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Introduction to Special Topic Section on TRANSPERSONAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The Ethno-Epistemology of Transpersonal Experience: The View from Transpersonal Anthropology

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This paper introduces the topic of ethno-epistemology with regards to transpersonal experiences. The distinction between polyphasic and monophasic cultures is introduced and the interaction between a society's world view and individual transpersonal experience is explained using the cycle of meaning model. A link to philosophical work on "natural epistemology" is made and the importance of the "projectability" of cultural theories of experience is discussed. The individual contributions to this special section of the journal are introduced.

Keywords: *alternative states of consciousness, reality, ethno-epistemology, brain, natural epistemology, experience-near*

Epistemological, metaphysical and axiological continuity must be in harmony if we are to have a coherent naturalistic picture of the world as well as human end-seeking and activity within it.

—Maffie, 1990, p. 290

It should be possible to formulate more explicitly the necessary and sufficient conditions that make a human existence possible and which account for the distinctive quality of human experience.

—Hallowell, 1967, pp. vii-viii

The literature in transpersonal anthropology extends back into the 19th century, and is rich in the range of transpersonal experiences described among the planet's cultures (see Campbell & Staniford, 1978; Laughlin, 1989, 1994a; Laughlin, McManus, & Shearer, 1983; Peters, 1994, 1996; Schroll, 2011; Schroll & Schwartz, 2005; LaHood, 2007; Gaffin, 2012). Transpersonal anthropology is the cross-cultural study of transpersonal experiences, including the sociocultural evocation, interpretation, and utility of transpersonal experiences, and their involvement in defining social roles. Of particular concern for anthropologists is the various ways rituals and psychoactive substances are used to encourage and evoke transpersonal experiences, and how these experiences are integrated into their social identity. Holocultural research¹ has shown that the vast majority

of the 4000-plus human societies seek altered states of consciousness (ASC) and integrate information obtained about themselves and the world from these experiences into their world view (Bourguignon, 1973, 2003; Bourguignon & Evascu, 1977). My group has called such peoples *polyphasic cultures* (see Laughlin, this volume)—cultures in which both the world view and the individual's identity are specifically informed from experiences in ASCs (i.e., dreaming, visions, drug trips, rituals, and ordeals, etc.). Polyphasic cultures are significantly different from *monophasic cultures* of the sort that is typical of modern, materialistic, technocratic societies like the Euro-American-Aussie one, as well as modern industrial Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian societies. Monophasic cultures are those that privilege experiences had in what is called "normal waking states" as opposed to "alternative states" such as dreaming,

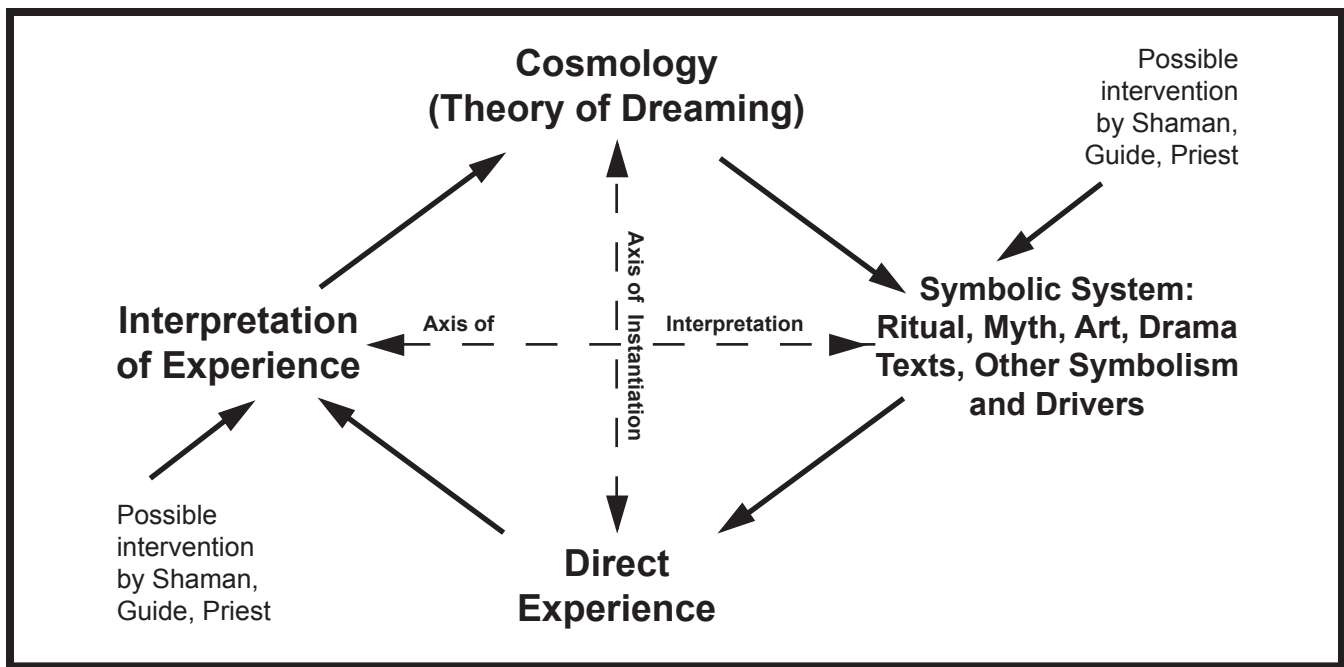


Figure 1. *The Cycle of Meaning.* Individual experiences arise as a consequence of social activities that derive their meaning from the society's world view. Activities lead to direct experiences (incubated dreams, visions, drug trips, etc.) that are then interpreted in accordance with the world view. Experience functions to vivify and verify the world view, and instantiate the symbolic materials presented in the social activities. In the case of truly novel experiences, the interpretation may result in an alteration of the world view and the meanings of its constituent symbolism.

visions, drug trips, ritual enactments, and so forth. Monophasic culture is correlated with a materialistic world view. All monophasic societies, however, retain elements or sub-cultures that tend toward the polyphasic, and all were once entirely polyphasic in their pre-modern world views and practices.

The Cycle of Meaning

Engagement in ASCs among traditional peoples almost never occurs outside a social context. Rather, the emphasis is upon integration of individual experiences within a social process that has elsewhere been modeled as a *cycle of meaning* (see Figure 1).

Take for example a typical dream incubation situation (see Laughlin, 2011, pp. 221-231). A person is seeking guidance from ancestors, spirits, or gods, and travels to a special place where she prepares herself by purification and other rituals (often under the guidance of a priest), dons special clothing, prays, then sleeps in a sacred place (a grove, cave, so forth) and upon waking, relates her dream to the priest who helps her interpret the meaning of the dream(s) relative to both the problem she is seeking to solve, and her culture's world view. However, the experience and its interpretation relate to her individual problem, the process has both

instantiated her world view in direct experience (e.g., she has been visited by a revered ancestor from the City of the Dead), and she has gained real-life experience that becomes part of the meaning of her culture's sacred symbolism in her own mind. By direct experience I mean what Kohut (1978/2011, pp. 268-271; see also Kohut & Goldberg, 1984) termed "experience-near" as opposed to "experience-distant". The difference is one of relative abstraction from direct, immediate experience. As Geertz (2000, p. 57) noted, "love" is experience-near, while "object-cathexis" is experience-distant. If, as sometimes happens, her experience is perceived by herself or the priest as novel, it may lead to a transformation of the meaning of symbolic material and thus the world view. This is the kind of cultural transformation that anthropologist Wallace (1956, 1966) called "revitalization". McGee (2012) offered a marvelous example among the people of Haiti of the positive feedback that may occur between dream experiences and the people's world view. As he wrote, "Dreams are vital sources of liturgical novelty in Haitian Vodou—and this novelty is, itself, an underdescribed and understudied quality that the religion possesses" (p. 83).

Natural Epistemology and Ethno-Epistemology

While anthropologists have recorded a vast amount of information about transpersonal experiences and sociocultural systems, they have almost always done so by describing local folk beliefs as related to them by host elders and religious/ritual practitioners (e.g., Grindal, 1983; Harner, 1973; Lederman, 1988; Long, 1976). The emphasis has usually been on *what* people believe—*what* people claim to know about themselves, others, and the world around them. In other words, anthropologists are generally satisfied in asking about a people's *ethno-ontology*. They rarely go on to ask about the people's *ethno-epistemology*—that is, *how do people come to know what they claim to know*. Returning to the hypothetical dream incubation scenario related above, our dream-seeker comes from a group of people who believe that ancestors, spirits, gods, and so forth inhabit a spiritual domain which, among other places, includes a City of the Dead. This is an ethno-ontological description referring to the society's world view—their belief system. Yet the description does not tell us *how* the people come to know that there is a spirit world, that they may access that world in dreams, and obtain information from such encounters of use during waking consciousness.

Rule of Multiple Interpretations

It helps here to understand that any direct experience is open to multiple interpretations. In other words, abstracting meaning from experience is an interpretive (hermeneutic) process. This is the case regardless of the experience (transpersonal or otherwise) or the culture from which the experiencer belongs. Put negatively, the *rule of multiple interpretations* states: *There is no such thing as an experience or an intuition that admits of one and only one interpretation* (Laughlin, 1994b; Laughlin, 2011, p. 489). Following is an example of this rule. Barbara Tedlock (1992) told an interesting story about her husband, Dennis Tedlock, who had a dream while in the field among the Quiché Maya. He dreamt “of receiving an ear of corn from an unknown person at a party; when he opened the husk the corn was already roasted, with butter, salt, lime juice, and chili powder on it” (pp. 105-106). He did not eat the corn, however. Tedlock realized that had her husband reported that dream to a Zuni interpreter with whom they had previously done research, it would have been viewed as a very bad omen: that he would die if not treated to avoid a drastic outcome. However, instead of a Zuni interpreter,

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he reported his dream to a Quiché interpreter. He was told it was a good dream, but that the next time he dreamed of receiving a gift of food from an ancestor spirit, he should eat it immediately. Interpretations of the same material may vary widely across cultures, and perhaps even among different interpreters within a single society.

Natural Epistemology

Much of Western academic metaphysics is inapplicable to cross-cultural situations; this is for several reasons. In the first place, they are often armchair ruminations without empirically-supportable hypotheses. In the second place, these ruminations are ethnocentric, linked to Western values and ways of knowing. In the third place, most are uninformed by the natural sciences, especially evolutionary biology and neuroscience. In the fourth place, the assumptions of professional metaphysicians may be of an *a priori* nature that is unrelated either to empirical science or more traditional notions in other cultures. However, one of the more useful formulations coming out of philosophical thought has been an increasing call for *naturalizing* epistemology (Goldman, 1992, 1999; Devitt, 1991; Boyd, 1981, 1984, 1991; Maffie, 1990, 1991, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002). According to philosopher of science Maffie (1999):

Naturalists reject epistemology as First Philosophy, [that is] as an autonomous *a priori* enterprise prior to and normative for all other inquiry. They propose instead an epistemology that is continuous with science: one conducted within science, as part of science. Naturalists endeavor to create such continuity by extending the epistemology of the sciences (i.e. their *a posteriori* evidential practices) as well as the substantive findings of science into the epistemology of epistemology. (p. 23)

A naturalized epistemology is one that is open to the empirical study of how the acquisition of knowledge actually occurs, as well as how people conceptualize such acquisition. As Maffie suggested, the study of epistemology may extend to people across cultures. Indeed, Maffie (2002) himself analyzed the epistemology of the Nahuatl-speaking cultures of Mexico during the 16th century. In testing Goldman's (1992, 1999) notion of *veritism* (that all people everywhere seek knowledge and relate language-based, descriptive, and conceptual knowledge to the truth), Maffie showed that

the presumption of veritism—that people everywhere rationally judge the truth of statements by their correspondence to facts—like so many other notions in Western philosophy, is ethnocentric and a projection of Western values upon another, alien culture.

Transpersonal Experience and Nelson Goodman’s “Projectability”

One of the most valuable notions coming out of naturalistic epistemology—and the closest view I have yet found in philosophy to my own multiple interpretation rule—is Goodman’s (1973, Ch. 4) *projectability* characteristic of scientific theories:

A hypothesis will be said to be *actually projected* when it is adopted after some of its instances have been examined and determined to be true, and before the rest have been examined. The hypothesis need not be true, or lawlike, or even reasonable; for we are speaking here not of what ought to be projected but of what is in fact projected. Moreover, we are not concerned with the question whether a hypothesis is projected in the tenseless sense that there is some past, present or future time at which it is projected. We are concerned at any given time only with projections that have already been made. (pp. 87-88)

As Boyd (1984) put it, “given any finite body of data, there are infinitely many different general theories that are logically consistent with those data” (p. 57). Of course Boyd is a constructivist and would have one believe there is no way to evaluate which theory that fits the facts should be accepted. It is all a matter of “paradigms”, to use Kuhn’s (1974) term. However, that is an issue for another time, and one that does not diminish in any way the utility of projectability as a characteristic of scientific *or cultural* theories, and, more importantly for ethnological purposes, the hermeneutics of transpersonal experiences. Projectability is inherent in any living cycle of meaning, and is part of the axes of interpretation and instantiation. When reading Tonkinson’s description (this volume) of the relations between individual experience and *The Dreaming* among Australian Aborigines, there is a perfect example of the timeless nature of projectability as noted by Goodman, and how projectability operates to maintain the Aboriginal cycle of meaning.

Put in more neuropsychological terms, it is precisely the nature of the brain to develop an internal reality model (or cognitive map) that derives from and in turn is projected back upon direct experiences. Any

moment of conscious experience is a neurophysiological act which melds sensory input and cognitive models (Laughlin, McManus, & D’Aquili, 1990, pp. 28-29). Perceptual/cognitive models inform the experience precisely because they are *projectable* upon patterns of sensory input. Obviously, any number of alternative models can be projected onto any given set of sensory data (hence the rule of multiple interpretations above), and that is when culture may, and usually does, influence experience.

The term “transpersonal” is often bandied about as a catch-all term for every kind of extraordinary experience. Yet if we use the term in its more technical sense, and define *transpersonal experience* as any experience that transcends ego expectations—this calls a person’s identity into question because of dissonance between what was once thought about oneself and one’s well-ordered world and what one is actually experiencing (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980)—then it follows that an experience that is transpersonal for one person may not be transpersonal for another. The experience may produce ego-changing dissonance in the former person and fail to do so for the latter. This is particularly relevant when considering the nature of transpersonal experience across cultures. If one is raised in a polyphasic culture to expect encounters with “other-than-human persons” (Hallowell, 2002, p. 20) such as ghosts, sprites, gods, ancestors, et cetera, then such encounters may not cause dissonance. However, if one is raised in a Western technocratic and monophasic society in which one is taught to disbelieve in such encounters, then such an experience might be “mind-blowing”, so to speak. Transpersonal experience thus has a lot to do with what a person’s world view prepares her or him to project upon potentially transpersonal experience.

What is found among polyphasic peoples is that they typically have cultures that incorporate a transpersonal cycle of meaning. That is, not only do the people mount symbolic and ritual methods for evoking transpersonal experiences, they also provide interpretations, or perhaps models, that are easily projectable onto whatever experiences arise during the process. If one speaks in tongues, that is because one is filled with the Holy Spirit. If one dreams of a conversation with a long-dead Aunt Lucy, then it is because one aunt has traveled from the City of the Dead to impart important information. Such experiences instantiate the cultural theory, because the cultural theory is easily

projectable onto the experience. This is the root of all real-life, everyday hermeneutics.

There is no clearer example of projectability than the attribution of meaning onto the landscape. Devereux (this volume) offers a wonderful survey of the many sacred sites around the world that derive their meaning in part because they are simulacra—features that remind local people of elements in their mythology. A mountain ridge is seen as a sleeping chief, a rock feature is seen as a bleeding vulva, a rock bears the resemblance to a buffalo. What one projects upon such features is heavily determined by one's culture. There is a famous rock formation in New Mexico known in English as Shiprock, from which the town of Shiprock takes its name. As one gazes at this geological feature, driving toward it from the east, it does resemble an old sailing ship to Western eyes. But the Navajo long ago projected a bird wing onto that same formation and named it *Tse'Bit'Ai*, or "rock with wings". The Navajo understand that the bird itself and its other wing are underground and hence hidden from sight, while Westerners see the feature entirely above ground—a sailing ship plying the sea. This difference in projection and interpretation is significant relative to the two cultures' very different world views.

Experience:

The Root of Ethno-Epistemology

The task we six anthropologists set for ourselves for this special section was to think about how various peoples come to know what they claim to know with respect to transpersonal experiences. Of course people in all cultures know a lot of things simply because they were taught them. They believe because that is the way their worldview tells them to believe. Most Westerners believe the Earth rotates around the sun, and that microscopic creatures produce disease, and these things are believed because they were taught. However, our question is more refined. We want to know the influence of transpersonal experience—experience that is, by definition, transformative in some way—on the beliefs of people, and how those beliefs anticipate, set-up, encourage, evoke and offer interpretations of extraordinary experiences. This question is much harder to answer by reading much of the ethnography of religious and spiritual experiences. There are excellent exceptions, of course, and these are almost always written by anthropologists that have had transpersonal experiences themselves (see, e.g., Bharati, 1975; Furst, 1976; George, 1995; Goulet, 1998; Goulet & Miller, 2007; Grindal, 1983; Harner,

1973; Krippner & Friedman, 2010; Lederman, 1988; Long, 1976; Winkelman, 2010; Young & Goulet, 1994). Methodologically speaking, there really is no alternative for the ethnographic fieldworker but to open herself up to potentially transformative experiences (Laughlin, 1989).

Implied in this methodology is the core answer to our question about ethno-epistemology. As each contributor in his or her own way confirms, the roots of local transpersonal knowledge are grounded in direct experience. Some may receive knowledge via tradition, but people everywhere, especially in polyphasic societies, believe in the spiritual domain precisely because they experience its reality. A thing is true because I experience it to be real. In this volume, I discuss the phenomenology of dreaming and show why one might reach the conclusion that, not just waking consciousness but all states of consciousness are real. Moreover, I make the point that experiences had in ASCs make available potentially transformative information to the dreamer and quite often to the community (see also McGee, 2012). Tonkinson (this volume) takes us among the Mardu Aboriginies who live in Australia's Western Desert region. The Mardu people see themselves as conduits of information between the timeless Dreaming and the everyday life of the community. Because they are able to leave their corporeal bodies at night and travel long distances to engage with Dreamtime spirits, ASCs are the source of creativity and transformation in both culture and social identity. The grounding of reality in a timeless mythopoeic spiritual domain is not limited to traditional ontologies, but is also reflected in modern physics of the sort Bohm (1980) described. Schroll (this volume) encapsulates Bohm's thinking about what he called the "implicate order" of physical reality. The implicate order is, like the Dreamtime, a timeless domain that makes possible an understanding of how there may be a continuum from mind to matter. Is it possible that traditional epistemologies of people everywhere intuit the truth of the implicate order, and thus almost inevitably see everything as ontologically entangled in a vast whole?

Recognizing that polyphasic peoples do in fact consider their worldviews as grounded in experienced reality, and that confirmation of this contention involves direct and transpersonal engagement with the world, Glass-Coffin (this volume)—like Turner (1996) before her—raises the obvious question: Why do so many anthropologists and other transpersonal researchers

fail to take our hosts' descriptions of "other-than-human sentience" seriously? All too often ethnographic presentations of these important descriptions are couched in constructivist (relativist) narratives that allow the researcher to implicitly disavow the fact that these are lived realities to the people having those experiences. Why else would people take such interest in sacred places, like those described for us by Devereux (this volume)? Not only that, but why else go to such extreme efforts to construct elaborate megalithic and spiritual centers like Stonehenge? The power that people describe for such sacred places is, once again, grounded in direct experience, and hence considered as part—indeed, a very pivotal part—of reality. As Devereux notes, and as Winkelman (this volume) also emphasizes, many of these elements, both material and spiritual, are part of the many shamanic traditions across the planet. Shamanistic practices in a sense involve a social maximization of the ability to enter ASCs and engage with the other-than-human beings, cosmic power, spiritual insights, and healing potential available to those who can access alternative realities.

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Note

1. Holocultural research is a method used by anthropologists to test hypotheses about psychology, culture, or social organization using a world-wide sample of societies. The research is usually statistical and of a correlational nature.

About the Author

Charles D. Laughlin, PhD, is an emeritus professor of anthropology and religion, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Carleton University, Ottawa. He has completed ethnographic research among the So people of northeastern Uganda, Tibetan Tantric Buddhist lamas in Nepal, Chinese Buddhists in southeast Asia, and the Navajo of the American Southwest. He is the co-author of *Brain, Symbol and Experience* (1990) and author of *Communing With the Gods: Consciousness, Culture and the Dreaming Brain* (2011). He specializes in the neuroanthropology of consciousness.