to unfold in awareness, to "sit with the feeling," as the Buddhists might say, or to "lean into" the affect without need for preemptive or otherwise avoidant action or distraction.

Affect/impulse modulation capacity: Again, closely related to the above two indices regarding affect, but with emphasis on the capacity to regulate the enactment-potential already aroused in highly-charged states, such as when I "feel like wringing your neck," can I manage to down-shift to a more

communicative, collaborative engagement that more readily lends itself, in most circumstances, to more likely-adaptive resolution. Can consequential enactments of aroused impulses be averted with employment of alternative strategies? Again, what is your estimate of the subject's affect/impulse modulation capacity based on your listening?

Narratives: This last segment of indices focuses on the narratives themselves, and is therefore potentially deceptively simple, especially in an interview/encounter that is itself urgent or affectively stirring, and hence distracting toward dramatic content (as in, "The pills are in my medicine cabinet—I can take them anytime..."). This dimension of assessment is again broken out into a set of indices, including coherence (vs. fragmentary) and complexity, as discussed above, and affective richness (allowing for an assessment of such qualities as depth, fullness, power, groundedness, transcendence, movingness, subtlety, inspiration, and the like), and realism/magicalness, assessing the narrative for its likely accuracy of attribution vs. distortion or simplification of events and their meanings.