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Paul F. Cunningham

Rivier College Nashua, NH

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Transpersonal Education: Problems, Prospects and Challenges

Paul F. Cunningham
Rivier College

Despite its substantial scientific, academic, and professional achievements, transpersonal psychology has not been fully incorporated within traditional undergraduate psychology curricula. One reason is conventional psychology's prejudiced perception of humanity's spiritual nature. Other reasons lie within the field of transpersonal psychology itself, including the lack of agreed-upon general curricular models, absence of normative educational (student) outcomes, unstructured courses with restricted content coverage, and conceptual and methodological disagreements among experts. One of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary transpersonal education is the publication of an authoritative, standard textbook that would effectively introduce undergraduate students to transpersonal psychology and facilitate the progress of the discipline's further integration into mainstream psychology.

After more than 35 years of organized investigation into "the spiritual or cosmic dimensions of the human psyche and the potential for consciousness evolution" (Grof, 1985, p. 197), transpersonal psychology – or what Abraham Maslow (1968) referred to as the "Fourth Psychology" (p. iii) – has developed into a full-fledged academic, scientific, and professional discipline that calls attention to possibilities of selfhood and psychological development beyond the humanistic model of self-actualization (Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996; Taylor, 1992). It seeks knowledge through the study of causes (scientia in the broad Aristotelian sense), bases its conclusions on data obtained by observation and direct experience (empiricus in the radical Jamesian sense), and applies the steps of the scientific method in its exploration of a broad range of normal and nonordinary states of consciousness (Braud & Anderson, 1998; Wilber, 1990). It has established graduate and undergraduate courses at over 60 degree-granting institutions of higher education across the United States and offers scholastic programs in countries such as Belgium, Brazil, Canada, England, France, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Russia, Scotland, Spain, and Switzerland (www.atpweb.org). It has launched numerous peer-reviewed journals to provide a forum for the communication of theoretical and empirical research concerning the study of exceptional human experiences and transformative capacities (www.saybrook.edu). It has founded many professional societies and associations that sponsor specialized conferences, which promote the field and facilitate productive interaction among its members (www.itaconferences.org).

Transpersonal Education: Problems

Despite these substantial scientific, academic, and professional achievements, however, transpersonal psychology has not been fully incorporated into the curricular framework of the psychological sciences. The indexes of most general psychology texts contain no reference to terms such as "religion" or "spirituality" and for the most part ignore what personality psychologist Gordon Allport (1969) called the "religious sentiment" in its function of "relating the individual meaningfully to being" (p. 98). Humanity's spiritual nature is one of our strongest attributes as a species and yet it is the part of our psychology most often overlooked within traditional psychology curricula.

One reason for this lack of attention to humanity's spiritual nature in mainstream psychological education is that conventional psychology has traditionally had little positive regard for the concepts of "soul" and "spirit" because of a prejudiced perception of religion and spirituality as reflecting irrationality and primitive animistic thinking, cognitive delusion and superstition, emotional instability or even pathology that would, if not opposed and repudiated, destroy the objective structure of psychology itself (Clay, 1996; Coon, 1992). Although transpersonal psychology may be theoretically fascinating and creatively valid, many mainstream orthodox Western psychologists still believe that it deals essentially with "non-information" and does not contain any statements about any kind of scientifically valid, hard-bed reality (e.g., Ellis & Yeager, 1989).

This belief and attitude puts conventional psychology seriously out of step with the rest of mainstream contemporary life. Transpersonal concepts are quite ancient, expressed

by many religions and cultures from the past and continuing into the present. Although many transpersonal concepts run directly counter to much “official” knowledge and contemporary scientific thought as far as mainstream orthodox Western psychology is concerned, spiritual experiences and phenomena are psychological facts, regardless of the interpretations that are made about them, and represent their own kind of evidence about the nature of the psyche and the nature of reality – evidence that modern psychological science can no longer ignore, overlook, or deny (Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000). Whether the scientific method can ultimately know the final truths concerning the spiritual dimensions of human nature and existence, “a psychology that impedes understanding of the religious potentialities of man scarcely deserves to be called a *logos* of the human psyche at all” (Allport, 1969, p. 98).

A second reason why transpersonal psychology has not been fully incorporated within traditional psychology curricula lies within the field of transpersonal psychology itself. Transpersonal psychology has no agreed upon statements of educational (student) outcomes related to or supportive of accepted general curricula models for transpersonal education at the undergraduate level which prepares future social and behavioral scientists for later graduate training and professional careers in the psychological sciences. Undergraduate courses in transpersonal psychology vary considerably in academic content as a review of undergraduate course descriptions identified in the Association of Transpersonal Psychology’s 2004 *Listing of Schools and Programs* documents (www.atpweb.org/public). Many teachers of transpersonal psychology are self-taught or trained only in particular areas of the discipline and therefore may be somewhat reluctant to cover certain topics and issues with which they are unfamiliar or do not interest them (e.g., the clinician who overlooks experimental research or the experimentalist who ignores clinical data).

Beyond a few basic assumptions that define the transpersonal orientation articulated in the *Articles of Association for Transpersonal Psychology* (Sutich, 1972, pp. 93-97), veteran transpersonal psychologists have not resolved basic issues of subject matter, philosophic assumptions, conceptual models, theoretical language, or research methodology. For instance, transpersonal psychologists may hold opposing viewpoints about (a) the validity and significance of certain areas of investigation (e.g., parapsychology), (b) what constitutes transpersonal experiences and phenomena (e.g., are all transpersonal experiences altered states of consciousness and are all religious experiences transpersonal experiences?), (c) what defines a transpersonal orientation (e.g., what differentiates transpersonal psychology from other areas of specialization in psychology?), (d) what constitutes fundamental tenets of the field (e.g., how founda-

tional is the perennial philosophy?), (e) the epistemological status of its knowledge claims (e.g., do transpersonal phenomena actually reveal direct knowledge about the objective existence of extra-mental transcendental realities?), and (f) transpersonal psychology’s relation to empirical science (e.g., is transpersonal psychology an empirical science?).

The educational problems that face transpersonal psychology today in many ways are no different from those faced by other specialties within psychology (e.g., health psychology) and parallel those confronted by parapsychology 30 years ago – unstructured and disorganized courses with uneven or restricted content coverage, absence of an agreed-upon set general curriculum for undergraduate teaching, conceptual and methodological disagreements among experts, and lack of an authoritative standard textbook in the discipline (Rogo, 1973). Given the diversity of topics between courses, specialized approaches within courses, absence of systematic training in the field, and lack of agreement over foundational issues, it is not surprising that there is no generally accepted standard textbook appropriate for undergraduate students that would efficiently and effectively introduce them to the field of transpersonal psychology and facilitate the progress of the field’s integration into mainstream psychology.

Transpersonal Education: Prospects

Donald Rothberg (1999), faculty member at Saybrook Graduate School and Research in San Francisco, outlined various critiques of current transpersonal education and identified seven directions that contemporary approaches to transpersonal education of the future might take. As he stated:

The area of education, considered broadly and at all levels, is one of the most significant areas of future inquiry and exploration in the transpersonal field. It is also an area fraught with controversies and challenges... If there is to be an expansion beyond small numbers of dedicated educators and students at the margins of mainstream education and Western societies, transpersonal approaches to education will have to gain greater articulation and maturity. (pp. 49-51)

Dialogue on the topic of education in transpersonal psychology is indeed one of the most crucial needs now facing transpersonal psychology today. One way for transpersonal education to gain greater articulation and maturity is to address the immediate curricular issues that currently confront it in a more systematic and organized fashion.

Fortunately, extensive bibliographies exist that lay an excellent foundation to establish statements of intended educational outcomes related to or supportive of accepted models of teaching and curricula (e.g., American

Psychological Association, 2000; Hendricks & Fadiman, 1976; Miller, 1997). As far back as 1974, Roberts identified how transpersonal education could transform and invigorate the traditional psychology curriculum (Roberts, 1974). The *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, in print continuously since 1969, has published numerous reports describing specific examples of how educators have attempted to incorporate transpersonal theory and practice into undergraduate and graduate psychology education (Boucoulalas, 1980; Clark, 1974; Davis & Wright, 1987; Dubin, 1994; Frager, 1974; Ingersol, 2002; Katz, 1973; Mansfield, 1991; Murphy, 1969; Redmond, 1974; Roberts, 1989; Scotton, 1985; Wilber, 1995).

There are numerous texts that one could adopt as supplementary texts for an undergraduate course in transpersonal psychology, including Assagioli (1965, 1988), Boorstein (1996), Braud and Anderson (1988), Campbell (1999), Ferruci (1982), Hardy (1987), Maslow (1971), Mann (1984), May (1991), Neher (1990), Tart (1975), Vaughn (1985), Wallace and Fisher (1991), Walsh and Shapiro (1983), Washburn (1995), and Zusne and Jones (1982). These books are not used as a primary standard text of the field, however, because they are dated, limited in content coverage, and not designed for a broad-based survey course in either transpersonal psychology or general psychology.

Other works considered as standard, authoritative transpersonal psychology course textbooks, include books by Cortright (1997); Rowan (1998); Scotton et al. (1996); and Walsh and Vaughn (1993). Even these works, however, are not without their limitations. Wide but uneven coverage of topics, treated in a brief and condensed manner, with many different authors writing in styles that are discontinuous with one another, at difficulty levels ranging from medium to high that presuppose more background knowledge than the average college undergraduate typically possesses, with a focus more on transpersonal psychotherapy than on research findings or how transpersonal research is actually done, and virtual absence of in-text pedagogical aids (chapter outlines, glossaries of key terms, discussion questions, illustrations) makes clear and logical communication of key transpersonal concepts uneven and comprehension difficult for the uninitiated student.

Transpersonal Education: Challenges

The field of transpersonal psychology requires a textbook that would accomplish for the discipline what the publication of Ulric Neisser's (1967) book *Cognitive Psychology* did for the emergence of contemporary cognitive psychology and what William James's (1890) *Principles of Psychology* did for the emergence of American functional psychology. Ideally, the scope of the textbook would be

comprehensive and balanced to provide a straightforward introduction to the basic topics, issues, and research areas of psychology typically covered in a conventional mainstream introductory psychology survey course but from a *transpersonal* perspective, including biological foundations, sensation and perception, learning and memory, language and thought, motivation and emotion, lifespan development, personality theory and measurement, abnormal behavior, methods of therapy, and social psychology. The text would be applied as well as theoretical and explore the evolving applications of transpersonal psychology in each of the basic research areas typically presented in an introductory general psychology course.

The use of such an organizational framework would address the curricular problems that confront transpersonal education today. It would encourage a more complete coverage of transpersonal topics within traditional content domains. It would promote greater integration of transpersonal concepts and theories with the research methods and findings of mainstream psychology. It would help integrate transpersonal psychology within the framework of contemporary educational process. Traditional psychology's content areas would also become enriched and gain greater breadth and depth when viewed from the multidisciplinary, broadly integrative approach that has come to characterize contemporary transpersonal studies.

Writing style and pedagogical aids. Ideally, a single author writes the text in order to avoid the difficulties inherent whenever multiple authors contribute to the writing of an edited work (abrupt changes in topic, inconsistent grammar and word usage, dissimilar syntax, disparate writing styles). Written at a difficulty level appropriate for two-year and four-year college students, the text would maintain an interest-arousing quality and present abstract, difficult concepts in clear, accessible prose and in a visually appealing format. Each chapter would begin with a list of educational (student) outcomes and an outline that helps organize the subject matter for the student. End-of-section summaries review key ideas to help provide students psychological closure and consolidate their learning. Activities and exercises are provided to give psychological roots to transpersonal theories and concepts so that students could put them to the test of further action and personal development in their own lives. For the student, a Reading and Study Guide would promote student learning and used by instructors to structure course lectures. For the instructor, a Test Bank containing multiple-choice items and short-essay questions keyed to each chapter would provide a quantitative and qualitative measure of students' knowledge of important concepts, principles, and theories. An Instructor's Manual that includes educational (student) objectives, teaching strategies, expanded chapter outlines, additional activities and

exercises, suggested readings, films, and web sites closely integrated with the text would promote effective course design and teaching.

Content coverage. Coverage would focus not only on contemporary interest in the relationship between spirituality and psychology, but also the relationship between biological and transpersonal phenomena and between philosophical and psychological theory. For instance, the exceptional human physical transformative capacities documented by Murphy (1992), the scientific evidence for psi functioning summarized by Radin (1997), and the provocative demonstrations of personality action described by Hastings (1991) would form the core of chapters on biological foundations, sensation and perception, and personality theory, respectively. Being as up-to-date as possible, the text would present transpersonal psychology's classic studies and concepts, as well as present the discipline's most important recent postmodern developments (e.g., Ferrer, 2002). Ideally speaking, its content coverage would come to define the typical transpersonal psychology course and used as a standard of reference for students in the field.

The transpersonal perspective is not new to psychology. James Fadiman, co-author of the popular personality theory textbook, *Personality and Personal Growth* (Frager & Fadiman, 2005), once said: "Conventional psychology is at least 150 years old, whereas transpersonal is 45,000 years old" (cited in Fadiman, Grob, Bravo, Agar, & Walsh, 2003, p. 119). An argument can indeed be made that the roots of modern psychology itself lie in an intellectual tradition that is thoroughly transpersonal in character.

Gustav T. Fechner (1801-1887), acknowledged founder of the branch of experimental psychology known as psychophysics, for instance, "developed his psychophysical science for the purpose of providing a scientific foundation for his belief in the survival of the human spirit or soul" (Rosenzweig, 1987, p. 788) and even authored a book, *The Little Book of Life After Death*, that gave an explicit defense of the idea of life after death (Fechner, 1836/1992). Philosopher-psychologist William James (1842-1910), founder of the school of Functionalism and the philosophy of Pragmatism, pioneered the study of consciousness, cultivated scientific interest in parapsychology, and wrote extensively about the psychology of mystical experience (Taylor, 1996a, 1996b). Swiss psychiatrist and founder of Analytical Psychology, Carl G. Jung (1875-1961) was one of the first psychodynamic psychologists to open the subject of "the life of the spirit" to scientific inquiry (Jung, 1934/1960). Presently, the American Psychological Association (APA) is beginning to acknowledge the clinical value of using clients' religious beliefs as a valuable and important adjunct to traditional forms of therapy in bringing about desired therapeutic outcomes, as reflected in its publication of such

books as *Religion and the Clinical Practice of Psychology* (Shafranske, 1996), *A Spiritual Strategy for Counseling and Psychotherapy* (Richards & Bergin, 1997), and *Spiritually-Oriented Psychotherapy* (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). The ideal textbook would draw students' attention to these historical facts and current developments.

Active areas of research. The ideal textbook would highlight psychology's potential contributions to the task of understanding humanity's "religious sentiment" (Allport's phrase) and clarify the relationship between science and religion in the modern world. The text would describe how transpersonal psychology is exploring basic research areas that are relevant to this topic, including states of consciousness (Hunt, 1995), meditation (Murphy & Donovan, 1997; Shapiro & Walsh, 1984), lucid dreaming (Gackenbach & Bosveld, 1989), entheogens (Grof, 1975; T. Roberts, 2001), near-death experiences (Ring, 1982; Sabom, 1998), mind-body healing (Achterberg, 1985; Benor, 1993; O'Regan & Hirshberg, 1993), trance channeling (Hastings, 1991), phenomena suggestive of post-mortem survival (Braude, 2003; Stevenson, 1997), transformative biological capacities (Murphy, 1992), cross-cultural contemplative development (Walsh & Shapiro, 1983), psi functioning (Braud, 2003; Radin, 1997; Rao, 2001), the relation of psychosis to mysticism (Lukoff, 1985; Nelson, 1994), and the relation of brain states to mind states (Austin, 1998; Newberg, D'Aquili, & Rause, 2001). These basic research areas have thrown light on how spiritual practices work, confirmed the benefits of altered states of consciousness, broadened conventional concepts about the nature of the psychological self, developed a greater understanding of human potential and abilities, and have promoted the growth and development of the field known as transpersonal psychology (Wulff, 1991, Chapter 12). Coverage would present not only the conclusions reached by transpersonal research, but also describe how quantitative and qualitative transpersonal research designs are actually implemented (Braud & Anderson, 1998).

Integrative perspective unique among the sciences. Finally, the ideal textbook would highlight how transpersonal psychology, like transpersonal education itself, is not merely another academic discipline but a viewpoint and orientation toward body, time, self, world, and others, something akin to humane education and affective education that, to a great extent, is unique among the psychological arts and sciences. Transpersonal psychology's *integral approach* integrates the five perspectives commonly used in contemporary mainstream psychology (biological, environmental, cognitive, psychodynamic, phenomenological) into an inclusive, comprehensive, multilayered overview of experience and behavior that arguably represents one of the field's most important contributions to the psychological

sciences (Wilber, 2000a, 2000b). It incorporates “the *psychological* study of the transpersonal and spiritual dimensions of human nature and existence...[and] the *spiritual* and *transpersonal* study of human psychology” with the benefits of inclusiveness provided by the integration of multiple perspectives (J. Ferrer, cited in Caplan, Hartelius, & Rardin, 2003, p. 147).

After taking their first course in transpersonal psychology or general psychology course that incorporated a transpersonal perspective, students would come to understand how transpersonal theory and research is not merely another area of specialization, but a perspective that applies to a wide variety of human experiences and behaviors – sensing and perceiving, learning and remembering, thinking and creating, speaking and behaving. Students would recognize how the transpersonal perspective applies in research courses such as experimental psychology; clinical courses such as personality theory, abnormal psychology, and counseling theories; and developmental-social courses such as lifespan development and social psychology. They would realize how the “transpersonal vision” (Walsh and Vaughn’s [1993] phrase) applies not only in psychology but also allied disciplines, such as art and music, physics and biology, education and anthropology, law and government, philosophy and religious studies, business and medicine, sociology and environmental sciences. They also would appreciate how information obtained through the seemingly disparate perspectives of contemporary psychology (biological, environmental, cognitive, psychodynamic, phenomenological) is integrated into an interrelated, logically coherent, and broadly inclusive overview of human behavior and experience in a way that avoids reducing the complete truths of all into the partial truth of one, or committing what philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949) referred to as a “category mistake.”

Conclusion

The modern cultural and societal trend away from traditional collectivist forms of religion and the movement toward innovative individualistic forms of spirituality, coupled with the rediscovery of ancient and cross-cultural forms of spiritual practice and growing dissatisfaction with purely materialistic and mechanistic explanations of life, mind, and consciousness, have given popular interest in transpersonal psychology a strong grounding in contemporary life. People are “desperately seeking spirituality” (Taylor, 1994, p. 54). Their need gives impetus to work in transpersonal psychology, which answers questions that arise from the hearts and minds of many people – questions that help individuals bring out answers by searching into their own experience. The books that transpersonal psychologists write are used by people as ladders to transcend plateaus of growth and devel-

opment and bring them to another “higher” point. The publication of an authoritative up-to-date textbook for an introductory course in transpersonal psychology would not only provide a generalized model of curricula for undergraduate courses in transpersonal psychology but also would encourage teachers to introduce this exciting area of theory and research into their introductory general psychology courses as well.

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Correspondence regarding this article should be directed to the author at pcunningham@rivier.edu