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Introduction to the Special Topic Section on Transpersonal Measures of Spirituality

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Introduction to the Special Topic Section on Transpersonal Measures of Spirituality

Abraham Maslow, the most prominent founder of transpersonal psychology, reached for new ways forward that were within the domain of scientific study. Maslow was himself an experimental psychologist who spent years researching primate behavior and motivation prior to his work in psychology. While he criticized ways in which certain assumptions appeared to artificially limit psychology, he was in no way opposed to the use of science. For example, Maslow (1968) criticized psychology for focusing mainly on pathology to the exclusion of human potential. He suggested that objectivity did not necessarily require an attitude of complete detachment, and that a certain intimacy between the investigator and his or her subject might actually produce enhanced objectivity (Maslow, 1970). Maslow (1969) also argued that behaviorism was inappropriately modeled on physical sciences, and that psychoanalysis considered only those things that the person has in common with animals, rather than what might be uniquely human. While it has been correctly noted that Maslow expressed musings about mysticism and religion that seem to have a perennialist flavor (Taylor, 2016), none of his concerns argued against the pursuit of scientific work in areas of interest to transpersonal scholarship.

To the contrary, Maslow (1970) observed that the common association of spirituality with religion was problematic “for the writer who is intent on demonstrating that the common base for all religions is human, natural, empirical, and that the so-called spiritual values are also naturally derivable” (p. 4). He noted that he had available “only a theistic language for this ‘scientific’ job” (p. 4). When Maslow (1970) suggested that, “all religions are the same in their essence and always have been the same” (p. 20), it would seem that he conceived of this essence in naturalistic and empirical terms amenable to scientific study rather than as something pertaining to the domain of esoterics or metaphysics.

The scholar carrying forward this strand of the field most vocally has arguably been Harris Friedman

(2002, 2015), who has consistently pressed for the development of transpersonal psychology as a scientific field. Friedman has made a case roughly similar to Maslow’s, arguing that transpersonal should navigate between the twin extremes of ideological science—what he has called scientism—and naïve belief in abstract concepts for which there is no empirical evidence of any kind, which he labeled as romanticism.

Friedman’s work has done much to support quantitative assessment within the field, a crucial component for advancing empirical work related to transpersonal constructs. Given that many founders of the field came out of humanistic psychology, which advocated for the role of lived human experience, it is fitting that the core literature of transpersonal psychology reflects an appreciation of qualitative research. At the same time, scale development is a somewhat natural extension of qualitative research. With a psychometric scale, it becomes possible to learn how frequently certain aspects of lived experience are found in a community or group of individuals—for example, facets of experience associated with constructs such as spirituality, mindfulness, empathy, or compassion.

Friedman’s (1983) Self-Expansiveness Level Form represented the first effort to measure a transpersonal construct. Together with Douglas MacDonald (1997, 2000, 2009), who developed the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory (ESI) based on exploratory factor analyses on a variety of instruments, Friedman has supported the assessment of humanistic, transpersonal, and spiritual constructs (e.g., Friedman & MacDonald, 1997, 2002; MacDonald & Friedman, 2002, 2013; MacDonald, Kuentzel, & Friedman, 1999a, 1999b; MacDonald, LeClair, Holland, Alter, & Friedman, 1995).

MacDonald, Friedman, and other colleagues have recently published a validity study on the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory – Revised (ESI-R; MacDonald et al., 2015), which has been translated and validated in German. Three further studies validating the

ESI-R in Czech, Spanish, and Peruvian contexts, appear in this issue. The ESI-R represents what is likely the most comprehensive and sophisticated effort to measure the construct of spirituality cross-culturally, and as results are obtained from a variety of cultural contexts will surely provide a much more reliable understanding than anything currently in the literature.

The definition offered by MacDonald et al. (2015) suggests that spirituality is:

a natural aspect of human functioning which relates to a special class of non-ordinary experiences and the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that cause, co-occur, and/or result from such experiences. The experiences themselves are characterized as involving states and modes of consciousness which alter the functions and expressions of self and personality and impact the way in which we perceive and understand ourselves, others, and reality as a whole. (n.p.)

This definition provides what Maslow (1970) complained that he did not have: language that is compatible with naturalistic science, yet “does not completely deny the utilization of such ideas and systems of thought as hermeneutic tools for the interpretation of spiritual phenomena” (MacDonald et al., 2015). Its inclusion of non-ordinary states of consciousness and its applicability to cross-cultural contexts make this a definition that reflects transpersonal perspectives in a way that can effectively inform the broader academic study of spirituality. As such, the ESI-R and the associated research is likely one of the more important developments related to transpersonal psychology of the past several decades.

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