Transpersonal Psychology and Science

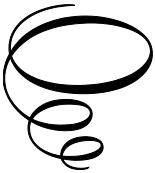
Transpersonal Psychology and Science:

An Evaluation of Its Present Status and Future Directions

Edited by

Douglas A. MacDonald
and Manuel Almendro

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

DOUGLAS A. MACDONALD
AND MANUEL ALMENDRO

Transpersonal psychology is a discipline born in the 1960s from the tripartite influences of the psychedelic movement, the influx of Eastern and indigenous spiritual ideas and practices into Western psychology, and the growth of humanistic psychology to incorporate spirituality and transcendent experience as necessary components for studying and understanding the entirety of human potential and consciousness. While initially an American phenomenon, the discipline has come to be embraced by scholars and practitioners throughout the world. At present, there are a variety of academic journals (e.g., *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, Journal of Transpersonal Research, Transpersonal Psychology Review*) and professional organizations (e.g., Association for Transpersonal Psychology http://atpweb.org/; European Transpersonal Association [EUROTAS], http://eurotas.org/; International Transpersonal Association [ITA] http://www.transpersonalassociation.com/) that are dedicated to supporting, exploring, and promulgating the transpersonal viewpoint both within psychology and across a range of other disciplines and areas of inquiry including but not limited to anthropology, sociology, medicine, nursing, counseling, education, social work, philosophy, religious studies, creative arts, and gender studies.

Though these developments may lead one to think the discipline has a coherent and agreed upon worldview, since coming on the scene and throughout its existence, transpersonal psychology has struggled with a variety of very fundamental issues concerning its definition, scope, and methods that have led some to criticize the field and/or to proffer ways of bringing clarity and focus to its mission and vision (e.g., see Friedman & Hartelius, 2013a). Among the most contentious and important of these

issues is the extent to which transpersonal psychology can and should operate as a science (e.g., Daniels, 2005; Ferrer, 2014; Friedman, 2002).

We ourselves know of many scholars and practitioners who have an interest in transpersonal psychology but are uncomfortable with the field being framed as a "psychology" and/or a "science" because they feel that it goes beyond the boundaries of both psychology and science writ large. For several of these people, issues regarding transpersonal psychology as a science are embedded in a larger set of problems with trying to demarcate how the foundational ideas of the discipline can be adapted to the traditions, methods, and practices of their own areas of inquiry, and they are critical of any efforts at trying to fit everything under the umbrella of a psychology, whether scientific or otherwise. At the same time, we know of a fair number of people, almost all of whom lack formal training in psychology and are without recognized professional credentials, who have shown an eagerness to use the name of the discipline as a way of enhancing their legitimacy in the eyes of others and to use their status as "transpersonal psychologists" to make claims and/or offer services to the public that we think most advocates for the discipline would find questionable and even troublesome. We consider the first of these situations to be a concrete reflection of the uncertainties surrounding the identity of the transpersonal psychological movement and the latter as an indication of the potentially undesirable consequences that can arise when there are no agreed upon structures, processes, or methods that can be used to meaningfully evaluate claims and hold people into account for their actions done in the name of the field. In our opinion, both of these instances provide a strong impetus for the transpersonal psychological community to begin open, inclusive, and critical dialogue regarding its present status and what it wants for its future.

As researchers and psychologists who treat transpersonal psychology as a central part of our own professional identities, we ourselves have been actively engaged in trying to make sense of the field with particular attention given to how it could incorporate and more effectively utilize science (e.g., see Almendro, 2009a; MacDonald, 2013). From what we can determine, the discipline has a lot to gain by embracing science in terms of recognition, credibility, accountability, and opportunities to participate in the broader workings of the scientific community. As well, we think that transpersonal psychology has a lot to offer science and has the potential to influence the direction that science takes with respect to the ideas and phenomena that transpersonalists hold dear and value as essential for a more complete understanding of human consciousness and well-being. In our view, science is not a closed and immutable system that only seeks to

reduce things to material processes. To the contrary, we see it as open, dynamic, and responsive to different perspectives. However, our view seems to be in the minority as many people who consider themselves transpersonalists appear to harbor mostly negative attitudes about science, either seeing it as a threat or as an encumberance which is unnecessary for the field to sustain itself. Nonetheless, after considerable reflection, we have come to the conclusion that in order for transpersonal psychology as a whole to make significant progress on issues related to science, there is a need to consider the myriad perspectives of those who are recognized authorities the field so as to get the best possible sense of how they may be reconciled and integrated into a coherent framework upon which others like us can ground their ideas, research, and practices. In turn, we see this having tremendous implications for addressing the larger issues of discipline identity as it could aid people in making determinations as to whether or not transpersonal psychology or another field of inquiry is suitable to their values and interests.

With all of this in mind, the aim of this book is simple—to give interested readers a resource where they can examine the views of recognized transpersonalists from all over the world on the matter of the relation of transpersonal psychology to science. To the best of our knowledge, there is no single publication that provides a centralized source for such discourse and dialogue. We felt it important to include voices "from all over the world" because most of the discussion and debate that has transpired in the literature to date has come from scholars in the United States and, less so, the United Kingdom. We adopted the stance that differences in perspectives which may be linked to culture need to be respected and incorporated as much as possible if the dialogue is going to have any positive and lasting influence over the current and future workings of transpersonal psychology as a discipline.

To accomplish our aim, we identified scholars and practitioners who are known for their contributions to transpersonal psychology and we invited them to provide written submissions in which they addressed five questions. These questions were (a) What is transpersonal psychology? (b) What is science, particularly quantitative science, in relation to what you consider to be transpersonal psychology? (c) What is the current state of transpersonal psychology in your opinion? (d) If nothing changes, what is the future of transpersonal psychology in your opinion? (e) What needs to be done to ensure that transpersonal psychology has a vibrant and productive future? Invitees were encouraged to write whatever they felt as being most reflective of their own point of view and were told that they could be as personal or as scholarly as they liked. The only constraint that

we asked everyone to honor as much as possible was to keep their submissions reasonably concise.

While we did not hear back from each and every person, the majority of invitees replied. Several were appreciative of being invited but declined, primarily due to lack of time because of other commitments or simple lack of interest. However, most of these scholars gave praise for our efforts with one stating "[t]ranspersonal research will benefit from varying points of view and cordial scholarly debate." Some of those who responded with either an acceptance or declination provided notable comments in their initial communication which onto themselves were interesting as they seemed reflect the invitee's sense of the state and/or significance of transpersonal psychology as a discipline. For instance, one invitee stated "I find [transpersonal psychological] basic ideas doing wonderfully culture-wide, but barely noticed in psychology." Another one commented that transpersonal psychology "has always been a grab bag, or an umbrella term for a bunch of different approaches, and that's still the case." In a poignantly toned email, a third invitee replied that transpersonal psychology used to suffer from an "anti-intellectualism" in its early years which has appeared to have waned somewhat in more recent times. Nevertheless, due to its history and politics in its formative years, the invitee decided to not restrict his/her allegiances to transpersonal psychology.

In total, we received submissions from a respectably large number of experts. Many are solo authored but several are co-written compositions. In this book, we present the submissions in separate chapters organized alphabetically by author first name (first author first name in multi-authored pieces). We opted to use such an approach to organization because we wanted to be theoretically and ideologically nonpartisan and to mitigate any potential criticisms that might arise if a more conceptual or thematic structure were imposed by us (or, in other words, we did not want to appear that we were favoring some perspectives and arguments over others). While some submissions needed revision to improve quality of expression, we endeavored as much as possible to keep all submissions in the form we received them. It was our intent to preserve the unique voices of all contributors as much as possible.

Without divulging too much up front, our careful reading of the submissions revealed a wide array of responses to our aforementioned questions. Some authors lament the state of transpersonal psychology and offer serious criticisms of its perceived failure in realizing its potential. Others express little by way of concern, characterizing the field in an almost panglossian manner as vibrant and as needing little, if any, change. Others still offer some constructive insights into areas where the discipline

could benefit from some retooling. In all cases, the authors offer their viewpoints with honesty, integrity, and with a sincere desire to benefit the field.

Following the various perspectives shared by our contributors, we provide a brief summary of some of the main grievances and issues expressed and then offer a variety of suggestions that we hope will be helpful in moving transpersonal psychology toward greater visibility, coherency, and rigor in its scholarship and professional applications.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ADVANCEMENT OF TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE: A NEUROPHENOMENOLOGICAL TRAJECTORY

ADAM J. ROCK AND CHARLES D. LAUGHLIN

In 1968 Abraham Maslow asserted that, "I consider humanistic, Third Force psychology, to be transitional, a preparation for a still 'higher' Fourth psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interests, going beyond humanness, identity, self-actualization and the like" (as quoted in Visser, 2003, p. 43). Almost four decades later, Hartelius, Caplan, and Rardin (2007) thematically analyzed 160 definitions of the term *transpersonal psychology* derived from publications and interviews with transpersonal colleagues from 1968 through 2002. Three comprehensive constituent themes were identified: (1) beyond-ego, (2) integrative/holistic, and (3) transformative. With respect to (1), *ego* refers to one's individual sense of self, which inhabits a clearly delineated space-time location, as distinguished from Freud's conception of the ego as the mediator between the superego and id. That is, (1) implies that transpersonal psychology focuses on experiences of spatial and temporal transcendence (see Friedman, 1983). Regarding (2), *integrative/holistic* suggests that transpersonal psychologists avoid reductionistic (e.g., biological) formulations and investigate persons in the context of their social-cultural-political milieu. In terms of (3), *transformative* suggests that transpersonal psychologists investigate injunctions or state-change technologies (e.g., meditation) that facilitate the attainment of states of phenomenology (e.g., *samadhi*) associated with greater positive affect (e.g., joy, love) and meaningfulness compared to ordinary waking states. Thus, following Hartelius *et al*. (2007) the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3) above may be conceptualized as a sufficient condition for a research content area to be deemed transpersonal psychology.

The aim of the present chapter is to argue that the advancement of transpersonal psychological science may be facilitated by the adoption of a neurophenomenological approach. In order to achieve this objective we will first examine the relationship between transpersonal psychology and science. Second, we will appraise the current state of transpersonal psychology. Third, we will provide a brief exposition of phenomenology with special emphasis on Husserlian phenomenological methodology. Finally, we will outline a possible future neurophenomenological trajectory for transpersonal psychology.

Transpersonal Psychology and Science

Friedman (2002) examined the relationship between transpersonal psychology and science, and concluded that,

> based on the historic roots of the field, the ethical and legal implications of its connection with the discipline of scientific psychology, and the importance of the field for human survival and betterment, transpersonal psychology should be bound to a scientific commitment. (p. 176)

What most people would consider a scientific psychology would be one in which theories are built from, and tested using direct observations of reality. Specifically, a scientifically grounded transpersonal psychology would be one that espouses views that are, in principle, falsifiable either through direct experience or through controlled experimentation. This does not mean that everyone who practices scientific psychology agrees upon appropriate methods. We note, for example, the current controversy surrounding the prevalence of *questionable research practices* (QRPs; e.g., rounding down a *p* value from .053 to .049 to obtain significance; *see* John, Loewenstein, & Prelec, 2012; Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011), and the inability to replicate initial results (e.g., Begley & Ellis, 2012). Indeed, one foundational principle of science is *replicability*. Pashler and Wagenmakers (2012) posed the question, "Is there currently a crisis of confidence in psychological science reflecting an unprecedented level of doubt among practitioners about the reliability of research findings in the field? It would certainly appear that there is" (p. 528).

Irrespective of the current status of psychological science, we agree with Friedman (2002) that the importance of transpersonal psychology for "human survival and betterment" (p. 176) necessitates an embrace of the scientific method rather than the peddling of folk beliefs and anecdotal evidence. Several decades ago, Tart (1972) provided a model for this embrace. Tart (1998) asserted that *states of consciousness* (SoC) consist of

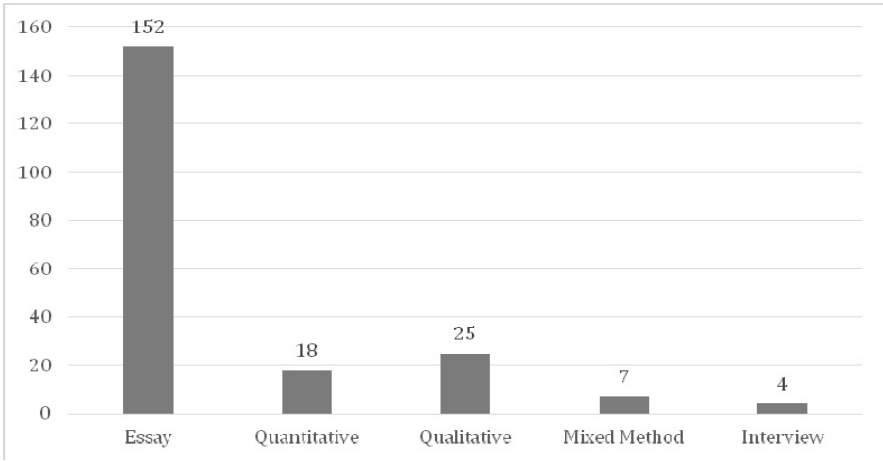
"state-specific perceptions and logics" (p.103). For example, ordinary waking consciousness is characterized, in part, by the logic of linear and binary segmentation (i.e., temporality and duality, respectively), whereas various transpersonal experiences (e.g. *savikalpa samadhi*) consist of logic that is ostensibly non-linear and non-dual. Tart further proposed that, "the methods of essential science (observation, theorizing, prediction, communication/consensual validation) can be applied from within various SoCs and ASCs" to create what he termed *state-specific sciences* (SSS) (p. 103). However, Tart (1972) emphasized that SSSs should be used to complement, rather than invalidate, the experiential knowledge obtained by what he referred to as *normal consciousness sciences* (NCS). For instance, Laughlin had a lucid dream in which he was with various friends and became aware that he was dreaming. He told his friends that they were all dreaming together, and that he could prove it. He reached out his hand toward a sweater laying on a table and by exerting his will, caused it to levitate. "There," he told his friends, "we could not do that if we were awake." He was thinking at that moment that he was empirically proving he was dreaming. This is an example of how state-specific phenomenology may be practiced. It depends upon cultivating sufficient awareness within the state of consciousness to pursue relevant questions (*see* also Rock & Klettke, 2009).

The Current State of Transpersonal Psychology

An examination of articles published in the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* (IJTS) from 2008 to 2019 revealed that 8.74% (18) were quantitative studies, 12.14% (25) were qualitative studies, 3.40% (7) were mixed-method studies, and 1.94% (4) were interviews. In contrast, 73.79% (152) of published papers were essays (i.e., not empirical studies; see Figure 2-1). Thus, transpersonal researchers appear to focus largely on the production of essays rather than the application of the scientific method to transpersonal phenomena. Of course it is clear that in many cases, the application of parametric statistics is inappropriate, for the universe is not known. In order to sample an attribute within a population, one must know who among the population exhibits that attribute. For instance, to validly sample lucid dreamers within a population (say, the population of the United States), one must identify everyone within that population who is a lucid dreamer. Only then is the application of parametric statistics valid. Moreover, even if the researcher samples from a known universe (all lucid dreamers in the US), the results of the statistics used can only be generalized to the population of lucid dreamers in the

US—not to all lucid dreamers in the world, a classic error made frequently in psychology where it is assumed that what characterizes a sample of university student volunteer subjects characterizes the whole world. The point here of course is that transpersonal data are often anecdotal and experiential and the use of high-powered statistics is simply inappropriate.

Figure 2-1. Type of article published in the International Journal of Transpersonal Studies (2008 to 2019)



The counter-contention regarding the results displayed in Figure 2-1 is, of course, that we have created a "straw-man" argument on the grounds that a distinction may be "drawn between the field of transpersonal psychology as a science and the broader area known as transpersonal studies that may legitimately use scientific or nonscientific methods" (Friedman, 2002, p. 175). Interestingly, however, an examination of the content of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology's *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* and the British Psychological Society's *Transpersonal Psychology Review* reveals an equivalent trend characterized by an overemphasis on essays, which is consistent with Friedman's (2002) lament that transpersonal psychology has produced little quantitative research relative to other sub-disciplines of psychology. (Friedman's lament may, of course, be extended to qualitative and mixed-methods research). Indeed, in an attempt "to begin to rectify the lack of many quantitative empirical papers in transpersonal psychology", Friedman and Hartelius (2007, p. 56) published a special issue of IJTS titled "Applying Quantitative Research Methods in Transpersonal Psychology".

According to Leahey (1992, p. 17),

> For scientific research to be progressive, the scientific community in a particular research area must agree on certain basic issues. Its members must agree on the goals of their science, on the basic characteristics of the real world relevant to their subject, and on permissible research methods and mathematical techniques.

This notion of progressive scientific research is especially problematic within transpersonal psychology where transpersonal authors "frequently portray science as inadequate for and irrelevant to addressing transpersonal concerns" (Friedman, 2005, p. 3). In addition, debate continues regarding "permissible research methods". For example, while some prominent transpersonal researchers (e.g., Friedman & MacDonald, 2002) advocate quantitative approaches, we note that the anthology, *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences* (Braud & Anderson, 1998) outlines five transpersonal research methods (i.e., integral inquiry, intuitive inquiry, organic research, transpersonal-phenomenological inquiry, inquiry informed by exceptional human experiences), none of which utilize statistical tests.

Thus, broadly speaking, this particular sub-discipline of psychology demonstrates a predilection for formulating sets of logically related hypotheses (i.e., theories) coupled with a disinclination to engage in hypothesis testing; a curious state of affairs, indeed. This predilection has numerous negative outcomes including: (1) The glacial accumulation of empirical knowledge, which hampers the development of an evidence base concerning, for example, the efficacy of transpersonal psychotherapy (e.g., holotropic breathwork); (2) A dearth of studies that provide quantitative phenomenological maps of ostensibly transpersonal states of conscious awareness (e.g., *kevala nirvikalpa samadhi*) and therefore a failure to respond adequately to Tart's (1972) decades-old call for the establishment of SSSs; and (3) A lack of validation of quantitative instruments designed to measure transpersonal constructs.

Psychology's sister discipline, anthropology, has an opposite problem. Because, with the exception of so-called *holocultural* studies of transpersonal experiences (e.g., Bourguignon & Evascu, 1977), anthropological research is naturalistic, it rarely has a way of determining a universe for which parametric statistics would be valid. Hence, anthropology has had no such methodological quandary, for ethnographic fieldwork is normally qualitative and grounded upon what is call *participant observation*: that is, learning about life in other cultures by participating in the host's everyday life and seeing what happens. As is often the case when doing fieldwork among non-Western peoples, anthropologists have come across practices