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Introduction to the Special Topic Section on Transpersonal Sexuality: Bringing Sexy Back to Transpersonal Studies

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Transpersonal psychology was born, in part, from the American counterculture of the 1960s that challenged values and social structures of the previous generation. The combination of psychedelic use, exposure to non-Western spiritual traditions, and economic prosperity created a fertile ground for a new channel of sexual exploration and expression. This sexual revolution, together with advances in racial and gender rights, was part of the force that brought transpersonal psychology into being. Given that it is now 50 years after transpersonal psychology first emerged as a field, the first journal special issue on transpersonal sexuality is perhaps overdue.

Beyond a few select publications over the past decades (Elfers, 2009; Grahn, 2010; Long 2014; Malkemus & Romero, 2012; Sovatsky, 1985; Taylor, 2015; Wade, 2000, 2004, 2013), sexuality has played a marginal role in transpersonal discourse. This is true of the field's literature and also of its conferences. For example, this past April 2019 the Association for Transpersonal Psychology 50th anniversary conference featured only three presentations pertaining to sexuality, out of a total of 102 presentations. In comparison, the same event featured 10 presentations pertaining to psychedelic experiences and an equal number on shamanism (Association for Transpersonal Psychology, 2019). Connections between sexuality, altered states of consciousness, and personal transformation have been well established for millennia within traditions such as Taoism (e.g., Chia, 1984), Tantrism (e.g., Douglas, 1997), Judaism (e.g., Feuerstein, 1992), and Christianity (e.g., Carr, 2003). One might ask why transpersonal scholarship has paid so little attention to these cultivated avenues of eroticism that allow for the harnessing of wisdom and power.

One possible explanation for this is the widespread embarrassment around the topic of sex that still prevails in modern professional and research environments—especially when the conversation ventures beyond the mechanics of sexual function or dysfunction, and into the meanings and potentials of sexual pleasure (Tiefer, 2006). Shame around sexuality is pervasive within and without the walls of academia, and in spite of the commodification and reification of sex in Western cultures (Barratt, 2010, 2013) serious discussions around the somatic, transformative, and spiritual aspects of sexuality are sparse. A quick look at the state of youth sex education in the United States is a reminder that “the inherent sexuality of our embodiment is being systematically suppressed, repressed, and oppressed” (Barratt, 2010, p. 146) from a very young age. This goes hand-in-hand with an epidemic of sexual abuse and assault—perpetuating a cycle of shame around the lived experience of sexuality. Perhaps because of this embarrassment, different academic communities have dealt with sex in narrow and partial ways that often leave research projects feeling hollow; as if academics were analyzing the outer shells of sexuality, but seldom its embodied, somatic, or spiritual nature. In one corner, many mainstream sex researchers (see Hargons, Mosley, & Stevens-Watkins, 2017) have tended to focus on the low hanging fruits of easily quantifiable physiological and behavioral aspects of sexual behavior—often relying on convenience samples of mostly White American, middle- to upper-class college students with little sexual experience to generate a representation of the full range of human sexuality. In the other corner, religious studies scholars (e.g., Hanegraaff & Kripal, 2008; Kripal, 2001) have

explored the philosophical aspects of eroticism deeply, but have done so while keeping a safe distance from the flesh and bones nature of its lived experience and its empirical study.

There is a need to research human sexuality from the more comprehensive lens of whole-person psychologies—that is, to situate erotic embodiment within the purviews of somatic, humanistic, and transpersonal psychologies with the intention to explore its deeper meanings and potentials. For academics to dismiss the lived experience of eroticism as a footnote to biology, cognition, and behavior is not only a crime to good science; it is also unwittingly reinforcing a partial and performative view of human sexuality in the wider culture. Barratt (2010) has discussed this issue at length, and ultimately called for the marriage of somatic psychology and sexology into a new sub-discipline he would refer to as “somatic sexology” (p. 149). We would like to reaffirm this call, while also inviting transpersonal scholars to the conversation. Transpersonal psychology has the opportunity to hold a privileged position in these spaces by honoring the non-conventional and/or post-conventional avenues of personal development that can occur when one moves beyond a mechanistic view of sexuality (cf. Foucault, 1976/1990). Furthermore, transpersonal psychology is a ripe terrain for the study of sexuality because of its willingness and ability to reconcile a philosophical worldview that recognizes the spirituality of embodiment (e.g., Ferrer & Sherman, 2008) with a commitment to empirical work and scientific rigor (Hartelius, Krippner, & Thouin-Savard, 2017). Holding those two commitments together can allow for the creation of an expanded sexual science that is both holistic and scientifically sound. In this sense, human sexuality and transpersonal psychology hold the potential for mutually enriching contributions of significance and depth.

There is no better time than the present to embrace this union. During its early decades the field of transpersonal psychology focused more exclusively on altered states of consciousness and ego transcendence phenomena typically taking place outside the physical body (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007), but this appears to be changing to include more embodied, embedded, and

diverse perspectives within the transpersonal field. A review of the field’s literature would seem to suggest a shift away from up-and-out transcendence toward the fundamentality of the body in human transformation, in line with participatory (e.g., Ferrer & Sherman, 2008) and feminist philosophies (e.g., Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Grosz, 1994); as Donnelly (1982) elegantly put it: “we do not *have* bodies; we *are* bodies” (p. 127, emphasis in original). This trend offers fertile soil for a renewed, down-to-earth exploration of transpersonal sexuality that honors the sexual body as full participant in psychological development and identity within an inclusive psychology of the whole person.

The intersection of transpersonal psychology and human sexuality invites scholars to bring the transformational focus of transpersonal studies into dialogue with diverse contexts of erotic life, grounding transpersonal inquiry within the flesh of culturally situated embodied discourse and opening the study of sexuality to include its transformative potentials. The urgency of open dialogue embracing the many dimensions and diversities of sexual expression is underscored by the degree to which these remain marginalized in American culture: nonheteronormative and gender nonconforming identities still face cultural shame and threats of violence; women continue to face discrimination and their stories of violation are met with skepticism; sex workers risk severe legal penalties, and by virtue of this have to work in unregulated and potentially dangerous situations; and women’s reproductive rights survive on shaky ground.

This reality raises an important issue regarding the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. For instance, if sexuality cannot be embraced and embodied due to fear of harm and cultural shame, this may negatively impact a fruitful spiritual praxis that is grounded in a whole-bodied engagement with spiritual life. If it is acknowledged that sexuality and spirituality are core aspects of human psychology (Ferrer, 2008), then it necessarily follows that if one is culturally marginalized or harmed by developmental conditions the other will be impacted. Lorde (1984) noted that in an ill-fated cultural move to separate “the spiritual and the erotic,” the spiritual is reduced “to a world of

flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing” (p. 56). Spirituality then becomes devitalized, devoid of the sensuous wisdom of the body’s erotic voice. That sexuality may serve to enrich spirituality further justifies a call toward sexual healing and the creation of supportive environments that allow for the full embrace of sexual identity—whether relationship style, sexual desire, gender identity or expression, romantic attraction, or bodily acceptance. As the American activist Angela Davis affirmed, “in a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist” (as cited in Jackson, 2017)—so too, in a sexually restrictive society that facilitates the embodiment and internalization of sexually oppressive norms, those called to defend sexual health and freedom must stand against sexual oppression. One of the driving aims of this special issue is to participate in the social transformation of sexual health via scholarly dialogue that normalizes, validates, and gives voice to the diverse dimensions of sexual life.

The contributions of this special issue extend a needed conversation by challenging culturally embedded narratives of sexual normalcy and revealing many roles that sexuality can play within spiritual life. This Special Topic Section, with ten articles and one essay, will more than double the existing contributions pertaining to sexuality in peer-reviewed transpersonal journals to date. We hope this will mark an upward trend in the scholarly exploration of this vital domain of inquiry.

In This Issue

The following Special Topic Section contains three articles utilizing a quantitative or mixed-methods methodology, two qualitative papers, and five theoretical explorations. Four themes emerged in the collection: nonordinary states of consciousness (BDSM, sexual consent, extreme love phenomenon, and sexual ecstasy); sexual identity (intentional childlessness and transgender); relationship styles (sacred *grihasthyin* marriage and consensually nonmonogamous partnering); and a somatic perspective (esoteric energies and erotic mindfulness). Interdisciplinary in nature, this collection covers new grounds in the fields of both transpersonal psychology and sexuality research.

Special Topic Introduction: Transpersonal Sexuality

Beginning the issue is John Elfers and Reid Offringa’s paper entitled, “Sexual Ecstasy: Conceptualizations and Measurement.” This article describes the development of the *Sexual Ecstasy Scale*, a psychometric instrument designed to measure the specific features that emerge when sexual arousal triggers an ecstatic experience. The paper accomplishes several goals. First, it clarifies connections and differences between several constructs used in the literature to describe transpersonal or peak experiences associated with sexual intimacy. Second, it introduces a reliable tool to account for peak experiences in measurements of sexual arousal. Three studies were used to establish the components of the scale, test its factor structure, and compare it with additional measures to establish convergent validity. Results showed strong internal consistency for the overall scale and subscales. This seminal project establishes that ecstatic sexual experience is consistent with other measures of peak experience, demonstrating the ability to measure the specific features of the construct and paving the way to mapping additional dimensions of meaning inherent to sexual arousal.

In the next contribution entitled, “Amigeist: A New Extreme Love Phenomenon,” Jeffrey Sundberg describes his qualitative study of 25 individuals who reported experiencing a very intense and significant romantic love occurrence. This new phenomenon, called *amigeist*, is characterized by immediate, intense soul-mate bonding, with lifepartner potential. Sundberg uses a phenomenological approach to examine important questions such as, Could falling in love be one of the most common and overlooked transpersonal events in human experience? Could extreme occurrences of falling in love be synonymous with spiritual emergence or oneness? Through this inquiry Sundberg opens a journey into the compelling intimate experiences of his participants.

In the following paper, consensual nonmonogamy is empirically introduced to transpersonal psychology in the quantitative study, “The Religious and Philosophical Characteristics of a Polyamorous Sample” by Akhila Kolesar and Seth Pardo. Through 484 responses to a digital survey that was posted in various online forums related to

polyamory, the data revealed a number of interesting findings. Consistent with prior research, the results showed a higher degree of liberalism, paganism, and a greater sense of connection between sex and spirituality than in the general U.S. population. In contrast to the doctrines of traditional religious institutions, the authors highlight the philosophical values of paganism as a potential indicator of a worldview that is supportive of individuals partnered with multiple others. This paper is a welcomed addition to research within transpersonal psychology as it contributes, through statistical validation, to a more comprehensive understanding of consensually nonmonogamous spirituality.

Next, Seth Pardo's paper "Towards a New Theory of Gender Transcendence" contributes to the ongoing expansion of gender studies. It utilizes the results from an original quantitative study on 170 gender nonconforming individuals who were assigned female at birth. The results support Pardo's proposal of a new model of gender that recognizes the dynamics of transcendence, enhancing and extending intersectional approaches to gender nonconforming and transgender persons. This groundbreaking study examines variables that have not been previously considered—such as style of dress and appearance, surgical body modification, and behavioral expression—in order to underscore the transformative impact that a self-examination of gender can incur. Pardo suggests that transpersonal psychology is an ideal lens for exploring transgender and gender nonbinary themes, as it supports an epistemic openness to the diversity of human experience and critically examines oppressive, traditionalist narratives. More provocatively, Pardo's theory highlights spiritual and sociocultural features that imply that the formation of gender identity and its development need not be restricted to the spatial boundary of the physical body.

Christine Brooks' paper, "Meaning-Making Among Intentionally Childless Women," summarizes a qualitative research project that focused upon how intentionally childless women describe the meaning-making processes. A grounded theory exploration, it involved semi-structured interviews with 30 cisgendered women aged 27–61 who chose childlessness early in life. In her study, Brooks

employed a social constructivist and feminist approach to "conceptualize how, why, and when women make the decision to forego motherhood, and the ramifications of this choice over the adult lifespan" (p. 140). Categories of meaning that accompanied intentional childlessness were a *sense of freedom, stewardship, and contributions*, as well as some negative experiences. This paper is a timely contribution as many countries, including the United States, have witnessed dropping birth rates over the past four decades, partially due to women's changing attitudes towards mothering (p. 140).

In "Sexual Consent as Transcendence: A Phenomenological Understanding," Mark Levand and Nicolle Zapien propose a new interpretation of sexual consent. The authors argue that while "sex educators have tended to err on the side of clear and concise definitions of consent for ease of instruction, . . . the sexual science literature has steadily shown that the navigation of consent to sexuality activity is much more nuanced, situated and contextual" (p. 154). They demonstrate, using the lens of phenomenological philosophy and Buber's ideas of the I-Thou relationship, that the way people experience consent is a dynamic and dialogic process that involves a state of moment-to-moment presence with the other, as opposed to a one-time decision regarding a specific sexual act. The authors also show that the experience of consent can thus "lead to moments of transcendence of the self and deep reverence for the other, despite some moments of lack of clarity or ambiguity within the same sexual act" (p. 154). This groundbreaking paper makes a novel and valuable contribution to the fields of transpersonal psychology and sex science alike.

Barnaby Barratt's paper "Sexuality, Esoteric Energies, and the Subtleties of Transmutation Versus Transformation" presents a transpersonal vision of sexuality that is as broad in its scope as it is sophisticated in its presentation. It begins by exploring Freud's tripartite ontology of the psyche, wherein libidinality is seen as an intermediary between the physiology of biologic functions and the representations of self-reflective cognition. Libidinality is understood in terms of life force; it reflects the lived experience of somatic-sexual

energies, and can never be fully apprehended or captured by mental analysis. Barratt goes on to argue that sexuality is most accurately understood as the movement of life force, that which fills one with the experience of being alive, and suggests that healing, which does not merely involve an isolated repair of bodily function, is inherently sexual. Healing that involves libidinality is defined in terms of transmutation and is distinguished from transformation, which, according to Barratt, only involves two aspects of the aforementioned tripartite ontology—biologic or representational. The importance of transmutation is that it highlights a holistic understanding of healing that involves the energetic dimension that links “mind” and “body,” and critiques the common allopathic approach that only considers discrete aspects. The transpersonal implications are explored following a presentation of transmutation as a surge of sexual intensification that cannot be adequately captured by discursive cognition. Combining psychoanalysis with somatic psychology, this paper crafts a compelling theory of sexual healing.

Next, Jorge Ferrer’s paper “From Romantic Jealousy to Sympathetic Joy: Monogamy, Polyamory, and Beyond” argues for the cultivation of sympathetic joy (or *compersion*) in intimate relationships as a potential path towards emotional and spiritual growth. After presenting the pernicious role of jealousy in human history and its continuing impact upon relational intimacy, Ferrer critiques the cultural assumptions that maintain celibacy and lifelong monogamy as the only “spiritually correct” relationship structures (p. 192). In contrast to the dominant mythos of mononormativity and the accompanying unconscious adherence to monogamous cultural scripts, Ferrer suggests that “the greatest expression of spiritual freedom in intimate relationships may not lie in strictly sticking to any particular relationship style—whether monogamous or polyamorous—but rather in a radical openness to the dynamic unfolding of life that eludes any fixed or predetermined structure of relationships” (p. 193).

On the theme of sexual healing, Marie I. Thouin-Savard’s paper, “Erotic Mindfulness: A Core Educational and Therapeutic Strategy in Somatic

Sexology Practices,” argues that the use of an embodied state of consciousness, similar to neo-traditional forms of mindfulness meditation, may be a common factor contributing to therapeutic efficacy in a variety of somatic sexology methods, including sexual surrogacy, sexological bodywork, masturbation coaching, and orgasmic meditation. While such practices became popular in the 1960s and have since shown significant potential for helping individuals transcend sexual difficulties and grow into more fulfilling erotic lives, their statuses remain ambiguous vis-à-vis the medical and scientific community because of ethical concerns and a lack of empirical evidence for their efficacy. Paving the way for future research, Thouin-Savard compares the structure of three somatic sexology modalities—surrogate partner therapy, masturbation coaching, and orgasmic meditation—with recent evidence supporting the efficacy of neo-traditional mindfulness practices in promoting women’s sexual wellbeing. This comparison reveals that somatic sexology practitioners use embodied mindfulness as a strategy to set aside mental activity and invite their clients to feel, act, and interact with their sexuality from an embodied state of attention. This embodied state, focused on one’s eroticism and sexuality, is referred to as *erotic mindfulness*.

Sam Greenberg’s “Divine Kink: A Consideration of the Evidence for BDSM as Spiritual Ritual” provides a review of the limited research that supports a view of BDSM as a spiritual ritual that facilitates altered states of consciousness. The paper evaluates the contributions of two empirical studies and one qualitative study that highlight the parallels between BDSM and extreme ritual, suggesting that BDSM is a viable path of spiritual praxis that involves ritual elements of pain or ordeal, spiritual meaning, and transformative potential. Greenberg makes a strong case for the spiritual potency of this often-marginalized practice and concludes by suggesting that further research is needed, especially that which focuses upon “the spiritual and ritual roles that BDSM fulfills for many practitioners” (p. 220).

Finally, Stuart Sovatsky distills his forty-four years of clinical practice as well as his deep knowledge of both Eastern and Western spiritual

traditions into the essay, “The Path to Enlightenment of Sacred Married Home Life: Grihasthya Dharma as a Guiding Ideal for the Transpersonal Marriage Therapist.” In a colorful and descriptive style, this article describes the lifelong spiritual developmental path of the married householder (*grihasthyin*), where “healthy ambition and egoic traits such as loyalty and lifelong commitment are emphasized en route to a balanced ‘ego-dissolution’ and ‘ego-development’ within the crucible of lifelong marriage, daily family life, and conscious aging” (p. 236). Sovatsky argues that the *grihasthya*-based marriage path can be a powerful path to spiritual enlightenment, by virtue of reclaiming the sacredness and mysteries of fertility, parenthood, and marital commitment as sources of *bhakti*-style devotion and “passion that exceed all manner of personal gratification” (p. 239). Suggestions for a *grihasthya*-based marriage therapy are also described.

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