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Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

Transpersonal studies is an approach to scholarship that employs the perspectives and values of transpersonal psychology to a wider set of scholarly fields. Yet because transpersonal studies is an interdisciplinary approach, there are frequently tie-ins to psychological ideas or theories, or psychological implications. A transpersonal approach accepts the careful methods of scientific inquiry, but holds as tentative the assumption that phenomena can be reduced solely to the rule-governed actions of discrete bits of matter—as if the world were some great tinker-toy system that could be fully explained by a diagram of its production-made parts.

Transpersonal theories typically draw on systems or process models, or philosophies that assume the world to be interconnected in some more intimate or complex way than a reductionist-materialist account would offer. The critique of conventional psychology is that strict adherence to a particle or unit model (cf. Gendlin, 1999) uncritically accepts a metaphysical proposition about the ultimate nature of reality, when in fact, as with Euclid's fifth postulate, there may be multiple approximations that each yield useful results.

Perhaps because transpersonal disciplines take an approach that does not reduce spiritual traditions to superstitious constructs, but aims to investigate their practices and claims with methods that do not imply such a reduction, transpersonalism has at times been suspected of being some sort of cult or religion. There are two relevant responses to this: First, a transpersonal stance does not assert the ultimate correctness of any particular assumption about how the world might be interconnected; second, the transpersonal project is critical of the conventional position that assumes reality can *only* be particle-based mechanics, or that a reductionist-materialist metaphysic is identical with reality.

Referring to conventional scientific assumptions about reality as metaphysics is accurate, for although science is empirically based, it is not possible to demonstrate empirically that describing the world as discrete matter-particles is an exhaustive account, or even an optimal account. Publication of an empirical paper such as the one by Daryl Bem (2011) entitled, "Feeling the Future: Experimental Evidence for Anomalous Retroactive Influences on Cognition and Affect" in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* suggests that the question of how reality operates is far from foreclosed by existing empirical evidence. The strength of this challenge to postulates that have been long assumed may, in fact, explain the furor that erupts around such research—and informs the protests that such work ought not be published in scientific journals.

For example, one critique of Bem's paper (LeBel & Peters, 2011) claimed that the paper suffered from "overly strong theory-relevant beliefs" that led to "a systematic and pernicious bias in the interpretation of data that favors a researcher's theory" (p. 371). Yet the facts that empirical research on similarly controversial topics can typically only achieve publication outside of psychology journals, and that such papers are regularly scrutinized in ways that little research could withstand, offers the possibility that much of mainstream psychology itself holds an equal and opposing systematic bias against any evidence that implies shortcomings in its own metaphysical positions.

Transpersonal studies embrace and welcome empirical evidence gathered from within conventional philosophical frameworks; it recognizes that all empirical work does and must reflect some tentative metaphysical postulates about the nature of reality. However, it can hold both conventional and exploratory philosophical frames

as approximations, and then test for the utility of results gathered from research conducted within those frames.

There is much research on topics of interest to transpersonal psychologists that can be gathered using conventional reality frames, and not enough effort has been put into this sort of empirical work. However, the transpersonal project is larger in scope than merely using conventional means to study non-ordinary topics.

That is not to diminish the value of good scholarship that is theoretical in nature. This journal usually gives priority to empirical papers, publishing them in first position when submitted. However, an exception has been made for an excellent paper by Harry Hunt on “Implications and Consequences of Post-Modern Philosophy for Contemporary Perspectives on Transpersonal and Spiritual Experience: 1. The Later Foucault and Pierre Hadot on a Post-Socratic This-Worldly Mysticism.” In this paper, Hunt examines a less-known side of the later writings of Michel Foucault. In this work, Foucault contrasted the presence-based spiritual practices of the Stoics, Epicureans, and Cynics with the self-denying values of Christianity—a theme also developed by Foucault’s contemporary, Pierre Hadot. Together, these writers may point the way toward a this-worldly mysticism that provides an alternative to views that offer a more transcendence-focused understanding of mysticism.

A second paper by Eva Bojner Horwitz, Cecilia Stenfors, and Walter Osika is entitled, “Contemplative Inquiry in Movement: Managing Writer’s Block in Academic Writing.” The paper presents evidence from a small preliminary qualitative pilot project applying Contemplation in Movement to the problem of writer’s block with an academic. While the evidence generated is modest, the project also serves as a context for presenting a particular approach to an embodied version of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

A second empirical paper, “‘Say from Whence You Owe this Strange Intelligence’: Investigating Explanatory Systems of Spiritualist Mental Mediumship Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis,” examines the lived experience of spiritualist mediums using semi-structured interviews. The results offer a glimpse into the explanatory beliefs of spiritualist mediums, as well as aspects of their qualitative experience.

After this comes a Special Topic Section edited by Charles D. Laughlin, one of the founders of transpersonal anthropology. A transpersonal approach to anthropology considers the fact that the epistemology of non-Western peoples may well be influenced and shaped by states of mind

that differ from the conventional rational waking state, and attempts to both describe and experience through those alternate states as part of obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of a particular society. Laughlin’s work in this area is wide and deep, and we are privileged to have three of his papers in this section, though the first also serves as introduction to the Special Topic.

The final section contains a paper by Harris L. Friedman, senior editor of this journal, entitled, “Searching for Wild Elephants in the North Georgia Forests: The Saga of Writing a Transpersonal Dissertation at a Mainstream University.” This paper serves not only the purpose of its title, but is also a fitting tribute to one of Friedman’s mentors, Earl Clement Brown of Georgia State University.

Special thanks are due to Charles Laughlin for his work in putting together an exceptional Special Topic Section. The current issue is being actively managed by IJTS Assistant Editor Courtenay Crouch, who is scheduled to be promoted to Associate Editor later this year. Her work is guided by Maureen Harrahy, PhD, now Associate Editor with the journal. Maureen has been with the journal since 2010, and has dedicated herself to mastering every level of the process—she deserves thanks and congratulations. Nick Fortino also deserves particular thanks for his work as Associate Managing Editor.

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About the Journal

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