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An Approach to Transpersonal Psychology as a Science

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Afterword

An Approach to Transpersonal Psychology as a Science

by Harris Friedman¹

I appreciate Glenn interviewing me, as he has invited me several times to respond in this journal to recent papers (e.g., Cunningham, 2019a, 2019b; Ferrer, 2014) that have been critical of scientific approaches to transpersonal psychology, naming my approach as one particular example. I have, until now, resisted his invitations, as I have been busy doing, and less inclined to talk about doing, transpersonal psychological science. I note also that it takes much effort to untangle other people's misunderstandings, so I prefer to simply invest in my own scientific work by trying to make it as good as possible and also writing about my own ideas pertaining to transpersonal psychological science. Just as I have felt misunderstood in many of these criticisms, I surely do not want to likewise mischaracterize anybody else's position.

However, I consented to this interview as a more interactive, and less arduous, way to address some vexing issues raised by these critiques that are important to the area. A recent paper (Taylor, 2022), that only came to my attention after the interview, reinforced this need to again articulate, and perhaps expand on some aspects of, my position. For any who might want to see my previous writings on this topic, more details in some areas than presented here are provided (e.g., Friedman, 2002, 2013, 2015, 2018). However, I take this opportunity to share some reflections.

First, I think much of the criticism of my approach has been based on a "strawman fallacy," attacking a false, and more vulnerable, effigy of my approach and, maybe more grievously, based not just on misunderstanding my own work but perhaps also misunderstanding some fundamentals of what science is about. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that it is an important development that these issues are being

openly discussed within transpersonal psychology, rather than ignored or, worse, demonized as a taboo topic. In this regard, I see much of transpersonal psychology, both historically and continuing into the present, as wedded to romanticism and hostile to science, and this openness as refreshing, even if problematic.

I think of the story I shared in the interview on an adversarial collaboration in which I debated whether qualitative methods were always best for humanistic-transpersonal psychology, as I believe such debate is healthy: it can expose chinks in the armor of people's dearly held positions, enabling growth. Increasingly, I enjoy such adversarial collaboration, such as two recent papers in this journal (Marks-Tarlow et al., 2020a; Robbins et al., 2018). I thus consider this interview, and this afterword, as an opportunity for fostering growth through confronting misunderstandings.

To set the stage, I believe transpersonal psychology is a part of psychology, if for no reason other than by virtue of its name. Psychology is consensually understood as a science, although there is some debate about this. The area is not called transpersonal mumbo-jumbo, but transpersonal psychology. Also, there is power involved, as those adhering to the term psychology inure to many benefits from being part of psychology, and such dynamics are important to consider. To participate in the privilege of these benefits, such as the ability to earn a good living as a professional psychologist—whether academic or applied—while rejecting science, is duplicitous.

If people want to be religionists, they can own it by practicing as pastoral counselors or teaching in divinity schools, but posing as psychologists, transpersonal or otherwise, while rejecting what

psychology means, is a sham. To claim to be doing psychology while rejecting that psychology is fundamentally a scientific field is, to not mince words, unethical in my view. Similarly, I do not condone those who practice or promote transpersonal psychology through using pseudoscientific approaches. I hope I do not come across as too “preachy,” but my deepest commitment regarding transpersonal psychology as a science is ethical.

I believe it is important to reconcile a fundamental dilemma: how to rectify the transpersonal topics that mainstream psychology leaves out through its scientism, with the tendency of transpersonal psychology to address these important topics poorly by embracing romanticism. Consequently, I have advocated a middle path: doing good science (i.e., not practicing scientism) in the transpersonal areas ignored by the mainstream. I like the saying, “Keep an open mind, but not so open that your brains fall out” (this quote, and its many variants, has been attributed to many but its origins are undetermined; see Farley, 2014), and this is the balance I seek.

To achieve this goal, it is important to delineate scientific transpersonal psychology from both religion and pseudoscience, and this involves the pesky demarcation problem, namely how to clearly separate out science from the varieties of non-science. Without delving deeply into the philosophy of science which excels at splitting such hairs—although not to many’s satisfaction, there are two general guidelines that I think crucial to emphasize here.

First, a good scientific claim must be grounded in some way on sensory experience (but this can be broadly construed, including interoception), or it is literally “nonsense.” By grounded, I do not mean evidence-based, as that is too high a standard in my opinion—as there is a paucity of evidence in many areas of psychology, and especially in transpersonal psychology. However, claims should be congruent with what is known and, therefore at least plausible as being evidence-informed, if not -based.

Second, good science must not be solipsistic or only self-referential, but requires social confirmation in which claims are amenable to being examined by others through their sensory

experience, such as through replication studies. This makes science an open system of knowing that can be cumulative, as scientists can build on the discoveries of others, not just relying only on their own idiosyncratic experiences. It also allows beliefs to be challenged, in contrast to systems that rely on authority, or traditions based on authority (e.g., revelations from charismatic leaders passed along as dogma), in which challenges are rejected as heretical and blasphemous. Sure, there are cliques and cults within science, including psychology and its subfield of scientific transpersonal psychology, but ultimately all claims are challengeable in good science.

Much more can be written about science’s many virtues as a disciplined way of knowing about ourselves and the world, including transpersonal phenomena, but these two are what I consider its main guidelines. Applying these guidelines can be useful for examining the scientific worth of its claims. For example, many in transpersonal psychology adopt non-Western religions, such as Buddhism, as their core worldview. Aspects of Buddhism bear resemblance to science, such as having a vibrant tradition of asking people to engage in specific meditation practices to explore for themselves whether or not they might experience something that others claim to experience from the same practices. Such experiences are both empirical and social, which is akin to a scientific approach, but the problem is that these are vested in dogma about metaphysical constructs that are outside of the realm of empiricism (e.g., beliefs in reincarnation and karma; see Friedman, 2009, 2010). Of course, this type of critique applies to all religions that posit supernatural agents and forces, as empiricism refers to what can be apprehended through the senses within nature (the space and time notions of physics, broadly speaking), not to what is possibly beyond (“meta”) nature, namely the metaphysical and supernatural. Consequently, I have cautioned transpersonal psychologists not to speculate about these, and I believe engaging in such to be outside of the realm of science. However, in no way am I taking a position on such speculation’s value or ultimate “truth,” as I leave that to fields like religion and non-scientific transpersonal studies.

As another example, I find it disconcerting how many transpersonal psychologists are still under the sway of different pseudoscientific beliefs. For example, astrological beliefs have captured the imagination of many of the most influential transpersonal psychologists (e.g., Grof, 2018). I decline to make the argument here that astrology is a pseudoscience, as there is a voluminous literature debunking astrology in contrast to a relatively miniscule amount of supportive empirical literature. However, using astrology in a divinatory way within psychological practice is tantamount to throwing bones or examining innards of chickens, practices that few would take seriously as being legitimate parts of psychological assessment. Practices that continue in certain religious communities but lie thoroughly outside of what modern science would take seriously abound within transpersonal psychology, and should be rejected. Although demarcations of pseudoscience from good science is challenging, and might occasionally be wrong—as some approaches might be deemed pseudoscientific at one time and later redeemed as being within good science—critical discernment is part of professional judgment for scientists.

Three issues relate to this discussion: metaphysics, linear thinking, and post-materialism. These are often raised as bases for rejection of contemporary science as applied to transpersonal psychology.

Metaphysical assumptions are unavoidable, as everything rests on something else, yet this does not mean that more plausible metaphysical assumptions, such as that there is a reality to be discovered and all is not merely a human construction, are equivalent in worth to more questionable ones, such as belief in astrological determinism. Attributing meaning to coincidences, such as associating the red coloration of Mars with blood and the god of war for whom that planet is named, defies plausibility. Daniels (2022) proposed metaphysical bracketing or minimalization as an approach to avoid either/or thinking about metaphysics, which is similar to my approach. The argument that all approaches have some metaphysical assumptions simply does not justify believing that dubious assumptions are equivalent to those that have more

plausible, evidence-informed, bases. Metaphysics being unavoidable does not mean it gives license for everything to be allowed, as that is a logical fallacy: some assumptions are patently more absurd than others, and this requires discernment to navigate.

Regarding linear thinking being invoked as a reason to reject science, the simple statistics of the past remain useful, such as linear regression models, but are also being replaced by more complex approaches, such as my work modelling transpersonal phenomena with fractal geometries (e.g., Marks-Tarlow et al., 2020b). Psychology in general, and transpersonal psychological phenomena as one specific area, can benefit from using linear approaches, as well as emerging approaches. In this regard, I am excited about new developments, such as artificial intelligence, helping to make sense of transpersonal patterns that elude more simplistic approaches.

Regarding materialism—and the many calls for post-materialist science among transpersonal psychologists—modern science does not narrowly construe matter, as this is understood in a more complex way (e.g., as being energetic relatedness). Consider modern notions of atomic structure, as these are no longer the indivisible particles of Democritus or the simple billiard balls of Newton. Critiquing antiquated views of science, which authors like (Cunningham, 2019a, 2019b), Ferrer (2014), and Taylor (2022) have done, is simply not relevant to contemporary science, and, to mix metaphors, is beating a straw horse.

But, alas, science does have its limits, mostly based on the lack of human imagination and, equally importantly, perspiration. Those who have the romantic yearning for a totalitarian system of meaning surely will find science stultifying to their desires for ultimate truths, while those who decry the uniqueness of everything will find the banality of science to be stultifying. I am reminded of the saying, everybody is unique—just like everybody else. One of science's limits, and this is tough for many transpersonal psychologists to accept, is that science requires a subject and an object divide, so absolutist claims such as about non-dualism and other ultimate states are outside the realm of science, at least as how I see science to date. This

is where some might feel the baby is thrown out in the bathwater, but I await the next Einstein who can show a proof of concept as to how to do science in such ways. Meanwhile, there is so much of value to do, albeit in a more limited but still transpersonal, way, as my own scientific efforts have both modestly achieved and demonstrated to be possible.

Please note, I never have claimed that either the baby or bathwater lack legitimacy, only that science cannot speak to that which cannot be said, or at least yet said, in any cogent way. Unfortunately, even those who are sympathetic to my call for a scientific transpersonal psychology often misunderstand my position, such as Daniels (2021), who recently claimed that I “reject” metaphysics, such as belief in the supernatural. This is simply too harsh of a claim, as I merely bracket such claims as being outside of the realm of science, but I do not entirely reject their worth, as in transpersonal studies. For example in my cartography of self-expansiveness (e.g., Friedman, 1983, 2018), I provide a map of self-concept, which is defined as within space and time, but I also allude to what may be beyond the map’s boundary—the possibility of “more.” Although the map is based on what is natural, I explicitly mention this “more” and never reject the possibility of whatever the supernatural might be. In being taciturn about notions of metaphysics and the supernatural, I am merely observing a respectful silence about what cannot be cogently stated within a scientific framework, especially when I am engaged in doing scientific work.

In regard to my not rejecting metaphysical and supernatural claims, I actually am fascinated by these, such as in parapsychology. In fact, much of my recent scholarship is in this area. For example, I have been co-editor of a major series in this area for a number of years (Krippner et al., 2013, 2021), and am now assuming the first editorship role of its upcoming volume. However, I approach studies in this area from a scientific vantage, just as I do with transpersonal psychology, striving for a balance between skepticism and open-mindedness. Consequently, I am often amazed at how defensive scholars can be when their pet notions are not affirmed, even if they are not rejected, as I try to maintain a neutral agnostic stance in areas not yet

supported by science. However, I do get adamant about not including nonsense as being part of science, as it simply is not.

In this regard, the mysteries that draws many to transpersonal psychology do not have to be denied, but merely bracketed. Science is not static, but evolving as an open system that looks forward, while traditions, religious or otherwise, primarily look backwards. Also, science always changes, and perhaps what is unspeakable today can be spoken tomorrow, or that which is relegated to pseudoscience today can possibly be vindicated later, just as my doctoral dissertation was viewed with skepticism initially by my professors. Transpersonal psychology can progress by using traditional scientific approaches, as my work has both accomplished and, also, has shown as a proof of concept that it can be done. Transpersonal psychology also might pioneer new approaches to science, such as Tart’s (1972) proposal for state-specific sciences, which unfortunately has generated little empirical work but deserves more attention, something which I am now researching. For the present, however, the tools of traditional science can be meaningfully applied to transpersonal psychology, and those who call for new tools should invest in inventing and using them, rather than gripe about the limits of what science now offers. The fact is that most who criticize the role of science in this area are not actively doing science, and seem to lack a deep understanding of what that entails.

When I first was drawn to transpersonal psychology, I like many was mostly a romanticist. But, as I have diligently pursued scientific research from a transpersonal vantage over many years, I realize the ethical imperativeness of this work, as well as it being feasible. The question remains then, who is willing to take on the challenges by getting their hands soiled in the hard work, as opposed to only relishing the glory of transpersonal phenomena without giving back?

Last, I want to end with the importance of debunking claims that are wrong, or “not even wrong,” which counterbalances legitimate scientific claims that are never “right” in the sense of being true but that are informed by evidence and are plausible. Much of transpersonal psychology is not

even wrong, as it is replete with speculations about things that are inaccessible to empirical evidence, not unlike the medieval scholasticism arguing about the number of angels that can fit on a pinhead. However, in allied fields, such as positive psychology, that do research on transpersonal phenomena—even if the term transpersonal is itself not invoked—there are interesting problems that I and colleagues have labelled “romantic scientism” (Brown et al., 2014). Instead of the dichotomy between romanticism, which plagues transpersonal psychology, and scientism, which is the bane of much of mainstream psychology, is the emerging blend of romantic scientism in which scientific evidence is used in “bad faith” (e.g., misinterpreted to support a romantic-ideological position), such as seen in the five papers of Barbara Fredrickson's that I have helped debunk (see Friedman et al., 2020). Perhaps this is the most insidious threat to a scientific transpersonal psychology, as pure romanticism and scientism are easier to detect and refute; but this blend of both can undermine any attempt at developing a useful and honest scientific transpersonal psychology, which is something the world sorely needs.

Note

1. This Afterword is a freestanding part of the interview that appears in the just prior Editors' Introduction, a piece entitled, "Harris Friedman: Pioneer of Transpersonal Psychology as a Science" (Friedman & Hartelius, 2021).

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