



9-1-2017

# Transpersonal and Psychology: An Experiment in Inklusivity and Rigor (Editor's Introduction)

Glenn Hartelius

*California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA, USA*

Stanley Krippner

*Saybrook University, Oakland, CA, USA*

Marie I. Thouin-Savard

*California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA, USA*

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## Recommended Citation

Hartelius, G., Krippner, S., & Thouin-Savard, M. (2017). Transpersonal and psychology: An experiment in inclusivity and rigor (Editor's introduction). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.1.iii>



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# Transpersonal and Psychology: An Experiment in Inclusivity and Rigor

## Editor's Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, as transpersonal psychology took shape, the global order was organized around tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, and between the West and the Communist bloc. Transpersonal scholars, as the humanists and existentialists before them, tended to take on this narrative—to frame psychology as an us and them, as alternative and mainstream, or as spiritual truth and secular reductionism.

While there are still elements of binary struggle in today's world, there has been a shift toward a more multipolar landscape. With the rise of Brazil, India, and China, geopolitics are no longer just a chess match between the United States and Russia. Walk through the streets of New York City or Abu Dhabi or any major city in the world and you will hear a dozen languages. Media and entertainment markets have splintered into a hundred pieces. Gender is no longer male and female, and sexual orientation is more than just straight or gay; both of these are now dimensions of intersectionality. Black and white truly has erupted into an iridescent rainbow.

In this world it is no longer necessary for transpersonal psychology to retreat into alternative institutions and publications, though these continue to play an important supportive role for the field. In this world transpersonal journals are indexed in databases such as ProQuest alongside *Brain and Behavior*, and the *Journal of Black Psychology*. In this world all that transpersonal psychology need do in order to fulfill its founding mission is produce the work: research, write, and publish in the vitally important areas of psychology that the field has pioneered. In the 1970s and 1980s,

holistic was alternative, meditation and spirituality were alternative, psychedelics were alternative. Today all these are mainstream topics. The establishment walls that transpersonal scholars railed against and pounded on have crumbled, and if its scholars are ready to relinquish their role as outsiders, seize the openings, and above all *do the work*, transpersonal psychology can now angle toward a seat at the table and play a role in changing psychology in the 21st century.

What is the work of transpersonal psychology? In the early days of the field participants at transpersonal conferences made a sport of asking each other what their definition of transpersonal psychology was, and some reveled in not knowing. But the field has moved past this, and now has good data on what the field covers.

An operational approach to defining transpersonal psychology focuses on its study of reported individual and group behaviors and cognitive-affective experiences in which one's socially constructed personal identity is transcended or transformed. Transpersonal psychology focuses on the scientific understanding of the related stages of development and the shifts in consciousness that accompany this change, as well as the relevant paths of personal and group practice. The data elicited on these topics by transpersonal psychologists have been applied to counseling, psychotherapy, education, and personal growth. Transpersonal psychology is not an esoteric footnote to the psychological study of behavior and cognition, but a ubiquitous field that encompasses and contributes to topics that have long been the focus of psychology in general.

This focus on mystical, spiritual, and exceptional human experiences is sometimes seen as mainly oriented

toward the non-ordinary, the transcendent, the esoteric, and the elite. But such language misses the fact that these states, these experiences, these encounters, are already everywhere in contemporary communities and societies. These are often among the most significant, meaningful, inspiring, life-shaping, and transformative kinds of experiences and capacities in human life. Despite this, these dimensions tend to be marginalized in psychology, perhaps because they do not fit neatly into Western beliefs or yield easily to scientific research methods. As a result, psychology has tended to give priority to those aspects of the person that are easy to measure, and marginalize those that pose an extra challenge. One central task of transpersonal psychology could be seen, then, as leading the way in the scientific study of these capacities and experiences, not as anomalies or curiosities, but as integral to healthy human functioning.

Yet the task is larger than this, because psychology's selective focus has crafted a limited depiction of the human person that is informed more by its mechanics and its pathologies than by its potentials and capacities. This picture of who we are is technically correct, but misleading because of the key pieces that it omits. It is as if a biographer of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo focused mainly on her wardrobe and her medical history, and ignored her work as a pioneering artistic genius. It is up to transpersonal and similarly oriented approaches to restore to psychology an image of the whole person, not just as individual, but intimately connected with community and world.

At the same time, transpersonal psychology is not an abandonment of scientific methods in favor of romanticized philosophies of spirituality. In the pursuit of Eastern and indigenous wisdom, transpersonal scholars at times lose sight of Western science as also representing a contribution to the understanding of human spirituality. At its best, science at least partially liberates knowledge construction from the bounds of authoritarian structures, and builds its models on evidence that anyone who has patience and discipline can help to construct or challenge. Transpersonal approaches will not benefit by watering down science with esoteric beliefs or lapses in critical thinking, but by challenging the influence of Western philosophy within scientific communities. The way forward is not by shying away from empirical work, but through inviting science to be less swayed by limited Western notions of reality, and in this way more empirical.

In the first 40 years of transpersonal psychology, its two longest-lived journals published fewer than 100 empirical papers, which is not nearly an adequate foundation for a thriving subfield of psychology. Many psychology journals publish more than a hundred empirical papers in one year. Rather than fearing that empirical study of exceptional human capacities will cause distortion, transpersonal scholars could be on the forefront of developing empirical methods that can be used to study these experiences and events in ways that are rigorous yet conducive to the examination of these phenomena. The need is for more science, not less; for more critical thinking, more transpersonal scholars, more research, more participation at psychology conferences and events.

There are no doubt many readers who rely regularly on flashes of insight, moments of flow, of deep absorption, intuition, and gut instinct. For some, lives have been shaped by spiritual and mystical encounters, by tastes of profound connection with the world, or by empathic bonds that open something far deeper than words. Nor is it just in communities with interests in human spirituality that these effects are felt: Individuals in luminary and unassuming lives alike have routinely developed and utilized intuitive, mystical, or charismatic abilities, whether in the course of simple day-to-day personal decisions or in changing the course of human history. In this sense, so-called exceptional human experiences and capacities are not an exception to the rule, but often a factor of great impact in human life and society. These dimensions of the person cannot continue to be ignored by a psychology that strives to be both empirical and inclusive.

In an age of science, it requires scientific work to restore these aspects of the whole person to their rightful place in psychology, and in society. It requires a science that has been strengthened and broadened by transpersonal critiques, and transpersonal scholars who are willing and able to build transpersonal constructs and test transpersonal theories and ideas. Letting go of divides between alternative and mainstream is a form of nonduality that is inclusive rather than exclusive, and that will benefit the field of transpersonal psychology. There are literally hundreds of simple empirical research projects that, if carefully conducted and published, would greatly increase the impact of the transpersonal field.

In an increasingly multipolar world, transpersonal psychology needs simply to do the work that will develop and refine its constructs and areas of study. For those who wish to take up this work, the pages of this journal welcome your contributions.

### **In This Issue**

The general topic section begins with a paper by Harry Hunt, considering the life of secular mystic Simone Weil. This poignant recounting of Weil's efforts to wrestle with mystical meaning and universal spirituality in a secular age illuminates starkly and brilliantly the scope and scale of work needed to articulate any broad human spirituality in a postmodern world. This paper, titled "Intimations of a Spiritual New Age: I. The Spiritual Emergence and Personal Tragedy of a Universalized Christian Mysticism in the Life and Work of Simone Weil," is the first of projected series by Hunt on the spiritual visioning of the 1930s, an era in which the persuasive powers of traditional religion were already ebbing as capitalist-fueled technology gained momentum in a newly-globalized economy, and visions of a spiritual New Age already stirred. Hunt's work in this area is keenly relevant to transpersonal psychology's current engagement with the study of human spirituality.

Turning from vision to praxis, the next paper is by Charles Laughlin, one of the founders of transpersonal anthropology. Based on nearly five decades of meditative practice—mostly as a practitioner of Buddhist insight meditation—Laughlin shares descriptive accounts of his experiences that illustrate how long-term practice results in specific forms of neuropsychological development. The implication is that even a beginning meditator who practices correctly will have a different experience than a long-term meditator who engages the same technique. Given that much of the research on mindfulness, for example, measures the impact of a brief training, Laughlin's experience-based observations may be of value in contextualizing those results as representing merely the earliest stage of a contemplative practice.

Yet consciousness, contemplative or otherwise, has scant room to exist within either modern or most postmodern worldviews. In "Retrieving Realism: A Whiteheadian Wager," Matthew Segall advances Whitehead's process philosophy as an elegant solution to the problem of a scientific world that has no room for subjectivity. A number of solutions to this issue have been put forward, some of which are critiqued in Segall's careful navigation

of this potent issue. His comparison of Whitehead's work with Ferrer's participatory thought makes this piece particularly relevant in a transpersonal psychology context.

Experiential engagement with shifting one's consciousness is vibrantly alive in contemporary culture, nowhere more so than in electronic dance music events. In their paper, "Electronic Dance Music Events as Modern-Day Ritual," Audrey Redfield and Marie Thouin-Savard offer an illuminating review of literature relating to this phenomenon. The following paper, "An Analysis of the Experiences and Integration of Transpersonal Phenomena Induced by Electronic Dance Music Events," presents the results of Redfield's dissertation on this topic. Her study examines the types of transpersonal experiences induced by these music events, and how these events are integrated into the daily lives of those who encounter these transpersonal domains of experience at such events.

Transformation can happen as much on the sports field as it does at a music event. David Turner's consideration of "The Extreme Phronesis of Percy Cerutti: A Narrativized Life History of a Legendary Sports Coach," presents Cerutti as a man embedded in a relational process of self-improvement and transformation—a quality that, despite his human flaws, enabled him to deeply inspire those whom he coached. This case of transpersonal principles applied in a highly pragmatic context demonstrates the value of whole person approaches in the domain of sports.

These papers are followed by a Special Topic Section on Transpersonal Measures of Spirituality, employing the Expressions of Spirituality Measure—Revised, in three populations. This important advance in the development of a cross-cultural transpersonal measure demonstrate that cross-culturally inclusive and scientifically rigorous measurement in areas of interest to transpersonal psychology are indeed possible.

*Glenn Hartelius, Main Editor*  
California Institute of Integral Studies

*Stanley Krippner, Honorary Editor*  
Saybrook University

*Marie I. Thouin-Savard, Associate Editor*  
California Institute of Integral Studies

## About the Authors

*Glenn Hartelius, PhD*, is Founding Director of an online PhD program in Integral and Transpersonal Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco, CA, where he serves as Associate Professor. He serves as main editor for the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, coeditor of *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology*, and Secretary of the International Transpersonal Association. His research on the definition and scope of transpersonal psychology has helped to define the field. His work in attention and somatic phenomenology strives to make states of consciousness measurable. He also maintains an executive coaching practice.

*Stanley Krippner, PhD*, professor of psychology at Saybrook University, Oakland, is a Fellow in five American Psychological Association (APA) divisions, and past-president of two divisions. Krippner received his Ph.D. in Special Education from Northwestern University. He is a pioneer in the study of consciousness, and he conducts research in the areas of dreams, hypnosis, shamanism, and dissociation, often from a cross-cultural perspective with an emphasis on anomalous phenomena that seem to question mainstream paradigms. is

*Marie I. Thouin-Savard, MBA*, is a PhD student in the East-West Psychology department at the California Institute of Integral Studies, and an Associate Editor at the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*. Her research interests include embodied sexuality, empathy, consensual nonmonogamy, compersion, and collective transformation.

## About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, published by Floragrades Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).