

7-1-2013

## Introduction to Special Topic Section: Transpersonal Sociology

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### Recommended Citation

Rominger, R. (2013). Rominger, R. (2013). Introduction to special topic section: Transpersonal sociology. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 32(2), 13–16.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 32 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2013.32.2.13>



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## Introduction to Special Topic Section: Transpersonal Sociology

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The field of transpersonal studies, including theory and research, has predominantly been historically focused on the individual. For example, theorists have developed models explaining an *individual's* exceptional, spiritual, or anomalous experiences (e.g., C'de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; Maslow, 1971; Miller, 2004; White, 1997), and much research has been conducted to further describe various associated phenomena, including an individual's developmental process, in order to refine these various models. A question arises, however, when one moves from analysis of the *individual* to analysis of the *social*. Considering William James' (1890) contemplation of the "something more" (p. 305) within individual experience, how does that something more apply to groups of individuals? Might that something more be active within small and large groups, and within institutions and organizations?

Sociology is the field typically associated with studying group behavior, particularly within the organizations of education, the penal system, the workplace, and political environs, to name a

few. However, the sociological field has not moved to systematically incorporate a transpersonal perspective, despite efforts within the 1980s and early 1990s to establish a transpersonal sociology movement and journal (*Transpersonal Sociology Newsletter*, Summer, 1995-Summer, 1997; Wilber, 1983/2011). This is likely due in large part to the strong materialist assumptions held within modern sociological circles, which describe transcendent, paranormal, religious, and spiritual experiences as an "epiphenomenon of social structures" (Cohn & Markides, 1998/this issue).

This Special Topic Section of the journal aims to bring together prior resources and introduce the discussion anew through a series of six original articles each representing an aspect of social engagement and transformation, along with reprints of two important historical articles specifically directed toward transpersonal sociology. The introductory article, *Transpersonal Sociology: Origins, Development, and Theory* (Rominger & Friedman) presents a brief overview of the development of thought regarding transpersonal sociology, poses a potential working definition for the

field, and presents two practical applications of using a transpersonal framework in sociological research.

The two reprints within this section present a historical context for discussion of transpersonal sociology as an emerging field. In *Religion and Spiritual Experience: Revisiting Key Assumptions in Sociology*, Cohn and Markides propose a paradigm that “would allow sociologists to consider in a more open-minded manner the spiritual and ethical yearnings of many people and their belief that they have authentic religious experiences” (p. ?). Additionally, the authors assert that within this “modified” paradigm, which would include, and transcend, prior forms of sociological critique, sociologists would also be able to “accommodate a transpersonal view of human nature” (p. ?) which values experientially-based, socially-embedded spiritual development. Greenwood, in *Emile Durkheim and C. G. Jung: Structuring a Transpersonal Sociology of Religion*, continues this exploration through a comparison of the concepts of the archetypes of Jung (found in the collective unconscious) and the collective representations of Durkheim (found within the collective consciousness). Greenwood asserts that there is great similarity and resonance between the personal structures offered by Jung, and the social structures offered by Durkheim, and that this resonance points toward a potential transpersonal approach toward the sociology of religion, particularly when considering the personal and public symbols found within religious systems.

In addition to the introduction and the reprints, six additional papers aim to contribute to a better understanding of the practical applications and further theoretical extrapolations within the transpersonal sociological umbrella. Machinga and Friedman, in *Developing Transpersonal Resiliency: An Approach to Healing and Reconciliation in Zimbabwe*, discuss a program that has been established within the country of Zimbabwe to facilitate community healing. This model, LAWECE, contains three distinct phases that incorporate important cultural symbols from both the Shona (traditional Zimbabwean) and Christian religious traditions, including the acknowledgement of altered states of consciousness as practiced within the Zimbabwean culture. Through LAWECE processes, communities are able to lament the prior violence within the community, welcome the (redeemed) perpetrators back into the community, and then celebrate the reconnections between community members. The

authors feel the LAWECE process helps foster healing within the fractured, grieving, and war-torn communities in Africa, and particularly within Zimbabwe where the program was developed.

Rowe offers another practical application of transpersonal sociology through *Intentional Kayaking: Awakening to Intimacy Within the Natural World*, wherein she expounds on personal experience in relation to nature. This piece, reminiscent of Heron and Reason’s (2013) critical subjectivity, situates Rowe’s personal experience within an epistemology acknowledging tacit understanding, knowing through relationship, and indigenous wisdom. Rowe, through conducting a qualitative analysis of her journal entries from several years prior to and during an intentional kayaking experience, came to understand that certain “actions, attitudes, and ways of being” in nature facilitated greater intimacy with nature and a deeper sense of earth-based spirituality. The sociological lens is useful when considering the ecological realm and how one might facilitate greater understanding of and connection to one’s natural environment(s). Through critical subjectivity, as demonstrated in Rowe’s piece, one may move into environmentally-based social action.

The three remaining articles cover areas of theoretical discourse relevant to transpersonal sociology. Hunt, in *Implications and Consequences of Post-Modern Philosophy for Contemporary Transpersonal Studies: Georges Bataille’s Post-Nietzschean Secular Mysticism, Phenomenology of Ecstatic States, and Original Transpersonal Sociology*, provides a tantalizing journey into the work of Georges Bataille. Bataille’s struggle to understand the nature of ecstatic experience brought him to a nuanced, if not controversial, understanding of what might be a social version of projective identification, inclusive of individual and group re-incorporation of previously projected notions of religion and spirituality. Additionally, Hunt discusses Bataille’s *atheology* and his existential approach to human nature.

Heelas, in *Transpersonal Pakistan*, posits the dominance of a sacred humanist tradition found within Pakistani Sufism. Heelas argues that Pakistan is not influenced as much by (or steeped within) militant Islam as it is by moderate Sufi pirs. Heelas develops a greater understanding of moderate Pakistani theism, the sacred, and values of non-violence, particularly within the “the most popular, influential saints of Pakistan [which] include Bulleh Shah (Punjab), Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai

(Sindh), Bari Imam (Islamabad), Baba Fareed (Punjab), Lal Shahbaz Qalander (the 'Red Sufi of Sehwan') and Sachal Sarmast (Sindh)," as well as several popular Sufi mystic poets.

Elfers, in *A Declaration of Interdependence: Peace, Social Justice, and the "Spirit Wrestlers,"* directs attention toward a religious group who has, due to persecution and political conflict, moved from Russia to Canada. Elfers describes the plight of the Doukhobors, also known as the "Spirit Wrestlers," as they sought a nation wherein they might practice their strict tradition of alignment to the laws of God, commitment to communal living and peaceful values, and spiritual individualism. The Doukhobors' political troubles centered on their dismissal of the local and national laws, which resulted in their exile from Russia, and more recently in conflicts within their current Canadian home. Elfers further explores issues with regard to the Doukhobor community, including raising children within a cooperative, non-competitive, communal environment, and issues of conflict and social justice, making comparisons to early Christian communities. Elfers asks "Is equal treatment the pinnacle of social justice, or will that telos be found in an ethic that transcends individualism, that embodies transpersonal, communal values, and that becomes an ethic of caring and interdependence?" He asserts (referring to Naess' [1989] work) that

the transformation of the individual ego from its grounding in the values of individuality and isolation to the espousing of its transpersonal state of interdependence promises to be a dramatic shift with powerful implications for personal morality, social justice, and ecological awareness. When a person is living in a state of interdependence with a human community, self-interest becomes community-interest, with the recognition that to injure a member of my community is to injure myself and that to nurture my community is to nurture myself.

This perspective seems congruent with the LAWECE model proposed in this issue by Machinga and Friedman.

Finally, there is a shift into a discussion of personal and social redemption. Similar to the redemption discussed in Zimbabwean communities by Machinga and Friedman, Shavrien directs attention to the redemptive process as artfully demonstrated in Shakespeare's play *Cymbeline*, in her article *Shakespeare's Cymbeline and the Mystical Particular: Redemption,*

*Then and Now, for a Disassembled World.* Through this article Shavrien proffers an invitation into the world of *Cymbeline*, while leading the reader through themes of fragmentation, disassembling, reconciliation, and the resolution of *Concordia discors*. This resolution arises out of the ashes of an over-pluralized contextualism and an over-simplified universalism, arising as a newly formed paradigm that is more in alignment with a post post-modern perspective. Part symbolic interactionism, part social commentary, Shavrien's piece offers readers footing for utilizing the archetypal themes and metaphors posed by Shakespeare as a means of understanding current social transformation.

This collection of articles marks a shift in recognition of the transpersonal within the social domain. While conversation of spirit-in-action is not new, nor is discussion of social values, or even morphogenic fields, what *is* new is the framing of these discussions within a specified field of *transpersonal sociology*. I invite readers to expand the discussions started herein, and I hope you enjoy this special section of the journal.

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