

1-1-2002

## Transpersonal Psychology as a Scientific Field

Harris Friedman

*Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ciis.edu/ijts-transpersonalstudies>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), [Psychology Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Friedman, H. (2002). Friedman, H. (2002). Transpersonal psychology as a scientific field. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 21(1), 175–187.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 21 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2002.21.1.175>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#). This Article is brought to you for free and open access by International Journal of Transpersonal Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Transpersonal Studies by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact the editors.

# Transpersonal Psychology as a Scientific Field

*Harris Friedman*

Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center  
San Francisco, California, USA

The importance of the development of transpersonal psychology as a science is considered. Arguments from romanticism, scientism, and constructionism that challenge this possibility are countered. A distinction is drawn between the field of transpersonal psychology as a science and the broader area known as transpersonal studies that may legitimately use scientific or nonscientific methods. The concepts of transpersonal phenomena and transcendent noumena are delineated, the latter being seen as outside of the purview of science. The benefits of embracing a scientific approach are contrasted to a number of epistemological alternatives. The scientific approach is forwarded for its potential contribution towards providing a unifying paradigm for the discipline of psychology and for solving crucial problems in the world. I hope that this presentation challenges the reader to more deeply examine the role of science in transpersonal psychology.

**T**RANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY has never developed a coherent scientific frame of reference, and despite numerous attempts to adequately define it (e.g., Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993), still suffers from serious ambiguity regarding its scope and appropriate methodology. As a result, little progress in understanding transpersonal psychological phenomena from a scientific perspective has occurred since the founding of the field. In this paper, I consider the importance of specifying transpersonal psychology as a scientific field and propose some strategies to further its progress as a science.

## **Reasons to Restrict the Field of Transpersonal Psychology to Science**

**T**HERE ARE three pragmatic reasons why the study of transpersonal psychology should be unambiguously restricted to scientific approaches.

First, transpersonal psychology was clearly instituted as a field that was meant to be part of the larger discipline of scientific psychology. The major founders of transpersonal psychology were clearly invested in extending the rigorous scientific discipline of psychology beyond the conventional boundaries of psychoanalytical, behavioral, and humanistic psychology. Their purpose was not to abandon science, as exemplified by the statement in the first issue of the major publication which initially launched the field: "*The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* is concerned with the publication of theoretical and applied research, original contributions, *empirical* papers, articles and studies in..." (Sutich, 1969, p. 16). Thereafter, a number of diverse content areas were listed, but clearly a scientific agenda was presented.<sup>1</sup>

Second, since the discipline of psychology is clearly identified as a science by the majority of psychologists and also by society as a whole, the field of transpersonal psychology explicitly lays

claim through its name to be part of that scientific discipline. Likewise, the rewards of scientific status accrue to transpersonal psychology through its association with psychology. For example, professional psychological services are provided in a context that is legitimized by various governments based on the rationale that scientific standards are being used in such practice. Legitimization entails specific benefits to practitioners as provided through licensing laws. A practitioner operating outside the scientific framework in providing applied services offered through a professional psychology license would be perceived as violating this implicit contract. It is well established in law that psychologists who use approaches that are not scientifically justifiable can be sanctioned for professional discipline such as loss of their licenses to practice. There may also be civil penalties, enforced through malpractice action, and even criminal penalties for a licensed professional operating in a nonscientific fashion. Furthermore, if nonscientific approaches were to be allowed as a legitimate part of professional practice by applied transpersonal psychologists, a situation of inequity would be created that would discriminate against other practitioners, such as religious healers, who might use similar nonscientific methods yet not be allowed a comparable professional license and its privileges. (Even in academic and scholarly arenas, transpersonal psychologists enjoy benefits due to their attributed scientific status, such as in receiving greater public acceptance as authoritative experts.) Consequently, I argue that to allow practices that are not scientifically based within the field of transpersonal psychology is neither legally nor ethically defensible.

Third, and most importantly, I consider the development of a scientific transpersonal psychology crucial for human survival and the betterment of life. Relegating the field to the collection and reportage of unscientific folk traditions presented in a journalistic fashion would at best be superfluous since such sources are abundant and have little likelihood of helping humanity in any progressive way. If the field is used to promulgate any specific religious or spiritual folk traditions, under a falsely assumed scientific label, the deception could be damaging in many ways, including the possibility of undermining further scientific development of

the field. I believe that the best hope for lasting solutions to many of the grave problems faced by humans, and the earth itself, at this time lies in psychological rather than technical progress. For example, although pressures of escalating overpopulation in third world nations could be eased through further attempts toward increasing agricultural output, as through genetically enhanced crops, this type of solution is likely not to prove sustainable but only to postpone overpopulation breaking points. Psychological solutions, such as changing core attitudes toward reproduction that are currently embedded in religious belief systems, are likely to be more effective than technical solutions to these human-based problems. Furthermore, the type of psychological solutions required for these crucial problems of contemporary adaptation, both human and planetary, cannot be adequately addressed solely through the limited conceptualizations offered by mainstream psychology but require, instead, transpersonal considerations. Only transpersonal psychology allows for innovative avenues in which scientific approaches can address many of the most pressing problems that threaten our very survival as a species and the survival of our planet. And, beyond mere deficit motivations, a scientific transpersonal psychology is required for the optimum development of our human potential. To throw away the unique promise offered by transpersonal psychology through rejecting the proper role of science in the field would be not only irresponsible but tragic.

In summary, based on the historic roots of the field, the ethical and legal implications of its connection with the discipline of scientific psychology, and the importance of the field for human survival and betterment, transpersonal psychology should be bound to a scientific commitment. Those who wish to abandon scientific approaches to pursue their transpersonal work should be unfettered as long as they use a broader term, such as transpersonal studies, to describe their work. But those who elect to associate their work with the field of transpersonal psychology need to be aware of the implications of their choice. In particular, those who disseminate their own religious or spiritual beliefs through their professional work should not present themselves as transpersonal psychologists.

## Objections from Romanticism, Scientism, and Constructionism

HAVING ADVOCATED that transpersonal psychology be restricted to the realm of science, I will focus the discussion now on directly confronting the positions of those who are hostile to the possibility of a scientific transpersonal psychology. For simplicity, three opposing positions that I label as romanticism, scientism, and constructionism will be explored.

The view identified with romanticism poses the greatest current threat to the development of a scientific transpersonal psychology since so many people of this persuasion are attracted to the field. The romantic movement has long opposed the scientific approach in all spheres. Most advocates of romanticism seem to cast doubt upon both the value and possibility of a scientifically based transpersonal psychology by offering broad critiques such as that science is inherently reductionistic or deterministic. To be fair, some who are less extreme argue cogently that the approach of romanticism provides initial ways to explore important realms that are not yet amenable to scientific approaches, such as "poetic, intuitive, and visionary states" (Schneider, 1998, p. 284) but do not fully disregard the utility of science. I accept that, while these methods of romanticism may not meet the criteria of science, they may still be legitimate and worthwhile scholarly efforts within what could be called transpersonal studies; however, they should not be viewed as transpersonal psychology. The positions of romanticists thus range from those who outrightly dismiss any applicability of science to the field to those who posit a more moderate view that science may one day be useful to investigate the transpersonal realm but currently is inadequate for the task.

The former type of romanticism poses a severe challenge to the field. There are those, for example, who take such romanticism as a license to naively accept, and promulgate, questionable beliefs and practices that have not been critically evaluated from a scientific perspective. Such a stance provides a variety of benefits: Clinical practitioners with this attitude, for example, may rely on whatever happens in a psychotherapy session without having to tax their skills by using rational treatment strategies or taking responsibility for outcomes. Thus they may

comfortably serve, or exploit, their clients without any accountability, at least until the regulators and litigators arrive. In addition, romanticism can lucratively be used to sell questionable transpersonal works—witness the numerous ludicrous books and seminars marketed to a naive public. It seems that including the terms spirit or soul in such work increases its marketability.

Responsible transpersonal psychologists need to consistently and rigorously examine the appropriateness of including extreme romanticism within the field: For example, should astrology be included in transpersonal psychology? Even though systems of astrology are filled with nonscientific assumptions and fail to demonstrate any consistent evidence of validity, numerous so-called professionals openly promote this folk system in their teachings, writings, and even professional practice. I strongly advocate that scientific studies on astrology, such as exploring the antecedents and consequences of belief in astrology, are appropriate material for a scientific transpersonal psychology. Likewise, it is appropriate to continue to scientifically explore the validity of systems of astrology, although I think that the lack of evidence thus far is such that serious investigators would likely not want to invest their time further in this direction. But it is deplorable to write or teach about astrology in any way other than as an unsubstantiated folk tradition and especially to use astrology as part of a licensed psychological practice. This abuse exemplifies one practice steeped in romanticism that is unfortunately tolerated within transpersonal psychology. Astrology and similar, nonscientific practices should not be sanctioned as a legitimate part of the field. The myriad of other pseudoscientific approaches used by those who embrace extreme romanticism within the field of transpersonal psychology should also be held up to scientific standards or be excluded from the field.

A difficult issue that should be addressed in this discussion is the way in which traditional religions are handled. For example, many Western transpersonal psychologists seem to have rejected their own religious traditions and have become enamored of seemingly more exotic traditions. It can even be claimed that at present the field of transpersonal psychology can be largely characterized as the Western practice of Eastern religions in a pseudoscientific guise. But why should traditional beliefs or practices



from some other culture with little or no supporting empirical evidence be given any special credence? The same can be said for pastoral counseling in the predominantly Judeo-Christian tradition in the West. This argument is not meant to deny the importance of belief systems and their cultural relevance in effective psychological practice. The point is that science, including its applications in professional practice, should not be tied to any particular religious or spiritual tradition although it can clearly be used appropriately within the context of such a tradition. In addition, traditions might be sources of fruitful hypotheses for beginning to scientifically explore within transpersonal psychology, but a skeptical scientific attitude should prevail unless support is evidenced. Finally, I intend no disrespect for those in any religious or spiritual tradition as long as they do not try to characterize their tradition as science and do not try to stop scientific inquiry, as exemplified by a recent challenge by advocates of creationism to the teaching of evolution in Kansas, USA.

A romanticism that lacks discrimination in regard to numerous prevailing folk beliefs and unsubstantiated claims has unfortunately proliferated within transpersonal psychology. This has encouraged a perspective in which rational scrutiny has been placed in abeyance to the degree that there is no difference perceived between, metaphorically speaking, gold and pyrite, not to mention denying that feet may be of mere clay. Thus many transpersonal psychologists have unfortunately taken the position of affirming that everything claiming to be spiritual, particularly if it is from an Eastern tradition, is gold. But I believe strongly we can and must distinguish gold from baser metals and, even more importantly, simple clay. The Sufi aphorism that there would not be counterfeiters if there were not real gold applies to the huge number of romantic approaches in the field that suggest at least the possibility of value in the transpersonal area. Excesses of romanticism may have some role in the larger scheme of things, but only scientific discrimination can allow us to reliably and validly distinguish what is of value from what is not. Likewise, romanticists who dogmatically embrace only one specific tradition, seeing gold only within that tradition, need to consider that other traditions may also contain gold and even that their own tradition may also contain baser elements.

In dramatic contrast to the rejection of the field by advocates of extreme romanticism, there is also a strong rejection by those who advocate a position of scientism which is characterized by an attitude that outwardly appears similar to the attitude of science but is actually dominated by a rigid and closed-minded view. Scientism is not a legitimate aspect of the scientific approach per se, since openness is a core scientific value that is complementary to skepticism; instead scientism is a perversion of science that has been corrupted into a parochial ideology. Science should never be an ideology but an approach to knowledge grounded in respect for understanding experience. It is unfortunate that some adherents to scientism have dismissed the entire field of transpersonal psychology as fundamentally irrational and therefore not amenable to scientific approaches. Ellis (1989) has written the best expression of this misguided rejection of transpersonal psychology through engaging in catastrophic thinking, a type of cognitive error he made famous. In his book, he regards the transpersonal perspective as having no value for scientific psychology and he views transpersonal psychology as thoroughly dangerous. Those who embrace scientism and reject the field in this way, however, err through confusing the lack of critical discrimination and the excesses among those embracing extreme romanticism that is endemic in transpersonal psychology with what the field could actually achieve. Their conclusion is not realistically based on any limitation inherent in transpersonal psychology as a science per se, only on fear of the consequences of unbridled romanticism (not totally unwarranted given the problems rampant in the field).

I find it fascinating that both romanticism and scientism, appearing antithetical on the surface, fundamentally agree in prematurely rejecting the possibility that transpersonal psychology can be a science. The romanticists need to consider the futility of romantic speculation not based on empirical observation. They should ponder the prospects of their efforts helping to bring in an unfortunate New Age—a New Dark Age. And those who embrace scientism need to consider the narrowness of their approach in the light of the scientific value of openness as opposed to an overly closed-minded skepticism. Neither of these protests against the applicability of science to the field can be substantiated and, therefore, a

science of transpersonal psychology cannot be so easily dismissed.

Another threat to transpersonal psychology's becoming established as a science stems from the postmodern movement known as constructionism, a term frequently prefaced with adjectives such as social or cognitive (e.g., Gergen, 1994). This approach emphasizes that human knowledge is always constructed in some fashion by "knowers" who bring along personal baggage. Thus all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is perceived as an artifact having no real independent existence. Furthermore, this construction always is seen in a context limited not only by material constraints but mediated by culture, that is, those who control social power also control the way in which knowledge is constructed. Therefore, knowledge is always relative; there is never an absolute truth, only limited, constructed viewpoints that are necessarily equivocal.

The assumptions of constructionism are, in themselves, useful observations about the limitations inherent in all claims to knowledge. However, one unfortunate result of constructionism is that all viewpoints are held to be equally valid. This eliminates science as the defining method for pursuing knowledge and even the value of any knowledge.

As applied to the field of transpersonal psychology, assumptions from constructionism may be exaggerated in a particularly problematic way. For example, the recognition of limitations to knowledge widely accepted in the physical sciences (e.g., the Heisenberg uncertainty principle) has eroded the unquestioned authority of the scientific method in general. Constructs such as consciousness and free will that are assumed relevant to all human sciences have further undermined the legitimacy of traditional approaches to science as applied to the discipline of psychology. It is argued that the limitations of science in the material world are eclipsed by the magnitude of the additional limitations science faces in dealing with the greater complexity inherent in the human world. Finally, in the field of transpersonal psychology, science is often blatantly dismissed as irrelevant, particularly in relation to arguments based on transpersonal concepts that openly defy basic scientific assumptions. For example, one such scientific assumption is the presumed requirement of the

independence of subject and object in any valid observation or experiment. This assumption is brought into question, however, by constructs such as transpersonal self-expansiveness (MacDonald, Gagnier, & Friedman, 2000; Friedman, 1983) in which the individual is conceptualized as possibly surpassing limitations that allow for any absolute subject-object dichotomy. Thus the uncertainty recognized through the Heisenberg principle in all of science is magnified by the unique concerns of human, as opposed to natural, science and then is further increased in the transpersonal field, bringing doubt as to the ultimate worth of science in transpersonal psychology. Constructionism, bolstered by these types of legitimate concerns about scientific limitations, provides an especially potent challenge to the hegemony of science in transpersonal psychology, as well as a challenge to science in general.

Several alternative positions to constructionism can contribute to this discussion. One is to clearly posit that aspects of reality can be known, at least to some degree, in ways that are not just cognitively or socially constructed. For example, there may be differences among language users from different cultures as to how they might discuss the ways to climb a mountain. Nevertheless, the mountain appears to solidly exist as an independent reality regardless of how it is described linguistically. Thus significant relativism from the perspective of constructionism might primarily involve the meanings of associated reality, not the reality itself. Remember the Zen saying, "First the mountains are just mountains; then, they are no longer mountains; and in the end they are mountains again." One interpretation of this is that after completing a mystical journey in which reality is deconstructed, reality should once more be reconstructed and realized in both levels of that word. One might argue further, from a realist position, that to deny the fundamental reality of the mountain, and its dangers, would be foolhardy and tantamount to death if one were called upon to climb the mountain. Despite the current popularity of constructionism in the humanities and among some in the social sciences, realism is not only viable but still is the main philosophical underpinning of most of contemporary science. Nevertheless, it has been aptly pointed out that, "As we enter the twenty-

first century, we psychologists are having trouble with reality" (Martin & Sugarman, 1999, p. 177), particularly in the attempt to reconcile modern with postmodern perspectives.

Another alternative to the constructionist argument is the kind of positivism that approaches science as a language game of theory building which may or may not relate to any ultimate reality. Sometimes this is called postpositivism when there are specific efforts to distance science from veridical ties to any external reality. From this perspective, science should avoid claims about truth and, instead, should only offer theories that progressively become more elegant and closely related to empirical data through their refinement over time. Truth, at least in relationship to any underlying reality, is irrelevant to purists from such a perspective. What is relevant is the ability of a model to be useful in the game of science. This strategy is illustrated by the classic scientific use of the null hypothesis, a clever ploy in which scientists construct hypothetical alternative explanations to challenge their theoretical formulations. The scientific method then proceeds by attempting to nullify or disprove these alternative hypotheses. This method does not allow for directly trying to prove the validity of hypotheses that support the theory being entertained—that would be attempting to affirm something as true: Instead attempts are made to whittle down alternative explanations so that the theory offered becomes either increasingly more compelling or is found to have problems and is rejected. The absolute truth of any theory is thus irrelevant and never proven through this approach to the scientific method: Instead, the systematic rejections of null hypotheses provide increasing circumstantial evidence to enable more confidence to be had in the potential usefulness of a theory. Furthermore, the expectation is that a theory is always a work in progress and will be revised as more becomes known. All theory is therefore relative, a version of our best understanding at the moment.

In spite of the current popularity of constructionism in some circles, science based on such versions of positivism is still viable. Unfortunately, it is easy for those who read transpersonal literature and are not conversant with modern science except through transpersonal "pop" science to misconstrue the importance of

postmodernism in general and constructionism in particular. Science clearly remains the dominant worldview and is not about to be replaced by a constructionist revolution that would immobilize it. In addition, most scientists do not engage in much philosophical reflection as they proceed in doing science, since the scientific method provides such obvious results. The process of most science is basically oblivious to the implications of constructionism; most scientists implicitly embrace traditional scientific perspectives and avoid the nihilistic quandary of constructionism. That so many transpersonal psychologists have jumped on the constructionist bandwagon as justification for abandoning science is truly counterproductive. In my opinion, the extreme nihilistic implications of constructionism will eventually be seen as an intellectual dead end similar to the sophist paradoxes offered by the ancient Greeks that alleged to demonstrate the impossibility of change. At the same time, constructionism has been useful in further sensitizing us to potential bias issues, such as power and position differences among scientists.

Study in the field of transpersonal psychology does involve some specific philosophical difficulties from a scientific perspective but, of course, all sciences struggle with their unique disciplinary problems. Even though constructionism provides some clear insight into scientific limitations, it does not demonstrate that science is irrelevant to transpersonal psychology—and arguments from extreme romanticism and scientism should be outrightly rejected. I conclude that, in spite of the challenges, finding ways to proceed with a science of transpersonal psychology should be ardently pursued.

### **Important Distinctions to Facilitate Scientific Progress in Transpersonal Psychology**

TO FURTHER this discussion, an important distinction alluded to earlier needs to be formally established, namely, that transpersonal studies and transpersonal psychology are not equivalent. The former is a broadly defined domain of inquiry that can legitimately include a diversity of methods ranging from those of the humanities to those of a variety of scientific endeavors. Psychology, on the other hand, is defined by most psychologists as a scientific



discipline; except for a few humanistic and transpersonal adherents who insist that including alternative, that is, nonscientific, approaches is important for the discipline, science is widely accepted as the mainstay of the discipline. A preliminary conceptualization of transpersonal psychology that I see as useful is to place it as a field of study and applied practice positioned at the intersection between the broader domain of inquiry known as transpersonal studies and the scientific discipline of psychology. Furthermore, I see transpersonal psychology foremost as a field within the discipline of scientific psychology that focuses on those aspects of transpersonal studies that involve the individual, including thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as found in the individual's biological, cultural, social, and wider contexts.

In studies or applications related to such transpersonal phenomena, transpersonal psychology can draw upon content common to diverse fields of transpersonal studies. As a field of psychology, however, it requires responsible use of the scientific approach, such as submitting transpersonal folk beliefs to rigorous scientific examination. I consider all nonscientific approaches to transpersonal material better viewed as distinct from transpersonal psychology and classified, instead, within the broader domain of transpersonal studies. Likewise, transpersonal approaches that are not focused on the individual, regardless of whether scientific or not, are best viewed as residing in other transpersonal fields.

Unfortunately, the domain of transpersonal studies is often confounded with the field of transpersonal psychology. This has led to much confusion, which I hope the distinction I have drawn clarifies. The present argument is not intended to delimit the methods used by transpersonal studies in any way; further, it explicitly acknowledges that methods from that domain could be either scientific or representative of other approaches of knowing (e.g., hermeneutics) that are legitimate but not within the realm of science. Nor is the argument intended to limit spiritual or religious beliefs or expressions, whether traditional or New Age. All of these pursuits can, of course, inform and be informed by transpersonal psychology in a variety of creative ways.

Another way to facilitate scientific progress in transpersonal psychology would be to overtly recognize specific areas in which science might be irrelevant and bracket them from scientific

inquiry. For example, areas resisting scientific efforts since they are not yet amenable to empirical exploration, as previously mentioned, could be appropriately explored by nonscientific methods that are openly recognized as such. This type of exploration would then be seen as prescientific in the sense that it does not preclude the possibility that scientific approaches may later prove possible.

An extremely important area that has been immensely problematic to transpersonal psychology is the transcendent. The transcendent is intertwined with most conceptualizations of the field, yet I see it as outside of the purview of all scientific approaches, now and in the future. I consider it to be the ultimate holistic concept that can only be experienced, if at all, in a direct and unmediated fashion unhampered by any specific limitation. Since all concepts are inherently limited, they are inadequate vehicles for comprehending the transcendent. All discussions of any attributes of transcendence, for example, through using terms such as "ultimate transcendence" in contrast to "nonultimate transcendence," break down as meaningless. The transcendent is beyond all conventional thought that involves symbolic mediation by words or any limiting symbolic system and beyond all public discourse including science. Thus any direct experience of the transcendent, such as unity consciousness, would be accompanied by an override or shut-down of conventional thought during the time of the experience of transcendence. In this mode, a merger of subject with object would likely occur such that the knower would cease, in any ordinary meaningful way, to be a separate individual. Since unmediated knowledge would be, by definition, experienced directly and, when the experience was over, forgotten or vaguely coded in some system of symbols, one who disappeared as a separate being in transcendence would, upon reentry into the world of ordinary thought and discourse, have to rely on symbolically mediated memory of that experience after the transcendence. Even if one were to remain connected with transcendent experience while using a symbolic system such as language, as an enlightened being might possibly be, that use would necessarily be filtered through the limitations of the symbolic system and would thus also be limited. Thus I conclude that science is required to be mute about the ultimate issue of



the transcendent since it transcends the symbolic process itself that is the sole vehicle of science. A major difficulty preventing scientific progress in transpersonal psychology therefore can be avoided through making a clear delineation between the concept of the transpersonal and that of the transcendent, a distinction which I hope will lead to a productive reframing of many transpersonal questions.

This important distinction between the transpersonal and the transcendent is not original. Valle (1998), for example, contrasted transpersonal with transcendent awareness. He described transcendent awareness as prereflective, or the ground of consciousness without a subject-object split, whereas he described transpersonal awareness as referring to experiences deeper or beyond our ordinary ego sense but not necessarily transcendent. Transpersonal awareness still contains the content of self as a separate knower, in contrast to the transcendent which is radically beyond any limiting content, including rational description, and thus defies direct scientific exploration.

However, the transpersonal realm (excluding the transcendent) remains open to scientific study, as does the indirect relationship between indicators of the transcendent and more conventional concepts. Thus asking questions about the transcendent may be still within the realm of science as long as we recognize it is always "about" the transcendent and not directly addressing it (e.g., "How does having transcendent experiences [or at least experiences people are willing to label in such a way] change aspects of a person's life?" or "How do different religious conceptions of the transcendent relate to objective cultural or environmental sources of variability?").

The distinction between phenomena and noumena, found throughout the history of Western philosophy, is applicable here in that science can directly study phenomena but not underlying noumena. In this regard, some transpersonal theorists might argue that noumena should be approached only through a higher-level understanding than science can provide (e.g., the "eye of spirit" proposed by Wilber, 1997). Alternatively, I advocate that we exclude the transcendent from direct discourse since we cannot make meaningful statements about it. This position is also congruent with the

beliefs of many Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, such as the Judaic emphasis on the essential mystery of God's unknowability and the Taoist emphasis in the *Tao Te Ching* that those who speak about the Tao do not know of what they speak. There is also a long history of this type of perspective in Western philosophy, going back at least to Plato's famous cave metaphor, that similarly points out limits to what can be directly known.

It is therefore imperative for a viable science of transpersonal psychology to clearly delineate the transpersonal domain into two areas that have been implicitly confounded by the field. For clarity, I am labeling these as transcendent noumena which are beyond the scope of scientific study, and transpersonal phenomena which are amenable to scientific study. Juxtaposing the term transpersonal with the term phenomena is meant to establish reference to a nontranscendent and non-noumenal area of the transpersonal domain. This distinction provides the important advantage of pointing to the possibility of rigorous scientific examination of transpersonal phenomena while bracketing the metaphysical morass of the direct role of science, or rather lack of role, in regard to the transcendent. The transcendent no longer remains confounded with transpersonal phenomena and thus the questions beyond science regarding the transcendent can be fruitfully ignored by a scientific transpersonal psychology. It should be explicitly restated, however, that phenomena related to the transcendent, like all phenomena, can be studied by science while the transcendent itself can only be scientifically studied indirectly through secondary indicators. Thus, approaches toward developing a science of transpersonal psychology that explicitly excludes the direct study of transcendent noumena provides a firmer basis for scientific progress. Of course, transcendent noumena can still be the focus of transpersonal studies that utilize nonscientific methods, such as comparing poetic depictions of transcendent states.

It should be noted, however, that there is a way for science to provide an indirect comment on the transcendent. Even if something cannot be directly shown, it may be delineated through a process of pointing out what it is not. Since all that materially exists may be seen as existing

within time and space, the realm of the nontranscendent can be symbolically placed on a map of space-time such as used in the construct of transpersonal self-expansiveness (Friedman, 1983). That which transcends this map may be implied by its absence. This type of residual approach to the transcendent can be heuristic and is a core feature of the construct of self-expansiveness. This strategy toward approaching, but never fully grasping, transcendence is similar to that in which some meditative traditions stress disidentifying the self with all limitations, resulting in what is left being that with which one cannot disidentify, the residual of the transcendent. From a more conventional perspective, as calculus can be used to make successive approximations to approach the true measure of the area under a curve, so can a transpersonal approach gradually be like an asymptote and move toward the transcendent while never quite achieving that goal. In my opinion, though, to grasp the transcendent in any meaningful way would require abandoning science and directly experiencing transcendence. Thus a science of transpersonal psychology, though not dealing directly with transcendence, can elucidate the relationship of the transcendent to the world of space-time in which humans typically dwell and about which humans can meaningfully discourse. Furthermore, a transpersonal psychology limited to the domain of transpersonal phenomena, while excluding transcendent noumena, can be potentially amenable to scientific study and capable of yielding beneficial applications. Transpersonal psychology sorely needs a revolution in perspective, one that allows for transpersonal psychology to be responsibly grounded in scientific approaches. I hope the explicit delineation offered here moves the field in such a direction.

Finally, I think it wise, from a scientific perspective, to remain agnostic about the transcendent, even as to whether it can be meaningfully said to exist since it is beyond any categories, even the most fundamental ones of existence and nonexistence. Abandoning all direct speculation about the transcendent would be a productive scientific strategy. Those who operate under the banner of transpersonal psychology while engaging in speculation about the transcendent or, worse, endorsing one system or

another that allegedly develops transcendent qualities as part of their professional practice, should be regarded as outside the domain of the field. Of course, no religious or spiritual approaches to the transcendent need to be questioned as long as they are not promoted as part of the field of transpersonal psychology.

### Epistemological Considerations

TO GRASP more deeply the need for a scientific perspective in the field of transpersonal psychology, it is helpful to attend to how we know anything—the field of epistemology. Transpersonal psychologists who reject science as useful in the discipline are implicitly relying on other strategies for obtaining knowledge. These other strategies, including their benefits and limitations, need to be made explicit. Science, as one way of knowing, is characterized by its emphasis on empiricism, that is, relying on information from our experience as a criterion for affirming knowledge. Our experience may be based upon external sensory input, as is usually emphasized in science, but also can be based on internal sources of experience such as proprioception. Our experience can also be extended through communication with others and through technology, including simple technology such as standardized self-report procedures used in conventional psychometric instruments.

However, there are other ways of knowing that may or may not be more useful than the empiricism of science, depending upon circumstances. For example, following an authority such as a wise guru can be an expedient means to obtain valuable transpersonal knowledge. This may be especially useful if it involves knowledge that may not yet be scientifically available.

Science itself has sometimes been criticized as authoritarian because those who have not been initiated into the fold really cannot evaluate the veracity of its claims. However, at least potentially, individuals can replicate or empirically observe for themselves any process of science and draw their own conclusions, although it might take years of training to do so. Of course if the observation requires an enormously expensive piece of equipment, it is an option open only to the scientifically elite. Fortunately, science is competitive, and those who assert any claim typically have an ample supply

of competitors to try to disprove their assertion, thus providing a vital check and balance to the system. In this way, science strives to be highly antiauthoritarian, challenging any claims that are not backed up by evidence.

Another approach to gaining knowledge is through tradition exemplified by the common platitude as to why something is done a certain way, "because it has always been done that way around here." Traditions are formed in interesting ways; sometimes they are useful, oftentimes they are not. Many religious traditions may provide valuable transpersonal knowledge that may not yet be scientifically available. Science itself has sometimes been criticized for blindly following traditions. Some of these scientific traditions may or may not turn out to be useful. The self-corrective nature of science, however, openly encourages growth that can expose what traditions are useful and what are not.

Another way of knowing is through intuition. Examples include a felt body sense such as "knowing in the bones" or through a directly revealed inner symbolic system such as dreams. Many transpersonal psychologists seem to especially honor intuition as having a power beyond other ways of knowing. Intuition is a very personal way to know and can seem very compelling. Intuition by itself is based only on one person's insight and is therefore not subject to social testing or capable of being clearly articulated and passed on to others (though it can be translated into a consensual symbolic system and thereby studied scientifically). Furthermore, intuition can be as misleading as any tyrannical system of authority or tradition, especially considering the many biases in human judgment that can alter how intuition becomes interpreted into belief or action. To be able to tell the difference between accurate and inaccurate intuition cannot be resolved at the level of intuition. I am a strong believer, for example, in the meaningfulness of dreams in my personal and professional life. How to accurately interpret these dreams, which I believe are deep intuitive revelations from my unconscious (and/or perhaps superconscious?) is the rub. I know how easy it is for me to arbitrarily flip-flop from one interpretation to another for the same dream as my mood or mindset changes.

I would also like to draw a parallel between intuition and emotional knowing. Emotions can

be seen as a more primitive way of knowing, based on body arousals that are preverbal and not cognitively mediated. They may arise from simpler brain structures such as our so-called reptilian brain. Thus intuition may have a powerful biological basis in emotion and indeed be accurate at times, but this is not a way of knowing that I would exalt as more accurate than cognitive approaches based on higher brain functions. Ideally I advocate for congruence between what we cognitively know in our higher (mammalian) brain and what we might intuit in our reptilian brain or in our bodies. When there is mismatch, much more deliberation is warranted.

Science also draws upon intuition and some of the greatest scientific advances have stemmed from intuitive insight. However science specifically attempts to bring these into the realm of consensual methods that are empirically available.

It should be noted, too, that as ambiguity increases in a situation, we tend to rely on others through a process called social comparison. In the transpersonal arena, ambiguity is often maximized since we are looking for that which is customarily unseen, although it is all around us and, indeed, we are it. Thus transpersonal psychology is particularly vulnerable to the infirmities of both misguided tradition and authority in which we tend to rely on others without question. As an example, just as research subjects can be hypnotized into believing false memories, even conscientious meditators who are sincerely looking for a deep truth can unwittingly be led through subtle suggestion to believe in phenomena (and concepts about transcendent noumena) that are not valid. Such socially constructed meanings may or may not be valid despite an illustrious history of transmission and regardless of whether underlying motives might be benevolent or otherwise. In addition, when phenomena do not easily make cognitive sense, individuals may overvalue intuition. Since at present, transpersonal phenomena are not understood well cognitively, overvaluation of intuition is rampant in the area.

The scientific method provides a way of knowing through which blind reliance on tradition, authority, and intuition can be avoided. These other ways of knowing may still be sources



of inspiration for scientific exploration: for example, they can be scientifically used to produce potential hypotheses for empirical testing through science. To be able to rely on concepts based on experience, regardless of any authority figure or long-held tradition or individual intuitions, provides a unique openness characteristic of science. And because science benefits from cumulative knowledge and is inherently self-correcting, the continuous discovery of new knowledge may or may not alter what was previously believed.<sup>2</sup>

As previously discussed, some transpersonal psychologists are strong adherents to romanticism and blatantly reject the scientific approach as too narrow to be useful to transpersonal inquiry. However, James (1890/1950), one of the pioneers of psychology, argued for a broad, open approach to science that can answer this concern. He called his approach radical empiricism and, over a hundred years ago, clearly addressed much of the contemporary criticism that rejects the applicability of the scientific method to the field. I share his view of the need for a radical empiricism that can allow research into a broad range of experience.

Specifically, science may appropriately include innovative approaches that allow for exploring deeply private experiences or even those that require placing an observer in an altered state of consciousness. In this regard, even aspects of certain states of meditation that can be entered only through years of following an esoteric path can be brought into the objective and consensual domain of scientific scrutiny through the use of appropriate methodologies. For example, Tart's (1975) state-specific theory of science allows for a broad view of scientific approaches that includes such techniques as gathering data during altered states of consciousness. His state theory approach to science is an excellent example of how innovative yet rigorous approaches to science can fruitfully be used to explore transpersonal phenomena that were previously thought to be unamenable to scientific research. Although this type of scientific approach might require researchers to devote years toward mastering a meditation technique in order to research a type of transpersonal phenomenon, it is not so dissimilar to the years of mastery required by researchers in areas of conventional science.

## Conclusions

IT is important to consider some of the beneficial implications that could come with success in developing a scientific transpersonal psychology. The discipline of scientific psychology as a whole has been struggling throughout its short history to develop a unifying paradigm (Yanchar & Slife, 1997). I believe that the transpersonal perspective is the most comprehensive perspective possible for psychology and could provide such a paradigm. Similarly, Cortright (1997) wrote, "Transpersonal psychology is in the unique position of being the only psychological approach to human experience that can be more than just integrative but fully inclusive..." (p. 242). If the field of transpersonal psychology could abandon its current posture of ambivalence, if not overt rejection, toward science, it could progress beyond being an isolated and narrow endeavor to having a real impact on the larger discipline of psychology. Transpersonal psychology should therefore be actively concerned with contributing to the development of mainstream, conventional psychology and not remain content with its marginalized status within the larger discipline.

More crucially, a scientific transpersonal psychology could have major consequences in productively addressing the massive crises rampant in our contemporary world. Krippner (1998) expressed this theme well: "There is an urgent need in today's fractious world for integrative transpersonal perspectives, especially if presented in ways that are self-critical and able to be linked in contemporary scientific and practical concerns" (pp. x-xi). Returning to its scientific roots is the only path for transpersonal psychology to take in order to make such needed contributions. Furthermore, accelerating advances within science, such as sophisticated new neurotechnologies applicable to studying consciousness, are increasingly opening innovative and exciting scientific avenues for exploring transpersonal psychology. A redirection back to science would both allow transpersonal psychology to gain acceptance as a legitimate enterprise within the larger community of scientific efforts, including the discipline of psychology, and allow for its responsible application toward human betterment.

Perhaps no field identified with the discipline of psychology has openly accepted so many

nonscientific approaches as has transpersonal psychology. Wilber (1998) has aptly expressed the current state of the field, as follows: "There are many who see all too clearly the sad shape our field is in. They tell me about it all the time. They are truly alarmed by the reactionary, antiprogressive, and regressive fog thickly creeping over the entire field" (p. 336). Without a rededication to science, the field is unlikely to progress or earn acceptance by the scientific and professional communities and, accordingly, it is likely to eventually stagnate and disappear, its ultimate impact on humankind being slight. Transpersonal psychology could be either totally forgotten or remembered only as an obscure footnote in a few of the more comprehensive history of psychology books. Sadly, this is generally its status now in mainstream psychology. If transpersonal psychology, however, were to return to its original vision and fully embrace a renewed commitment to science, it could become not only scientifically and professionally viable but also one of the most important assets to the survival of humankind and its continued evolution.

Simply stated, the path transpersonal psychology will follow will be determined by whether its scientific proponents actively demonstrate renewed commitment toward creating a responsible science or, instead, allow the field to lapse into the default status of merely being another superfluous New Age movement or worse, a sham promulgating Eastern religious traditions under the false pretenses of being part of the discipline of psychology. We are at a choicepoint: if transpersonal psychology fails to more fully embrace science and thereby ceases to exist as a field, its disappearance would create an unfortunate void since no other field is so well oriented toward forging the necessary scientific perspectives to directly address pressing global problems. In contrast, if a renewed commitment to science were to occur, competent theorists and researchers would be attracted to the challenges abundant in this field. I do not know of any field more worthy, nor in need, of intense scientific efforts. I am also convinced that, if concerted scientific efforts were to be made in transpersonal psychology, the resulting advances could have great potential for improving the human condition, even for preserving our planet from destruction. As we go about destroying our own planet with our material success (excess), the roots of any

salvation for our species and our world can be found only in the firm realization of the interconnectedness of ourselves and all humankind to our ultimate ground of being. Transpersonal psychology can provide such a focus for this realization. I hope that transpersonal psychologists will become involved in a deeper and more systematic examination about what the field promotes and where it is heading in order to provide an additional impetus for its redirection to science. Ultimately, I believe that scientific progress in the field will lead not only to increased transpersonal understanding but may even lay the groundwork for larger numbers of us to directly experience transcendence—which, indeed, goes beyond what science can directly grasp, but toward which science can possibly point.

### Notes

This article is partially based on the following: Friedman, H. (2000). *Toward developing transpersonal psychology as a scientific field*. Paper presented at the Old Saybrook 2 Conference, State University of West Georgia, Carrollton, Georgia, USA.

1. The complete statement of purpose reads as follows:

*The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* is concerned with the publication of theoretical and applied research, original contributions, empirical papers, articles and studies in meta-needs, ultimate values, unitive consciousness, peak experience, ecstasy, mystical experience, B-values, essence, bliss, awe, wonder, self-actualization, ultimate meaning, transcendence of the self, spirit, sacralization of everyday life, oneness, cosmic awareness, cosmic play, individual and species wide synergy, maximal interpersonal encounter, transcendental phenomena; maximal sensory awareness, responsiveness and expression; compassion; and related concepts, experiences and activities. As a statement of purpose, this formulation is to be understood as subject to optional individual or group interpretations, either wholly or in part, with regard to the acceptance of its content as essentially naturalistic, theistic, supernaturalistic, or any other designated classification.

2. As an aside, it is undeniable that many have intentionally defrauded others for monetary or other advantages in the transpersonal arena, not to speak of the dogmatic intolerance in this area which has caused much human suffering. I therefore maintain strongly that science, as an open system with built-in checks and balances, is sorely needed in transpersonal psychology to protect consumers of both knowledge and services from exploitation. In fact, I think it is needed more in transpersonal psychology than in any other field.

## References

- Cortright, B. (1997). *Psychotherapy and spirit: Theory and practice in transpersonal psychology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Ellis, A. (1989). *Why some therapies don't work: The dangers of transpersonal psychology*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Friedman, H. (1983). The Self-Expansiveness Level Form: A conceptualization and measurement of a transpersonal construct. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 15, 37-50.
- Gergen, K. (1994). *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- James, W. (1950). *The principles of psychology*. New York: Dover. (Original work published 1890)
- Krippner, S. (1998). Foreword. In D. Rothberg & S. Kelly (Eds.), *Ken Wilber in dialogue*. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House.
- Lajoie, D., & Shapiro, S. I. (1992). Definitions of transpersonal psychology: The first twenty-three years. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 24, 79-98.
- Martin, J., & Sugarman, J. (1999). Psychology's reality debate: A "levels of reality" approach. *Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 19, 177-194.
- MacDonald, D., Gagnier, J., & Friedman, H. (2000). Transpersonal self-concept and the five-factor model of personality: Evidence for a sixth stable dimension of personality. *Psychological Reports*, 86, 707-726.
- Schneider, K. (1998). Toward a science of the heart: Romanticism and the revival of psychology. *American Psychologist*, 55, 277-289.
- Sutich, A. (1969). Some considerations regarding transpersonal psychology. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1(1), 11-20.
- Tart, C. (1975). *States of consciousness*. New York: Dutton.
- Valle, R. (1998). Transpersonal awareness: Implications for phenomenological research. In R. Valle (Ed.), *Phenomenological inquiry in psychology: Existential and transpersonal dimensions* (pp. 273-279). New York: Plenum Press.
- Walsh, R., & Vaughan, F. (1993). On transpersonal definitions. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 25, 199-207.
- Wilber, K. (1997). *The eye of spirit: An integral vision for a world gone slightly mad*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Wilber, K. (1998). A more integral approach. In D. Rothberg & S. Kelly (Eds.), *Ken Wilber in dialogue* (pp. 400-402). Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House.
- Yanchar, S., & Slife, B. (1997). Pursuing unity in a fragmented psychology: Problems and prospects. *Review of General Psychology*, 1, 235-255.

