


9-1-2021

## Transpersonal Psychology: Trends in Empirical Research and Diversity During the First Five Decades of the Field

Glenn Hartelius  
*Alef Trust, UK*

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

 Part of the [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#), [Philosophy of Science Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), [Somatic Psychology Commons](#), and the [Transpersonal Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hartelius, G. (2021). Transpersonal psychology: Trends in Empirical research and diversity during the first five decades of the field. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 40 (1). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2021.40.1.39>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#). This Special Topic Introduction 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: Trends in Empirical Research and Diversity During the First Five Decades of the Field (Introduction to the Special Topic Section)

*Glenn Hartelius*

Editor-in-Chief

*International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*

Prior research on the role of empirical research in transpersonal psychology is updated, along with trends in gender diversity and geographical distribution of authorships. Data was compiled from a review of articles published in the two main journals of the field, *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* and the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, over the first five decades of the field. Based on these records of the field's published work, it appears that empirical research has played a small though gradually growing role in the literature, and that there has been substantive correction from early skews toward male authorship in North America. Despite this, gender imbalance remains somewhat greater in the transpersonal field than within the broader field of psychology. While there is continued growth of international authorship, it has not kept pace with growth in North American authorship.

**Keywords:** *transpersonal psychology, empirical research, gender diversity, cultural diversity*

The transpersonal field was founded with a mandate to focus on empirical research. Its most prominent founder, Abraham Maslow, published numerous articles on empirical research on primate motivation in the 1930s before turning toward human psychology. Given Maslow's close relationship with Anthony Sutich, founding editor of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (JTP), it should be no surprise that the Statement of Purpose he wrote for JTP referred to "publication of theoretical and applied research, original contributions, *empirical* papers, articles and studies," with the word "empirical" italicized until 1973 (Lajoie et al., 1991, pp. 175–176). This clearly contrasts with the wording Sutich (1969) used for the statement of purpose in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (JHP) in 1961, which he also founded; in JHP he used the exact same phrase, word for word, but with omission of the word "empirical." In contrast with humanistic psychology, Sutich, and likely Maslow with whom he worked closely, envisioned empirical research as a key distinction that would characterize transpersonal psychology.

While other scholars within transpersonal psychology had called for more empirical research, it was not until 2002 that the field was formally challenged to set aside metaphysical philosophies (Ferrer) and function as a science (Friedman; cf. 2015). While there have been a number of rebuttals to Friedman's encouragements toward more empirical research (Cunningham, 2019a, 2019b; Ferrer, 2014) and Ferrer and Hartelius' arguments for setting aside metaphysical schemas (Abramson, 2014, 2015; Taylor, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c), the volume and percentage of empirical papers in the field's two main journals (JTP and the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* [IJTS]) grew steadily if modestly from its inception through 2009 (Hartelius et al., 2013)—even as the number of papers continued to expand. The following small study was conducted to extend findings of trends in empirical research and diversity from previous studies into the field's fifth decade.

Analysis of gender diversity within the field's literature began with a 2007 study by Hartelius et al. that pointed to a strong historical imbalance in

Fig. 1. Empirical Research in Transpersonal Journals	<i>The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology (JTP)</i>			<i>International Journal of Transpersonal Studies (IJTS)</i>			Total JTP + IJTS		
	empirical papers	total papers	% empirical papers	empirical papers	total papers	% empirical papers	empirical papers	total papers	% empirical papers
1969	0	10	0%				0	10	0%
1970–1979	4	107	4%				4	107	4%
1980–1989	23	107	21%	0	72	0%	23	179	13%
1990–1999	23	93	25%	4	92	4%	27	185	15%
2000–2009	24	104	13%	11	99	11%	35	203	17%
2010–2019	14	98	14%	52	198	26%	66	296	22%

favor of male authorship. These results were refined and replicated with a larger sample, and extended to consider the role of empirical research in the first four decades of the field, as well as the degree to which literature from its two main journals reflected authorship beyond North America (Hartelius et al., 2013). Findings showed that empirical research played a small but slowly increasing role in the field's literature, and that inclusion of authors from beyond North America was gradually expanding.

While these results merely reflected papers published in the field's journals, they likely reflected much of the activity in the transpersonal field. Speaking from my experience as a journal editor for the past 15 years, I have only been able to exert minimal influence over the number of empirical papers in the journal, and the number of women authors and authors from outside North America who are represented; editors can only choose from what is actually submitted. What we have been able to do at IJTS is expend extra editorial effort on empirical papers and submissions that represent gender or cultural diversity, with the hope that more empirical papers and more diversity in our published papers will attract more submissions of these types.

### Study

A review of articles in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (JTP) and the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* (IJTS) was conducted to determine the number and percentage of empirical papers published between 2010 and 2019, the

number and percentage of women authors, and the number and percentage of papers by non-North American authors.

### Method

Articles were identified and distinguished from other content as those published pieces with an abstract. Each article in each publication was identified as either empirical or theoretical. The sex of each named author was determined from pronouns used in author biographies; each article was assigned a value of  $n = 1$ , and authorship sex was assigned that full value for sole authors, or a fraction thereof in cases of multiple authors. Author geographical location was determined by the location of each author's listed affiliation; each article was assigned a value of  $n = 1$ , and each author location was assigned that full value for sole authors, or a fraction thereof in cases of multiple authors. Results of this study were compiled with earlier results from the first four decades of the field for reporting purposes (Hartelius et al., 2013).

### Results and Discussion

The gradual progress toward more empirical papers in the transpersonal literature demonstrated in the first four decades of the field (Hartelius et al., 2013) was sustained through the fifth decade (Fig. 1). While the percentage increase in the most recent decade was modest, rising from 17% to 22%, it should be noted that the number of papers in the field's two largest journals increased by nearly 50% when IJTS expanded from one to two issues per year; accordingly, the number of empirical papers in the most recent decade was nearly twice that

<b>Fig. 2.</b> <b>Diversity of Authorship</b> <b>in Two Transpersonal</b> <b>Journals</b> <b>(JTP + IJTS)</b>	<b>%</b> <b>Women</b> <b>Authors</b>	<b>%</b> <b>Non-North</b> <b>American</b> <b>Authors</b>
<b>1969</b>	0%	0%
<b>1970-1979</b>	14%	0%
<b>1980-1989</b>	18%	30%
<b>1990-1999</b>	19%	30%
<b>2000-2009</b>	23%	35%
<b>2010-2019</b>	36%	27%

of the previous decade. The number of empirical papers in the field is in any case quite low, but they demonstrate a clear direction toward increased empirical research.

The number of women authors increased sharply in the fifth decade, as compared with earlier decades, with 36% of authorships held by women (Fig. 2). While an imbalance, this is an improvement from the field's earlier decades; however, this still represents far less parity than is present in the wider field of psychology, which tends to have better gender balance than science as a whole (cf. González-Álvarez & Cervera-Crespo, 2019). Notably, the percentage of women authors was nearly identical in both transpersonal journals even though one is edited by a woman and the other by a man.

The absolute number of non-North American authorships in the field's main journals increased in the field's fifth decade from 69 to 79, even as the percentage of papers by non-North American authors decreased. This demonstrates that the rate of publication of papers by North American authors grew more quickly than that of authors outside of the United States and Canada.

### **Controversies in Empirical Research**

Skeptics and critics of empirical research, and especially quantitative research, within humanistic and transpersonal fields typically characterize such approaches as *reductionist* (e.g., Cunningham, 2019b; Ferrer, 2014). While a modernist-informed psychology often does tend to collapse notions of mind into measurements of brain, for example, this

does not mean that engagement in processes of measurement implies agreement with such premises. Even qualitative research, sometimes regarded as superior, involves reduction of experience into verbal reports and extraction of themes from sets of transcripts.

Not infrequently I encounter scholars and students in fields of holistic psychology who express an aversion to quantitative research—due in part to its association with approaches that marginalize lived experience. I can appreciate the recoil at this philosophically-driven rejection of important aspects of the person, and the affront this can occasion (cf. Hartelius, 2019). At the same time, sometimes a measurement is just a measurement.

For example, determining that individuals practicing meditation in tandem with another person show differences in brain activation than when they practice meditation solo does not reduce persons to that data (Engelbregt et al., 2021, this issue) any more than determining that a woman is 5'10" tall reduces her to that measurement. It would be hard to imagine a transpersonal scholar objecting to having their feet measured out of fear of being treated as nothing more than their shoe size. Measurement is simply a practical tool to test hypotheses; for safety's sake, the process of measurement can be properly qualified with respect to its limitations.

Friedman's (2002, 2015) emphasis on the use of scientific approaches in transpersonal psychology has also been criticized for its association with a scientific empiricism rooted in neo-Kantian thought that dissociates between mental and somatic worlds (cf. Ferrer, 2014). While this critique applies fairly to the ways in which much of psychological research and social institutions are constructed, it likely points more squarely at Western cultural biases that have filtered into scientific communities rather than to any prejudices against subtle aspects of human experience required by scientific method (cf. Hartelius, 2019). Empirical research conducted by transpersonal scholars seems rather less prone to this bias (e.g., Elfers & Offringa, 2019; Hartelius et al., 2022; Trevathan-Minnis et al., 2021), as is also generally true regarding those supporting increased use of scientific methods (e.g., Friedman, 2015).

Based on the demonstrated increase over time in empirical studies, as well as in frequency of reference to measurement in JTP (Hartelius et al., 2021), there may be some gradual warming to the utility of basic scientific processes within the transpersonal field. This is heartening, given that transpersonal psychology has many concepts and processes worthy of careful study.

### In This Issue

Against this background of the slow increase in empirical papers within major transpersonal journals, it is with particular pleasure that we present a topic section on Empirical Research in Transpersonal Psychology, featuring six studies from authors in the Netherlands, Lithuania, Spain, and Canada, as well as the United States. Similarly worthy of note is a paper in our general section, by Jenny Wade, entitled, "The Varieties of Spiritual States Triggered by Sex: A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature."

The first of these, "Brain Activity During Paired and Individual Mindfulness Meditation: A Controlled EEG Study," compared measurements of brain activation in 20 female university students while meditating alone, and while in pairs. Results showed clear differences in activation patterns, and authors Hessel Engelbregt et al. offered possible reasons for why such differences might occur.

The next paper, entitled, "The Varieties of Spiritual States Triggered by Sex: A Systematic Review of the Empirical Literature," is by Jenny Wade, the foremost scholar of human sexuality from a transpersonal perspective. This review provides an illuminating overview of the range of states that have been empirically linked to sex, and the factors that are conducive to sexual spiritual experiences.

Self-location, the sense that one's "self" is associated with a particular area of the body, is an affective experience that nevertheless shows remarkable consistencies in body location. With their paper, "Locating the Embodied Sense of Self and Examining its Relationship with Psychological Well-Being," Adam Wesley Hanley and colleagues make the original contribution of documenting the size and shape of embodied self-location. The authors also arrived at important conclusions about correlations of a more widely distributed bodily self-location.

A study on "Positive Psychological Transformation: A Mixed Methods Investigation into Catalysts and Processes of Meaningful Change," by Nick Fortino and colleagues, examined the catalysts, dynamics, supportive factors, and outcomes of transformative change. Their study included interviews with individuals who reported trauma as the primary catalyst of transformation.

These papers are part of the first issue of the 40th anniversary volume of the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* (IJTS)—and will comprise the first full volume dedicated to empirical research. IJTS was founded in 1981 as *The Australian Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, by Don Diespecker, an Australian transpersonal psychologist and professor of psychology. The journal retained this name through 1992, and early issues were stapled duplications of hand-typed manuscripts.

In 1993, the journal moved to Hawaii and assumed its current title under the editorship of Sam Shapiro and Philippe Gross. The journal's Senior Editor, Harris Friedman, brought the publication to Saybrook University in 2003, where it remained under his editorship (with Douglas A. MacDonald) until 2006—when the university sought to shut down the journal.

Through negotiation, the journal was transferred to Floragrades Foundation, a nonprofit corporation under the direction of Harris Friedman. In 2007, Glenn Hartelius joined as co-editor—moving to the role of Editor in 2010 and now Editor-in-Chief—and assumed responsibility for most of the processes of planning and producing the journal. In 2009 IJTS expanded to two issues per year, and soon afterwards it became indexed by major databases including PsychINFO. As Fig. 1 shows, IJTS is now the largest transpersonal journal within the field.

While this volume's collection of studies is modest, it represents one of the larger assemblages of empirical work in the transpersonal field, which reflects IJTS' commitment to empirical research in transpersonal psychology and other transpersonal fields of study.

## References

- Abramson, J. (2014). The misunderstanding and misinterpretation of key aspects of Ken Wilber's work in Hartelius and Ferrer's (2013) assessment. *Transpersonal Psychology Review*, 16(1), 3–14.
- Abramson, J. (2015). The emperor's new clothes: Ferrer isn't wearing any—Participatory is perennial. A reply to Hartelius. *Transpersonal Psychology Review*, 17(1), 38–48.
- Cunningham, P. (2019). Scientism and empiricism in transpersonal psychology. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 51(1), 6–27.
- Cunningham, P. (2019). Science and unity in transpersonal psychology—Part II. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 51(2), 176–197.
- Engelbregt, H., Alderse Baas, H. F., de Grauw, S., & Deijen, J. B. (2021). Brain activity during paired and individual mindfulness meditation: A controlled EEG study. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 40(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2021.40.1.45>
- Elfers, J., & Offringa, R. (2019). Sexual Ecstasy Scale: Conceptualizations and measurement. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 38(1), 66–82. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2019.38.1.66>
- Friedman, H. L. (2002). Transpersonal psychology as a scientific field. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 21(1), 175–187. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2002.21.1.175>
- Friedman, H. L. (2015). Further developing transpersonal psychology as a science: Building and testing middle-range transpersonal theories. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 34(1–2), 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2015.34.1-2.55>
- Ferrer, J. N. (2014). Transpersonal psychology, science, and the supernatural. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 46(2), 152–186.
- González-Álvarez, J., & Cervera-Crespo, T. (2019). Contemporary psychology and women: A gender analysis of the scientific production. *International Journal of Psychology*, 54(1), 135–143. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12433>
- Hartelius, G. (2019). Is diversity possible in an integrative psychology? Transpersonal as a whole person/all person approach. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 38(2), iii-x.
- Hartelius, G., Likova, L. T., & Tyler, C. W. (2022). Self-Regulation of seat of attention into various attentional stances facilitates access to cognitive and emotional resources: An EEG study. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 810780.
- Hartelius, G., Rothe, G., & Roy, P. J. (2013). A brand from the burning: Defining transpersonal psychology. In H. Friedman & G. Hartelius (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118591277.ch1>
- Lajoie, D. H., Shapiro, S. I., & Roberts, T. B. (1991). A historical analysis of the statement of purpose in "The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology." *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 23(2), 175–182.
- Sutich, A. J. (1969). Some considerations regarding transpersonal psychology. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1(2), 11–20.
- Taylor, S. (2017). The return of perennial perspectives? Why transpersonal psychology should remain open to essentialism. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36(2), 75–92. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.75>
- Taylor, S. (2017). Keeping the account open: On metaphysical mistrust in transpersonal psychology (A response to Hartelius, 2017). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36(2), 111–120. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.111>
- Taylor, S. (2017). Moving beyond materialism: Can transpersonal psychology contribute to cultural transformation? *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 36(2), 147–159. <https://doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2017.36.2.147>
- Trevathan-Minnis, M., Bloom, T., Atlas, N., MacDonald, D. A., & Friedman, H. L. (2021). Using dog facial-emotion recognizability to explore the putative black dog syndrome. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 49(4), 616–629. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000252>

### **About the Author**

*Glenn Hartelius, PhD*, is Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, co-editor of *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology* and *The Ketamine Papers*, and Secretary of the International Transpersonal Association. He also serves as Honorary Research Fellow for Alef Trust in Liverpool, UK. His research on the definition and scope of transpersonal psychology over 20 years has helped to define the field. He has taught at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Naropa University, Saybrook University, Sofia University, California Institute of Integral Studies, and Middlesex University in the UK.

### **About the Journal**

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a Scopus listed peer-reviewed academic journal, and the largest and most accessible scholarly periodical in the transpersonal field. IJTS has been in print since 1981, is published by Floragades Foundation, sponsored in part by Attention Strategies, 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).