

Island of Individuation: Teaching With a New, Dynamic Approach to the Development of the Human Psyche in the Singapore Context

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Abstract

The fostering of not just better mental health outcomes, but a more creative, knowledgeable and versatile workforce (Watermeyer, Chen & Ang 2021) has been at the forefront of Singapore's development of her people since the seminal events of the late 2010s: the passing of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the Singapore Bicentennial, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 4G leadership transition. Occurring in tandem with this have been the arrival of two of the most diverse and metacognitively-aware generations the planet has likely ever seen, Generation Z and Generation Alpha, the possibilities, anxieties and dangers of a more technologically-advanced population and society, and the normalisation and sensitization of both to issues of trauma, resilience and inequality (e.g. Ang Qing 2022, Neo et al. 2022). In relation to all of these, this presentation introduces a new theory of the human psyche known as Individuation Theory, developed and applied during the COVID-19 pandemic in a H1 General Paper classroom in a government junior college in Singapore by the author. This presentation will consider how Individuation Theory offers a new and dynamic means of working with diverse, intelligent and trauma- and abuse-aware young Singaporeans who are not simply looking for the traditional 5Cs (Elangovan 2021), but for four new intangible qualities Singaporeans have always struggled to appreciate: value, identity, vulnerability and authenticity (VIVA). Alongside a consideration of the well-documented VUCA context of Singapore, therefore, the presentation will outline these four new VIVA factors emerging within the collective Singapore psyche, and how Individuation Theory supports both their development in younger Singaporeans as well as larger outcomes related to community- and nation-building.

Keywords: Osura Pesuasang/Individuation Theory, Trauma, Teaching, COVID-19, Singapore

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Introduction: A creole/indigenous sexual abuse and suicide survivor in Singapore

The silent pandemic of sexual abuse and trauma is nothing new, but both Singaporeans and people in general have become more comfortable talking about it and trying to break free of it. Worldwide, the two major events that appear to have catalysed this change are the #MeToo movement, starting from 2017, and of course the COVID-19 pandemic, starting from late 2019. All students in K-12 classrooms worldwide born from 2000 onwards will thus have been affected by the first, and 2002 by the second; in other words, Generations Z and Alpha are two of the most trauma-conscious generations to ever have existed on the planet.

I am a gay, non-binary Kristang creole/indigenous millennial Singaporean (born 1 October 1992); my status as a millennial meant that I was hence arguably not as ‘naturally’ exposed to such new concepts when #MeToo first became prominent in the collective psyche, having just completed my Bachelor’s degree in Linguistics from the National University of Singapore at the time in October 2017. However, I was forced into a much greater appreciation of trauma and abuse when I was sexually and psychoemotionally abused by a fellow Kodrah Kristang Core Team member from August 2018 to July 2019, prompting me to enter therapy between August 2019 and April 2020 (33 sessions total) while I was working fulltime in a government junior college (JC), with the full knowledge (and support) of the college leadership at the time. It was during therapy that I also only first understood that I had been previously sexually and psycho-emotionally abused by another friend from 2008 to 2013, prompting me to nearly commit suicide on 1 February 2013, as well as by family as a child in 1996 or 1997. I desperately wanted to understand not only why I was so susceptible to abuse, especially psychoemotional abuse, despite being someone who had otherwise served in multiple major leadership positions (and therefore had believed that I had been able to manage my own psychoemotional boundaries and needs) in secondary school, junior college, university and in the public sphere, but why people I had loved and trusted would even think of doing something like this to me.

Cognitive function theory

My therapist introduced me to a number of extant systems for organising people’s psyches and inner worlds, including the Enneagram and Spiral Dynamics Theory, but the only one that really stuck was Jung (1921)’s theory of how every single person’s inner world can be understood as a combination of at first four and later eight separate cognitive functions (Beebe 2017), also known as function-attitudes and by other names and/or in other forms (e.g. Nardi 2005, Berens 2006). Cognitive function theory was the only theory that not only allowed me to consistently recognise and account for my own behaviour and the behaviours of my abusers in the past, but to predict and anticipate the thoughts and feelings of my students to the extent that one student jokingly accused me of being a practitioner of some form of new Kristang magic, and another walked around college shouting, to anyone who would listen, “Mr Wong fixed my brain!”

However, there is a great deal of fair criticism of cognitive function theory in Western psychological approaches to the psyche (e.g. Bonds 2002 and as discussed in Roesler 2013), especially for the following reasons:

- It is incomplete, only attempting to organise and structure a very preliminary part

- It is framed almost entirely within Jung's Western and Christian paradigm, rarely even attempting to include indigenous traditions and approaches to the psyche
- It is overwhelmingly patriarchal and completely fails quite often to account for the inner experiences of women, to say nothing of LGBTQ+ people and others

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which is the most visible use of Jung's original theory, is also therefore fairly criticized for similar reasons:

- It is also incomplete by derivation, since the starting theory that it is based on is also incomplete. In particular, it presents hyper-reductive stereotypes of each of the sixteen ego-patterns that, when taken to their extremes, lock people into thinking that that is all they will ever be (which for some ego-patterns includes suggesting that they are robots or machines, or hypersexual or primitive)
- All MBTI tests determining someone's ego-pattern via impersonal means cannot account for the test taker's intent and objectives in taking the test, which are two of the eight functions (introverted Intuition and extroverted Thinking). Any praxis as a teacher will have usually helped one recognise that students' results are often affected by their motives in succeeding at or failing the test.

Osura Pesuasang

The Osura Pesuasang / Individuation Theory is a radical new grassroots creole/indigenous LGBTQ+ friendly and neurodiverse theory of the human psyche that was developed by the author starting in September 2020 to completely overhaul cognitive function theory while still recognising the observable phenomena Jung and subsequent Jungian analysts were able to uncover: the first eight cognitive functions and sixteen ego-patterns (Wong, 2022a). The four most major principles undergirding the Osura are:

- The psyche is recognized to have both infinite potential and a certain way of evolving that potential, and therefore there is no actual end state to human individuation (i.e. it is impossible to ever say 'I have integrated the 8th function and therefore my psyche is complete'). Where Jungian thought and MBTI seek mostly to describe and categorise, the Osura seeks to transform and encourage diversity and agency by highlighting that the psyche is instead an infinitely ever-expanding structure that is both fractal and consistent to a degree, and mutable and particular to a degree.
- Ego-pattern hypotheses are thus exclusively formed and refined through the building of authentic, real human relationships that invite dialogue, debate and co-construction between teacher and student, or analyst and client. This is a far better way of understanding the full breadth and depth of the structure of someone's inner world with reasoned and humanizing accuracy, and to account for both conscious and unconscious daily life.
- Individuation Theory is designed with every single human being in mind as far as possible, meaning that it is ground-up, creole / indigenous, postcolonial, LGBTQ+ friendly and neurodiverse, and places as a primary focus making mental health and well-being fully accessible to the layperson. As the Theory itself predicts, an analyst is occasionally useful, especially at the earlier stages of individuation, but the ultimate goal of Individuation Theory is to develop individuals who can independently work with and comprehend their own psyche, and thereby have as full ability as possible to exercise agency over their mind and soul, as we do with body and heart.

- Individuation Theory always aspires to full internal structural coherence. Where Jungian thought is still comfortable with leaving many major constructs unattached to the 8-function structure (e.g. the Self, the Spirit of the Depths, the Unus Mundus), the Osura strives to avoid this practice.

Methodology: Teaching with individuation

The Osura was first used implicitly with the author's classes in a government junior college cohort from September 2020 during consultations, and then explicitly also embedded into H1 General Paper tutorials with the author's classes in a second cohort destined to graduate in November 2022 from the latter half of JC1 in August 2021 (Wong, 2022b). Both cohorts showed stunning and very unexpected progress both quantitatively and qualitatively, with all three of the author's classes in the second cohort in particular staying in the top 10 out of 30 classes in the college at all subsequent summative examinations, despite very different starting average L1R5 and English grades at point of college entry, and thereafter performing near the top of the junior college's cohort at the actual 2022 Singapore Cambridge General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (A-Levels), with many students achieving perfect scores. The main reason for this seems to be that the Osura provides very clear scaffolding for developing one's own creative ability and metacognition, which are two of the most critical skills in the otherwise relatively unstructured H1 General Paper. The general process by which this was achieved is captured in reductive fashion below. In practice, each stage was an ongoing effort with each student or within the author himself, rather than a strictly linear sequence.

1. Teacher recognises and accepts own hypothesized ego-pattern and any trauma affecting teacher's own ability to teach effectively; the ego-pattern hypothesis is further constantly subjected to query and deconstruction to ensure that the hypothesis is accurate.
2. Co-construction of hypotheses for student ego-patterns by teacher and students, either in student-requested formal life coaching consultations or based on data from GP consultations.
3. Dissemination of metacognitive reflection handouts and hypothesised articulated structure of each individual student's ego-pattern. Each student receives a personalised individuation hypothesis chart for the particular hypothesised component of the psyche as relevant to GP and that particular lesson. To maintain the principle of full internal coherence and to provide a point of comparison for critique and self-analysis, the teacher's own hypothesis for the structure of their own psyche as it stands at the time is also provided.
4. Bite-sized 5-15 min classroom-level frontal teaching of Individuation Theory only as directly relevant to creative writing in GP in tutorials; deliberate avoidance of 'creating a second subject.'

Results and Conclusion

Students in the cohort were asked to write a "Letter to a Younger Person Entering JC who may share your Ego-Pattern" in August of JC2 as part of the lead-up to graduation. These letters, collected across two cohorts of students from all 16 hypothesised ego-patterns from 2020-2022, were consistently focused on four central goals that were very different from the traditional 5Cs of previously understood Singaporean aspiration:

- Value: Living and developing a life of (unique) worth

- Identity: Accepting and cherishing all of oneself and one's life
- Vulnerability: Negotiating trauma and abuse
- Authenticity: Moving beyond image and face

The VIVA aspirations also seem to connect to two cognitive functions not well understood in Singapore, introverted Feeling (Fi) and introverted Intuition (Ni); these aspirations and the success of the Osura in the classroom, together with the wider emerging interest across generations in negotiating trauma and abuse, and breaking free from cycles of toxic and unhealthy behaviour toward greater empathy and collective empowerment, all suggest that future generations seek a more sustainable, healthy, balanced and nuanced relationship with not just the world around them, but with themselves.

We often treat our inner world, our psyche, and our emotions and desires as terrifying, uncontrollable and irrational dragons or monsters that cannot be tamed, negotiated with or understood. But it is also up to us to see that that, too, is an image and a story that we tell ourselves, both individually and as a society. It is also our choice, both individually and as a society, to tell a better one going forward for the benefit of us all.

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