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Further Developing Transpersonal Psychology as a Science: Building and Testing Middle-Range Transpersonal Theories

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Further developing transpersonal psychology as a science has been impeded by the over emphasis on two approaches to building theory, namely grand theories that attempt to explain everything and mini-theories that avoid explaining much of anything. In between these extremes are “middle-range” transpersonal psychology theories that can better allow for scientific progress. They bracket metaphysical and supernatural approaches common in transpersonal grand theories, and accept the possible generalizability of findings commonly rejected by transpersonal mini-theories. The transpersonal construct of self-expansiveness illustrates one way that middle-range transpersonal theories can lead to a program of cumulative empirical research and empirically informed practices. Other transpersonal constructs, such as awe, can also be good candidates for building and testing middle-range transpersonal psychology theories.

Keywords: *grand theory, middle-range theory, mini-theory, science, self-expansiveness, transpersonal*

For transpersonal psychology to thrive, both as science and praxis, it must rely on empirical evidence, not simply faith or dogma, to support its claims (Friedman, 2002). Whether starting inductively from empirical observations, deductively from extant beliefs, or more intuitively through some process of abduction, transpersonal concepts must be amenable to empirical approaches to be part of the scientific process. In this regard, empirical refers to being accessible to experience via the senses, both outer (e.g., vision) and inner (e.g., proprioception), congruent with how contemporary cognitive psychologists (e.g., Solso, 2001) include consciousness as awareness of “objects” in both physical and phenomenal space.

It could perhaps also apply to other ways of experiencing (e.g., using active imagination; Jung, 1997), if these could be brought into a consensual framework for others to corroborate, as some agreed upon referent is always needed for the data gleaned from scientific observations. This requires that truth claims can be disputed (and neither embraced as part of an untestable faith, nor foisted upon others as authoritarian dogma). In essence, science requires that any appropriately trained observer be able to replicate scientific claims, rather than having to blindly accept them. Scientific theories integrate empirically accessible concepts into a

type of structure, which can be seen as an explanatory mechanism (see Bunge, 1997) based on some organizing principles (e.g., logic, mathematics, graphical depictions) that provide for what can be called explanation, and also the ability to make predictions (hypotheses) that are testable using empirical data (see Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). For a scientific theory to grow, it needs to build upon the iterative interplay of both empirical data and theory. Scientific theories cannot be isolated from empirical observations or they would only be philosophical speculations, while traditional worldviews (e.g., astrological systems) and even contemporary religious faiths (e.g., Buddhism) are not part of science per se, insofar as they do not rely on empirical evidence for their claims. In previous writings, I have criticized portraying both astrology (Friedman, 2002) and Buddhism (Friedman, 2009, 2010) as sciences. Although both are not sciences in my view, they can be used to further science in many ways (e.g., as in generating scientific theories reframing their beliefs and practices). One starting place for building scientific transpersonal theory is to operationally define (i.e., in a way that is empirically accessible through a specified procedure) concepts that serve as the fundamental components of theory. For this purpose, I developed a construct (i.e., a type of concept that is created specifically to be used in

science), which I called “self-expansiveness” (Friedman, 1981, 1983). It refers to how the boundary drawn around one’s sense of self (i.e., self-concept) can vary from being narrowly constrictive to broadly expansive. Although I maintain that self-expansiveness can provide a fruitful way to create and develop a variety of transpersonal psychology theories, it is just one among many other possible concepts that offers heuristic potential for empirically developing and testing such theories through programs of cumulative research, as well as for furthering evidence-based transpersonal psychology praxis.

Theory and Science

Transpersonal psychology can be seen as an attempt to replace traditional spiritual and folk psychological worldviews with perspectives congruent with those of modern science, and which can develop scientifically through empirical research. Specifically this means making these perspectives amenable for empirical exploration. In this way, transpersonal psychology straddles conventional science and other disciplines focusing on spirituality and related concerns, attempting to meld them together in a way that benefits from the openness of empiricism, while still considering some of the most profound questions typically relegated to non-scientific pursuits by the mainstream. Transpersonal psychology as a science also is focused on applications, namely empirically informed practice.

Scope of Theory

One way to view theories is to look at their scope, or the range of phenomena they attempt to explain (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). The leading transpersonal theories have been in the tradition of “grand theory” (as delineated from mini- and middle-range theory; Merton, 1968), which means they often attempt to explain too much, which usually means they end up explaining little of scientific worth. Two examples of such over-reaching transpersonal work are Wilber’s (2001) *A Theory of Everything* and Laszlo’s (2004) *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything*, both of which unabashedly profess to explain everything. Essentially what such grandiose works provide are mythic accounts about reality. These may provide comforting illusions of sense-making to the largest questions of meaning and purpose, but these operate outside of a framework of science, and are more similar to the explanatory stories told around campfires since the advent of humankind (and to the many current religious ideologies that invoke supernatural and metaphysical causation). Although

these accounts could provide not only comfort, but also socio-cultural adaptation (i.e., by unifying disparate groups under common beliefs), they also often led to strife—as people are all too willing to kill over their differing untestable beliefs about such matters. As closed systems, grand theories cannot be questioned empirically and are therefore unavoidably authoritarian, whether based on inner faith or enforced by external power. The Freudian tradition is an example of a grand theory, as it can be used *post hoc* to explain virtually everything, from art history to zoological evolution, without being able to provide definitive tests of its assertions. In contrast, more useful scientific theories require openness and the capacity for growth, while grand theories offer little opportunity for generating improvements through empirical efforts. Although there are thriving traditions of psychoanalysis that continue to evolve, these are more influential within the humanities and other non-scientific disciplines than in psychology. Grand theories result in scientific stagnation, placing them in a cul-de-sac making them more akin to folk psychology and religion, where open questioning is discouraged, if not banned. Many of the approaches that have dominated transpersonal psychology since its inception suffer the problem of being grand theories and, thereby, outside of the scientific realm.

Perhaps Wilber’s (e.g., 2001) extensive work is the best example of this. It spins complex conjectures employing esoteric language that is mostly without empirical referents. This is not to deny that some empirical work has been conducted on its notions (e.g., Sehrbrock, 2007). However, the sheer mass of Wilber’s work is overwhelming, which is exacerbated by the fact that it is constantly being revised (MacDonald, 2007), while his scholarly eruditeness can lull readers into passively accepting its many empirically unfounded conclusions. Problems with Wilber’s approach have been clearly pointed out by Ferrer (2002), among other critics. My main concern is that, like the legendary King Procrustes, Wilber attempts to place everything into universal categories, providing a so-called perennial vision that embraces everything, whether or not it fits well into his system (and, when something does not fit so well, Wilber does not hesitate to make post hoc adjustments to ensure it fits). Wilber’s approach also suffers from employing many supernatural and metaphysical concepts, such as the notion of non-duality, which elude empirical examination. In my

view, his grand theory veers closely toward becoming a new religion, while at best it is a philosophical, but not scientific, effort. Although no science, including psychology, is totally free of underpinning philosophical assumptions, the history of psychology has been one of evolving from philosophy, which engages in speculations that do not require subsequent empirical evidence. This is not to denigrate philosophy, which in itself is a valuable enterprise, but simply to delineate it from science, including transpersonal psychology. The first step in developing a scientific transpersonal psychology is to escape from the shadow of such grand theory by creating theories that are empirically accessible and able to generate testable hypotheses that can challenge their claims and foster their evolution.

One avenue of such escape would be to seek refuge in what can be called mini-theories (Merton, 1968), which attempt to avoid overly large generalizations by making sense of specific phenomena within delimited contexts. For example, in attempting to explain the diversity of various transpersonal systems across cultures by imposing a singular universal structure upon them, which could be seen as oppressively colonialistic, mini-theories can explain how they differentially operate within their local contexts as indigenous psychologies (Allwood & Berry, 2006). These allow for ways to understand diverse spiritual traditions from an emic (or cultural insider) perspective, which could be adaptive in cross-cultural encounters (e.g., in understanding a specific spiritual path from the perspective of those who are immersed in it). Just as there was fear that anthropologists would “go native” when involved in cross-cultural research by abandoning their etic (or cultural outsider) discipline, there is a similar occupational hazard for transpersonal psychologists, who also frequently go native by embracing exotic traditions and thereby abandoning scientific efforts (see Wallis, 2003). This relates to the frequent confound in transpersonal psychology in which traditional worldviews and spiritual approaches are often taken whole as being themselves psychologies, when in fact they are typically not scientific, but based on metaphysical and supernatural assumptions (Friedman, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2010). This makes cultivating an emic perspective potentially hazardous for those who desire to maintain their so-called scientific objectivity through keeping an etic perspective. However, having an emic perspective can be useful, if the etic perspective can also be kept intact. For example, while challenging

beliefs held by many practitioners within the martial art of Aikido, I brought an outsider’s scientific perspective onto transpersonal a practice in which I long had been involved as an insider (Friedman, 2005).

Ferrer’s (2002) participatory approach appears to be arguing for mini-theories when it champions the diversity of all spiritual traditions as seen on their own terms. He apparently minimizes their commonalities in an effort to avoid promoting the hegemony he critiqued in Wilber’s (e.g., 2001) grand theory. Such mini-theories allow for acknowledging and respecting cultural differences, but essentially they build silos that separate, abnegating the possibility of finding useful connections. This can lead to considering all transpersonal systems as incommensurate, rather than part of potentially meaningful patterns (i.e., scientific laws) that can further development of scientific theory. Unfortunately, Ferrer’s participatory approach, like the grand theory he aptly critiqued, does not offer any specific strategies that would position it well as a scientific approach. Rather, it appears to promote only a vague research agenda, which I think could be subsumed under the long tradition of inter-subjectivity studies (see Fuchs & Jaegher, 2009). Organic inquiry (e.g., Clements, 2004) is an example of an approach to building mini-theories within transpersonal psychology congruent with Ferrer’s participatory vision, as it explicitly does not seek to generalize results from its data and advocates full (including from transpersonal perspectives) participation of the researcher with little regard for any so-called objectivity in its data-near descriptive research. I see the products of this type of research as being similar to journalism, and at the borderline of the scientific tradition by virtue of being more descriptive than interpretive (however note, journalism is a worthwhile endeavor in and of itself, and is not clearly distinguishable from social sciences; Weaver & McCombs, 1980).

In between the two extremes, namely grand theories that attempt to explain everything and mini-theories that avoid explaining much of anything, are “middle-range” theories (Boudon, 1991; Friedman, 2002; Merton, 1968). Rather than trying to explain everything, these theories carve out a limited, but not so limited as to be just local, context in which to explain how things might operate, and they attempt modest generalizations across local situations in search of regularities without becoming fixated on either grandiosely explaining everything or humbly denying the possibility of any

useful explanations. Middle-range approaches focus on balancing the interplay between theory and data without privileging either, while recognizing the equal importance of both, providing a solid foundation upon which to further develop scientific theory. In contrast, grand theories can be seen as overly focused on building one-size-fits-all theory to the exclusion of attending to the specifics of data, while mini-theory can be seen as overly focused on gathering specific data to the exclusion of building generalizable theory. As must be evident, I am a strong proponent of middle-range transpersonal psychology theory (M-R TPT), which I position within a post-positivistic epistemology (Popper, 2001/1937) congruent with methodological pluralism (Dawson, Fischer, & Stein, 2006; Robbins & Friedman, 2009). My approach neither claims that M-R TPT needs to be veridical to any ontological truth, nor does it privilege any singular empirical method as inherently better or worse, but it is pragmatic for building a science of transpersonal psychology, as well as supporting transpersonal praxis.

Concepts and Constructs

To build M-R TPT, transpersonal psychology needs scientific concepts that are amenable to clear operationalization for testing hypotheses that derive from theories, as theories again are simply linkages between and among concepts. This in turn can lead to further theory building and then further empirical research in an open and iterative cycle that characterizes the scientific process, and differentiates it from closed approaches. Scientific strategy facilitates progress, rather than stagnation, and differentiates transpersonal psychology as a science from traditional worldviews and religions, as well as philosophy (note, my intent is not to denigrate traditional worldviews, religions, or philosophy, but to separate them as different, but neither better nor worse, from science). However, it is especially important that transpersonal psychology not attempt to be a New Age religion by advocating for stances that are supernatural and metaphysical, while hypocritically posing as a science.

Consequently, building M-R TPT first involves developing clearly defined concepts that are empirically accessible. Concepts can be gleaned from natural language, but to build a theory of scientific worth using terms employed in natural language can be quite problematic. For example, one natural language concept that is relevant to transpersonal psychology is “awe,” but it is a quite ambiguous term, so I and a colleague recently

used qualitative methods to clarify it (see Bonner & Friedman, 2011). This type of clarification is especially important within transpersonal psychology, where natural language terms often employ contradictory traditional usages, which can be especially difficult to define when imbued with supernatural and metaphysical baggage. Additionally difficult is when the meaning of words radically change over time—as in the case of awe, which has shifted from originally describing an overwhelming sense of fear (e.g., as reflected in the recent U.S. military campaign titled “shock and awe”) to now describing a predominantly positive emotion (e.g., the ubiquitously overused slang of “awesome” as a positive exclamation). In our recent research, Bonner and I focused on clarifying this term to make it more useful for building M-R TPT, and our intent was to operationalize it through later creating an empirical measure useful for testing M-R TPT involving awe. A natural language term that is clarified this way takes on less ambiguous meaning by being specified in ways delineating what it does and does not mean, preparing it for operationalization and making it more useful for theory building.

Constructs are a special type of concept that are acknowledged as being artificially created (i.e., not used in natural language) and have scientifically designated meanings, even if they may refer only to imaginary entities without clear veridical connection with any reality. To avoid the problems with imprecisely specified natural language terms, it may be simpler to coin a new, more precise, term not found in ordinary usages. In that sense, scientific constructs, although expressed in natural language terms, are created for theoretical purposes. As such, they do not need to be real in any veridical sense when used to build theory, and often it is important to refrain from prematurely reifying them, as they can simply be temporary place markers for what may or may not later justify the ontological status of being deemed “real.” However, to be part of science, there has to be some potential at least for them to earn such a status by being amenable to empirical observation. One current example of a construct is the Higg’s boson or so-called “god particle.” It has long been a sought prize in modern physics as a needed complement for extant theories in physics, despite that its actual existence was until recently only speculative—and whether or not its existence has recently been empirically verified is subject to much debate (Ellwanger, 2012). The point is, prior to being

supposedly found, the Higg's boson was constructed as something needed to have scientific theory make sense, so it was only a place marker for what was not yet known, yet was seen as a useful fiction for building and testing theory. What made the Higg's boson within the realm of science, and not within the realm of the supernatural and metaphysics, is that as a construct it was potentially amenable to empirical scrutiny, even if that had to wait until a huge super-collider was built to test for its existence. Many transpersonal notions used in grand theory, such as non-duality (Wilber, 2001), are unavoidably metaphysical and supernatural. In contrast, science as an empirical endeavor is limited to the study of the physical and natural, namely that which is phenomenal (i.e., can be experienced empirically). Terms without empirical referents, such as non-duality, pose insurmountable scientific challenges when employed as building blocks for developing M-R TPT. At a minimum, to begin specifying the diverse meaning of these terms into narrower categories would surely offend some in spiritual traditions who might use the terms in their own parochial ways, while finding empirical referents for them would be impossible.

When an adequate natural language concept does not exist, but a new concept is created to be useful for theory building and testing, it is called a construct (i.e., something constructed, rather than given). Consequently, I coined the neologism "self-expansiveness" (Friedman, 1981, 1983), which I defined as referring to the flexibility in the boundaries everyone draws around their sense of self (i.e., self-concept), and I emphasized that this boundary, which can range from quite narrow to quite expansive, includes the possibility of transpersonal self-expansiveness. Note that, after the advent of search engines, I recently found that some others had used this same term in different contexts and with different meanings than I ascribed to it, but my usage was constructed for a specific purpose, namely to be used to build and test M-R TPT. Self-expansiveness is presented as not being necessarily the best concept (or construct) for building M-R TPT, rather it is just one among many potential contenders, such as awe, that holds heuristic potential for developing M-R TPT by being operationalizable for empirically testing.

Why Transpersonal Psychology Should Be Scientific

I have long advocated that transpersonal psychology should be a science (e.g., Friedman, 1981, 1983). In

an earlier "manifesto" (Friedman, 2002), I made a number of arguments for this conclusion, which I briefly summarize in this section. I start with the fact that transpersonal psychology is positioned as a subfield of the discipline of psychology by virtue of its name. As such, transpersonal psychology is widely recognized, and benefits by being seen, as a science. Juxtaposing the terms transpersonal and psychology clearly implies that whatever transpersonal psychology might be, it relates to psychology, which makes it part of a recognized scientific endeavor. Regarding the academic aspects of transpersonal psychology, this understanding places it within psychology departments, while in terms of praxis, it opens the door for legitimacy in the eyes of those seeking and paying for professional services. In the clinical arena, potential clients seeking traditional healing (e.g., from someone invoking a supernatural intervention within a religious tradition) or New Age healing (e.g., from someone employing a pseudoscientific energy device) would clearly not expect the same protections or expertise based on science as they would if going to a licensed psychologist. Anyone claiming to be an applied psychologist would be seen as having at least some scientific background and training when claiming that title, even if not possessing actual expertise. Likewise, when a scholar produces a work as a psychologist, there are expectations related to the scientific basis of such a product. Even if the term transpersonal is used as a qualifier, specifying the type of psychology being practiced or produced, it does not act as a disqualifier that allows one to operate outside of the scientific tradition. Those who use the term transpersonal psychology but eschew science, yet garner benefits from their practices and work products through being associated with the science of psychology, are perpetuating a potential ethical, and possible legal, breach.

Beyond this encumbrance lies a more basic issue, namely is it even possible for transpersonal psychology to actually be a science? Braud (1998), among others, raised this question, and many reject the possibility of a scientific transpersonal psychology, despite that I advocate for this on many grounds (see Friedman, 2002). After all, central aspects of the transpersonal are often defined as being ineffable, dealing with realities beyond the ordinary senses and transcending all conceptualizations. However, science is founded on empiricism, and the scientific process operating in transpersonal psychology can be described as an effort toward reducing that which

was formerly seen as ineffable into that which literally makes sense (as in being in accord with the world as one can empirically find it through the senses). But what about aspects of the transpersonal that are clearly outside the bounds of science, such as non-duality and other empirically inaccessible concepts (e.g., soul) that seem to transcend ordinary reality? People usually experience the world, including themselves, through an implicit Cartesian divide, which perceptually splits their sense of subjectivity from objectivity, separating the sense of self as lived from a world that is perceived as being other than the self, including dividing their own sense of self into the subjective “I” and objective “me” (James, 1890). So how can such a radical divide be handled by scientific approaches, as transcendent states (e.g., non-duality, unitive consciousness, etc.) would abnegate all conventional bases of knowledge involving separation between knower and known? These questions pose a conundrum that lead me to the conclusion that transpersonal psychology cannot be scientific unless it is constrained into abandoning its focus on transcendence. Although disallowing speculations about transcendence, by labeling that as non-scientific, reduces the scope of its study, I see it as unavoidably necessary if transpersonal psychology is to be scientific. Some might see this stance as destroying the heart of transpersonal psychology, and leaving only trivial concerns for it to study. However, this is the trap that I believe underlies the continuing fascination of transpersonal psychology with grand theory, including the many problems stemming from such a fascination.

To escape this trap, I believe it has to be forthrightly acknowledged and accepted that there are areas within the transpersonal that truly elude scientific efforts. The solution I proposed (Friedman, 2002) involves delimiting transpersonal psychology using one simple maneuver, namely dividing that which is transpersonal into two components: its transcendent and non-transcendent aspects. In this regard, a scientific transpersonal psychology can bracket all concern about the transcendent, as that is not amenable to empirical approaches or even conceptualization itself. In fact, whatever transcendence might be and/or not be (as the most basic state of being itself cannot necessarily be predicated or denied to it) is undefined, but I loosely take it to be anything that is supernatural and metaphysical (e.g., that might be outside of space and time). Again, science can only deal with the natural and physical.

Conceptualization, which is one of the foundations of science, seems logically to require a Cartesian split between knower and known, and any direct, non-mediated knowing would not be conceptual but of another ilk that is outside of the parameters of science. By bracketing sticky metaphysical and supernatural issues, and focusing instead only on the non-transcendent aspects of the transpersonal, a scientific transpersonal psychology can be developed. This does not mean, however, that the transcendent cannot be studied, only it cannot be studied under the guise of psychology, which is a scientific endeavor. To study the transcendent directly would involve way more than science could ever capture, as approaching the transcendent would seem to require going beyond both limited concepts and data into other possible non-scientific frameworks and ways of knowing. This bracketing, which I have championed, requires acknowledgement that transcendence eludes efforts to reduce it into a scientific paradigm, as it is avowedly supernatural and metaphysical.

However, such bracketing does not prohibit a scientific transpersonal psychology from dealing with many other important, even crucial, transpersonal concerns through M-R TPT. But it does undermine the metaphysical and supernatural notions prevalent within transpersonal grand theories, while it also avoids the cacophony of focusing only on local understandings as in mini-theories. Despite possible protestations that might allude to potential ways to directly research the transcendent (and that somehow would surmount the Cartesian divide), frankly I have never seen a successful example, nor do I think this is possible while maintaining a scientific vantage (and I eagerly await being proven wrong in this regard). Instead, I accept that science is unavoidably caught in this divide and has to operate within limited parameters that allow it to study only empirical phenomena. Grand theory may attempt to bypass this divide by offering fancy construals that are inclusive of everything, but these are empirically unfounded, while mini-theory does not even approach the divide by instead staying close to the particulars.

For those who want to study the transcendent, there are non-scientific approaches that remain available, such as through religion, poetry, and other artistic expressions, seeking direct attainment via meditation, contemplation, and many other avenues, which all can be called aspects of transpersonal studies and can involve a plethora of non-scientific transpersonal

practices (Friedman, 2002). These endeavors are neither intrinsically more or less valuable than science, but they are not science. Likewise, there are many other sciences besides psychology that can study the transpersonal from non-psychological perspectives, such as transpersonal anthropology and sociology. Collectively, all disciplines that study the transpersonal can be subsumed under transpersonal studies, whereas a subset of these can be seen as scientific, one of which is transpersonal psychology. My solution does not foreclose on the legitimate right to study or practice the transpersonal in any way, but it does require clarity that non-scientific approaches to transpersonal studies are not part of psychology. Simply put, not all ways to know are scientific, and both scientific and non-scientific ways have their relative advantages and disadvantages. This delineation also makes it clear what transpersonal psychology can and cannot entertain as a science, namely again that the transcendent is outside of the boundary that science can successfully consider.

What Is Left for

Transpersonal Psychology to Study?

Some might think that this leaves transpersonal psychology to only consider trivial issues, while it abandons its major concern on transcendence. However, science can be quite broadly construed, even if it cannot deal with transcendence, and can deal with many exciting and important issues that are not transcendent. That which is transpersonal does not have to only be supernatural and metaphysical, as there is a realm of the non-transcendent transpersonal that is amenable to science, which I am trying to carve out for M-R TPT. For example, to feel a merger of one's identity with another during the experience of love-making can be transpersonally self-expansive, yet this may be a transpersonal experience that is non-transcendent, namely an experience that only overcomes the sense of being an isolated individual but that does not necessarily lead to any supernatural or metaphysical experience. A sense of dyadic oneness, in which two are merged in identity but still exist as separate from others within the larger cosmos, is not the same as a non-dual experience of unity with the entirety of the cosmos and beyond—and that obliterates any possibilities of conceptualization. Although both can be seen as transpersonal, the former would be non-transcendent and amenable to scientific study, whereas the latter would be transcendent and outside of the purview of science.

Regarding the methods of science, James (1890) proposed a radical empiricism, which is congruent with

my vision of transpersonal psychology as a science. For example, people ordinarily perceive from an inside versus outside perspective toward the world, delineated by using their skin as the boundary. Conventional science tends to only look outward, but what occurs both within and outside of the skin is within the purview of science, such that science can focus on inner data, even if they seem subjective and resistant to objectification, as well as more conventionally can focus on outer data, such as things and other persons. Inner data can be obtained through phenomenological methods and, with the advent of new technologies, through scientific apparatuses, such as electroencephalographs, which are simply sensory extenders (see Krippner & Friedman, 2009). Scientific data can also be collected from various states of consciousness, including alternate (i.e., to ordinary waking consciousness in Western culture; see Tart, 1975) states. To be seen as empirical data, all that is required is that information be amenable (or potentially amenable) to the senses, while it needs to be recognized that the senses can operate under many different consciousness states (e.g., under the influence of psychedelic substances; Friedman, 2006). As long as phenomenological data from an alternate state can be accessed with some degree of reliability (again, a prerequisite for being a scientifically valid observation), either by the same researcher across time or by others, it can be studied scientifically. Thus a community of meditators who share common practices that alter their ordinary consciousness in reliable ways can be seen as producing empirical data that are accessible to science. Insofar as some in such a community might have what could be described as transcendent experiences, these would be outside the realm of science to directly study (i.e., I would see these direct experiences as noumenal, not phenomenal). But these could be brought into scientific study as remembrances that are translated into concepts, despite that transcendent experiences themselves would not be amenable to science. So the stories such allegedly transcendence-experiencing meditators might tell should be seen as different from their direct experiences, and their stories could yield good data for science as stories. Last on this point, I must admit that I am not even comfortable calling so-called transcendent experiences an "experience," as that places the term back into limiting Cartesian concepts, so even that term should itself only be seen as a loose metaphor for an ineffability.

From such a broad perspective on science, why would studying the transcendent directly be out of scientific bounds? Perceiving phenomena is at the heart of empiricism and is based on a differentiation, such as in signal detection theory where a sensory input, at its simplest, is either deemed present or absent. From a transcendent frame, such basic delineation falls meaningless, similar to how the so-called laws of physics appear to break down under the conditions in a black hole. Any attempt to impose categorization onto transcendence is simply off the mark, as it reduces it to a symbol, such as language or mathematics or perhaps a graphical relationship, but such symbols are not “it,” only faint shadows of whatever it might be and not be simultaneously. Even if one were to have a transcendent experience in any meaningful sense, it cannot be attributed to that one as an individual, as at the point of such experience individuality would seem to dissolve. Likewise, to try to conceptualize about it later would necessarily portray it in reduced terms, and even to attempt to remember it would seem to be only a translated blur reconstructed within dualistic memory. One could extemporaneously dance or sing as an attempted depiction of a transcendent experience, but even such a free expression would only be at best a loose translation of the ineffable. To attempt to capture anything that could be meaningfully called transcendent within a scientific frame with its demands for logical consistency and empirical accessibility is more than challenging as, in my opinion, it is simply not possible.

Conclusion

This paper outlines a guide to building M-R TPT as an alternative to both grand theory and mini-theory. In order to build M-R TPT, emphasis is placed on developing concepts, including constructs, that are empirically accessible and relevant to transpersonal psychology. This requires bracketing concepts that are metaphysical and supernatural, as they are outside of the purview of science. A viable transpersonal psychology based on such development can lead to useful theories, cumulative programs of research, and applied practices that are empirically supported. One construct that could be useful for this purpose is self-expansiveness, which is discussed in greater depth elsewhere (e.g., Friedman, 1983; 2013a). It is introduced to provide a concrete example of how M-R TPT can be pursued. However, other concepts, such as awe, are also potentially useful for such a purpose.

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Note

This paper is a revised version of an earlier chapter by its author (Friedman, 2013b). Only the title and conclusion sections have been updated.

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