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Transpersonal is a Whole Person Psychology (Editor's Introduction)

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Cover Page Footnote

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Transpersonal is a Whole Person Psychology

Editor's Introduction

An event of 50 years ago, forged of dramatic tragedy and simple heroism, can serve to illustrate the value of a whole person psychology: one that includes more of what makes us truly human.

It was the first day of August, 1966, the morning after the hottest day of the year at the University of Texas in Austin. At 12 minutes to noon a former Marine sharpshooter opened fire from the observation deck of the university's clock tower, as part of a murder spree that eventually took 17 lives. The first victim to be shot from the observation deck was Claire James, then eight months pregnant. The bullet pierced her fetus and left her bleeding on the ground next to her boyfriend, Thomas, who was fatally wounded by the next round. As Claire lay wounded on the plaza beneath the tower, fully exposed to the gunman, another young woman, Rita Starpattern, ran from cover to lie down beside her, knowing that at any moment she could be the next target. For an hour Rita lay fully exposed next to Claire beneath the tower and talked to keep the wounded woman conscious until she could be rescued by two young men who also risked their lives to carry her to safety.

Conventional approaches to understanding the mind focus largely on brains, behavior, and theories about how information is processed in the nervous system. They can explain violence as the result of self-interest, or as trauma and rage and impulse control run amok, but they have a harder time explaining heroism, the impulse that moves a person to put their own life or safety at real risk to save another. Next to complex language, it is this altruism and cooperation beyond kin groups that make human societies almost unique in the world (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003). It may be that our complex language, of which we are justifiably proud, is

merely a tool that enables us to collaborate; certainly, everything that is truly worthy in human life and society can be traced back to this practice of working together for some greater good.

Much of current psychology tends to privilege aspects of human capacity and culture that its tools can measure, while those harder to study are often given scant attention even when these may be closer to the core of what makes us human. A psychology rooted in adaptation and response to stimuli, in information processing for survival and self-interest, or that focuses on head but marginalize what poets have named as heart, falls short of who we are. Within its limited framework vision, creativity, intuition, spirituality, and other exceptional human capacities remain hard to decipher. Such an approach accounts for the worst in us but pays scant attention to our best; it explains the shooter on the tower but not the woman who risked death to lay down next to a wounded stranger to keep her alive, or the men who carried her to cover.

Transpersonal psychology began with an emphasis on exceptional human experiences (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007), but this was accompanied by an interest in how these scientifically peripheral data might change accepted notions of the human person. Complementary to Western notions of a rugged individual (often assumed to be male) conquering the elements through brawn and intellect, a transpersonal vision has typically embraced a transformative approach to the whole person, not just as individual, but in intimate relationship with the world. Transpersonal experiences are those that expose possible limitations of conventional ideas about the mind and individual, and point toward the need for a larger concept of who we are.

Because it is a whole person psychology, evidence from behavioral, cognitive, and neuroscientific approaches remains crucial; because these schools of thought omit aspects of human capacity that are less compatible with their methods and philosophies, transpersonal maintains greater emphasis on those experiences that may be marginalized in more conventional approaches to psychology, yet carry power to shape destiny. Individuals who carry exceptional capacities, whether intuitive or mystical or charismatic, repeatedly change the course of human history. Other abilities may guide the path of someone's life or change it in an instant: flashes of insight, moments of flow, of deep absorption, intuition, gut instinct, spiritual and mystical encounters, tastes of profound connection with the world, or empathic bonds that open something far deeper than words.

Yet transpersonal is not merely a psychology that studies a broader range of human aspects or experiences within a conventional academic frame. Psychology holds an implicit assumption that the human person is best explained by understanding such things as the properties and actions of neurons and hormones that make up the nervous system. While these data are of great value, a transpersonal approach is also interested in understanding the person as a system—that is, as a whole that may have emergent properties that go beyond those of its parts. In this spirit it has interest in systems theories and process philosophies.

Transpersonal is interested in understanding the person as a *living* system that can be described and defined, but that is also capable of turning limitations into handholds that open a way beyond those constraints. For example, tell a small child that he or she cannot do something, and rather than foreclosing options, it may open in their minds the possibility that they *can* do that thing. Mechanical systems typically follow rules; living systems leverage their existing limitations into new capacities. With this perspective that anticipates the presence of novel human potentials, a transpersonal approach can not only consider data from cognitive-behavioral and neuroscience research in a different light, but can offer a perspective from which to ask novel research questions that may contribute to these fields.

A consideration of the whole person within a transpersonal approach includes not only a comprehensive study of individuals, but also an inclusive consideration of their contexts (Ferrer, 2002, 2011; Hartelius, 2014; Hartelius et al., 2007). In this sense, transpersonal is inherently related to social psychology,

multicultural psychology, and ecological psychology; it is a psychology that considers the importance of sexual orientation and gender identity, that respects the value of spiritual traditions as expressions of a human capacity for connecting with something larger and deeper than ourselves, and recognizes that the justice of a society impacts the health and wellbeing of all its members.

One could say that transpersonal is a transformative psychology of the whole person in intimate relationship with a diverse, interconnected and evolving world. It pays particular attention to vital aspects, capacities, states, and potentials that are often minimized by cognitive-behavioral and neuroscientific approaches, seeing these as contributions toward an understanding of the human person that better reflects the breadth of who we are rather than the constraints of a particular scientific toolset (cf. Hartelius, Rothe, & Roy, 2013).

Yet transpersonal is not merely a boutique approach that adds to psychology elements it wishes were true. It typically argues that many approaches to the study of the psyche carry implicit assumptions about reality that are based in Western philosophy rather than in empirical evidence. For example, *parapsychology* is often described as the study of psychological phenomena that cannot be explained by Western science, despite the fact that researchers in parapsychology often go to far greater lengths in developing and using experimental safeguards than conventional psychologists (Allison, 1979), and in the face of what some have characterized as a crisis of replicability in psychological research (Open Science Collaboration, 2012, 2015).

What impedes the acceptance of parapsychology is not a lack of rigor or a dearth of evidence, but the fact that many of its well documented findings do not fit well within Western models of reality. Although conventional models of reality are consistent with many empirical results, parapsychology's work suggests that these models may be artificially constrained by the entirely non-empirical and non-scientific assumptions of Western cultural beliefs about the nature of the world. One need only revisit the intense controversy sparked by Bem's (2011) careful presentation of evidence that the body responds to events a fraction of a second before they occur, to witness the fierce resistance to evidence that challenges the adequacy of contemporary scientific reality models. In a truly dispassionate science, one might wish for greater curiosity and less knee-jerk rejection in relation to evidence that question existing assumptions.

Transpersonal scholars tend to hold a more open mind about the nature of reality, and for this reason have necessarily engaged in considerable discussion of alternate and non-Western philosophies and models of reality in the hopes that one or more of these might prove to be more adequate to all the evidence, and not just that which fits comfortably within a conventional scientific frame. As a part of this process transpersonal approaches typically assume that each human culture has developed its own systems for understanding and addressing what psychology considers to be disorders of the mind—often including these within spiritual traditions—and holds an interest in what scientific psychology might learn from these. In this sense transpersonal psychology is holistic not only in its commitment to the whole person, but to the whole of human diversity.

While numerous aspects of transpersonal as a whole person psychology have yet to be well developed within the literature of the transpersonal field, all are present to various degrees. In these varied interests, transpersonal can find common ground with many other approaches such as humanistic, integral, holistic, somatic, and phenomenological schools of thought that consider the individual as an integral part of society, culture, and ecosystem, or that include music, dance, and the arts. It is with these and other allied fields, as well as in concert with more conventional approaches, that transpersonal can labor toward the maturation of a whole person psychology.

In This Issue

This issue deals in various ways with the issue of imaginal imagery, metaphysics, and transpersonal psychology. The first paper, *Dreaming in Two Worlds and Two Languages: Bilingual Dreams and Acculturation Challenges*, by Winnie Lum and Jenny Wade, presents results from a study of bilingual dreams and their role in resolving cultural conflicts that a person may be experiencing. The journal is particularly pleased to offer this pioneering work that holds important therapeutic potential with respect to cultural identity conflicts, and that may also play a role in understanding and developing cross-cultural competency.

Dream imagery is typically understood within psychology as having metaphorical meaning at best, rather than literal meaning. Metaphysical constructs are literal claims about the nature of reality that cannot be tested for validity. The role of metaphysical constructs

within a transpersonal approach comes to the fore with a second paper, *From Philosophy to Phenomenology: The Argument for a “Soft” Perennialism*, by Steve Taylor. Taylor offers a sound critique of perennialist approaches as ways to explain the diversity of spiritual traditions. He sensibly suggests that research should be based on phenomenology rather than philosophy, and should include study of associated experiences both inside and outside of religious contexts, offering his own research as evidence of what such research can discover. Taylor frames his research findings within a model that he calls *soft perennialism*, the notion that practitioners of various spiritual disciplines access different aspects of what might be considered a landscape of potentials for such experience.

While Taylor’s call to more phenomenological research is sound, the paper that follows, *Taylor’s Soft Perennialism: A Primer of Perennial Flaws in Transpersonal Scholarship*, by Glenn Hartelius, offers a number of critiques intended to put this phenomenological work on firmer conceptual ground. The landscape that Taylor envisions is alternately described in terms that are phenomenological, psychological, and metaphysical; while it is clear that Taylor aims to avoid metaphysical claims, his approach as currently constructed necessarily includes them. There are also shortcomings with the phenomenological work itself, as Taylor has not made methodological provisions for identifying and countering the influence of his pre-existing beliefs in what he calls soft perennialism. Yet rather than focus only on Taylor’s work, this paper considers three categories of errors in his paper that occur with some frequency in transpersonal scholarship, and illustrates these with examples from the work of other scholars as well.

Also relevant to this discussion is a second letter to the editor from Judith Blackstone, published near the back of the issue along with an Editor’s Response. This is another instance in which a scholar deliberately rejects metaphysical claims, yet retains ideas in which such claims are inherent. Reading this exchange along with the Taylor paper on soft perennialism and the response to Taylor provides useful illustration of how metaphysical claims may be present even when the author intentionally attempts to avoid such claims.

The special topic section on Jung and Transpersonal Psychology, edited and introduced by Jacob Kaminker, provides an example of an area in which metaphysical notions have remained important within the transpersonal field, though it is of course

necessary to identify metaphysical concepts as such and make note of their corresponding value and limitations. In addition, this issue contains two book reviews, one of which fits with the Jungian theme: *Walking Shadows: Archetype and Psyche in Crisis and Growth*, by Tim Ready, is reviewed by Jay Dufrechou. Jay offers a personal and illuminating engagement with this work by a psychiatrist who shares from a lifetime of encounters with archetypal presences in his professional work—a review that informs and entertains in its own right.

The final book review, by Nick Atlas, looks at *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology*, edited by Harris L. Friedman and Glenn Hartelius. As an editor of the volume under review, this editor recused himself from the acceptance process for the review, and despite this the report offers a succinct summary and generally positive account of the *Handbook*.

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About the Journal

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