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What is Transpersonal Psychology? A Concise Definition Based on 20 Years of Research

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Research on definitions of the field of psychology and themes in the literature of the field over a period of 20 years inform this description: Transpersonal psychology is a transformative psychology of the whole person embedded within a diverse, interconnected, and evolving world that pays particular attention to states of consciousness and developmental models reflecting expansion beyond conventional notions of self. Each element of this definition is examined, as well as the four phases of definitional development within the field from its founding in 1968 up to the present.

Keywords: *transpersonal psychology, transformative psychology, whole person psychology, particle myth, idioholographic, states of consciousness, post-conventional development*

Transpersonal psychology is an audacious, exuberant upstart field that challenges the wider discipline of psychology to expand its views of the capacities and potentials of the person. Changing one's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors can of course impact feelings, and psychiatric medications can help in the management of some symptoms and disorders. But healing is also about reviving the human spirit, and the ability to do so is diminished when psychological models center on these pragmatics to the exclusion of human motivation, inspiration, vision, and the creativity to become more than one imagined. Shifting the center of psychology to include positive potentials alongside pathologies is the work of transpersonal psychology—not simply by focusing on positive thoughts and feelings, but by gaining a clear understanding of a wide range of human potencies and how they can be activated.

A Concise Definition of Transpersonal Psychology

The definition offered here is the product of 20 years of research on this topic, in collaboration with various scholars. But before providing the resulting definition it is crucial to describe the field as one that promotes, or at least permits, transformative priorities in psychology.

Transpersonal as a Transformative Psychology

Just as spiritual teachers weave visions of attainment beyond mundane life to inspire their

students toward the necessary years of rigorous practice, so military officers know that even the best in military hardware will be of little avail without the will to fight, and business leaders know that a small inspired team in a creative skunkworks may outcompete a building full of bureaucratic paper-pushers. Conventional treatment models based on cognitive behavioral neuroscience concern themselves with the necessary biological machinery and cognitive behavioral mechanisms, but transpersonal psychology adds a focus on how to instill the desire to reach for higher potentials, and how to guide that development. This vision to which transpersonal psychology aspires is not based on religion, nationalism, or personal ambition, but grounded in empirical science—even if the field's efforts to engage in scientific work are still fledgling.

Western psychology's marginalization of the mystical, spiritual, and exceptional human capacities that engage the transpersonal area is based not so much on science as on a Western cultural mythos that approximates the world as a collection of discrete objects made up of lifeless rule-following particles: a sort of *particle myth*. This belief is clearly expressed in a statement by Emil DuBois-Reymond, who reported that in 1842 he and Ernest Brücke "pledged a solemn oath to put into effect this truth: no forces other than the common physical-chemical ones are active within the organism. ... the physical-chemical forces inherent

in matter, reducible to the forces of attraction and repulsion" (Wertheimer, 2012, p. 64). This statement is emblematic of the particular kind of materialism that has been assimilated into scientific culture. By contrast, note that Strawson (2006a, 2006b) has proposed a version of physicalism that is not anti-mentalistic but actually requires panpsychism. Yet the specific, narrow materialism drafted by Brücke and DuBois-Reymond in their Berlin manifesto prefigures the one to which scientific culture has also sworn fealty—seemingly unaware that it represents allegiance to an ideology rather than to empirical inquiry.

As Bhaskar (1975/1997) has noted, "every account of science presupposes an ontology [in the sense that] it presupposes a schematic answer to the question of what the world must be like for science to be possible" (p. 59). The issue is not that science has made pragmatic background assumptions about reality that are necessary for its functioning, but that scientific society has been seduced by one particular speculative vision of reality, as if it were as reliable as the science that it supports—and thereby denied all others.

Moreover, the speculative reality assumptions that typically accompany science are themselves powerful innovations. Analyzing the world as if it were made of discrete particle-based objects drove the development of standardized parts and assembly lines in medieval Venice (Wilson & Favotto, 2016) and enabled the mass production that drove an 18th and 19th century industrial revolution in the West (mass production likely imagined either by Simeon North or a slave known to Eli Whitney; DuBois, 1924; Stovall, 2017); this vision informed the recognition of cells as building blocks of organisms by Robert Hooke (Klein & Treutlein, 2019) and of bacteria as pathogens by Anton van Leeuwenhoek (Ribatti, 2018); description of matter in terms of molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles; and the electronic digitization of information processing that has led to now-ubiquitous computers. Particle-based analysis has transformed technology and revolutionized the world.

At the same time, when this pragmatic analytical tool is expanded into a worldview, it becomes an ontological belief that *the world really is made of lifeless particles arranged amazingly well.*

Despite its efficacy in many applications, analysis-as-particles remains an approximation rather than a revelation of how reality is structured. For example, the shape of the human foot reflects our planet's mass and its earthen surface; if humans evolved on a rocky planet of much greater mass, our feet would likely be squat and claw-like rather than slender and arched (cf. Gendlin, 1997). If seemingly separate objects also reflect aspects of larger wholes of which they are part, this violates the common notion that objects are wholly discrete, local, and bounded. This reflection of wholes within its parts is not quite holographic (e.g., Talbot, 1991), since each aspect reflects larger wholes in its own unique way—a property I describe as *idiholographic* (*idio-* as "specific to one," *-holo-* as "whole," and *-graphic* as "written": the whole written into each aspect in a unique way).

Objects are also not discrete from each other, as they should be in a particle-based worldview. For example, there is no clear boundary between the atmosphere and the oxygen that is breathed in through the lungs and circulated through the blood (Gendlin, 1997), nor between the moisture in our bodies and the water in the oceans, rivers, and atmosphere. There is no clear boundary of the planet on which we live—the surface of the crust extends into the dust and water vapor in the air; the atmosphere that is itself a crucial part of the planet has no clear boundary with empty space; and magnetic structures that make life possible, such as the Van Allen radiation belt and the plasmasphere, reach far into space, so that it is no simple matter to define what is and is not the "thing" that is Earth. However useful it is to analyze the world as particles, doing so remains an approximation—not evidence of "how the world really is."

Nor are particles the only way to analyze things—if the unit of analysis is *relationships*, then objects and particles are simply locations where relationships intersect; if analysis engages with *systems*, then particles and relationships are both features of larger networks (e.g., Von Bertalanffy, 1950); if systems are analyzed as dynamic rather than static, then systems are participants in the constant emergence of *process* that is ubiquitous (e.g., Gendlin, 1997). None of these other units

of analysis—relationships, systems, process—hold any more or less reality than particles, as each is a constructed unit of analysis rather than an objective reality. Yet if relational, systems, and process models are extrapolated into worldviews, they tell a very different story than the particle myth. With these, the human being is not some larger instance of a rat pressing levers in a cage to gain rewards or to escape punishment, but rats, humans, forests, and oceans are relational systems within a dynamic, ever-emerging process of becoming that creates, renews, and re-invents itself in every moment. Such transformative visions also contain a mythic element, but are *no less true than the particle myth* that subtly permeates science, and psychology—and that is often served up as a mandatory pessimism in scientific societies.

A clear example of this disheartening vision is provided by Francis Crick in his 1994 book, *Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul*, where he declared that, “you, your joys and sorrows, your memories and ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will are, in fact, no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells. As Lewis Carroll’s Alice might have phrased it: “You’re nothing but a pack of neurons” (p. 3). This notion of neuroscience accords with Daniel Dennett’s (e.g., 2021) assertion that consciousness is a user-illusion; he seemed to suggest that humans are something like avatars in virtual realities generated by organisms in order to help those organisms track things that matter to them, and these avatars do a better job if they believe they *are* the organism.

Worldviews based in the particle myth hold bleak implications for human agency, identity, and potential. This is not to deny that techno-utopian visions have recurred regularly since before the Fabian socialists of the 19th century, but even these require that humans break out of a bottom-up, deterministic reality and use technology in transformative ways that a particle model of reality cannot explain, because it is a limited and limiting worldview.

In education, limiting worldviews in students have been linked with decreased ability to engage effectively in the learning process (Roeser et al., 2002);

conversely, teachers rated highly by their peers have been associated with transformative worldviews (Adler, 2019). There are likely similar implications for psychotherapy, where a transformative view may be more effective in inspiring human healing. But there are also implications for psychology, where a limiting worldview informed by the particle myth routinely quashes proposals, funding, research, and publication related to empirical projects not aligned with its dismal view of human capacities and potential.

For example, a rebuttal to a paper discussing positive evidence for precognition (Mossbridge & Radin, 2018) rejected its review of empirical findings, and its entire subject area, as “implausible” (Schwartzkopf, 2018)—a claim that subtly elevates this skeptic’s background reality assumptions above the evidence being reviewed. As counterpoint to this stance, a university professor shared his discomfiture when he realized that his common-sense standards for refereeing research proposals would have led him to turn down three projects that went on to win the Nobel prize for their discoveries (Pietronero, 2020). The critic who found precognition implausible recited the phrase, “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” (Schwartzkopf, 2018, p. 97), but what is extraordinary in Euro-American culture may not be extraordinary in many other cultures of the world. Sometimes a proposal is implausible because of its flaws; sometimes this charge may reveal a reviewer’s parochialism, or lack of constructive imagination to perceive potential.

Transpersonal psychology has spent much of its first five decades describing human experiences and processes that challenge the hegemony of the particle myth. It has critiqued the symptoms of this philosophy—sometimes conflating its drab worldview with science itself, and then promoting active subversion of scientific approaches (e.g., Cunningham, 2019a, 2019b; Taylor, 2017). Given that the task of transpersonal psychology can be understood as building a psychology not based in gratuitously despairing visions birthed from the particle myth, it is fitting that the field has spent effort on philosophies and theories useful for this project. While construction of its foundations is ongoing, and transpersonal psychology has not committed

to any specific paradigm, there does appear to be enough *terra firma* at last for the field to launch a more robust empirical phase (cf. Hartelius, 2021a) capable of avoiding particle myth distortions.

This raises the question of whether a field that is avowedly transformative can also be a psychology—with the implication that it is also a scientific discipline. Here the short answer is, yes, because science is a method, not a worldview—and whether that method is associated with a dispiriting view of the world as lifeless particles or as a self-renewing living process, the method is effective. It works as long as it is not distorted by the confines of a limiting worldview—either by suppression, in the case of the medieval Christian Church, or by the culture-based constraints of a particle myth.

It is clear that the founders of transpersonal psychology launched the field as an empirical scientific enterprise (Hartelius, 2021b; Sutich, 1968), even though many questions of methodology were yet to be answered. As will be described, after Maslow's untimely death the field went through a more metaphysical phase of some 25 years before again finding a place for rigorous scientific methods. Abraham Maslow, the founder with the greatest scholarly weight, and who was also instrumental in the founding of humanistic psychology, was a scientist of repute who published an early (1932) paper with Harry F. Harlow, perhaps best known for his 1959 study showing that infant rhesus monkeys preferred clinging to a surrogate mother made of wool rather than one made of bare wire, even when the latter dispensed milk. It was after a series of studies on primate motivation that Maslow transited to the study of human motivation, of self-actualization, and eventually of peak experiences and "the farther reaches of human nature" (1969a), which he believed to be biologically based processes that could be studied empirically (1967, 1970).

It should be no surprise, given Maslow's close relationship with founding editor Anthony Sutich, that the Statement of Purpose in the first several volumes of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (JTP) referred to "publication of theoretical and applied research, original contributions, *empirical* papers, articles and studies," with the word "empirical" italicized until 1973 (Lajoie et al., 1991).

When Maslow referred to "transcendence," as he did in a 1969(b) paper with 35 proposed applications of the term, his usage was psychological rather than metaphysical. For Maslow transcendence could mean going beyond such things as self-consciousness (definition #1), identification with one's own physical body (#2), one's culture (#4), one's past (#5), selfishness (#6), the necessity of death, pain, sickness, and evil (#7), and so forth. Even when describing transcendence of time and space, Maslow was referencing a state of mind in which there is escape from identification with one's present experience (#3) or current location (#28). There was for Maslow no notion of access to a spiritual or metaphysical domain that is somehow beyond time and space.

In 1976, shortly after Sutich's death and the transition to a new editor (Miles Vich), reference to empirical papers was removed (Lajoie et al., 1991), and transpersonal psychology entered its metaphysical phase. For a quarter of a century, transpersonal psychology succumbed to the transformative charms of its own mythos, elevating its necessary but speculative background assumptions into an ontology. In its unsteady early steps transpersonal psychology committed itself to a different version of the same error it condemns in scientific culture.

Other than versions of Sutich's definition in JTP's Statement of Purpose, none of the collected definitions of the field from its inception through 1995 associated transpersonal psychology with empirical research (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992; Shapiro et al., 2002). Boucouvalas' 1980 description of the field included only reference to "inner or experiential empiricism" (p. 41), and Donald Rothberg (1986) argued for perennialism as a philosophical foundation of the transpersonal field. By the late 1990s critics were calling out both perennialism and Ken Wilber's once-dominant models as unsupportable metaphysical schemas (e.g., Ferrer, 1998; Rothberg, Kelly, & Kelly, 1998). In 1999, after allegedly blocking publication of papers not aligned with Wilber's thought during his tenure (Ferrer & Puente, 2013), Miles Vich stepped down as editor of JTP (Puhakka, 2000); in 2000, Wilber formally announced his departure from the field.

In the wake of these changes came two new impulses: With a 2002 book, Jorge Ferrer launched participatory thought within transpersonal psychology, offering it as an alternative to perennialism that embraced pluralism without requiring metaphysics. In the same year Harris Friedman (2002, 2015) formally called for the transpersonal field to function as a science. Yet Friedman's advocacy of science was no call for a return to the pessimistic mythos of particle-based reality; instead, it was a call to set aside discussion of worldviews long enough to actually apply empirical methods to the study of the transformative phenomena and processes at the heart of transpersonal psychology.

A Concise Definition of Transpersonal Psychology

To characterize transpersonal psychology as a *transformative psychology* sets a necessary context for definition, but it is not sufficient as a definition. A formal definition should reflect the field's broad goals, its main areas of focus, and the many ways in which it has been defined. The following definition results from engagement with the work of well over a hundred transpersonal scholars and thinkers, as well as multiple collaborative reviews of decades of evidence in the literature of the field. The intent is to reflect the field's range of actual self-definitions and study rather than serving to promote any of its multiple approaches. Here is one such definition:

Transpersonal psychology is a transformative psychology of the whole person embedded within a diverse, interconnected, and evolving world that pays particular attention to states of consciousness and developmental models reflecting expansion beyond conventional notions of self.

As will be shown, this definition makes implicit reference to historical transpersonal interests in transformative states of consciousness, spirituality, mysticism, beyond-ego development, compassion, altruism, embodiment, phenomenology, multiculturalism, positive human potentials, post-conventional development, parapsychology, evolution of consciousness, ecopsychology, nature mysticism, interconnectedness, participatory thought, and systems and process models. It

also reflects the three major definitional themes identified in 160 published definitions of the field by Hartelius et al. (2007): transpersonal as a beyond-ego psychology, as an integrative psychology of the whole person, and as a transformative psychology. While this is not a consensus definition, it does reflect the field's content and many earlier definitions in succinct form; in a field where most scholars tend to favor their own particular definition of the field, this may be as close as we are likely to get.

A Psychology of the Whole Person

Describing transpersonal psychology as a psychology of the whole person, or of the whole of human experience (cf. Boucouvalas, 1980, 1999), implies that conventional psychology misses some human dimensions. For example, psychology is designed wholly from the perspective of a conventional waking state that is normal to Western culture, and much of what psychological science misses can be characterized as the content and perspective from *transformative states of consciousness*—shifts in global cognitive state that facilitate access to valuable resources (McKilliam, 2020; cf. Grof's [2013] holotropic states). The primacy of this topic in the field is confirmed by a survey of definitional constructs in JTP articles from 1970 to 2009, which showed that transformative "states of consciousness" was by far the most prevalent construct in the first four decades of the field, consistently occurring in more than 85% of articles (Hartelius et al., 2021).

Transformative states often provide experiences that are aligned with a transformative worldview, and include mystical and spiritual states, meditation, hypnosis, trance, shamanic states, peak experiences, and flow. Dreams or active imagination processes may provide access to imaginal states in which psychoemotional content appears powerfully in metaphorical forms. A type of transformative state often placed in its own category is *embodiment*, a sense of awareness experienced as permeating the space in and around the body. Sometimes this experience is interpreted as direct veridical perception of the body and the physical space around it (Hartelius, 2016), but it is better understood as a state of consciousness constructed from complex sources of information;

within this felt space the sense of self may be located more in the trunk of the body than the head (Hartelius & Goleman, 2016; Hartelius et al., 2022), a shift sometimes linked to spiritual development (Dürckheim, 1962). Introducing clients to this state where identity shifts to the felt space of the body, and then engaging with personal and emotional content in this state, is a strategy often used in transpersonal and somatic psychotherapy approaches and one of the distinctive ways transformative approaches differ from cognitive behavioral therapies (e.g., Caplan et al., 2013; Himelstein, 2011).

In addition to transformative states, transpersonal psychology is also interested in potentials for human development beyond the self-centered egoic functioning, formal operational thinking, and sexual maturity that characterize conventional adulthood. Maslow (1969a) suggested that individuals motivated by more than basic needs could develop into self-actualizers with values that transcend selfishness. More recently, Harry Hunt (2021) has proposed that peak and mystical experiences, whether occurring spontaneously or induced through treatment with psychedelic agents, may have transformative effects that reduce egocentrism and promote maturation towards something like a formal operational level of affective functioning. Hunt's suggestion builds on Michael Washburn's (1995) concept of post-conventional development into a full-bodied sexuality of polymorphous sensuousness (cf. Ferrer, 2008; Thouin-Savard, 2019). In the language of the early field, these notions represent development beyond ego.

A Psychology of the Person Embedded Within the World

Transpersonal psychology studies capacities for states and stages beyond conventional notions of self in part because it assumes that the person is intimately embedded within the world, and that the ego's often shortsighted efforts to protect the individual can result in behavior that minimizes this connection. Experiences and developments beyond ego are then for the purpose of connecting more deeply with the wider world. When this connection is felt to be numinous and cosmic, these experiences may be characterized as aspects of *spirituality and mysticism*; when the connection is an immersion into the natural world it is studied

as part of *ecopsychology* and immanent *nature mysticism*; when the connection manifests in the form of exceptional experiences such as knowing who is calling before answering the phone, affecting the thoughts, feelings, or healing of another person at a distance, or having access to information at a distant location that is not available through ordinary senses or logical deduction, its study falls within the subject area of *parapsychology*. Efforts to describe phenomena from within that more intimate connection to the world, rather than as collections of mental objectifications, are an aspect of the field of *phenomenology*.

This assumption of intimacy with the world differs starkly from particle mythology, where each "thing," including the person, is discrete, local, and bounded relative to other "things"—a difference that leads to unjustified rejection of transpersonal phenomena. Psychology journals typically look askance at studies that produce results not in keeping with particle-inspired notions of mechanism. For example, when a study found that participants served tea that had been covertly blessed by Buddhist monks reported greater mood improvements than those served untreated tea, but who believed their tea had been blessed, such findings would commonly be criticized for the absence of a mechanism (Shiah & Radin, 2013).

While it is good practice to propose possible mechanisms for observed results, the bias against such studies runs somewhat deeper. Notice that when every subatomic particle measured by particle physics showed a mass of zero, quantum physicists did not throw up their hands and decide that their enterprise was fanciful; they simply postulated that particle collisions would also create some other particle that held mass—as predicted by Peter Higgs in 1964 and verified in 2012 (Aad et al.; CMS Collaboration et al.). Yet mechanisms that might be proposed for the effects of blessed tea would likely be rejected out-of-hand as "implausible" *because they would necessarily challenge the implicit mythos of a particle-based reality*. Due to this bias, it would seem that even science needs to become a bit more scientific, and perhaps give up censorship based on a restrictive mythology.

As such, transpersonal psychology's assumption of a more intimate connection between humans

and the world is a crucial part of its definition. Moreover, if humans do have capacities to feel the future (Bem, 2011); be influenced by the thoughts or emotions of others at a distance, obtain information about events at a distant location by means other than conventional senses or logical inference, or influence physical events at a distance (Cardeña, 2018); or even experience spiritually-toned encounters while clinically dead (van Lommel et al., 2001), conventional assumptions about the nature of personhood and of particle-based models of reality would appear to be in urgent need of revision—or at minimum accompanied by a robust agnosticism.

A Psychology of the Person Embedded Within a Diverse and Interconnected World

Connection with the wider world occurs in the form of more conventional relationships as well, for if the world is characterized by *interconnectedness*, as transpersonal approaches assume, then engagement with its many diversities is imperative. In such a world, harvesting spiritual models and practices from various traditions for use by a spiritual elite must be displaced by transpersonal's embrace of *multiculturalism*—not only in its sources but among its participants. With its facility to navigate multiple ontologies, spiritualities, and states of consciousness unfamiliar to mainstream Western culture, it may be advantageously situated to collaborate in the development of Black, Latin, Asian, and other psychologies that respond to and reflect the traditions and lived experiences of these communities in ways that a Euro-American psychology likely cannot: a psychology that learns how to maintain scientific integrity while adapting to a multipolar, post-secular world (cf. Wade, 2019).

Movement toward these engagements comes from recognition that diversity is not something to be denied by appeal to transcendence toward a cosmic ultimate in which differences disappear; some early transpersonal models seemed to imply this sort of bypass remedy. Instead, it comes from valuing the transformation gained from embodied, embedded engagement with the world in its splendid diversity (Hartelius et al., 2021)—a process that calls for the study of self-transcending emotions such as *compassion* and *altruism*.

In support of its more horizontal forms of transcendence and transformation, the application of *participatory thought* within the field envisions truth claims within any community of knowledge or practice as radically equal to such claims within any other community, and calls for the cultivation of respectful dialogue between communities in ways that open each to learn from the insights of the other (Ferrer, 2002, 2008, 2017; Hartelius & Ferrer, 2013). Participatory thought may also be key to management of the tensions between spiritual and scientific models of reality (Hartelius, 2019a, 2019b).

A Psychology of the Person Embedded Within an Evolving World

There is no consensus among scholars in transpersonal psychology around a particular worldview, but there is consistent rejection of worldviews that exclude or minimize mystical, spiritual, and exceptional human experiences as aberrant or pathological. There is also attention to constructive developmental processes: the potential in individuals for *post-conventional development* that extends beyond conventional notions of maturity into higher human potentials, and for societies to align with the long arc of the moral universe as it bends towards *social justice* (King, 1967; Parker, 1853). Given that transpersonal models of every sort assume that subjective and objective aspects are integrated aspects of the whole person, it is reasonable to imagine that evolution of the human species may entail a complementary *evolution of consciousness*, or some other potent Mystery (Ferrer, 2017) that drives the diversities and beauties of the world.

Yet in naming this worldview that embodies transpersonal psychology's transformative mythos writ large, it is again necessary to step back and acknowledge that while biological evolution has over time achieved organisms of greater complexity, the notion that this represents *progress toward some greater good* is a hermeneutical overlay. The vision of an evolving world is a speculative background reality assumption that offers an alternative to the nihilistic prophecies of the particle myth—and by acknowledging the mythic character of both its own and science's background reality assumptions it frees psychology from the illusion that scientific

work necessarily carries within it a poison seed of cynicism about the aliveness of life.

Within a vision of an evolving world, it is easy to imagine how a person can heal and evolve, transform and thrive. No worldview can claim to be empirically true, but one in which not only species but also their consciousness evolves can offer rigorous scientific work a hermeneutical context free from the limitations of a pessimistic particle-based mythos. While it is necessary to keep the metaphysical nature of such an optimistic vision within view—and research is needed to control for experimenter effects of such a worldview—the primary impact of this shift is simply to counter biases against empirical results when they are in tension with an implicit, unacknowledged philosophy that has claimed allegiance from much of Western scientific society. With this prejudice removed, fields with carefully collected empirical data such as parapsychology would no longer need to be sequestered and marginalized, but would simply be another domain of psychology.

Nor would such a shift open some imagined floodgates of pseudoscience. Acknowledging that every worldview necessarily speculates beyond the boundaries of empirical knowledge is not the same as embracing perennialism or Enuma Elish or the book of Genesis as veridical accounts—these latter are myths first and foremost, whereas particle-based, relational, systems, and process worldviews are veridical accounts supplemented by speculative assumptions that are necessary to turn assemblages of facts into comprehensible visions—visions that hold narrative implications: Each implies a different story about how the world came to be, what sort of place we inhabit, and what it means to be a person in that world. The fact that the story implied by a particle myth tells of a meaningless world may not be evidence of its objectivity, but just evidence that it is not a good story for humans.

I experienced some bemusement when I first heard humanistic and transpersonal psychologies referred to as “philosophically situated psychologies,” because every approach to psychology is necessarily philosophically situated. In the case of cognitive, behavioral, and neuroscientific approaches, the particular Western philosophy imbued in them

remains invisible—as with fish who cannot see water. Transpersonal psychology has from its inception called out the problematic effects of this covert philosophy, noting that it can be uncritically used to censor even good quality empirical work that cannot be reconciled with a particle-based mythology. Rejection of a specific form of Western materialist philosophy should not of itself be a criterion for pseudoscience.

As transpersonal psychology absorbs the fact that its complaint is with a myth that permeates much of scientific culture rather than with the simple pragmatics of empirical research, it can perhaps make more room for quantitative methods alongside theoretical and qualitative research. With much work and a favorable wind, the field may just gain the momentum to move psychology that single cubic centimeter—a small shift that can make a large difference.

How this Concise Definition of Transpersonal Psychology Developed

I arrived a few minutes late to the first class of my doctoral program in the Fall of 2002, after going astray in the hallways of an unfamiliar campus. As I caught my breath, the instructor explained that each of us would write a definition of transpersonal psychology and read it to the class. When we had gone around the small circle, she suggested that our definitions of the field were likely as good as any, because transpersonal psychology had not been able to define itself. The final project for that class birthed two decades of research on the topic of defining the field, which culminates in this paper.

Four Phases of Defining the Field

The work of defining the field has developed in four stages: editorial formulations, literature review and qualitative inquiry, collection of definitions, and in-depth analysis of results. The process began at once, alongside the launch of the field, in the form of a slowly evolving definition published in the announcement of the new field (Sutich, 1968) and embedded in the Statement of Purpose in each issue of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (JTP) from 1969 to 1983 (Lajoie et al., 1991). These definitions focused on a wide variety of beyond-ego phenomena such as unitive consciousness, peak experiences, ecstasy, mystical experience,

essence, bliss, awe, wonder, spirit, sacralization of everyday life, oneness, cosmic awareness, cosmic play, and individual and species-wide synergy. As such, they reflected a spirit of exploration within the study of an expansive new domain of human experience. The definition in the Statement of Purpose was discontinued in 1983, when Miles Vich, then the editor of JTP, ended the practice and invited contributions to the development of a new statement.

A qualitative study into the scope of the transpersonal field by Boucouvalas (1980) did not result in a concise definition of the field, but its comprehensive outline offered a richer description based on a thorough review of relevant literature and discussions with scholars in the field. Its extensive results included a focus on individual and collective transcendent experiences; human potential, transformation, and evolution; beyond-ego states and developmental stages; exceptional human experiences; consciousness; integrations of disciplinary knowledge as well as between East and West, and applications in psychotherapy, education, and medicine. Importantly, Boucouvalas prefigured an element not recognized until decades later in definitional analyses: that transpersonal aspired, “At the most general level, to understand more fully the total human being in his/her external and internal worlds” (p. 40), and to accomplish this by extending the “domain of psychology ... to study the whole person” (p. 41). This early insight proved prescient of the current definition.

The next definitional phase, spanning from 1992 to 2003, was an effort to identify definitions of the field within its literature, publish these in collections, and conduct preliminary analyses of themes within them. A team led by Sam Shapiro published an initial collection of 40 definitions in 1992 (Lajoie & Shapiro), followed by another 80 definitions in 2002 (Shapiro, Lee, & Gross). These important efforts prepared the way for a more retrospective and empirical approach to definition of the field. However, the thematic analyses conducted on these collections appeared to focus somewhat selectively on elements already thought to constitute the field—beyond-ego phenomena, spirituality, altered and transcendent states of consciousness,

interconnectedness and unity, mysticism, meditation, and ultimate human potentials. A notable change in the analysis of this 2002 collection was the themes, “Inclusion of non-Western psychologies” in their Table 1. A separate research team solicited an additional 41 contemporary definitions from transpersonal scholars (Caplan et al., 2003), but did not attempt further analysis at that time.

The most recent phase of definitional research, spanning 2007 to 2022, has undertaken a more thorough thematic analysis of collected definitions and tested these themes by applying them to the literature of the field in order to discern possible trends over time. Hartelius et al. (2007) re-examined a corpus of 160 definitions from earlier collections: in addition to beyond-ego states, stages, and other phenomena, their detailed analysis identified a definitional theme describing transpersonal as a psychology of the whole person in their social and ecological contexts, and another theme of personal and social transformation. They also demonstrated that these second and third thematic areas were much more robustly represented in articles in JTP between 1999 and 2003 than between 1969 and 1973, suggesting a likely widening of the field’s scope that was not captured in earlier definitional analyses. This trend was confirmed in a subsequent study (Hartelius et al., 2021).

Three Major Themes in Collected Definitions

This broadening of content reflected a substantive shift in the transpersonal field—one that has been identified as a second wave of transpersonal psychology (Hartelius et al., 2021). The two earliest studies publishing and analyzing collections of definitions described the field almost exclusively in terms of its initial focus on states of consciousness and other beyond-ego phenomena (e.g., Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992; Lajoie et al., 1991; Shapiro, Lee, & Gross, 2002). A subsequent re-analysis (Hartelius et al., 2007) succinctly reframed the field as an integrative psychology of the whole person—as prefigured by Boucouvalas (1980). Such a psychology would necessarily include conventional approaches but also reach to encompass extended ranges of human consciousness, functioning, and development..

The early field focused on altered states as transcendence toward a cosmic ultimate—as it were, an “up-and-out” approach; by contrast, the emerging second-wave emphasis could be characterized as “here-and-with,” focusing on embodiment, embeddedness in the diversities of culture, and engagement with personal and social transformation (Hartelius et al., 2021). The third theme, personal and social transformation, can be understood broadly as a second-wave version of transcendence. Where the “up-and-out” vision of the early field offered a vertical cosmic transcendence, the “here-and-with” is a horizontal process of transformative response to the complexities of being embodied and embedded in the flesh, politics, and habitats of life.

These three themes accounted for about 90% of meaning units in the analyzed corpus of 160 published definitions of transpersonal psychology, with the remaining units describing non-content aspects such as the field’s methods, or consisting of transitional elements (Hartelius et al., 2007). As such, the three themes provide a fairly comprehensive summary of the ways in which scholars within transpersonal psychology have defined the field.

In the definition offered here, the phrase characterizing transpersonal as a psychology “that pays particular attention to states of consciousness and developmental stages reflecting expansion beyond conventional notions of self,” reflects the beyond-ego definitional theme. The integrative psychology of the whole person is represented in the description of transpersonal as a “psychology of the whole person embedded within a diverse, interconnected, and evolving world.” The third theme, personal and social transformation, is implicit in the claim that “transpersonal psychology is a transformative psychology.”

Measuring the Success of the Definition

As illustrated, the definition offered here offers a succinct summary of key transpersonal topic areas and reflects the major definitional themes present in 160 definitions published over 35 years (Hartelius et al., 2007). It is the definition used by the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. Papers associated with

the development of the definition have together received several hundred citations, so this approach to defining the field is in widespread use.

At the same time, there is a long-standing tradition within the field for scholars to engage in the process of creating their own definition, a tradition unlikely to be interrupted by the work done here. For those who prefer a definition that applies to a wide sampling of the field’s topics that is drawn from the definitions of many of the field’s scholars, perhaps the version offered here may serve a purpose.

In This Issue

This is the third consecutive issue focused on empirical research in transpersonal psychology, perhaps a small start towards a potential empirical phase—the value of which should be evident from the previous discussion.

The first paper in this collection summarizes “Transformative, Noetic, and Transpersonal Experiences During Personal Development Workshops” at the EarthRise Retreat Center formerly operated by the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). Authored by important IONS scholars such as Helané Wahbeh, Cassandra Vieten, Garret Yount, Agnes Cartry-Jacobsen, Dean Radin, and Arnaud Delorme, the study finds that the great majority of workshop participants reported having a transpersonal or noetic experience or moment of profound insight during their workshop attendance.

Following this is a long-ovdue empirical analysis of the effects of an intervention developed by one of transpersonal psychology’s founders, Stanislav Grof. Titled “The Perceived Impact of Holotropic Breathwork: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis,” Felipe Landaeta Farizo’s paper points to the value and importance of self-preparation for those who come to the process.

Evidence that profound experiences may begin before birth is the subject of Jenny Wade’s paper, “Life before Birth: A Thematic Analysis of People’s Earliest Memories of Coming into Life.” Part 1 focuses on “Recollections of Another Realm,” and analyzes accounts of memories that recall apparent pre-natal experiences portraying immersion in a reality quite different than the commonsense world.

This paper represents a new and important analysis of these noteworthy reports, and intersect with Grof's (e.g., 2000) work on psychedelic-induced recollections of perinatal experiences.

Part 2 of Wade's paper takes up a different aspect of memories ascribed to pre-natal and natal experience: descriptions of life in the womb, of the birth experience, and of related paranormal events. Whatever their ontological nature, recovering and addressing such experiences may hold substantial potential for healing trauma-related conditions that emerge or occur later in life.

These last three papers reflect the ongoing contributions to transpersonal psychology by Jenny Wade, celebrated in this issue's editorial introduction, who chaired the dissertation that is the source of Felipe Landaeta Farizo's paper, and authored the two studies that follow.

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