

ON TRANSPERSONAL DEFINITIONS

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In recent years there has been renewed interest in defining the field of transpersonal psychology. This reflects the continuing maturation of the field as well as the perceived need for clear definitions in order to increase consensus within the field and communicate effectively with those outside it.

There have been several recent studies of the various definitions and the ways they have changed over the last quarter century (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992; Lajoie, Shapiro & Roberts, 1991; Vich, 1992). These studies suggest that, while definitions converge on several key themes, they show significant variation and continue to evolve. This evolution reflects the open-minded spirit with which the field and its early definitions were formulated. Early pioneers explicitly recognized the value of openness to change and individual interpretation (*The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 1969, p. i; Sutich, 1975, 1976).

Surveying these definitions provides an overview of beliefs about the nature of the field. Lajoie and Shapiro (1992) found that five themes occurred most frequently. These were: states of consciousness, highest or ultimate potential, beyond ego or personal self, transcendence, and spiritual.

In reviewing definitions for the preparation of a new edition of *Beyond Ego*—now called *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal*

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Vision (Walsh & Vaughan, 1980; 1993)—we found a persistent problematic theme in many definitions. Therefore we want briefly to describe this theme and its potential dangers, and to offer definitions which hopefully reduce these difficulties.

The problem is that many definitions appear to be highly “theory-laden” and sometimes “metaphysically laden”—that is, these definitions imply, either overtly or covertly, a commitment to certain conceptual, theoretical and metaphysical beliefs and presuppositions.

There is wide agreement that there are no theory-free facts. All concepts are partly theory-laden. Indeed, theoretical holism argues for the organic character of thought, claiming that concepts cannot be understood in isolation: their meaning derives from the theoretical system in which they inhere.

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Practical holism goes further. It argues that since thinking proceeds in social contexts, meaning derives from these contexts. According to this view, an idea reflects more than the conceptual gestalt of which it is a part. It also reflects the social world out of which this gestalt is born. Dimensions of this social world that philosophers regard as important include Wittgenstein’s “forms of life,” Heidegger’s “historical horizons” and “ways of being-in-the-world,” whose “micropractices” (Foucault) give these gestalts their meaning.

Moreover, we all labor under the limitations of our own “horizon” (Gadamer) or “template” (Heidegger) constituted by our cultural practices and prejudices. Presumably we are always limited by these horizons or templates to some extent, at least in our usual state of consciousness.

Some philosophical, religious and transpersonal scholars would argue that these limitations can be escaped in certain transrational, transconceptual experiences. However this point is currently debated by constructivists who argue that *all* experiences are constructed and conditioned by inescapable individual and cultural factors. (For an excellent review of this debate, see Rothberg, 1989.)

Setting aside the debate concerning the extent to which we can escape our conceptual systems, it is clear that we can escape some beliefs, and that excessive theoretical and metaphysical presuppositions can be dangerous, especially when they go unrecognized. Presuppositions seem to function as cognitive biases that shape selective attention, perception, memory and interpretation. As such they tend to reduce cognitive flexibility and openness to novel

experiences that contradict the presuppositions (Langer, 1989). In other words, presuppositions bias the processing of new data by a process known as proactive inhibition.

Beliefs adopted prematurely constitute "premature cognitive commitments" (Langer, 1989) that inhibit the later adoption of more adequate theories. In a research field such as transpersonal studies, premature cognitive commitments presuppose conclusions that would be more appropriately determined by research findings.

A further problem with theory-laden definitions is political. When a definition entails a commitment to a specific theory or world view, it can alienate people who might otherwise be sympathetic to the field. Critics can also attack the validity of the field by attacking the validity of the presumed worldview. A notable example is Albert Ellis' (1986) dismissal of transpersonal psychology partly because, according to him, transpersonalists believe that "all living and inanimate things merge into one fundamental unity" (p. 149). Ellis' critique is wildly erroneous in many ways (Walsh, 1989; Wilber, 1989). However, it does point to the dangers of misunderstanding that accompany definitions that entail a particular worldview. (For a humorous response to Ellis, see Wilber, 1989.)

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COMMON COGNITIVE COMMITMENTS IN TRANSPERSONAL DEFINITIONS

Let us then examine some of the (premature) cognitive commitments that recur in definitions of transpersonal psychology. These include assumptions about the nature of ontology, the "Self," ultimate values, highest potentials, states of consciousness, and health.

Ontological assumptions include the presupposition that "a transcendent reality underlies and binds together all phenomena" (Transpersonal Psychology Interest Group, 1982, p. 1). Likewise, several definitions refer to a transcendent "Self," a reference which would trouble Buddhists, for example.

Other definitions indicate that transpersonal psychology represents a contemporary exploration of the perennial philosophy (Hutchins, 1987). However, there are many contemporary philosophical criticisms of the perennial philosophy and attendant claims (Rothberg, 1986). Exploring the precise relationship between transpersonal psychology and the perennial philosophy is an important task for future research (Wilber, 1990, 1993a, b), but assuming the nature of the relationship in current definitions may be premature and problematic.

Several definitions refer to ultimates, suggesting that transpersonal psychology's primary concern is with ultimate dimensions of human experience (Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, 1991) and "humanity's highest potential" (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992). There are significant problems here (Chaudhuri, 1975), and the term "ultimate" was therefore dropped from *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology's* statement of purpose in 1973 (Sutich, 1975). For example, how does one know or demonstrate that one is dealing with ultimates or highest potentials? In addition, much of the field focuses on concerns that are clearly not ultimate.

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Many definitions define transpersonal psychology in terms of the study of altered states of consciousness (see Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992). Probably most transpersonalists would agree that altered states are important, but they do not necessarily define the field. For example, some topics may not necessarily be associated with altered states, and the highest degrees of realization may entail, not so much an altered state, but the ground out of which all states arise (Wilber, 1983). There is also a debate over whether the dominant paradigm for transpersonal studies should be altered states of consciousness or developmental structures of consciousness (Wilber, 1993b).

Other definitions assume the field is centrally concerned with psychological health and well-being (Hutchins, 1987; Walsh & Vaughan, 1980). Our own definition in *Beyond Ego* said that the field was "concerned with the study of psychological health and well-being." It therefore framed transpersonal phenomena in a health paradigm rather than, for example, in a developmental paradigm. In doing so it implied that transpersonal experiences are intimately linked to psychological health, whereas it is increasingly clear that the relationship is more complex (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993, section 6, Problems on the Path; Wilber et al., 1986).

The assumptions implied by these transpersonal definitions are not necessarily wrong. However their validity should be researched and assessed rather than presupposed.

In light of these caveats we would like to propose some definitions which hopefully entail fewer presuppositions, are less theory-laden, and more closely tied to experience. In addition, since transpersonal studies have expanded beyond the founding field of transpersonal psychology, we also propose definitions of related disciplines.

DEFINITIONS

Transpersonal experiences may be defined as experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos.

Transpersonal practices are those structured activities that focus on inducing transpersonal experiences.

Transpersonal disciplines are those disciplines that focus on the study of transpersonal experiences and related phenomena. These phenomena include the causes, effects and correlates of transpersonal experiences and development, as well as the disciplines and practices inspired by them.

Transpersonal psychology is the area of psychology that focuses on the study of transpersonal experiences and related phenomena. These phenomena include the causes, effects and correlates of transpersonal experiences and development, as well as the disciplines and practices inspired by them (see, for example, Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

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Transpersonal psychiatry is the area of psychiatry that focuses on the study of transpersonal experiences and related phenomena. Its focus is similar to transpersonal psychology with a particular interest in the clinical and biomedical aspects of transpersonal phenomena (see, for example, Lukoff, Lu & Turner, 1992).

Transpersonal anthropology is the cross-cultural study of transpersonal phenomena and the relationship between consciousness and culture (see, for example, Laughlin et al., 1992, 1993).

Transpersonal sociology is the study of the social dimensions, implications, expressions and applications of transpersonal phenomena (see, for example, Wilber, 1983).

Transpersonal ecology is the study of the ecological dimensions, implications, and applications of transpersonal phenomena (see, for example, Fox, 1990, 1993)

The *transpersonal movement* is the interdisciplinary movement that includes various individual transpersonal disciplines (see, for example, Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

DISCUSSION

These definitions describe the focus and purpose of transpersonal disciplines while making minimal theoretical and metaphysical presuppositions. However, obviously they are not final.

It is important to note what these definitions do *not* do. They do not exclude the personal or interpersonal, limit the type of expansion of identity, tie transpersonal disciplines to any particular philosophy, belief system or worldview, or limit research to a particular method, art, or discipline.

Contrary to the assumptions of some critics (e.g., May, 1986), transpersonal disciplines do not exclude or invalidate the personal. Rather, they set personal concerns within a larger context that acknowledges the importance of both personal and transpersonal experiences. Indeed, one interpretation of the term transpersonal is *that the transcendent is expressed through (trans) the personal*.

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Likewise, the definitions do not specify limits on the direction or extent of expansion of the sense of identity. Some ecologists emphasize the importance of horizontal expansion of identification to encompass the earth and life, while simultaneously denying the value or validity of vertical transcendence (Fox, 1990, 1993). On the other hand, for some spiritual practitioners this vertical expansion of identity to encompass transcendent images and realms is central, while others value identification with both the vertical (transcendent) and the horizontal (immanent).

These definitions do not commit the transpersonal disciplines or their practitioners to any specific interpretation of transpersonal experiences. In particular they do not tie the disciplines to any particular ontology, metaphysics or worldview, nor to any specific doctrine, philosophy or religion. By focussing on experiences, the definitions allow for multiple interpretations of these experiences and the insights into human nature and the cosmos that they offer. Transpersonal experiences have long been interpreted in many different ways and this will doubtless continue. A transpersonalist could be religious or nonreligious, theist or atheist. A definition of transpersonal disciplines that focuses on experience thus makes room for a range of diverse, but valuable and complementary views.

Finally, these definitions do not place limits on the methods or disciplines for studying or researching transpersonal experiences. Rather, any valid epistemology is welcome. In practice, transpersonal researchers have encouraged a uniquely eclectic, interdisciplinary, integrative approach which makes appropriate use of all the so-called "three eyes of knowledge": the sensory, introspective-

mental, and contemplative (Wilber, 1990). This is in contrast to many other schools that effectively advocate or rely on a single epistemology. For example, behaviorism has centered on sensory data and science; introspective schools such as psychoanalysis have emphasized mental observation, while yogic approaches focus on contemplation. To date, the transpersonal disciplines are unique explicitly in adopting an eclectic epistemology which seeks to include science, philosophy, introspection and contemplation, and to integrate them in a comprehensive investigation.

Whatever understanding of humankind and the cosmos transpersonal disciplines may eventually unveil, to date they stand alone in the scope of their search. They advocate an eclectic integrative quest that includes personal and transpersonal, ancient and modern, East and West, knowledge and wisdom, art and philosophy, science and religion, sensory observation and introspection. Only by such a comprehensive approach can we hope for a vision that reflects the extraordinary richness and possibilities of humankind and the cosmos: a transpersonal vision.

Relationship to Religion

Several transpersonal topics overlap with areas of religious studies. This raises the question of the relationship of transpersonal disciplines to religion. Of course, much depends on definitions. As Ken Wilber (1983, p. 55) points out, "One of the great difficulties in discussing religion . . . is that it is not an 'it.' In my opinion, 'it' has at least a dozen different, major, largely exclusive meanings, and unfortunately these are not always, not even usually, distinguished in the literature."

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One simple stipulative definition of religion is "concerned with, or related to, the sacred." Since some, but not all, transpersonal experiences are experiences of the sacred, and since some, but not all, religious experiences are transpersonal, there is clearly some overlap between transpersonal experiences and religious experiences (Walsh, 1990). However transpersonal disciplines are also interested in transpersonal experiences that are not religious, and in research, interpretations, psychologies and philosophies devoid of religious overtones. Transpersonal disciplines espouse no fixed creed or dogma, demand no particular religious convictions, espouse an open-minded scientific, philosophical and experiential testing of claims, and usually assume that transpersonal experiences can be interpreted either religiously or nonreligiously according to individual preference. Transpersonal disciplines and religion should therefore be regarded as distinct fields with partially overlapping areas of interest and also significant differences. Likewise, although they share some areas of interest, transpersonal

psychology, sociology and anthropology are distinguishable from the psychology, sociology and anthropology of religion.

SUMMARY

We have attempted here to acknowledge the pioneering contributions of those who have sought to define the field of transpersonal psychology while pointing to the dangers of theoretical presuppositions inherent in some of these definitions. We then offered definitions of a variety of transpersonal disciplines which we hope are less theory-laden and more focussed on experience.

Of course, the definitions offered here are not final. They too will doubtless yield in their turn to more refined definitions born of more comprehensive viewpoints.

And yet if we only knew how each loss of one's viewpoint is a progress and how life changes when one passes from the stage of the closed truth to the stage of the open truth—a truth like life itself, too great to be trapped by points of view, because it embraces every point of view . . . a truth great enough to deny itself and pass endlessly into a higher truth (Satprem, 1969, p. 34).

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