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Editors' Introduction

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Editors' Introduction

Transpersonal scholars at times suggest that their work is an extension of an area of study that reaches far back into human history, that in the spirit of the great spiritual traditions it inquires into transcendent human capacities, but within the context of contemporary Western psychology and the humanities. However, it is also possible to see the contemporary transpersonal project as something quite new.

Within cultures where religious traditions still hold considerable influence—India or Indonesia, for example—the average person participates in religious ritual but does not typically partake in the transformative esoteric practices reserved for mystics or renunciates. These are used by a small percentage of the population, who devote themselves to advanced spiritual study. Such an arrangement is resonant with the structure of traditional cultures throughout much of the world—a spiritual version of the sorts of social hierarchies in which political power and wealth is vested in a monarchy or small ruling class.

The American and French revolutions of the late 18th century, however imperfect their implementation, brought a novel idea: Everyone can participate in political power. American transcendentalism, a movement of the mid-19th century that took shape around such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickenson, and John Muir, took a similar view of spiritual power. It planted the notion that the esotericism of the East was something in which a simple-living American might partake. In the words of Thoreau (1854/2008), “I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Bramin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges” (p. 183). Though short-lived, the transcendentalist vision was revived by best-selling books of the Victorian era such as *Light of Asia* (Arnold, 1879/1995)—a fictional account of the enlightenment of the Buddha—by the poets of the Beatnik generation, and by the counterculture revolution of the 1960s. Esoteric visions were now not just for a few in the East, but available to everyone through either meditation or communion with psychedelic substances.

Humanistic psychology began with the premise that mental health is not merely the absence of disease, but the cultivation of human potential. Transpersonal psychology applied this inspiring stance to human spirituality, adopting the vision of democratized transcendence crafted by the American transcendentalists and put into practice by the anti-authoritarian youth revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s. Unlike the great Eastern traditions to which transpersonal scholars often give deference, the transpersonal movement sees transcendence not as the province of the few, but as the birthright of every human being. This confluence of human potential and spiritual democracy is the particular heritage of transpersonalism. It is an approach resonant with a widespread contemporary interest in personal growth, popular spirituality, alternative approaches to healthcare that seek to align themselves with the healing powers of the body, and concerns for social justice and environmental sustainability.

Yet as a scholarly discipline, transpersonal psychology has been long on discussion and short on empirical evidence. A recent review of literature in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* and the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* during the first four decades of the field's existence showed that from 1970 to 1979, only 4% of articles were empirical in nature; three decades later, during the period 2000 to 2009, the percentage of empirical papers had risen to no more than 17% (Hartelius, Rothe, & Roy, in press). While this shows a clear positive trend, the amount of empirical evidence that the field has produced is still modest at best.

The resistance to empirical work is understandable, even laudable, given that it is inherited from humanistic psychology, and reflects a similar concern that the richness and nuanced complexities of human experience not be reduced to numbers and categories and statistics. Yet the tools of empirical study within psychology are vastly improved from the era in which these concerns took root—the 1950s and 1960s. Not only are there now scores of measures for qualities such as compassion, empathy, spirituality, mindfulness, and other transpersonally-related constructs (see MacDonald & Friedman, this issue), but qualitative inquiry has developed to the point where it is now represented by a division within the American Psychological Association (Division 5).

In short, at this date the sparseness of empirical papers within the transpersonal field appears to be more habitual than justifiable on grounds that once held validity.

As psychology moves toward being an evidence-based science, it will be necessary to take positions on what constitutes evidence, what philosophical assumptions may be implicit within a given methodological approach, and whether reductionistic and materialistic values should determine what is or is not reasonable to examine. However, for the field to gain the prominence that it deserves based on the importance of its subject matter and the care for preserving the authenticity of experience that permeates its approaches, a steadily increasing emphasis on empirical work can and should be made a priority.

The modest occasion for this rather large preamble is the fact that in the current issue, nearly half of the papers are empirical in nature. Small though this milestone might be, it serves as an opportunity to re-state this journal's commitment to the support and publication of empirical research within transpersonal psychology and other areas of transpersonal studies, and to call for additional empirical papers in these areas.

The first paper, by Mendez and MacDonald, takes direct aim at the sort of quantitative work that is sorely needed, both by transpersonal scholars and by others interested in the practical task of assessing spirituality as a dimension of human functioning. In this paper, the authors examine correlations between measures of spirituality and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 Restructured Clinical (MMPI-2 RC) scales, a common tool for identifying deviations from what is considered to be mental health. These results were then compared with earlier work that made a similar assessment of the original MMPI scales, and the differences explained in the context of how and why these scales have been reformulated.

The second paper, King, Mara, & DeCicco, uses a measure of spiritual intelligence previously published in this journal (King & DeCicco, 2009) to examine possible correlations between spiritual intelligence and measures of both emotional intelligence and empathy. It is not only the fact that correlations were found, but the specific nature of those correlations, that offers perspectives on how spiritual intelligence might be framed. As such, this work helps to give context and substance to the notion of spiritual intelligence, which remains a new and somewhat controversial construct.

Next, Blake and Shearer introduce a new measure, the Scale for Existential Thinking, which is designed to measure how much an individual examines

basic concerns about human existence and how adept they are at meaningfully situating themselves relative to these issues. The study presents validation data on the scale as well as correlations with constructs such as curiosity and meaning in life. Given that transpersonal psychology considers matters of ultimate concern, this scale offers a novel and valuable tool for measuring the tendency to think in those terms.

Finally, Morrison proposes that the experience of initiates who undergo experiences of controlled violence in traditional rites of passage significantly parallels the phenomenon of trauma disorder, and the fact that such initiates are apparently able to integrate their experiences usefully may offer insights into how trauma sufferers might be guided into similar positive outcomes. This suggestion is accompanied by two short clinical case histories, one success and one failure, that illustrate the clinical challenges and potentials of such an approach.

In addition, there are five papers in a special topic section on parapsychology, prepared by Special Topic Editor Sean Avila Saiter. These are introduced separately at the beginning of that section. Here, it is noteworthy that parapsychology is perhaps the aspect of transpersonal research for which there is the most extensive and rigorous empirical research.

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* will continue to encourage and support empirical work in the transpersonal field by giving priority and expedited consideration to empirical submissions, in the hope that the flurry of empirical papers in this issue will grow into a steady stream of research that can bring transpersonal approaches into the prominence that they deserve.

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