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INTRODUCTION

Dear CIIS community and friends,

It's my honor to present our second publication of CIIS Doctoral Dissertation Abstracts. This publication offers a snapshot of the innovative ideas, methodologies, and findings of our 2023–2024 PhD graduates from the School of Consciousness and Transformation and the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology graduates from the School of Professional Psychology and Health.



The research of the 60 CIIS doctoral alumni represented in this publication spans the interaction between humans and nature, children's sexual rights, ancestral rituals as a resource for psychospiritual wellbeing, the effects of closed adoption, mystical feminine jouissance, embodied experiences of highly sensitive activists, intentionally designed spaces for persons with dementia, enneagram type and patterns of sexual desire, psychedelic usage in psychospiritual evolution, and so much more. This doctoral research contributes to new knowledge and understandings and once again challenges scholars, practitioners, and activists to think beyond the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines.

Showcasing this research is a testament to the dedication and intellectual rigor of the authors—our alumni—and the faculty and staff who have supported this doctoral research.

We hope this collection is a source of inspiration for current and future scholars and is of value not only to the disciplines but to communities beyond the academy's walls.

Kathy Littles, PhD Provost
California Institute of Integral Studies

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Anthropology and Social Change

Lacanian Psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires: Or Why Americans Don't (La) Can-Can

By

Maria Liza Ahearne, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Andrej Grubačić, PhD

Abstract:

While the melancholic lyrics of tango were first published near the Rio de la Plata during the turn of the nineteenth century, across the Atlantic, Freud's controversial *The Interpretation of Dreams* was released. Today, Lacanian psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires is as popular as the tango and instituted with a Gramscian march. Adversely, in America and since Lacan is Freudian, psychoanalysis has been academically institutionalized with passionate antipathy, asset-stripped of its potency, and rendered ineffectual—lacking serious academic and clinical recognition. This dissertation elucidates these discrepancies between the reception of psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires and in the San Francisco Bay Area—generating the following question: Why Americans Don't (La) Can-Can?

Historically, psychoanalysis has always been on the other side of fascism—no democracy, no psychoanalysis. In the past few decades, Europe, Canada, and throughout Latin America, Lacanian psychoanalysis has been utilized as a critical lens to examine the revolutionary effects of capitalism and its world system. It has emerged within the context of political science and social movements in developing political antagonism. Lacan's mathemes and formulas exhibit the fecundity of psychoanalysis as an epistemology—by providing a critical and alternative analysis that exposes the inequalities of global capitalism. In view of the fact that Lacanian psychoanalysis has been integrated into multiple disciplines—alter-globalization, anthropology, cultural studies, education, emancipatory studies, international relations, organizational studies, philosophy, politics, queer studies, radical pedagogy, and social transformation—it has advanced Latin America's potentiality for social change.

To answer the inquiry question, I developed a methodology, theory, and ethnography based on the ethics and logics of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In this qualitative research, I collected data from a dozen distinguished Argentine Lacanian psychoanalysts through interviews. Participants were selected through professional and personal connections in Buenos Aires. Results reveal why psychoanalysis is nearly obliterated in the United States in contrast with Argentina. Definitively, more readily available access to Lacanian psychoanalytic literature is the *sine qua non* for the transmission of Lacanian psychoanalysis here in San Francisco and eventually throughout the country.

This dissertation is available in full-text on [ProQuest Dissertation & Thesis Global](#) (CIIS login required).

Verdant Underground: Ethnographies of Enchantment and Direct-Action Land Defense

By

Adam Luke Dolezal, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Michelle Glowa, PhD

Abstract:

Despite increased suppression two decades ago, direct-action land defense in the United States and Canada is adaptive, alive, and well, and at great risk continues to stop environmentally and culturally effacing forms of extraction. Through a feminist, anarchist, ontological, and environmental anthropology, this story/study explores how a re-enchantment of ecological relations—a project of repopulating the world with nonhuman beings—happens through direct-action land defense and ecological recuperation. With ethnographic attention to affect, agency, belonging, kinship, trust, magic, desire, death, divisions, ecological subjectivity, and alterity—it brings together a five-year ethnography with direct-action land defenders, seven decades of historical context, and a political conversation highly consequential in an era of ecological destruction. This dissertation asserts that ecological defense must be co-contingent with the defense of culture projects, life ways, cosmologies, ontologies, and ways of knowing about the land; it works to overcome rigid radicalism and internal divisions in activism that hinder our movements; to not succumb to positivist knowledge authority vis-à-vis the worldviews and metaphysics of activists defending the land. Through politically committed activist ethnography, it exposes the deceptions of capitalism that seek to capture our social and ecological relations. It insists on an ontological openness—a pluriverse of world-experiences—of critical importance to anti-colonial Indigenous solidarity, feminist projects of self-defense, and anarchist ecologies.

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Asian and Comparative Studies

The Unity of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity: Understanding the Relationship Between Humans and Nature

By

Jingbo Cai, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Yi Wu, PhD

Abstract:

As environmental issues become increasingly serious, scholars have turned their attention to Chinese philosophy for solutions. The term *tian ren he yi* (“unity of heaven and humanity”) is frequently mentioned nowadays, with some suggesting its potential in addressing environmental issues. However, in the literature review, no systematic study was found concerning *tian (di) ren he yi* (“unity of heaven, earth, and humanity”) and the human–nature relationship in environmental protection. Therefore, this study was conducted.

This study investigates the concept of the unity of heaven and humanity: What does it signify? How did it originate and develop? What are the differences between *tian ren he yi* and *tian di ren he yi*? How do Confucianism and Daoism in Chinese philosophy interpret the idea of the unity of heaven and humanity? The dissertation explores the relationship between heaven and humanity, and the human–nature relationship through the lens of the unity of heaven and humanity.

The study has employed a historical approach to examine the origin and development of the concept of *tian (di) ren he yi*. The hermeneutic approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the interpretation of the concept. Additionally, the comparative method offers a thorough view of the meaning of *tian (di) ren he yi* according to Confucianism, Daoism, and Neo-Confucianism. Chinese integral life philosophy connects the Dao, *li* (“principle”), and *yong* (“function”), demonstrating the implications of *tian (di) ren he yi* in addressing environmental problems.

The term *tian (di) ren he yi* did not encompass the relationship between humans and the natural environment. However, with the passage of time and the development of society, coupled with ecological awareness, this concept can now be applied to explore the relationship between humans and nature, emphasizing the intrinsic connection and harmony among the universe, the earth, and humanity. It suggests a holistic view of the world, which could encourage people to recognize the interconnectedness of all life forms and natural systems. This encourages the pursuit of paths for development that meet human needs without harming nature.

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Clinical Psychology

Latinx Immigrant-Related Parent–Child Reattachment

By

Stephanie Chiquillo, PsyD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Lani Chow, PhD

Abstract:

The study explores the experience of eight Latinx immigrants' experience of reattachment to their parents as children after a period of separation due to piecemeal immigration patterns. For decades, Latin American youth, especially Central American youth, have made the impossible, and yet inevitable, decision to leave their lives of love and hardship and migrate alone to the United States to reunite with a parent who had previously made the trek to the United States to provide a better life for themselves and their families. These youth often formed initial attachment bonds to their parent, but after separation due to parental immigration were left to form new attachment bonds with their surrogate caregivers—the other parent or extended family members. The study participants all expressed attachment challenges in initial reunification, subsequent cohabitation and relationship building, and current relationship connection with their parents as adults. The study references attachment theory but also calls into question its universal applicability to this specific phenomenon. The result of the study was a grounded theory that supported the fact that initial attachment bonds formed before the age of five were disrupted and lost during immigrant-related parent–child separation. During separation, Latinx immigrants who experienced immigrant-related parent–child separation formed fantasies of their parents to sustain attachment bonds. However, these fantasies were quickly exposed as illusions once they were reunited with their parents. During reunification, participants further mourned the parent who could never compensate for the time lost. So, the typical parent–child attachment relationship quickly faded into the background and what emerged was a parallel relationship. The reattachment process yielded a partner-like relationship that was still an attachment relationship pursued regardless of the losses, even though it was not a typical parent–child attachment relationship.

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Menstruation and Identity: An Exploration of the Menstrual Self as the Disavowed Feminine

By

Kelisha R Gardeen, PsyD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Willow Pearson Trimbach, PsyD

Abstract:

Despite constituting a significant portion of a menstruator's reproductive life, the menstrual experience has yet to be recognized as important clinical material in psychodynamic treatments. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, this qualitative study examines the menstrual experiences of four women who reported suffering with premenstrual and menstrual symptoms to better understand their menstrual experiences and the impact these experiences have on sense of self. Semistructured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, from which five superordinate themes were identified. Participants reported various experiences that constellated around the following themes: the menstrual secret, transition into womanhood, the maternal thread, the menstrual self, and reclaiming the menstrual experience. Participants reported early experiences of learning how to hide their menstrual experiences, negotiating loss of innocence in family systems, and working through maternal relationships through the menstrual process. Participants reported current and ongoing menstrual work involving a reclamation of the menstrual cycle, learning how to be in different relationship with their cycles, and ultimately how to be in more embodied and whole relationship with themselves. Menstrual experiences might prove to be beneficial in psychodynamic processes as the processing of menstrual experiences may reveal internalized beliefs about gender expectations, sexuality, and the maternal relationship.

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Essence of Connection: The Phenomenology of Experiencing Connection With Ayahuasca

By

Scott Gordon, PsyD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Rene Dumetz, PhD

Abstract:

This dissertation is a phenomenological study exploring the process of opening to experiencing connection for participants of ayahuasca ceremonies. This study also examines changes in participants' relationships with self, other, and world resulting from their experiences of connection. It also outlines the psychological benefits of these experiences of connection and highlights how the experience of connection leads to improvements in emotional well-being.

This study looks at these connection experiences with ayahuasca from three perspectives: From a psychological perspective, it discusses various psychological theories from a connection standpoint, including object relations, attachment, Jungian, Bionian, and transpersonal theories. From a sociological perspective, it explores the experiences of disconnection present in culture that results in a longing for connection experiences. From a spiritual perspective, the study compares experiences of connection with Eastern nondual traditions and their perspectives of unity in diversity.

The findings from this study show that connection is always available to us humans, and that we must open ourselves to experience this connection. Also, the study shows the impact of cultural factors that can facilitate or foreclose on one's ability to experience connection. The results highlight many psychological benefits resulting from experiences of connection, including decreased levels of depression and anxiety, as well as increased experiences of empowerment, possibility, and self-acceptance. The discussion of this dissertation proposes a model of connection-based psychotherapy as a means of helping therapy clients to better connect with themselves, others, and the world.

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Is There Room for the Erotic in the "E". An Analysis of the Absence of Erotic Transference in the MDMA Assisted Therapy For PTSD Literature.

By

Joshua Hamann, PsyD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Willow Pearson Trimbach, PsyD

Abstract:

An estimated 16.8 military veterans with PTSD complete suicide every day (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2017, p. 1). This staggering reality gives greater urgency to determining which therapeutic modality and clinical interventions are most effective for treating PTSD. Yet, within mental health today, both the conceptualization of and treatment for PTSD are highly contested. One promising treatment for PTSD is MDMA-assisted therapy. MAPS is in phase 3 trials on their FDA-sponsored/approved research on MDMA therapy for PTSD, and they have also expanded access to include more participants in the trials. However, some salient issues have yet to be considered with respect to this treatment. Perhaps the most concerning is the omission of erotic transference. In this qualitative literature review and theoretical integration, an analysis was conducted on the absence of erotic transference in the discussion in the literature, including framing erotic transference as it may occur during MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD and the potential impact that erotic transference and/or unintegrated transference may have on the client in MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD. Over 100 scholarly articles, multiple books, and several dissertations—as well as the MAPS manual for MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD, code of ethics for psychedelic therapy, and the adherence rating manual—were reviewed for this study. In addition, several digital sources were reviewed, including NY magazine, Power trip podcast, and the video transcripts of Michael and Annie Mithoefer at the 2017 MAPS conference discussing MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD as well as the Meaghan Buisson/Richard Yensen MDMA therapy video.

This dissertation is available in full-text on [ProQuest Dissertation & Thesis Global](#) (CIIS login required).

Living in the Multidimensionality: The Impact of Paranormal Experiences, Extraordinary Dreams, and Psychedelic Usage in Psychospiritual Evolution

By

Gabriela Sabater-Raffucci, PsyD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Rene Dumetz, PhD

Abstract:

This phenomenological study aimed to understand the impact of paranormal experiences, extraordinary dreams, and psychedelic usage on women's journey of becoming psychospiritual healers. It also examined the concept of multidimensionality and how it relates to consciousness, reality, and psychospiritual evolution. The role of psychedelics and how they facilitate paranormal experiences, extraordinary dreams, and healing was also captured. Five interviews were conducted with women who identified as psychospiritual healers and had experienced these phenomena extensively. The data analysis consisted of looking for significant statements in each of the interviews and then grouping those into themes through a process of coding, to then discover common categories and a shared meaning of the phenomena. The results highlighted the interplay between these phenomena. In essence, paranormal phenomena and psychedelic experiences can facilitate contact with the multidimensionality and a spiritual dimension, bring healing, and promote psychospiritual evolution. In turn, psychospiritual development, healing, and connection to one's essence and Spirit can lead to experiencing altered states and paranormal phenomena. The results also showed that multidimensionality can serve as a paradigm in which these concepts and experiences can be explained and have a legitimate place. This research invites the field of psychology to consider the multidimensional nature of the self and the healing process, and to destigmatize these lived experiences that go beyond normal consensual reality and rationality. This study highlights that the journey of becoming is enriched by the integration of Spirit into one's life.

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The Effect of Ayahuasca on Gay Men's Experience of Internalized Heterosexism and Internalized Homophobia

By

John C Sanders, PsyD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Rene Dumetz, PhD

Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of gay men who have used the psychedelic plant medicine, Ayahuasca, and experienced a shift in their experience of internalized heterosexism and internalized homophobia, especially in regard to their perception of gender and sexual identity. The methodology used for this research was an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), where data was gathered from interviews with nine gay men whose experience of internalized homophobia and internalized heterosexism was impacted after ingesting Ayahuasca. I sought to understand the process of integration of these experiences. Finally, I developed a theory based on analysis of the results.

Results were obtained through via an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), utilizing 'MAXQDA' code indexing software, of 9 participant interview transcripts, consisting of participant responses to 17 interview queries, generating 3,419 codes, revealing 22 major themes with 85 subthemes. Participants reported positive changes and psychological healing around sexual orientation, gender identity, internalized heterosexism, and internalized homophobia. In addition, participants experienced improved self-esteem, self-care, and self-regard. Positive improvement in the areas of communication in regard to romantic, personal, familial relationships were also reported. Finally, participants reported mental, psychological, and spiritual healing. Participants reported zero adverse consequences effecting internalized heterosexism, internalized homophobia, or sexual and gender identity.

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Some Notes on Self-Analysis

By

Navvab Tadjvar, PsyD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Willow Pearson Trimbach, PsyD

Abstract:

Psychoanalysis is largely indebted to Freud's self-analytic work; however, little has been researched regarding the potential utility of self-analytic practices that account for shifts in analytic theory since Freud. This paper identifies certain self-analytic practices that I believe follow from various responses to Freud's theory of the unconscious along with his aims of psychoanalysis. Through my work I hope to facilitate trainees in their development as analytically oriented therapists. I suggest that trainees can benefit from reading analytic literature, hypomnemata, repeating therapeutic aphorisms, and lengthening time in negative affective states. I argue that trainees also benefit from becoming an apprentice of death, which entails welcoming the paranoid-schizoid mode of experience as well as mourning the loss of old objects and pleasures. I suggest that these are practices to be added to the original Freudian self-analytic project that involves dream interpretation and analysis of parapraxes.

This dissertation is available in full-text on [ProQuest Dissertation & Thesis Global](#) (CIIS login required).



The Song Is Love: A Heuristic Study of the Vegetalista Shaman's Experience of Singing Icaros in Ayahuasca Ceremonies

By

Jean Ann Britt, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Adrian Villaseñor-Galarza, PhD

Abstract:

This dissertation is a qualitative psychological inquiry exploring the vegetalista shaman's experience of singing in ayahuasca ceremonies using the methodology of Moustakas's heuristic research. The unique contribution of this research project is the utilization of a personal experiential approach to study an experience of singing that focuses on the subjective experience of a vegetalista shaman. This study draws on interview data collected from eight Amazonian Shipibo vegetalista shamans from Pucallpa, Peru. The co-researchers were six men and two women in the age range between thirty and ninety-two.

The data analysis resulted in the identification of four core themes of experience of singing in ayahuasca ceremonies. These were protection, assessment, healing, and the vegetalista shamans' personal sensations, experiences, and interpretations.

By providing accurate accounts of the vegetalista shamans' experience of singing, this study records the experiences for these shamans. The study contributes to a better understanding and new knowledge of the therapeutic potential of combining psychedelics and music. This inquiry additionally contributes to the ongoing dialogue regarding the therapeutic use of psychedelics in our contemporary healing paradigm.

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Chinese Philosophical Virtues of Sincerity and Humility as a Catalyst for Transformation

By

Juei-Chen Chao, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Yi Wu, PhD

Abstract:

This dissertation, an in-depth exploration of Chinese virtues, specifically sincerity (cheng 誠) and humility (qian 謙), is presented within the transpersonal psychology framework. Grounded in seminal Chinese works like the I Ching, Zhong Yong, and Taoist teachings, the research employs both Gadamer's (1990) philosophical hermeneutics and Professor Wu's (1996) Method of Chinese Integral Life Philosophy for a contemporary interpretation. Instead of a direct comparison between transpersonal psychology and the cultivation of sincerity and humility, this research emphasizes the contribution of Chinese philosophical insights regarding the expansion the scope of Western psychological practices. The present study enriches Western academic and spiritual discussions by introducing these virtues, and highlighting their role in personal and societal well-being through fostering a cross-cultural dialogue about paths to transformation.

The research examines sincerity and humility's influence on psychological and spiritual growth, while advocating for a dialogue that extends the discipline's reach and variety. This approach promotes a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of transformation, bridging cultural and knowledge divides, and enhancing global discourse. Bringing Chinese philosophical traditions into conversation with transpersonal psychology, the study advocates for a more nuanced view of transformation, while underlining the distinct contributions of these virtues from a Chinese philosophical angle. As such, this exploration offers a more holistic view of the transpersonal psychology landscape by advocating for dialogue that not only broadens its inclusivity and diversity but also deepens the global understanding of transformation. The dialogue between Eastern wisdom and Western psychological practices enhances the integrity of the discipline, and offers new perspectives for a more comprehensive and varied exploration of human experience.

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Yin Virtues for Modern Psyche: Exploring the Unique Insights From the Chinese Self-cultivation Tradition

By

River Yun Lu Dahlkemper, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Craig Chalquist, PhD

Abstract:

This dissertation contends that since the modern era began in the 16th century, human history has primarily fixated on the masculine or Yang aspect of consciousness, with a linear proclivity. This global shift was not solely a result from natural historical progression; for the non-Western societies, it was imposed on them through colonialism and ideological imperialism. This imposition had complex repercussions, generating material wealth and comfort for many, but causing significant losses of non-Western indigenous cultures and lives. The consequences of this lopsided shift can be observed in the mounting income inequality, animal extinction, climate change, and a pervasive mental-spiritual crisis.

This dissertation explores the contemporary overemphasis of Yang and negligence of Yin, identifying key historical milestones that led us to the present moment—marked by material abundance but impoverished psyche. In seeking solutions, the dissertation examines the traditional Chinese Yin-Yang framework. Employing a transdisciplinary theoretical approach, it incorporates the philosophical principles of Yin-Yang Oneness. By discovering the unique insights from the Chinese self-cultivation tradition, the study intends to offer the means to restore balance within the human psyche to foster harmony, internally and externally.

In many parts of East Asia, Chinese self-cultivation theories and practices have endured over 2,000 years. Recognizing the profound role of languages in shaping how one's world is constructed, expressed and experienced, this research takes on an in-depth hermeneutical examination of ancient texts and the Chinese language, aiming to unveil this distinctive way of being. Specifically, it attempts to unfold original notions essential within the Chinese self-cultivation tradition. The focus of this inquiry is to re-discover the value and truth about Yin that is integral in restoring balance and harmony in our troubled modern psyche. This restoration holds the potential to not only heal our own inner world but also contribute to healing the world around us.

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Ayahuasca as Individuation Catalyst: A Healing Journey

By

Veronica Hernandez, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Craig Chalquist, PhD

Abstract:

Entheogens have long been used as catalysts for spiritual and visionary experiences. Many of these, which people report in shamanic journeys, bear striking similarities to those described by Jung in his explorations of the human psyche. A comparison of entheogenic shamanism and Jungian Psychology revealed similarities between the two. A heuristic study using terrapsychological inquiry through a shamanic lens, identified that connection to nature, community with plants, animals and people, and the Self are important themes of individuation that emerge from ceremony with the Amazonian plant teacher and entheogen, Ayahuasca. Narrative analysis identified emergent themes of disconnection and reconnection, connection with nature, community, and Self as well as gaining wisdom, healing from trauma, a sense of calling, and surrender to the plant teacher. The study concluded that shamanism and Jungian psychology share commonalities and that Ayahuasca plays a catalyzing role in the individuation process and in bringing about a reconnection with nature and with communal ways of being.

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Aging in the Lives of Contemplatives: A Narrative Inquiry into the Meaning and Purpose of Aging Through the Stories of Two Contemplatives, One a Southern Buddhist and One an Ignatian Practitioner

By

John Mathias McConville, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Helge Osterhold, PhD

Abstract:

Aging is a distinct experience that carries with it the potential for dynamic growth and a richer and fuller understanding of what it means to be human. This research is a narrative inquiry, using a holistic-content perspective methodology, to explore how contemplative practitioners experience aging by asking the question, “What meaning and purpose do contemplative practitioners attribute to their aging?” This study merges the academic and wisdom teachings from the disciplines of developmental psychology and spirituality by asking two contemplatives, one a Southern Buddhist and one an Ignatian practitioner, to tell their stories of aging and what they understand, through their experience, as the meaning and purpose of aging. After an analysis of the stories and other relevant data, this research brings the interpretation into dialogue with two specific areas of studies, the first being the respective spiritual teachings of the participants, especially in regard to the experience of aging, and the second is with C. G. Jung’s theory of individuation and Erik Erikson’s 8th stage of psychosocial development. The goal is to further the ever growing and lively discussions on aging, not only to support and affirm the aging process but also to establish a working body of information that can serve as a resource for seminars and workshops on aging.

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Narratives of Adoption: Adoptee Stories From the Closed Adoption Era (1945–1973)

By

Louise Sadhana Stupar, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Helge Osterhold, PhD

Abstract:

The aim of this study was to learn about the effects of closed adoption on American adoptees born between 1945 and 1973, the Closed Adoption Era (CAE), and how narratives and stories informed or contributed to their experience. CAE adoptees grew into adulthood with two identities—one a legal fiction, the other cloaked in secrecy—and this created both social and psychological differences. Subjective data were gathered by asking participants about their overall adoption experience, family stories of adoption, stories made-up about themselves, favorite fairy tales, books or movies, and how their experience of these stories changed over time. The interview data were first interpreted using narrative analysis methods, and these narrative findings were then analyzed using Carl Jung’s psychological model of lifespan development known as individuation. Lastly, the findings for each participant were brought together and discussed in a comparative summary. Notable results include an understanding of the lifelong impact of closed adoption, why adoptees search for first family, the connection between Bowlby’s attachment theory and Jung’s archetypes of the unconscious, the role of story in psychological life, and how archetypal representation in stories and film supports psychological growth and healing.

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Human Sexuality

Transformational Healing: A Phenomenological Examination Of The Practice Of Sacred Intimacy As Taught By The Body Electric School

By

Andres Cordero Jr, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Loraine Hutchins, PhD

Abstract:

In this dissertation I provide a qualitative contribution to the body of existing literature on the phenomenon of sacred intimacy as taught by the Body Electric School. As a practitioner, I used hermeneutic phenomenology as the foundation for my study, using my extensive experience with various somatic-based healing practices. Through the years, I have collected anecdotal data from both practitioners and their clients that this approach often benefits individuals seeking to address both clinically diagnosed dysfunctions as well as more nonclinical challenges related to sexuality, spirituality, and embodiment. Although several organizations offer sacred intimacy training, this examination focuses only on sacred intimacy as learned, practiced, and experienced by a small group of cis-male graduates of the Body Electric School's programs and their clients.

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The Black Church as a Riskscape: Masculinity in the Black Church for Black Men Who Have Sex With Men in the Era of HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis

By

Antonio Bernard Davis, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Michelle Marzullo, PhD

Abstract:

Historically the Black Church has been touted as the nucleus of the community, where the civil rights movement developed a foundation, where Blacks gained their opportunity to achieve roles of leadership, and the place where Blacks established a social network and resources to assist the community. Conversely, it is also the place where the teachings of love and charity are supposed to be taught, but the community of Black men who have sex with men (BMSM) have not always been the recipients of those messages. This study examined the teachings and beliefs of the Black Church, the formation of masculinity within BMSM, and BMSM's sexual risk for HIV or pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). In the Black Church's cultural beliefs, sexuality and homosexuality are generally taboo; therefore, homosexuality has been a particularly controversial subject. This research explored how the Black Church's teachings influence conceptions of masculinity and sexual behavior and how that impacts the HIV riskscape of BMSM. Ninety-two Black men participated in this study. The largest age group among participants was 26–33 years old. Regarding denomination, more participants selected the option “other” than any of the listed denominations. All participants had educational backgrounds, with most having a bachelor's (38%) or a master's (25%) degree. The most frequent response to God-related beliefs was “Spiritual; I believe in God, but I am not religious.” Furthermore, 65.2% of participants were church members for over 10 years. Hypothesis testing indicated that religious beliefs and behaviors explained 8% of the variance in masculinity. The results showed that education, age, denomination, years of church membership, and region did not moderate this relationship. Finally, the results revealed that religious beliefs and behaviors and PrEP-related stigma and conspiracy together explained 19% of the variance in risky behaviors. Recommendations are made for ways that the Black Church and community leaders may work together to address the HIV riskscape for BMSM.

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Poisonous Politics: Analyzing The Politics Of Environmental Toxicity And Pregnancy Outcomes

By

Allison Grossman, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Michelle Marzullo, PhD

Abstract:

Environmental pollutants are emitted into the air and water by anthropocentric human activities. These toxic emissions have caused significant harm to health, reproduction processes, and pregnancy. However, pregnant people and women are often left out of studies on environmental health risks and therefore omitted from related policy initiatives aimed to rectify the harm of environmental exposures. The limited consideration of pregnancy and reproductive health, in relation to environmental toxicity, elucidates the historical tendency to deprioritize women's health and wellbeing. This harm is more pronounced for under resourced communities and communities with high percentages of people of color, as they are more likely to be exposed to environmental toxicity due to housing and industrial discriminations and historical redlining. The current study engages this disparity and employs a necropolitical framework to answer the following question: Which political interventions are more effective to mitigate the negative relationship between environmental toxics and pregnancy outcomes?

This study inquires whether attainment of the Clean Air Act, access to private healthcare, or political leaning mitigates the effect of environmental toxicants on poor pregnancy outcomes and how sociopolitical factors, such as race and income, might moderate this impact. A secondary quantitative data analysis is used to analyze outcomes for counties in Arizona, New York, Nevada, New Jersey, Louisiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

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Grown and Sexy: A Phenomenological Study of Black Female Sexuality Vis À Vis Midlife and Divorce

By

K. Skye Henry Smith, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Kerubo Abuya, PhD

Abstract:

This dissertation responds to the need for more critical studies in the field of human sexuality by exploring Black female sexuality as it encounters two dynamic domains: divorce and midlife. This study helps to mitigate the negative stereotyping of Black women and their sexuality. It further dilutes the erasure of Black women's sex-positive, empowering, and pleasure-filled narratives by centering Black women's voices and privileging their lived experiences and collective, shared knowledge.

Using a qualitative phenomenological methodology, I conducted nine semistructured interviews to address the following research question: How do Black, cisgender, heterosexual women living in the United States experience their sexuality during midlife after divorce? The theoretical frameworks used for the study were Black feminist thought and sexual script theory. I used the hermeneutic "whole-parts-whole" approach for analyzing phenomenological research.

Four experiential themes emerged from this research conducted to learn how Black, cisgender, heterosexual women living in the United States who are divorced and are in the middle stage of life experience their sexuality. The themes were: sexuality is a site of sexual agency, sexuality is a site of preference, sexuality is a site of complexity, sexuality is a site of personal development. Other relevant findings that speak to Black female sexuality were sexuality is a site of body consciousness and sexuality is a distant site. These results provide novel contributions to scholarship on Black female sexuality, divorce, and midlife and confirm the satisfaction and empowerment Black women derive from telling their own stories. There are critical study implications for human sexuality students, educators, scholars, researchers, medical and mental health professionals, and most significantly, Black women as they reclaim their dignity, find healing through self-definition, and liberate themselves from dehumanizing sexual stereotypes.

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Mystical Feminine Jouissance

By

Angelina Christine Hensley, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Michelle Marzullo, PhD

Abstract:

This study explores the Lacanian concept of mystical feminine jouissance, a bodily, ineffable pleasure-pain, and spiritual rapture that transcends the symbolic order. The nature of women's embodied feminine energy and the essence of this profound experience were qualitatively investigated through embodied, hermeneutic phenomenological interviews. Seven participants, recruited through social media platforms, sexuality, listservs, and networks, diverse in age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, provided rich insights into their inner worlds. Employing body-based hermeneutics and felt sense inquiry, body-focused interviews were conducted utilizing focusing to uncover implicit bodily experiencing related to the phenomenon. Study findings capture the lived experiences of women who self-identified with this phenomenon. Seven essential themes emerged across the interviews describing the essence of mystical feminine jouissance from these women's inner experiencing of their embodied feminine energy: (a) awakened in the heart and the revived feeling function, (b) heightened aliveness as spirit in the body, (c) creatrix, (d) sensuality, pleasure, and bliss, (e) living through a web of relatedness, (f) sacred in the mundane, and (g) pain, wounding, and suffering. Finally, this study contributes to the methodological literature on embodiment research to reveal a focusing approach that operationalizes interview as sacred container, articulation of the implicit, deepening into experiencing, new relationship to experiencing, and trauma-informed interviewing. Overall findings suggest that an understanding of mystical feminine jouissance can enhance psychotherapeutic practices by fostering a deeper embodiment of the soul through somatics and expressive arts. Moreover, the use of embodiment in research, particularly through a focusing approach in interviews, emerges as a promising tool for feminist, somatic, and sexuality studies. The liberatory potential of embodying mystical feminine experiences challenges heteropatriarchal norms and offers a transformative power to deconstruct oppressive structures.

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Symbiosexuality: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Desire for and Sex With People in Relationships

By

Sally Johnston, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Penny Harvey, PhD

Abstract:

Symbiosexuality, the individual experience of attraction to people in pre-existing relationships (Johnston & Schoenfeld, 2021), has not been examined as a lived experience or sexual orientation. Lack of recognition and examination of symbiosexuality is surprising when one considers cultural and academic discourses on romantic and sexual desires and behaviors associated with more than two people. Dominant conceptions and assumptions about sexuality and desire including mononormativity, respectability politics within polyamorous communities, and current conceptions of desire within Western discourse contribute to symbiosexual invisibility. This invisibility harms several sexual minority groups, especially women and gender minorities within these groups. Through a queer feminist lens, I review cultural and academic discourses for evidence of symbiosexuality. I then conduct mixed-methods analysis of secondary data from The Pleasure Study (Harvey, Begum, et al., 2023) on people who experience symbiosexual attraction, their sexual and romantic experiences, and how they label and describe their sexuality. I find that a diverse group of people experience symbiosexual attraction, described as an attraction to the energy, multidimensionality, and power shared between people in a relationship. I also find that, while unanticipated, symbiosexual attraction can be a significant lived experience. In addition, I find that this population engages in a variety nonmonogamous, multiperson sexual and relationship dynamics that provide a variety of unique and heightened experiences, both gratifying and undesirable. Further, I find that those with significant symbiosexual attraction and gratifying symbiosexual experiences use orientation labels that only partially describe their lived experience of sexuality. These findings fill a gap in the literature on a largely unexamined population, highlight the limits of conception of and labels for sexual orientation in sexuality studies, and challenge the stigma in the polyamorous community, as well as within our broader mononormative culture, against symbiosexual desires and practices. This study validates and empowers those who experience symbiosexual attraction.

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Sexual Competence In Childhood: A Theoretical Defense Of Children's Sexual Rights

By

Stefan Lucke, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Gilbert Herdt, PhD

Abstract:

Children's sexuality from birth to gonadal puberty is an under researched and undertheorized topic. It is fraught with societal taboos and sexualized moral panics that have long impeded scientific and public discussion of sexuality in childhood. This dissertation provides a renewed approach, and a comprehensive critical analysis of the current impasse that subverts children's rights and negatively influences childhood sexual development and education. Based upon this analysis, the thesis strives to contribute to the field of critical sexuality studies through these dual aims: (a) conceptualize new systematic theoretical approaches to childhood sexuality by introducing the reconceived concept of sexual competence which also elucidates supportive frameworks, including sexual rights, sex positivity, and children's agency; and (b) integrate the dialogue of emergent theories of childhood sexuality and critical thought in diverse overlapping fields of study pertaining to childhood, erotic-sexual development, and overall sexual competence. The overarching goal is to advance scientifically based policy formations that ensure children's (sexual) rights which serve children's comprehensive education, optimum development, and empowerment. This goal can only be achieved by advancing a new paradigm that favors these new conceptual advancements, embracing the inclusion of children and young people as active participants in future research. Following the multipaper format for a thesis by publication, three main essays constitute the core of this dissertation across Chapters 2, 4, and 5, augmented by an introduction, a review section on sexual competence, a brief proposal for children's sexual rights, and finally a conclusion.

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It's Not Me It's You: Lived Experiences Of Nonbinary People

By

Alexus Martinez, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Penny Harvey, PhD

Abstract:

Nonbinary as a category is a relatively new area of Western study. Previous research often conflated nonbinary identity with binary trans identities, thus leaving the nuanced and complex lived experiences of nonbinary folk under-researched. Therefore, this study emphasizes self-identification and does not place labels on anyone they did not give themselves. This study explores nonbinary multiplicity with the aid of a participant driven photo-elicitation method. Participants were given a set of prompts to guide the photographs they take, which were discussed in a semistructured interview, resulting in the discovery that, at its core, nonbinary gender identity, embodied expression, and interactional expression are playful. Nonbinary identity is tributary in relevance as compared to other identity markers such as race, queerness, and community. This leaves nonbinary individuals to believe that gender is more relevant to others than to nonbinary folk themselves. Further, nonbinary identity is about resistance against normativity and oppressive power structures. Participant narratives emphasize the conceptualization of nonbinary gender as a rhizome that is influenced by and cannot be separated from other factors such as race, neurodivergence, geographical location, privilege, socialization, sexuality, and social power structures. This study highlights the heterogeneity within the nonbinary community, showing there is no one singular way of being nonbinary; rather, it is expansive, fluid, and a constant state of becoming.

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Contemporary Cisgendered Gay Men's Relationship Narratives: A Qualitative Study of New York City Gay Men's Worldviewing Regarding Romantic/Intimate Attachments

By

Eric G. Schneider, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Michelle Marzullo, PhD

Abstract:

This dissertation reports on a qualitative exploration of the romantic relational lives and worldviews of cisgendered gay men in New York City, using a qualitative approach grounded in conceptual metaphor theory. Through in-depth interviews with 15 participants, the study revealed multifaceted perspectives of individual experiences, perspectives, and societal influences. The thematic findings uncovered six distinct yet interconnected themes: age, relational frameworks, monogamy and nonmonogamy, sex and sexuality, HIV and AIDS, and New York City. These themes pointed to wider themes that seem to encompass gay men's worldviews: the complexity of individual experiences, historical struggles and resilience, community longing, fluid identities, evolving concepts of love, attachment, and partnership, and the power of individual agency. These themes collectively shape a complex worldview characterized by fluidity, diversity, individualism, and a potentially collective consciousness marked by historical adversities and a quest for community and belonging.

The dissertation delved into the unique sociohistorical context of New York City's gay community, examining how this environment influences personal narratives and shapes a collective cognitive lens. The study highlights the intricate interplay among personal agency, community dynamics, and societal norms, revealing how these factors contribute to the construction of individual and communal identities within the gay male population of New York City.

Key findings include the significance of fluid sexual self-expression, the impact of individualistic perspectives on personal relationships, and the apparently enduring influence of historical struggles on the collective consciousness. The study's implications reveal the importance of understanding these dynamics for therapeutic interventions, education, and public dialogue advocating for a nuanced approach that recognizes the complexities of gay men's romantic relational lives.

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Reddit Users' Sexual and Romantic Orientations: A Split Attraction Model Study on Branchedness

By

Giovanni Trimble, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Michelle Marzullo, PhD

Abstract:

This study explored how four selected influences of sexual orientation (FSISO; romantic attraction, sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual fantasies) play a role in shaping an individual's sexual orientation and whether these influences are rated differently based on an individual's self-reported sexual orientation and romantic orientation. The following research questions guided the study: Are there significant differences in how the FSISO are rated by individuals based on their self-reported sexual orientation? Are there significant differences in how the FSISO are rated by individuals based on their self-reported romantic orientation? How are the FSISO interrelated in shaping an individual's sexual orientation? and Is there an association between participants' Asexual Identification Scale classified orientation and romantic orientation? Using a cross-sectional survey distributed to a convenience sample of Reddit users, targeting allosexual and asexual adults in the United States, the study received 1,656 responses. Results indicated that the participant demographics did not mirror the 2020 U.S. Census findings, suggesting a sample bias skewed toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual populations. For the first research question, significant differences were found in FSISO ratings across sexual orientation groups, except for bicurious individuals. Significant differences in FSISO ratings were observed across romantic orientation groups, highlighting variations in how different romantic orientations perceive the influence of FSISO. The third research question revealed strong correlations between sexual attraction, behavior, and fantasies but a weaker link with romantic attraction, indicating divergent paths of sexuality and romanticism. The fourth research question assessed the association between asexual orientation and romantic orientation, finding an association between romantic orientation and whether the participant was classified as asexual or allosexual, as measured by the AIS-12. The findings underscore the diverse and fluid nature of sexual and romantic orientations, challenging conventional models of sexuality and highlighting the complex interplay of difference influences in shaping individual sexual orientations...(full text of abstract available on ProQuest).

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Integral and Transpersonal Psychology

Unlocking the Hidden World of Childhood: A Comparative Exploration of Play Therapy in Children With and Without a History of Colic

By

Nilufer Devecigil, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Jenny Wade, PhD

Abstract:

Colic, characterized by excessive, inconsolable crying in the early months of life, has long puzzled researchers and clinicians. Traditional approaches to understanding colic have predominantly relied on medical models, yet they have failed to provide satisfactory explanations or effective treatments. This study took a novel approach by examining the potential link between colic and early trauma within the context of relationships, guided by the following research question: What are the womb and birth experiences of colicky babies in relation to the prenatal relational trauma between mother and fetus or within the fetal environment?

This comparative qualitative study examined 23 mother–child dyads through 10 sessions of play therapy, including 10 children with a history of colic and 13 without. The major finding was that children with a colic history engaged in far less traumatic reenactment than those without, and those in both groups born vaginally re-enacted less trauma than those born via caesarian section. These findings suggest that colic may be the natural release of accumulated pre- and perinatal trauma, resulting in a healthier child, rather than an illness or condition requiring treatment.

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Transformative Aspects of Postdivorce for Single Mothers

By

Antonia Di Leo, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Jacob Kaminker, PhD

Abstract:

The aim of this study is to identify transformative aspects, or ways in which single mothers change during the postdivorce process. Findings in current research regarding single mothers postdivorce are conflicting and describe this process as either extremely detrimental or transformative. Considering the disparity in how this process affects single mothers, it is important to understand how change takes place through narratives to fully comprehend this period in their lives. To fully grasp the variables of change, change was described cognitively and emotionally, as well as in relation to personality traits. Ten women who were married for over five years, divorced for more than three, and expressed that they went through a transformation postdivorce, were interviewed to understand their journey through the postdivorce. The interviews were semi-structured, within a qualitative narrative analysis, to analyze the experiences in a chronological framework of how change took place. Through a chronological description, the mothers and researcher worked to cocreate a narrative that explained how their circumstances along with their inner decisions provided space for change. The narratives were interpreted to develop a thematic analysis to identify themes and subthemes to understand the phenomena and provide data that can be used for future research. The major themes include cognitive shifts, emotional shifts, personality shifts, social support, spiritual acknowledgment, and religious faith. The findings also revealed that change took place through time and involved multiple variables.

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Transforming the Dominant Paradigm: Practical Implications of a Fractal Epistemology for Academic Research in Transpersonal Psychology

By

Kathryn Leigh Goetz, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Terry Marks-Tarlow, PhD

Abstract:

Fractal geometry, created by Benoit Mandelbrot in the late 1970s, made it possible to model natural phenomena with more precision than had been possible previously. Understanding the ubiquity of fractals in nature; the way fractals work in complex adaptive systems; and the fact that they are an invisible substrata in a multiplicity of phenomena; the insights of fractal geometry could have a beneficial impact on transpersonal psychology. Additionally, adopting a fractal epistemology could potentially liberate psychology from laboring under an illfitting, antiquated, mechanistic, materialist, reductive scientific paradigm. This study assists in midwifing the paradigm shift in psychology catalyzed by the emergence of a fractal epistemology. The study elucidates the construct of a fractal epistemology and traces its trajectory in psychological science and in culture, how its presence can be identified, as well as how the adoption of a fractal epistemology furthers scientific research in psychology. It introduces fractal methodology, arising from the epistemology, and using multiple case study method, applies the methodology to three topics: (a) reframing healthy adolescent development, (b) self-expansiveness and modeling the transpersonal, and (c) tattoos as catalysts for self-transformation. The compatibility of a fractal epistemology with critical theory, feminist scholarship, and decolonizing research approaches is woven throughout the narrative.

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The Ontogenesis of Self: Individuation and the Problem of Self-organization

By

Sam Gould, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Courtenay Richards Crouch, PhD

Abstract:

This project outlines the epigenesis, morphogenesis, and formation of the self in the unfolding process of individuation. The self will be ascribed, not merely as the Jungian definition of something to be realized through individuation, but rather, as a twofold operation: (a) as a conjunction within the process of individuation that extends into, as part of, all possible future processes of individuation. To account for this phase in the operation of the unfolding of the self, I refer to Gilbert Simondon's (1964/2020) ontological operation of individuation. In addition, I refer to Henri Bergson's (1912/1991) theory of duration to substantiate the notion of the past as coexisting with the present, related to memory, which informs a heterogeneous form of mobility into the genesis, morphogenesis, and function of the process of individuation. This heterogeneous form of mobility implies a multiplicity such that each moment of intersection within the process of individuation forms a unity. (b) The operation of individuation distinguishes a conjunction between organism and environment, whereby, the body, a multicellular organism, and the environment inform one another in the function and developmental unfolding of one another. As such, the operation of individuation introduces a rhizomatic structure of self-organization, whereby the self, as a vital force in the individuation process is an operation of infolding. The problematic implies that through the infolding procedure of individuation, the past is brought forth as coexisting and informing the present, suggesting that phylogenic and ontogenic development coevolve, and coexist within the operation of individuation that is potentiated by the vital quality of the self.

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Eroticizing the Enneagram: A Quantitative Investigation of Enneagram Type and Patterns of Sexual Desire

By

Sam E. Greenberg, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Jenny Wade, PhD

Abstract:

Transpersonal scholars have noted the potential of sexuality to support health, personal and spiritual development, and transformation at the individual and collective levels. Yet, few modern guiding models exist for intentional engagement with sexuality for the purposes of transpersonal growth. The Enneagram theory of personality, a nine-type spiritual and psychological map of personality structures designed to guide individuals in noticing, integrating, and transcending their ego patterns, has shown effectiveness in previous research at supporting self-development in many arenas. Few studies have investigated the relationship between Enneagram type and any aspect of sexuality; the relationship between Enneagram dominant instinct and sexuality has not been studied. Using a quantitative approach, this study investigated the following research question: What is the relationship between Enneagram type and patterns of sexual desire? Experienced students of the Enneagram and Enneagram professionals were recruited and their Enneagram types were determined through a combination of self-typing and the Essential Enneagram Test (EET). Participants whose self-typing matched their EET results completed the Sexual Desire Inventory, the Cues for Sexual Desire Scale, and the Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness. These data were statistically analyzed using ANOVA and ANCOVA tests to determine how patterns of response differed across Enneagram type, dominant instinct, and triad. Results of these analyses revealed discernible differences in response patterns on all three instruments according to Enneagram type, dominant instinct, and triad. Study results have implications for Enneagram theory and research, clinical and sexological practice, and transpersonal theory and practice.

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Women's Shame and Sense of Agency: A Mixed Methods Study of How Women's Shame Experiences Impact Sense of Agency While Using Autophotography as a Therapeutic Intervention

By

Pamela S. Harris, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Glenn Hartelius, PhD

Abstract:

Psychologies of shame have typically centered on dispositional shame as it relates to body image and eating disorders, shame as a critical aspect of a woman's intersubjective life, or shame as a self-concept. Little research has addressed the relationship between shame and agency and the potential therapeutic role of liminal states in reducing shame. To address this, this mixed methods study asked a sample of 50 U.S. adult female licensed depth psychotherapists to complete a measure of internal and external shame, and a measure of internal and external sense of agency. A subsample of 15 were selected to participate in an autophotography process in which they captured photographic images that embodied their personal feelings and experiences of shame. These images were subsequently used in a phenomenological interview process in which concepts of liminal space and autophotography were applied to elicit the culturally salient aspects of each participant's unique shame experiences. The psychoanalytic conceptualization of liminality was used to understand how deep psychic transformation of their shame experiences might occur. It was postulated that through this process, participants could restructure their self-concept in a way that reorganized their conscious and unconscious minds, allowing for deep growth and psychic transformation.

The quantitative results for the sample ($N = 50$) showed that external sense of shame was negatively correlated with external sense of agency. This result was statistically significant ($p = 0.01$); while the sample is small and this result is not evidence for causation, it is consistent with the hypothesis that increases in shame would be inversely correlated to decreases in agency. The autophotography intervention with a subsample of participants ($n = 15$) also showed positive quantitative results in the form of small overall increases in internal agency and overall agency, along with decreases in internal and external shame. The qualitative results of this study showed evidence of increased sense of self and deep internal growth. Due to the small sample size, these results did not achieve statistical significance; however, the presence of small gains suggests that future studies are likely to obtain stronger results.

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Reciprocity and Cultural Wellbeing: A Heuristic Inquiry Into the Native American Experience of Reciprocity

By

Myrriah Jannette, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Valeria McCarroll, PhD

Abstract:

The burgeoning field of psychedelics is lacking a deep understanding of reciprocity toward the Indigenous cultures that brought Plant Medicines to the world. Native Americans consider Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) a Sacrament that has been used for Ceremonial purposes for hundreds of years. Reciprocity is considered a fundamental principle and essential part of life for Native Nations that has a fundamental role in all interactions with humans and Nature. This study explored and defined the Indigenous concept of reciprocity through shared narrative stories about how reciprocity can be implemented into the field of psychedelics. The research study's inquiry was as follows: "What is a Native American experience of reciprocity?" and "How is reciprocity linked to cultural wellbeing?" To answer these questions, the study utilized the foundations of phenomenological heuristic inquiry and was respectful of Indigenous methodology. Sixteen participants, selected purposively based on their encounter with reciprocity and their affiliation with a Native Nations of North America, were interviewed about their lived experience of reciprocity as it pertains to cultural wellbeing.

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Exploring the Embodied Experiences of Highly Sensitive Activists

By

Anna M. King, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Rae Johnson, PhD

Abstract:

Emerging research has demonstrated that individuals with sensory processing sensitivity (also known as the highly sensitive person trait) experience an enhanced capacity for sensory awareness, imagination, and empathy. These characteristics aid in their ability to create thoughtful solutions to navigating stressors such as sensory stimulation and conflict in interpersonal relationships. Embodied social justice research posits that antioppressive work must reference the somatic experience when discovering solutions to injustice. Cultivating somatic bandwidth and empathy within members of society through embodiment and sensory sensitivity might hold the key to sustainable social change. However, no known studies to date have examined the intersection of sensory processing sensitivity and embodied social justice with the intention of informing a deeper understanding of the HSP trait and informing creative approaches for the public to engage in activism more readily.

This qualitative research study utilized embodied narrative inquiry to discover the wisdom that lives within the stories and sensory experiences of activists who are highly sensitive people (HSP). By exploring the narratives of 11 HSP activists through a somatic lens, their insights offered meaningful contributions to embodied social justice frameworks to inform and support the cultivation of social change agents more broadly. Additionally, their stories reframe the pathological assumption that HSPs are at a disadvantage due to their experience of hypersensitivity to stimuli and instead highlight their capacity for emotional responsiveness, adaptation, and calculated decision-making to serve a higher purpose.

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The Healing Power of Mindful Play With Imagery: A Mixed-Method Exploratory Study on the Effect of Active Imagination Techniques on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms and Wellbeing

By

Joshua Rutt, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Jenny Wade, PhD

Abstract:

There are many treatments for PTSD, but recovery is often moderate at best and clinically significant symptoms often persist after treatment. The purpose of this study was to explore a low-cost, effective, drug-free intervention requiring limited contextual and institutional support. This mixed-methods study examined whether active imagination may be a viable and effective treatment for complex PTSD, or any persisting symptoms after a traumatic event. Seventeen participants were assessed using the Posttraumatic Diagnostic Scale (PDS), Multiscale Dissociation Inventory (MDI), and the Ryff Scales of Psychological Wellbeing (PWB) before and after a four-session, one-to-one active imagination intervention. On average, all quantitative scores significantly improved from baseline, and every subscale improved. An average percentile of the three assessments produced a descriptive total amount of positive change score that improved by 25%. On average, PTSD symptoms decreased by 32%, dissociation decreased by 29%, and wellbeing increased by 15%.

In addition, 16 participants engaged in follow-up interviews about the process. Thematic analysis produced 6 categories: general reflections on the active imagination process, general benefits, effect on PTSD symptoms, attitudes about different parts of active imagination, states of mind during active imagination, and the effects of the researcher. The major qualitative trends are of positive change with occasional radical improvement and personal transformation. Most participants (88%) indicated positive or very positive experiences, 75% described gaining deeper self-understanding or having a broader/holistic experience, 63% felt empowered, and 56% described experiences of personal transformation.

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When the Self Dwells in the Heart: How a Heart-Located Attentional Stance Facilitates a Felt Sense of Connection

By

Marie Sester, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Glenn Hartelius, PhD

Abstract:

Prior studies demonstrate that self-location in the heart or in the head is associated with particular measures of personality and behavior. This quantitative study seeks to extend existing knowledge by asking how self-location impacts perceptions of self and relationship in individuals who have had an intense felt sense of connection to others. In order to identify self-location in participants, a 14-item survey measure was developed and tested based on empirical results from prior studies that indicated specific behavioral correlations with head-located and heart-located individuals. This measure was expected to be largely congruent with, but potentially more objective than, self-location as identified on a body map. This measure was used to divide 218 participants into heart-located ($n = 115$) and head-located ($n = 103$) participants and was found to have better than 90% correlation with participant self-location on a body map, confirming expectations. All participants completed measures of self-construal (Self-Construal Questionnaire; Metapersonal Self Scale); self-expansiveness (Self-Expansiveness Level Form); connectedness with self, others, and world (Watts Connectedness Scale; Inclusion of Other in the Self); and qualities of relational connection (Qualities of Connection Measure).

Results showed significant differences between head and heart self-location in relationship to a metapersonal self-construal, connectedness with self and world, and association of relational connection with terms such as warmth and heartfelt. These results provide evidence that self-location impacts additional dimensions of personality, along with degrees and qualities of connection. This finding suggests that self-location may substantively impact the constructed interface between self and other, such that head-located and heart-located individuals may differ in their understanding of what connectedness entails.

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Ancestral Rituals as a Resource for Psychospiritual Wellbeing Among People of African Ancestry: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Personal Spiritness and Collective Healing

By

La Tronda Shawna Smith Lumpkins, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Danielle Drake, PhD

Abstract:

The collective spiritual, psychological, and emotional distress inflicted on African people globally has perpetuated a racial and intergenerational (historical and interpersonal) trauma that continues today, especially for those in America. This cultural impact left long-lasting effects that created a higher prevalence of chronic disease and mental health issues across generations. This topic warrants an in-depth exploration because not only are chronic health issues, psychological problems, and early death becoming more prevalent in the Black community among adults but also the suicide rate among Black youth ages 10–19 is on the rise in America. This study adds to the discussion supporting the benefits of participating in communal gatherings that involve activities such as storytelling, drumming, dancing, singing, poetry, producing art, and others. There are studies that support the importance of preserving African healing traditions, but few examine the personal and collective psychospiritual benefits of participating in ancestral veneration and communal healing rituals. This qualitative study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis method to explore how engaging in ancestral rituals can create personal and collective healing that allows for the wisdom of one's ancestors to positively impact one's life and influence one's creative intelligence, spiritual development, and expansive intuitive nature. The findings reveal how ancestral rituals can be a resource for psychospiritual health and wellbeing among people of African ancestry.

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Living in Essence: A Correlational Study of Self-Transcendence and Utilizing the Enneagram Personality Typology System

By

Andrea Jeanne Vidrine, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Anne Huffman, PhD

Abstract:

Over the last few decades, the Enneagram personality typology system (EPS) has gained popularity in the United States as a tool for personal growth through self- or type-transcendence. Most research studies on the EPS examined specific impacts of utilizing the system, such as adult ego development, empathy, leadership, mental health, mindfulness, organizational productivity, relationships, and counselor supervision. Yet, to date there are no studies that investigated whether self-transcendence is correlated with employing the EPS. Self-transcendence is fundamental to wellbeing, and self-awareness is an integral factor in self-transcendence. The capacity to self-reflect can be of particular usefulness in the recovery from trauma and is a foundational practice in engaging with the EPS. This study conducted a quantitative analysis of the level of self-transcendence of certified teachers and coaches of the EPS with at least one year of experience utilizing the system compared to the level of self-transcendence in the general population. The results were examined in the context of a transpersonal framework that highlights self-transcendence, an integrative, whole person approach, and a focus on personal transformation.

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Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness

Re-Storying Our Lore: Fiction, Vision, and Imagination as an Earth-Honoring Wisdom Path

By

Craig Chalquist, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Sean Kelly, PhD

Abstract:

Belief in absolute truths is overrated. This study argues that inspiring tales imaginatively woven can serve as a playful and creative frame of orientation, inspiration, and action: a life path of meaning and magic not to believe, but to believe in. “Loreologizing” refers to how we can use compelling fiction (broadly defined) as lore for weaving stories, personal or collective, around an ideal, vision, or dream without recourse to massive systematizing, creedal absolutism, or hardened dogma. We can also update old storied elements, even myths and folktales, by loreologizing them to bring out their relevance for how we live and work and for what we aspire to in the quest for a more just and humane world.

Drawing on Hermeticism, Gnosticism, and the long tradition of imagination as gnosis, Worldread, a depth philosophy offering an Earth-honoring path of reenchancement in a time of global disruption and climate chaos, provides an example of loreologizing. Worldread can be used as an ecospiritual path as well. Its depth philosophy informs the Assembling Terrania Cycle (Chalquist 2020a), hopeful science fiction tales charting the long adventure by which human beings come of age as a species.

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Dependent Origination as Cosmic Consciousness: The Evolution of the Knowledge of Reality

By

Beverly Ann Littlewood, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Brian Swimme, PhD

Abstract:

What is “real” and what is not? Philosophers and scientists have been searching for the origins of “reality” from the beginning of time. The greatest mystery of all may be the phenomenon of consciousness: has consciousness evolved as merely an epiphenomenon of matter or is consciousness the originator of reality? Overreliance on the separation of the dualities of matter (the physical) and spirit (the metaphysical) has rendered the definition of consciousness (what David Chalmers calls the “hard problem”) an unresolvable question.

Eastern philosophies are not handicapped by this bifurcation of experience. In Asia, the physical and the metaphysical, science and philosophy, had not been rendered separate and irreconcilable as the Western medieval struggles for preeminence between the Catholic church and an emerging material science had. It is only since the mid-twentieth century, with the emergence of quantum physics, that scientists have begun to wander across that sacred barrier to advance the evolution of an understanding of a more integral reality.

This evolution amounts to a recognition of the role of consciousness as the primary actor in the theater of life and not just a backstage epiphenomenon. The difficulty defining consciousness in the West stems from this determination to relegate it to just a piece of material substance, residing in the physical brain, and not recognize the role of the metaphysical in the totality of our experience of life. That is, until David Bohm redefined reality as a whole and not just disparate parts.

This whole, however, can only be seen on a deeper level that Bohm considered proof of a universal (cosmic) consciousness, responsible for our perception of reality. This acknowledgement mirrors the definition of dependent origination in Buddhism, and may offer scientific validation of Shakyamuni Buddha’s key discovery made more than 2,500 years ago.

In Buddhism, Nagarjuna describes dependent origination as “emptiness” meaning “Since all is empty, all is possible.” He was not referring to nothingness but to the endless potential for the manifestation of phenomena. Therefore, dependent origination and Bohm’s deeper level of existence both establish the basis of reality as embedded in consciousness.

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The Matrix of Possibility: A Systems-Based Metaphysics for Evolutionary Cosmology

By

Ari Makridakis, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Brian Swimme, PhD

Abstract:

In a thousand different ways, our planet is letting us know that the cosmological frameworks that have oriented and guided humanity for the last several millennia need to be replaced by new visions. In my view, one of the most promising candidates is Brian Thomas Swimme's evolutionary cosmology. Although Swimme has fashioned an awe-inspiring and life-affirming story of the universe, my sense is that he has not explicitly articulated a metaphysics that could successfully undergird his cosmological framework. Proposing one potentially viable candidate is the goal of this dissertation.

In this effort, I draw upon two primary intellectual resources: the triadic metaphysics of Charles Sanders Peirce and the burgeoning field of systems theory. To begin with, I seek to amend Peirce's triadic framework to include systems theory's insight that the cosmic adventure proceeds through distinct holonic levels, where the cocreated habits of each level generate stable building blocks for the next realm of creative emergence. Using evidence from contemporary science, I then propose that each of these holonic levels can aptly be described in terms of Peirce's triad. My hope is that such a triadic, transholonic framework might provide a workable metaphysical foundation for the epic narrative put forth by Swimme.

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Systems Metaphysics: Seeing the Macrocosmic in the Microcosmic, the Microcosmic in the Macrocosmic

By

David Milliarn, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Matthew Segall, PhD

Abstract:

Since Whitehead and process philosophy inspired Bertalanffy's genesis of systems theory, little work has been done in the branch of systems philosophy compared to other major branches in philosophy. Even less work has been done in systems metaphysics, while most of the work done has been in the development of systems ontology, especially in application to science. As an inspiring force, one would think Whitehead's metaphysical philosophy ought to serve as the cornerstone for systems metaphysics. However, the way forward, connecting Whitehead's metaphysics to current understandings in systems theory, is not obvious.

The present dissertation seeks to establish a conversation between Whitehead's philosophic corpus and systems thought at the level of creating preliminary metaphysical traction between the two. The intention is to demonstrate how key elements of systems metaphysics offer explanatory power in understanding systems-centric processes, like cosmogenesis. Among the elements discussed are part-whole relations, as understood through a Whitehead-inspired theory of abstraction; the onto-epistemic relationship between special sciences as abstractions out of Nature; metaphysical insight into the nature and role of processes in the ever-increasing growth of freedom manifested by systems; a radical reconsideration of ontology, offering a richer understanding of the possibilities of creativity; and an evaluation of the metaphysical role systems play in unifying a host of phenomena that are called "evolution" (e.g., stellar evolution and biological evolution), despite existing across disparate special science (e.g., cosmology and biological sciences).

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A Whiteheadian Perspective on Emotion: Finding Value in the Universe

By

Linda Pia Shaw, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Brian Swimme, PhD

Abstract:

The nature of human emotion is explored through the lens of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. Whitehead's metaphysical position offers a radical point of departure that challenges our usual way of viewing emotions. Emotions are typically thought to be epiphenomenal to being and experienced only by entities with a particular nervous system. Whitehead collapses the long-held Cartesian duality that places humans with self-reflective awareness and complex cognitive abilities separate from the rest of nature. He collapses the Cartesian mind-body duality as well, a paradigm prevalent in many theories of emotion.

For Whitehead, human experience and the rich diversity of emotions found there can be situated within a continuum of complexity that ranges from subatomic particles through molecules to all living beings. The general nature of emotions is presented along this gradient line of complexity to illustrate essential characteristics of emotions as experienced by all beings.

A Whiteheadian theory of emotion is supported by both biological and cognitive theories from the fields of biology and psychology. A credible, coherent, cogent theory of emotions based on a metaphysical analysis of existence offers a fresh lens by which to reexamine the role, significance, and meaning of emotion in our own concrete experience. Emotions are presented as arbiters of value.

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Transformative Studies

Transformative External Extraordinary Belief Application (TEEBA): Probing Wild Beliefs for Personal Growth

By

Michael Leo Chavez, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Alfonso Montuori, PhD

Abstract:

In this theoretical dissertation, I introduce, explore, and contextualize what I call Transformative External Extraordinary Belief Application (TEEBA). TEEBA is a five-phase process in which I explore weird beliefs in a particular way to accelerate personal growth. From my extensive experience with this process, I detect that TEEBA leads to more complex ways of knowing myself and my world, and I believe others can benefit from its operation.

Herein, I situate TEEBA in the literature, explore existing knowledge to get a better idea of what might give rise to this experience and propose subsequent steps to research whether it can be more widely used. To honor this goal, I describe the operational processes of TEEBA; relate the formative actions, events, and situations that inspired this unusual and intentional employment of mental faculties; convey its facilitative mental attitudes; and explore similar, recorded endeavors and supportive theories that aid in achieving my goal. Finally, I identify potential avenues of research TEEBA may inspire.

As I lay a foundation for future research, I propose TEEBA can help others accelerate personal growth, critically assess complex information in a chaotic world, and manifest mindful insight in contentious environments of political polarization.

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Dancing Between Paradigms: A Gebserian Consciousness Theory With Practical Applications for Early Childhood Education and Care

By

Ellen Cool, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Joanne Gozawa, PhD

Abstract:

Humanity is presently dancing between paradigms from the current paradigm that exists in the mental structure to the new paradigm that incorporates an integral structure. This dissertation explores what a paradigmatic shift from individual and separate ways of being to mutually enriching ways of being and participatory integration might look like within early childhood education and care in the United States and demonstrates the readiness of 3- to 6-year-olds to be active participants in this shift. Through establishing a theory of Gebserian consciousness in early childhood education and care and providing consciousness-enhancing tools and skills that can be practiced when interacting with young children, this study demonstrates the inherent capacity of 3-to-6-year-olds to enhance their consciousness. This inquiry can contribute to current dialogue on integral consciousness by highlighting the importance of these young children in the big picture of progressing toward a new worldview.

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The Practical Application of Vocalized Mantra Meditation for Integrative Health: A Theoretical Perspective

By

Alexandra Leonie Katharina Dech, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Allan Combs, PhD

Abstract:

This dissertation proposes a theoretical inquiry into the primary question: How can the practice of vocalized mantra meditation enrich current approaches to integrative health care? Today's society needs expedient, adaptable, and positive interventions to mitigate physical, emotional, and mental stress. Drawing from the most recent findings on meditation and research from several disciplines that support an understanding of the inquiry, the study explores and connects the concepts of vocalized mantra meditation as an effective means to address this need.

The inquiry employs a transdisciplinary methodology. Theoretical and empirical literature across the fields of psychology, neuroscience, biomedicine, alternative and complementary medicine, and spirituality are examined using an integrative approach. The theoretical concepts guiding the inquiry include health and wellness models that emphasize the integrative nature of health and assume that health is not only a physical matter but also comprises mental, emotional, and social well-being. These models also suggest that self-regulation skills, such as meditation, can support positive changes in health.

The practical outcome of this inquiry is a guide to vocalized mantra meditation for health care providers and practitioners, which offers helpful organizational planning and strategies for implementing the practice into integrative health settings and as a complement to conventional health services, school curricula, and the workplace. The inquiry also considers how artificial intelligence (AI) and technology can be used to integrate vocalized mantra meditation into everyday life.

This research is of interest to integrative health care professionals, scientists, and scholars from disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, and medicine, as well as spiritual practitioners, educators, employers, or anyone looking for a tool to promote their own health and well-being.

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An Autohistoria-Teoria and Remythologizing of the Virgin Mary Through Pregnancy, Birthing, and Postpartum Depression

By

Christine Dennis, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Annette Williams, PhD

Abstract:

This dissertation argues that dominant Eurocentric interpretations of the Virgin Mary have rendered my body, Her body, and women's bodies as subordinate. By rereading the myths of the Virgin Mary through a critical feminist hermeneutic lens, this research seeks to recenter the voices and bodies of mothers within the larger cultural imagination. By remythologizing Mary's body through my lived realities of pregnancy, birthing, and postpartum depression the research presents opportunities for the restoration of my body and Mary's body. The process of remythologizing is guided by Gloria Anzaldua's (2015) methodological framework known as autohistoria-teoría. Autohistoria-teoría supports the data collection through spiritual self-inquiry and self-reflexive narratives such as journal entries, dreams, anecdotes, and fictional reinterpretations of Mary in Catholic scripture. The findings indicate that the practice of remythologizing can transform the trauma inflicted by hegemonic narratives by restoring the body toward wholeness.

This dissertation is available in full-text on [ProQuest Dissertation & Thesis Global](#) (CIIS login required).

Interstitial Transmogrification—Boundaries as Bridges for Serendipities of Stewardship: Alchemical Hermeneutics of Gift Culture Recovery

By

MaryClare Foecke, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Joanne Gozawa, PhD

Abstract:

Interstitial transmogrification is an alchemical hermeneutic inquiry into Spaces Between to inspire and inform patterns of social and organizational structure characterized by flow and mutual beneficence—toward recovery of relational reality, gift culture, and care for our common home. An invocation-led and synchronicity-shaped walkabout methodology of labyrinthine unlearning invites epistemological shifts—with ritual as compass and terrain—expanding perception into imaginal realms to integrate body, spirit, and soul.

As egocentric, extractive, and incoherent systems crumble and collective metaphoric waters break, how to welcome birth of a new We? Dark and fluid, chaos contains infinite possibility—making liminal times as auspiciously promising as troublingly uncertain. Amidst contractions, how to melt fear and midwife navigation between death and rebirth—coming home to the Tree of Life and becoming matrixial hospitality of ecologies with whom we belong and matter?

How to participate fully in the shift from separation consciousness to interbecoming? Uprooting to better respond to connectivity clues and committed to exploring through experimental gift-based economics, opportunities arose amidst research playmates and threads emerged to weave perceptual shifts with sacramental portals—suggesting partnership with evolutionary telos.

Might embodying initiatory spaces invoke the grace of re-membling who we are, activate holotropic potential of what we came here to be and do, on and with this planet—beyond sustainability and survival, toward maturation and thrival? Might attuning to co(s)mic Wisdom through kenotic contemplation, shadow-embracing laughter, and collective gift-originating improvisation facilitate adaptation of Indigenous and Maternal sources of meaning, mattering, minding, and mending? This dissertation stories these heuristics...(full text of abstract available on ProQuest).

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Intentionally Designed Spaces for Persons With Dementia: A Dementia Simulation Study

By

Joshua Joseph Freitas, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Michael Raffanti, EdD, JD

Abstract:

Alzheimer's disease and related dementia (ADRD) will drastically increase over the next few decades. As caregivers wait for a cure, they may seek new ways to improve the quality of life for those living with dementia. This scholarly personal narrative and simulation-based inquiry addresses the central research question: How can the synthesis of professional practice, theoretical constructs, intentionally designed spaces, and technology inform a cohesive set of best design practices aimed at substantially enhancing the quality of life for individuals living with dementia?

The dissertation explores emergent ideas in environmental and ergonomic design, going beyond traditional architectural paradigms and care practices. It scrutinizes nuanced design elements, such as color contrast, spatial arrangements, tactile textures, and aesthetic styles, while also emphasizing the human-centric aspects of design such as care protocols, tactile interactions, and emotional reinforcement. Furthermore, the study investigates how technology can be effectively integrated with intentionally designed environments to offer improved, person-centered care. This integrated approach aims to generate actionable insights for creating adaptive and responsive environmental conditions for individuals with dementia. Also, it aims to transform complex ideas into practical tools that can be utilized in a variety of settings—including homes, residential facilities, medical centers, and public spaces—to better accommodate those living with dementia.

This dissertation is available in full-text on [ProQuest Dissertation & Thesis Global](#) (CIIS login required).

Beyond Binary Coping: Embodiments of Mutual Care in Queer Screen Cultures

By

Michael Hooker, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Cindy Shearer, DA

Abstract:

Coping with insidious trauma is a daily reality for many queer and feminized people. Research on coping and North American culture often normalizes ineffective Eurocentric coping models, compounding stressors for this marginalized population. Queer screen cultures departing from individualistic visibility present an expansive perspective, framing coping as mutual care through aesthetic devices and embodied performances. Drawing from corporeal feminist theories of embodiment, queer approaches to trauma, and art politics, this research reconceptualizes coping beyond binary notions. Supported by a performance studies analysis of queer media and literature, the resulting beyond binary coping theory fills gaps in coping research, enhances embodied care ethics, and offers a queer coping archive for broader application.

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Toward a Great Transition: The Concept of “Hierarchy” and Alternative Principles for a Better World in Herbert Marcuse’s Work

By

Harinamsimran K. Khalsa, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Jennifer Wells, PhD

Abstract:

The crux of this dissertation is whether or not the concept of hierarchy advances and/or thwarts socioecological transformation. It explores the role that hierarchies have had in organizing societal relationships, how they have contributed to or thwarted any advancement toward the multidimensional crises humanity faces today, and how hierarchical relationships are key to creating those much-needed transformations. Hierarchy is not a natural, biological process. According to my estimation, it is a purposely constructed scheme of understandings and power gradations implemented to erode social aspects of human societies. The central focus of this exploration is how people as a whole organize, cooperate, get along in groups, and share life-unifying experiences in communities, which promote a flourishing life. Distinguishing those natural elements of life from those more cultural and social aspects of human societies was pivotal to this exploration. A seminal line of investigation was a better understanding of peoples, specific cultures, commonly held norms, and rules. A crucial contention made throughout this exploration was a grounding belief that hierarchy is purposely constructed as a scheme of hierarchal dominance, which includes an orchestrated plan of gradations that favor and promote elite groups’ power and control over people and places for the benefit of only a few. These schemas initially took hold in the early development of patriarchy. Purposely constructed and promulgated laws ensured patriarchal elites’ power and control over those deemed less worthy. This model thwarted the advancement of harmonious and sustainable socioecological transformations.

Herbert Marcuse’s own explorations of the concept of hierarchy were the framework that shaped this transdisciplinary exploration, which was grounded in critical theory and complex thought and drew upon ecofeminism and critical ecologies. A search for sustainable transformations in the 21st century and a better understanding of the praxes contributing to multidimensional, intersecting socioecological crises that humanity faces today was an essential component of this investigation. Inquiries into conditions of injustices related to gender, racial, economic, political, social, and environmental inequities were cogent elements of the arguments put forth in this dissertation.

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Encountering Self, World, and Cosmos Through Ontopoetic Engagement With the Labyrinth: A Scholarly Personal Narrative

By

Jacqueline Buna Jean Kurio, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Constance Jones, PhD

Abstract:

This dissertation relates ongoing ontopoetic engagement with the ancient symbol and process of the labyrinth, precipitated in 2011 by a personal unitive experience with the earth. The initial response has evolved into a practice of labyrinth rituals performed in natural locations that evoke an enlivening presence of the living world and afford synchronistic experiences. This inquiry is an attempt to integrate and understand these experiences as openings to a spiritual dimension of reality largely negated in the dominant materialist worldview.

Using the theoretical lenses of ecofeminism, Indigenous Knowledge Traditions, and living cosmos panpsychism, the dissertation relates three significant episodes of engagement with the living world through the labyrinth. All episodes are foundational in their support of the theoretical and practical considerations of living cosmos panpsychism, a perspective that challenges the radical dualism of the materialist worldview. Ontopoetic engagement with the labyrinth includes critique of specific elements of radical dualism, primarily its denial of the knowing body, the creative living cosmos, and a complex sense of place.

This research is significant in its demonstration of how individual perspectives can transform to include the voices and presence of the living world through recognizing Indigenous qualities of relating that uphold kinship with all of life. Shifting the materialist perspective from disregard of the living world to relating with love and care seems essential work at this time of multiple biotic system breakdown, species extinction, and climate emergency. This research supports the assertion that the living earth labyrinth praxis is a valid method for individual and group transformation.

This inquiry will be of interest to scholars of the dominant materialist narrative, ecofeminism, panpsychism, and Indigenous perspectives as well as those who seek a method of transformation from isolation and separation within individuals and groups to a praxis that engages the living world.

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Embodying Transdisciplinarity: An Alternate Narrative Framework to the Hero's Journey as a Tool for Transformation

By

Robert P. Levey, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Jeanine Canty, PhD

Abstract:

Although ubiquitous in its use as a conceptual metaphor for transformation, the hero's journey is limited in its relevance and applicability in a postmodern world in which truth and reality are understood as individually shaped by personal history, social class, gender, culture, and religion. Presenting a linear path toward transformation, the hero's journey cannot readily accommodate the postmodern worldview. Transdisciplinarity, however, holds promise as a new way to conceptualize transformation in a postmodern world in its use as both a tool and methodology to produce knowledge and to collaboratively solve complex societal problems. It is this study's contention that transdisciplinarity itself suffers from Western biases and assumptions that contribute to complex issues in the 21st century.

How can decolonizing transdisciplinarity provide an alternate narrative framework to the hero's journey as a tool for personal and societal transformation in a postmodern world in active ecological crisis? This study answers this question through a transdisciplinary exploration of the ecological crisis through the lenses of ecopsychology, consciousness studies, Indigenous thinking, Taoism, Buddhism, Ubuntu, and moral philosophy. The anticipated contribution of this study is the foundation for a decolonized transdisciplinarity that is more inclusive in its use of multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. This decolonized transdisciplinarity may be particularly useful and relevant for Anglo-American, cisgendered males, although the explicit intent is to attract a broad audience.

To meaningfully address the ecological crisis, transformation is needed at both the individual and societal levels. In applying a decolonized transdisciplinarity to critique the hero's journey as a useful metaphor for transformation in a complex world, this study provides a loose framework for those in fields that explicitly and/or unwittingly subscribe to the conceptual underpinnings that give life to the hero's journey. These fields include, but may not be restricted to counseling, education, leadership, and business. The objective of this study is to encourage individuals from these and other fields to reimagine themselves and behave more compassionately as human beings.

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Separation From the Real: The Power of Story at the Heart of the Civil Commitment Process

By

Patrice Valida Mathon-Nerad, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Allan Combs, PhD

Abstract:

This theoretical dissertation uses a creative, transdisciplinary, and ecosystemic epistemological lens to explore aspects of Minnesota's practices that undergird the mental health civil commitment process and to critically examine the systems that support it. The central tenet is that a hidden ecology is embedded in the commitment process and the systems that enfold it, which deviate from the proclaimed rights and due process assigned to an individual entering this system. How systemic failure and institutional and professional abuse translate and create a container for coercive psychiatric practices; civil rights, social justice, and professional ethics violations; lack of redress; stigma; repetitive client episodes; and continued requests for resources to maintain this system are highlighted. This dissertation explores the power of the current mental health practices and story to transform a person's identity, replacing personal story, epistemology and agency with psychiatric narrative and diagnostic labeling that usurp an individual's innate wisdom and knowing and separate such persons from their fundamental life purpose, gifts, and valued place in society.

Hopefully, this discussion will prompt systemic changes to mental health policy and practices surrounding the civil commitment process. I encourage and invite the reader of this paper to engage in self-discovery and reflect upon their own beliefs in relationship to a civil commitment and the concept of mental illness and mental health. Engaging with the story contained within these pages in this manner moves outside the realm of a "normal" American Psychiatric Association (APA) approved format, but such is the nature of an ecosystemic or whole systems viewpoint. You, the reader, are a part of this ecosystem and the greater societal context in which we all dwell.

Psychiatric survivors may find peace and hope knowing that others have witnessed what they have experienced, and that their voices and courage have been acknowledged. Finally, the academy will have the opportunity to reflect upon the benefits to individuals and society as a whole of enculturating creative, transdisciplinary, and ecosystemic epistemological approaches to teaching and research within the varying fields that support mental health policy and practice.

This dissertation is available in full-text on [ProQuest Dissertation & Thesis Global](#) (CIIS login required).

Trans The*Logy Without Apology: Using Art, Narrative and Historical-Critical Exegesis to Celebrate Transfiguration and Trans Aesthetic in the Bible

By

Megan Marie Rohrer, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Jennifer Wells, PhD

Abstract:

Inspired by Comstock's (1993) *Gay Theology Without Apology*, this inquiry uses Christian art and historical-critical exegesis to create a transgender theol*gy without apology. An * is used within gendered terms to help readers see and remember that a greater gender diversity exists beyond contemporary assumptions. This theoretical dissertation unveils the trans themes, metaphors, and transfigurations within biblical texts to reveal the gospel-centered, liberation that predates contemporary transphobia, or bias against transgender individuals. The author argues that the trans experience is like a pilgrimage because it creates a new way of knowing that can only be understood after an embodied journey betwixt and between gender. Autobiographical trans narratives, in the style of Momaday's (1969) *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, are shared as an act of praxis, or faithful ethics put into action. Curated to honor the Trinity, or three persons of G*d, this dissertation weaves Early Christian and medieval art and poetic narratives into a pilgrimage experience for the reader. First, trans themes and metaphors about G*d the creator and characters within the Genesis/Bereshit is explored utilizing trans affirming Rabbinical insights. Then, exploration of the life, death and resurrected body of Jesus is used to uncover veiled metaphors in the transfiguration and wounds of Christ. Next, hagiographies with a trans aesthetic are used as a transdisciplinary example of unapologetic trans the*logy. The inquiry encourages readers to affirm transness in the imago dei, their own lives and the full life of the Christian church/εκκλησια.

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The Value Of Not Knowing: A Theoretical Perspective On Navigating Uncertainty

By

Heather A. Scott, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Alfonso Montuori, PhD

Abstract:

This theoretical inquiry uses integrative transdisciplinarity to explore whether adopting an attitude of “not knowing” can be a practical, adaptive, and creative way to navigate uncertainty. Uncertainty is a reality of life in the 21st century, and an attitude of not knowing can be an alternative to a know-it-all attitude where a person thinks they know or acts as if they should know. This inquiry looks at how humans grapple with the complexity of the world and the myriad ways they resist uncertainty and not knowing. I identify associated concepts with not knowing that I have encountered and practiced: negative capability, creative suspension, letting happen, and sunao mind (also known as “beginner’s mind”), each of which can offer ways to engage more directly with not knowing. Drawing on Buddhist philosophy and Morin’s complex thought, as well as my lived leadership experience, I put forward an alternative approach to navigating uncertainty: engaging a stance of not knowing.

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Our Sense of Safety, Our Fundamental Connectedness: A Polyvagal Informed Organic Inquiry into the Embodiment of Reciprocal Embeddedness When Histories of Trauma Persist

By

Jennifer Lee Tracy, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Daniel Deslauriers, PhD

Abstract:

This research study recognizes that for individuals with histories of complex trauma, coming into an embodied relationship to the reciprocally embedded nature of existence can feel impossible. When trauma prevails, surfacing in forms such as fear, anger, or disconnect, cultivating a sense of safety is foundational. The polyvagal theory, considered the “science of safety,” can support restoring and restoring this lost sense of safety, offering the opportunity to step into a fuller and more intimate embodied relationship to the reciprocally embedded (i.e., interconnected) nature of existence—fundamental connectedness. This restoring and restoring, however, cannot be done in disconnection; healing requires a union of mind and body; it requires the embodied experiencer.

Using organic inquiry, supported by art-based tools and a dialogic approach, this study offers insights into the effect and effectiveness of integrating polyvagal-informed mind–body practices for persons with histories of complex trauma who feel a disconnect to the embodiment of reciprocal embeddedness. This study engaged three coresearchers, alongside the primary investigator, to dialogically explore insights gained from polyvagal-informed mind–body practices. The extent to which the art-based and dialogic tools supported reflexivity and the challenges that arose were also part of the overall analysis.

Safety is foundational to embody our nature’s reciprocal embeddedness, and when trauma persists, acute awareness of the body and ventral stability can be the grounding anchor. From this compassionate and honest embodied place, we find a direct path between neuroceptive reactivity and peace and connection. For practitioners, researchers, and personal growth, this study offers new insights into connecting with our inseparability to all things, how to do this when trauma persists, and how critical this is for the wellbeing of all humanity and the environment.

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Women's Spirituality

Soul-to-Soul Healing: A Phenomenological Study on Reclaiming and Reimagining Embodied Spiritualities to Heal Historical and Intergenerational Trauma in Black Women

By

Kimberly Jacinda Davis, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Annette Williams, PhD

Abstract:

Black women endure trauma as a result of persistent sexual, racial, political, and economic oppressions that originate from the legacies of colonialism and slavery. The egregious, profitable, systemic abuse of Black women's bodies, characterized by exploitation and commodification, contributes to historical, intergenerational, collective, and personal trauma. Ravaged by physical, spiritual, and psychological wounds inflicted on their bodies, Black women often become dispirited and dismembered. Unresolved injury of the mind-body-spirit, or soul wounds, can leave embodied traumatic imprints that devitalize our internal and external environments, which can directly influence the psychospiritual, psychological, and physiological development of our offspring.

This phenomenological dissertation investigates the lived experiences of eight Black women residing in the United States who practice embodied spiritualities in an effort to transmute the energy effects of daily trauma into medicine for intergenerational healing. Data was gathered using the Black Women's Historical Trauma Assessment and semistructured interviews. This transformative study uses historical trauma theory and Black feminist/womanist/endarkened epistemologies to provide a multidimensional lens with which to navigate the complex spaces between Black women's lived experiences, trauma, and embodied spiritual healing.

The findings show that Black women suffer from historical and intergenerational trauma. Consequently, they endure harm caused by familial wounding, spiritual wounding, societal wounding, internalized wounding, and partner wounding, which incites wounded mothering. These wounds are chronic, intricate, and multilayered, and they permeate every aspect of Black women's lives. Findings also suggest...(full text of abstract available on ProQuest).

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Disruption, Reclamation and Delight: A Critical Organic Autoethnography of a Black Mother's Childbirth as Liberatory Transpersonal Consciousness

By

Tayla Shanaye Ealom, PhD 2024

Dissertation Chair: Alka Arora, PhD

Abstract:

This study examines natural childbirth as an expanded state of consciousness and suggests that a birthing person may experience forms of personal transformation that result in healing from White supremacist, patriarchal, and anthropocentric ideologies. To do so, this research first presents a theoretical comparative analysis of existing literature to position childbirth as an expanded state of consciousness. I then develop the qualitative research methodology of critical organic autoethnography, a new method that synthesizes critical autoethnography and organic inquiry. I utilize this hybridized method to analyze my first childbirth experience as a bicultural Black woman to illustrate this theory and demonstrate the transformative potential of birth.

Through the combination of theoretical comparative analysis and a critical organic autoethnographic account, I explore the birthing state of consciousness and reveal themes of spirituality and transformational change. Critical analysis of the impacts of racialization on Black maternal bodies and childbirth experiences situates this inquiry within the Black feminist tradition. Themes of nature, the divine, empowerment, and cultural change are explored.

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Mary Magdalene, Women, Sex, and Sin: From Wrath to Spiritual Realization

By

Paula Seymour, PhD 2023

Dissertation Chair: Cindy Shearer, DA

Abstract:

As a model for women's embodied experiences, Mary Magdalene's story emulates the struggles and perceptions surrounding female sexuality throughout history. As shown in Luke 8:2, Mary Magdalene is often portrayed as a repentant and sinful woman who was cleansed of seven demons. As a result of Mary Magdalene's image, biblical assertions regarding women's inherent sinfulness were strengthened. Consequently, many women have lost control of their narratives. Suppressing women's narratives, such as concealing Mary Magdalene's gospel, has resulted in the loss of crucial knowledge, including revelations regarding soul ascension found in The Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

This dissertation addresses the following questions: How do the Roman Catholic Church and Christianity, in general, define sexual sin for women? Can the patriarchal religious conventions of this understanding of female sexuality be overcome through a path of spiritual realization as taught and experienced by Mary Magdalene? My research methodology combines spiritual feminist hermeneutics and intuitive inquiry. In my intuitive inquiry, I have found that documenting women's lived experiences is crucial to liberating them from the oppressive and false narratives of some church teachings regarding women, sex, and sin.

This study draws essential conclusions about Mary Magdalene's Seven Powers of Wrath or her model of soul ascension. First, women's embodied experiences must be observed and documented. Secondly, discovering Mary's model of soul ascension gave me a fundamental understanding of the seven forms of the fourth Power. Lastly, we can access essential knowledge by listening to women's stories, such as Mary's model. In this study, counterfeit narratives are highlighted, and their damaging effects on women are discussed. However, this study also reveals that we can overcome the patriarchal religious understanding of female sexuality through spiritual realization as experienced and taught by Mary Magdalene. Women's stories must be documented and heard to change the current narrative. Through this study, I hope to create a repository of women's stories so that those who have been silenced and whose stories have been suppressed can finally speak out. To challenge the patriarchal narrative that limits women's agency, I hope other researchers will focus on the findings presented in this study.

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