

The transpersonal that can be defined is not the true transpersonal: A Taoist perspective on defining transpersonal psychology. (Position Paper)

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Introduction

This brief position paper is stimulated from the continued need to define and redefine the area of transpersonal psychology. Understandably, being able to articulate what 'transpersonal psychology' is enables discussions within the wider academic and public community, yet all existing definitions are complex, conveying a number of inherent meanings in their definition, which in turn, can cloud others' perceptions on the area.

A definitional crisis?

The field of transpersonal psychology is not widely recognised. Daniels (2005, p.11) commented that the term 'is relatively unknown outside certain rather small intellectual circles' while Hartelius, Rothe & Roy (2013, p.3) stated that transpersonal psychology 'has not had the luxury of a readily understood name or area of study, and has struggled to define itself in clear and articulate ways'.

Having collectively been involved with the academic study of transpersonal psychology for a combined total of 45 years, we find the need to expand on any given definition, in turn leaving the enquiring individual questioning whether the area is woolly by the lack of a concise definition. Despite the British Psychological Society's Transpersonal Psychology Section defining the transpersonal as, 'a field of psychology that integrates spiritual and transcendent experience within the framework of modern psychology' (BPS, 2019, online), the Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology provides the following definition, 'Transpersonal psychology is a transformative psychology of the whole person in intimate relationship with an interconnected and evolving world; it pays special attention to self-expansive states as well as to spiritual, mystical, and other exceptional human experiences that gain meaning in such a context' (Hartelius et al. 2013, p.13). Indeed, this latter definition is commendable given the amount of research Hartelius and his colleagues have invested in defining the area.

With both definitions, additional clarification would be required to explain such terms as 'spiritual', 'mystical', 'transcendent experiences' or 'exceptional human experiences', often with a range of examples being provided. For example, Sandage & Jankowski (2010, p.16) commented that 'spirituality is difficult to define', while Fontana (2003, p.11) explained that 'psychologists have made few attempts to define spirituality', that it has many meanings outside the field of religion, both at a physical and psychological level. However, Janowski did provide three dimensions of spirituality consisting of values and beliefs concerning the nature of reality, meaning of life, death and dying; a metaphysical, mystical, or transcendent element; and an experience of connection with others, nature and/or God (Janowski, 2002, pp.69-70). Thus, as we have asserted, while transpersonal psychology has definitions, such definitions need further clarification such as attempting to define spirituality. By analogy, defining the transpersonal is a definitional set of matryoshka or Russian nesting dolls.

Our intention is not to explore all existing definitions of transpersonal psychology in an attempt to synthesise a new definition: such attempts have been conducted to great effect numerous times (e.g. Boucouvalas, 1980; Cunningham, 2007; Daniels, 2005, 2013; Ferrer, 2002; Friedman, 2002; Hartelius, Caplan & Rardin, 2007, 2013; Lajoie, Shapiro & Roberts, 1991; Shapiro, Lee & Gross, 2002; Sutich, 1968; Vaughan, 1979; Walsh, 1993). Indeed, at the simplest level, we could suggest that transpersonal psychology is the 'study of human transformation', yet this invites critique in defining transformation, what it means to be human, and what is meant by study? Does 'study' necessarily relate to the scientific approach as advocated by Daniels (2011, 2013) or Friedman (2005)? As Daniels' warns, there is a danger that transpersonal psychology may be dismissed as a superstition, fad, or cult which can be avoided through 'transpersonal psychology's clear commitment to a broadly scientific approach' (Daniels, 2005, p.13). Is the scientific lens accurately tuned, or is it only useful at measuring what it sets out to measure, the materialistic perspective: that science has been constricted by assumptions which in turn have led to dogmatic

thinking in that science already understands the nature of reality, opposed to a method of enquiry (Sheldrake, 2012)?

Yet, despite the assertion of the scientific approach, Daniels (2005), Ferrer (2002) and Rothberg (2005) discuss the need for the engagement with transpersonal practices to 'inform, ground and enrich the transpersonal psychologist's research' (Daniels, 2005, p.16), with Ferrer noting that through experiencing the transpersonal, the ultimate goal is to 'stabilise spiritual consciousness, live a spiritual life, and transform the world accordingly' (Ferrer, 2002, p.37).

Transformation or transitional opposed to the transpersonal?

Perhaps the term 'transpersonal' should be replaced with the term 'transformation'? As Lancaster noted, 'transformative experience and higher states of knowing are the primary issues of interest' within transpersonal psychology, given that a fundamental focus of transpersonal psychology is an orientation towards personal change (Lancaster, 2004, p.11). Furthermore, he states that 'individuals are seeking to achieve a temporary or permanent change in themselves – a transformation of consciousness, or a state of greater intimacy with the divine' (Lancaster, 2004: 77). Indeed, several authors discuss the concept of transformation as a result of transpersonal experiences (Daniels, 2005; Hartelius et al, 2007; Hartelius et al, 2013). Yet Luskin (2004, p.15) comments 'unfortunately, the vagueness of the definition of transformation emphasises that it is a broad and diffuse multidimensional concept difficult to quantify and resistant to every delineation' although he extends this by adding that transformation can affect either one or more of the mind, body and spirit, and also the relationship between these. Indeed, given that many transformative practices are ineffable, perhaps so to is transpersonal psychology: too great or extreme to be conveyed in words?

While transformation is indicative of a one-directional permanent change (such as a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly, yet the butterfly being unable to return to the previous incarnation), perhaps the word 'transitional' should be used instead. For example, water is a solid, liquid and gas depending on the amount of energy inherent in the state. Water can therefore transition from one state to another in different directions depending on the energy expended. To maintain any state, such as boiling, energy needs to be continued to be applied. If such energy is applied, the water droplets remain as steam: the water has transformed. Yet as soon as this energy source is removed, it transitions back to liquid. By analogy, a person can physically exercise to transform their level of fitness, yet once they stop exercising, the fitness level with atrophy. Consequently, if transpersonal psychology is deemed a transformative practice, continued effort, discipline and practice are required (Leonard and Murphy, 1995). Therefore, while engaged in transitional practices, or the process of changing, the process does not promise a definitive end-point or transformation: it is an enduring commitment to continuing advancing. Indeed, this resonates with engaging in the Tao. The promise of transformation is not inherent, which is why the Tao is perceived as a 'way', or a journey.

Consequently, is it sufficient to just explain our field of psychology merely as 'trans- psychology'? Whether it is transpersonal, transitional, or transformative, our field is concerned with some sense of nourishment of mind, body, or spirit.

A Taoist perspective

Instead our intention is to suggest that all attempts to define the transpersonal are futile. The more complex the definition, the greater the explanation needed for each inherent component that comprise the definition. By this, we draw a parallel with the Taoist classic text, The Tao Te Ching (or Dao De Jing, 道德經), specifically the first verse:

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| A way can be a guide, but not a fixed path; names can be given, but not permanent labels. Nonbeing is called the beginning of heaven and earth; being is called the mother of all things. Always passionless, thereby observe the subtle; | The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao The name that can be named is not the eternal name The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth The named is the mother of myriad things Thus, constantly without desire, one observes its |
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| <p>ever intent, thereby observe the apparent. These two come from the same source but differ in name; both are considered mysteries. The mystery of mysteries. is the gateway of marvels. (Cleary, 2003: 11)</p> | <p>essence Constantly with desire, one observes its manifestations These two emerge together but differ in name The unity is said to be the mystery Mystery of mysteries, the door to all wonders (Lin, 2007: 3)</p> |
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A general interpretation of the two opening lines are that the Tao cannot be understood merely through talking about it or intellectualising the concept: it has to be experienced. As such, the Tao must be felt and experienced in order for it to be understood: that words are unable to define the concept. By this, if the Tao is defined, the definition limits understanding of the Tao to that very definition, however the Tao transcends any imposed limitations. From this, the question arises that if we attempt to define the transpersonal, the mere imposing of any definition limits understanding to the definition, when the transpersonal is more expansive than any provided definition. Are we trying to define the undefinable in establishing a definition for transpersonal psychology? Indeed, Hartelius, Caplan & Rardin (2007, p.135) commented, ‘...artistic expression is best expressed by creating art rather than making explanations. It is in this sense that transpersonal psychology, with its uplifting vision, has had difficulty defining itself’. Consequently, the scope of transpersonal psychology, by its very nature, should continue to be dynamic: expanding, and possibly contacting, as new ideas are imagined and old paradigms fall away. By this, today’s ‘new age’ may be tomorrow’s medicine, or vice-versa. Why should we, as transpersonal psychologists, limit ourselves to current understanding and current frameworks?

Conclusion

Without a definition, a potential argument is that we will lose the field of transpersonal psychology: that other, more clearly defined areas will subsume the areas traditionally aligned to transpersonal psychology. Perhaps this is a natural progression, that in trying to be all-encompassing to different fields and traditions, we have lost sight of the original intention of transpersonal psychology. Perhaps transpersonal psychology should fracture into different areas given its diversity? However, has this happened with the Tao? Although various schools of Taoism exist, the essential Tao remains itself: formless, undefinable, open to interpretation yet such interpretation is infinitesimal in relation to the Tao. From a phenomenological perspective, we have our unique understandings of transpersonal psychology, yet in conveying the term concisely to others, we may continue to struggle. The term ‘transpersonal psychology’ will continue to evolve yet is any one definition ever going to be the ‘authoritative’ definition? Maybe we should just call ourselves ‘transpersonal psychologists’ and let individuals define what it means to them, at a particular point in time and others perceive meaning as to who we are and what we study.

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