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Glenn Hartelius

California Institute of Integral Studies

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What Constitutes Evidence in an Evidence-Based Psychology of the Whole Person?

Editor's Introduction

The quest for psychology as a natural science began at least as early as Wundt (1863/1894) and Freud (1895/1957), and continues today as a press for evidence-based psychology practice (APATFEBP, 2006). This is a perfectly laudable goal, since it is reasonable to expect that science should be as applicable to the study of the human mind as to anything else in the world. Yet given that the mind may be not just more complex, but also differently complex, than other topics of scientific inquiry undertaken so far, some unique challenges along the way might be expected. A transpersonal approach may be able to support the development of an evidence-based whole-person psychology by pointing out and filling in central aspects that so far have been largely omitted from the scientific study of the psyche: the psyche as subject.

Psychology is made unique by the fact that the human psyche is not only the object of the research, but also the researcher of that object. While the reflexive nature of psychology should not be used as an excuse to indulge in mystifications, it would seem obvious that consciousness adds a dimension not encountered in other scientific disciplines. Nowhere else does the focus of research talk back to you in your own language; nowhere else is the object of research so evidently a subject.

Yet scientific method was designed to study objects, and if a human subject is merely another object, then it is a very unusual kind of object indeed—one that makes it hard to see why such a distinction between subject and object should be made in the first place. On the other hand, if the psyche represents whatever it is about people that makes them subjects, and if being a subject is really any different than being an object, then it is also reasonable to expect that the scientific study of subjects might inspire a careful reconsideration, not

only of the methods brought to bear, but also of the assumptions these might carry.

If one sets to work on a Chevy engine with a metric tool set, or if the intelligence of an African-American child is purportedly measured with scales based on the things one learns in a middle-class White community, damage will be done by the fact that the instruments used carry assumptions that are ill suited to the task. In the first case, the engine may be damaged; in the second, the real intelligence of a child may go cruelly unacknowledged. By this same logic, since scientific tools were designed to study objects, it seems at least possible that they might carry assumptions particularly shaped to the study of objects. The fact that these tools have proven themselves reliable on many different types of objects does not in any way remove the possibility that they might be less than ideally suited to the study of subjects. Nor would such potential biases be likely to appear until those tools were applied to humans as subjects—that is, until the advent of psychology.

There were two options available to the pioneers of psychology: either tackle the question of how the study of a subject might have different requirements and methods, or simply study the mind as if it would be amenable to tools created for the study of objects. While early psychologists such as William James and F. W. Myers attempted some of both approaches, the direction of the field was sealed with the success of J. B. Watson's (1913) behaviorist approach. The subject-ness of the subject was set aside, and from thence forward the mind has been studied, for the most part, as if it were an object, or at best the effect of object-based processes.

One of the strengths of a scientific approach is the fact that it strives for objectivity, in the sense of being

relatively impartial, open-minded to where evidence may lead, and emotionally uninvested in a particular outcome. However, treating the mind as an object is something other than objectivity. It might better be called *objectification*, a term that in feminist thought refers to treating a person as if they were an object. To objectify something can also mean to give something objective reality, or to express something abstract in a form that others can experience. All of these meanings come together in a scientific approach to psychology, where the psyche—that central yet oddly abstract thing that makes a human being a person—is treated as if it were an object in order to turn it into something that can be studied by an object-oriented science.

The question that arises then is whether the result is actually a natural science of the mind, or whether it is a natural science of whatever is left after the subject-ness of the mind is set aside. If it were the latter, then psychology, for all of its strengths and value, might be missing out on some rather important pieces—perhaps even central aspects of mind. The only practicable way to find out whether or not it might be possible to construct a scientific approach to subjectness on its own terms, and whether or not such an approach might provide information not available by other means, would be to make the attempt.

Of course, the attempt is already underway in the form of whole-person approaches to psychology. Humanistic psychology arose in the 1950s and 1960s out of the sense that the Freudian and behaviorist approaches of the day were deeply flawed because they omitted the central human-ness of the person, treating the individual more as an object or a machine. Humanistic psychology enjoyed great success with its more person-centered approach during the 1960s and 1970s. During this time it gave birth to transpersonal psychology, which, though carrying a different emphasis, displays a similar emphasis on the human being as subject.

Transpersonal psychology has focused considerable attention on consciousness, states of consciousness, practices or processes that affect states of consciousness, experiences in which the consciousness of the individual seems somehow interconnected with that of others or the larger world, and the transformative potential of consciousness. Speculations about consciousness have a long history, and while approaches such as the Gestalt psychology of Köhler cultivated its early consideration in Europe, it is fair to say that transpersonal psychology represents the first sustained effort at consciousness studies within psychology.

What characterizes a transpersonal approach to the study of consciousness, and what sets it apart from much of the current field of consciousness studies, is that it examines consciousness as human subject-ness, rather than as an object or as the effect of an object-based process. This is not to diminish the value of cognitive and neuropsychological approaches, but to point out that these also bring with them the object-oriented assumptions of traditional scientific inquiry.

The issue here is not so much that through empirical measurement, psychology reduces the human person to what its instruments can measure. This has been the complaint of humanistic psychology since its founding, and is often echoed within transpersonal psychology as well; certainly, such a point has its merits. Yet empirical research is not the heart of the problem. In a very real sense, all explanatory knowledge is to some degree reductionist in nature (cf. Slingerland, 2008), even qualitative studies of lived experience. One could argue that the alternative—the absence of empirical evidence—leaves knowledge vulnerable to vagaries of preferred interpretation in ways that may be even more distorting than the reduction implicit in any responsible form of inquiry. The more substantive issue is this: in a natural science of the psyche, *what will count as evidence?*

So, it is not so much the empirical process that reduces the human psyche in unacceptable ways, but the fact that the empirical process typically brings with it philosophical assumptions about the nature of mind and matter and reality that preclude asking the sorts of questions or designing the methods that might lead to a more useful understanding of subtle and exceptional experiences that seem closely associated with the subjectness of the person, such as those that a transpersonal approach considers.

An alternate path would not require mystical musings or fantastical assumptions; it would simply begin with the phenomena as they are reported, then work from there toward possible methods for detecting these phenomena in intersubjective contexts—that is, where the reports of more than one participant might be consulted to determine whether there is a phenomenon present that exists as something more than a private personal construction. If such reports can be corroborated intersubjectively, then it might be possible to seek correlations with conventionally measurable events, using neurological or other tools—much in the spirit of Varela's (1996) neurophenomenology. These are all foundational steps of a natural science. If one

assumes that mystical, spiritual, and other exceptional human experiences do not pertain to some transcendent dimension, but are instead phenomena that occur within the same dimension as garden rocks and burnt toast (cf. Ferrer, 2008), then it seems at least potentially possible to gather evidence—even empirical evidence—that might shed additional light on the nature of such happenings.

Yet such a step is possible only if these types of phenomena are not eliminated, a priori, from the possibility of existing. That is, a transpersonal approach may be able to contribute to an evidence-based psychology that would be more reflective of the whole of human experience and psyche, both as subject and as object of study, if one sets aside the naïve object-based materialist assumptions that typically restrain research questions within more conventional approaches to psychology. From there, it would be necessary to follow where systematic inquiry into consciousness and lived experience might lead. Such inquiry might include examination of reports of subtle features of consciousness (e.g., Ferrer, 2008, 2011), or might examine aspects of conscious experience capable of detection and consistent description within intersubjective contexts (Hartelius, 2007). If such an approach were to yield novel and useful information, it would tend to support the notion that object-based assumptions may constrain psychological research.

In fact, a strong case can be made that humanistic and transpersonal approaches have already yielded much fruit, and has had wide impact both within psychology and within wider culture. Psychotherapy as it exists today owes much to the rise of humanistic psychology. The entire personal growth and self-improvement movement is founded on the tenets of humanistic psychology; these in turn provided a tremendous boost to the holistic health and wellness movement that by some measures outstrips conventional medicine in popularity. Transpersonal psychology was the first field to examine mindfulness meditation, and other Eastern spiritual practices such as yoga and compassion meditation, in the context of psychology. Abraham Maslow, a founder of both the humanistic and transpersonal fields, originated the concept of human spirituality as something distinct from religion—a position that is now widespread within Western culture. Together, the transpersonal and humanistic approaches pioneered the psychological study of psychedelics, which is now coming to mainstream attention.

Yet if transpersonal and humanistic approaches have been so innovative, how is it that both are relatively small and obscure? A look at the fields that have come

in their wake may provide some clues. Consciousness studies emerged as a separate field in the mid-1990s with the founding of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, yet a large amount of its papers consider consciousness from a cognitive perspective. Positive psychology made its debut in 2000 with some rather unflattering (and arguably unfair) critiques of humanistic psychology, then proceeded to merely examine positive aspects of the psyche in quite conventional ways. What these two examples have in common is that their topics became more widely acceptable only after they became esconced within fields that examined them as objects or effects of object-based processes. It would seem that object-oriented philosophical assumptions have been reified as part of the scientific method, and that they continue to be applied uncritically to the subject-ness of persons, with little attention so far to how productive alternate approaches have been.

In scholarship, the peer-review process is deeply embedded in teaching, research, and writing precisely because receiving feedback that requires one to reconsider ideas and assumptions is what makes for better results. The deeper a critique can reach, the more effectively it can identify and challenge underlying theory or assumptions, the more powerfully it can inspire better scientific and scholarly work. Transpersonal and humanistic psychology hold that the consciousness and lived experience associated with mind—the “what it is like” to be a person (cf. Nagel, 1974)—pose a healthy challenge to the object-oriented assumptions of scientific psychology. If the result of this challenge could be a psychology in which the scope of what constitutes evidence were not automatically limited by object-oriented assumptions, then, as noted, it might be possible to make progress toward an evidence-based psychology that would, in fact, be more reflective of the whole of human experience and psyche. Toward this end, a transpersonal approach might be of considerable service.

In This Issue

It is noted with appreciation that the three general articles in this issue all represent original reporting on the results of research, as are two of the papers in the Special Topic Section on transpersonal medicine. While most of these reports represent relatively preliminary research, this is exactly what one would expect in a field that may be just beginning a more empirical phase of its development.

The first general paper, by Patty Hlava, John Elfers, and Reid Offringa, is entitled, *A Transcendent View*

of *Gratitude: The Transpersonal Gratitude Scale*; it presents the development and validation of a gratitude scale developed from a transpersonal perspective. The items on this scale were drawn directly from lived experience, and unlike existing gratitude scales, the definition is not restricted to gratitude in response to tangible benefits but considers gratitude within a larger context of relationship with oneself, others, and the wider world. Such scales are valuable steps in the development of a more empirically robust transpersonal psychology.

Jeanine Canty, in her paper entitled, *Walking Between Worlds: Holding Multiple Worldviews as a Key for Ecological Transformation*, presents results from her organic inquiry research on the characteristics of individuals moving to embrace a more relational, life-affirming stance, and a sense of self that is more interconnected and interdependent with others and the natural world. Her study suggests that the ability to hold multiple worldviews may foster greater resilience and responsiveness to crises of society and environment.

A third study, by David M. Odorisio, is entitled, *The Alchemical Heart: A Jungian Approach to the Heart Center in the Upanishads and in Eastern Christian Prayer*, takes on the task of comparing the concept of the heart, as an aspect of the person, as it is described in Jungian thought and in association with the hesychasm prayer practice of Eastern Christianity. The significance of this paper is that it attempts comparative work based on the psychospiritual processes that each tradition attributes to the heart—an approach that seems promising for work toward a broader and more cross-cultural understanding of what is meant by the heart as a psychospiritual dimension of the individual.

After this, Randy Fauver has brought together an excellent set of papers for a Special Topic Section on transpersonal medicine—or how transpersonal approaches to physical and emotional healing can be understood and applied. This section is introduced separately by the Special Topic Editor. Congratulations to Randy for bringing together what may be the first collection of papers under this title.

I am also happy to announce that the California Institute of Integral Studies, a transpersonally-oriented university in San Francisco, is now sponsoring this journal. We are grateful for the support, and the strong future it provides for *IJTS*.

Glenn Hartelius, Main Editor
California Institute of Integral Studies

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About the Journal

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