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Searching for Wild Elephants in the North Georgia Forests: The Saga of Writing a Transpersonal Dissertation at a Mainstream University

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In 1972, I approached Earl Clement Brown (see Pate, 2006) in the Clinical Psychology Program at Georgia State University about chairing my doctoral dissertation, which I wanted to focus on a yet to be decided topic within transpersonal psychology. I explained my desire to further my growing understanding and love of transpersonal psychology by writing a theoretical treatise integrating various Eastern, Indigenous, and Western spiritual traditions under a transpersonal psychological framework. He dismissed my interest in a theoretical work by arguing that, if I wrote without basing my conclusions on solid empirical data, I would lack scientific credibility to the community of psychologists and to the world at large, as my work would only be another opinion amidst the cacophony of transpersonal opinions. Consequently, he tried valiantly to discourage me from pursuing anything to do with transpersonal psychology, claiming how much more pragmatic it would be for me to research in a more mainstream area of psychology, and he suggested many interesting, and much easier, topics I could pursue under his guidance. He also assured me that I could write more freely on any topic of my choosing after having first established my scientific credentials. However, I would not be dissuaded due to the passion I held toward transpersonal psychology.

Reluctantly, Earl agreed to help me as my chair, but he set a clear expectation. Specifically, he stated that, if I were to conduct my dissertation research within a mainstream area, even if I were to find nothing of value, I would still be granted a doctoral degree if I had an approved proposal and followed what I proposed, as I would be working within established scientific traditions. However, if I were to go off the beaten track into the wilderness of transpersonal psychology, in which a myriad of opinions were brandished without adequate empirical support, I would be on my own—and would not be granted the doctoral degree unless I actively found something demonstrably important. He floridly

exemplified this with an analogy: if I were to seek to study a herd of allegedly wild elephants freely residing in the north Georgia forests as my dissertation topic, finding neither hide nor hair of these critters would not be of any scientific value—as nobody in their right minds would ever think such elephants actually existed. He also elaborated by stated that if, by some slim chance, I were to somehow find evidence of such elephants, then I would have made a worthwhile contribution, but the odds were quite against such a finding, as they almost assuredly did not exist.

With Earl's hesitant support, I undertook the gamble of searching for elusive wild north Georgia elephants, which aptly symbolized the chances then of my making a meaningful scientific finding in transpersonal psychology, at least in Earl's view. I narrowed my dissertation topic to studying transpersonal self-concept, and then further focused on operationally defining just one construct under the larger notion of self-concept, namely self-expansiveness, through attempting to create a viable measure. I reasoned that, since there were no explicitly transpersonal measures that I could find to use in my research, perhaps it might be beneficial for me to create one for others to use, so transpersonal psychology might better grow as a science as a result of my efforts. After finishing my doctoral coursework, I collected data for this purpose over several years while working as a college instructor, but I found no coherent patterns and it was becoming evident to me that my pursuit of wild north Georgia elephants was failing. Earl gave me little direct guidance or support, as I had made my choice against his advice, but he patiently stuck with me and gave me the latitude to fail, which was a great gift. As the years passed and I still produced nothing of value, he would send me occasional short notes. One stated, "I am about to retire and, if you do not finish soon, no one else will support your strange research in transpersonal psychology; also, I am getting old and could die at any time, so hurry

up” (Earl C. Brown, personal communication, circa 1979). Finally, after four years of struggling with this dissertation, Earl gave me a deadline by requesting I produce something by the first of the coming year or, he strongly suggested, I should quit torturing myself. That Christmas Eve, I sat in front of a pile of old data I had collected from nearly a dozen pilot studies and looked at the jumble of statistics once more, and still there were no discernible patterns. In despair, I drafted a letter to Earl, which simply stated, “I cannot find a single elephant, let alone a herd, so I give up.” However, I never mailed that letter, as the next morning, renewed inspiration hit me, and I worked furiously to revise my approach. I then, literally on New Year’s Eve (the day before the deadline), asked Earl for a short reprieve to test my new ideas and, behold, I began to glimpse elephant traces in the forms of emerging factors in my newest psychometric data. Soon thereafter, I submitted my dissertation, complete with preliminary data supporting my view that self-expansiveness is a transpersonal construct that can be coherently conceptualized in scientific terms, as well as measured using prevailing notions of scientific validity. I also provided a research-ready measure of it for others to use.

During my dissertation defense, however, there was a lot of rancor, including mean-spirited questions from some of the faculty challenging my work. After many of my responses were denigrated and the assault continued for what seemed forever, Earl took up the fight and began to himself defend my work alongside me. Usually a dissertation chair is expected to be neutral when a student defends, but this was an unfair fight and he could not condone the bullying. When finally I was asked to leave the room for the committee to deliberate my fate, nervously I could hear the heated arguments continue behind the closed door. When invited back, I was warmly congratulated by Earl, as I had won my doctorate with a major area specialization in transpersonal psychology, perhaps the first such degree from an American Psychological Association approved clinical psychology program within a fully accredited U.S. university (Friedman, 1981).

By then, I felt I had done enough research by completing a scientific dissertation in transpersonal psychology, and thought now it would be up to others to use the measure I had constructed and preliminarily validated. Consequently, I went forward to an applied career as a clinical and consulting psychologist, and

hoped someone would further my hard work. However, no one seemed interested in taking up the challenge by employing the measure, and it languished in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, where I had published it in a condensed form (Friedman, 1983). Transpersonal psychology at that time seemed to attract those who liked to engage in theoretical speculation (as I had initially wanted to do, but was stopped by Earl), rather than to do difficult empirical research, while those inclined to do such research seemed to eschew transpersonal psychology as too muddled or controversial an area to explore.

Many years later, long after I had given up any hope of my measure ever generating any fruits, I was reading an issue of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* and was shocked to discover that a graduate student had replicated and extended my research (MacDonald, Tsagarakis, & Holland, 1994). I found him and asked why, of all the possible things to research, he had chosen to explore my measure, and his response was, “I thought your measure was crap and I wanted to debunk it” (Douglas A. MacDonald, personal communication, circa 1994). But in his debunking efforts, Doug had also seen glimpses of elephants, as he found in his replication almost the exact things I had found—and I was doubly pleased, as replication by a skeptic is especially telling.

I immediately contacted Earl, who responded, “You’re vindicated” (Earl C. Brown, personal communication, circa 1994). I asked to meet with Earl to discuss this. Surprisingly, he divulged for the first time that many professors in my department had not only opposed awarding me the doctorate based upon their entrenched beliefs that no one could make sense of transpersonal psychology, which they saw as nonsense, but also thought I made up my findings, as my data looked too good to be credible in their eyes. Thankfully Earl, having been the chair of the department and a highly respected person in the field of psychology, had the clout to protect me, which he kindly did despite any cost to his own standing in that department.

Earl from the onset demanded that I complete a scientific dissertation, which did not initially please me but is something I have come to appreciate greatly, and he did allow me to pursue my passion, transpersonal psychology. He then allowed me the latitude to be creative, even in light of his belief that I would likely fail. He was unwaveringly supportive of my efforts, although he remained skeptical of them bearing any

fruit. Ultimately he put himself on the line by defending me against critics. To whatever extent my work on self-expansiveness, as I still actively pursue these elephants (see Friedman, 2013), has made an impact on transpersonal psychology, I can say that, without Earl's help, this would not have been possible.

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