

Transpersonal Psychology

Transpersonal psychology is the branch of psychology which integrates psychological concepts, theories, and methods with the subject matter and practices of the spiritual disciplines. Its interests include spiritual and mystical experiences, meditative practices, ritual, shamanism, and the connections between spiritual experiences with disturbed states such as psychosis, mania, and depression. Transpersonal psychologists apply their work in clinical and counseling psychology, spiritual guidance and pastoral counseling, organizational and community development, health care and healing, the transpersonal dimensions of interpersonal relationships, cultural diversity, gender studies, business, ecopsychology, and other areas.

The root of the term transpersonal, or literally "beyond the mask," refers to self-transcendence, the development of the self from a sense of identity which is exclusively individual to one that is deeper, broader, more inclusive, and more unified with the whole. The core concept in transpersonal psychology is nonduality, the recognition that each part or person is fundamentally and ultimately a part of a larger, more comprehensive whole. From this insight come two other central insights: the intrinsic health and basic goodness of the whole and each of its parts, and the validity of self-transcendence.

Transpersonal psychology is phenomenological, inclusive, and optimistic. It values and integrates the personal with the transpersonal, the psychological with the spiritual, exceptional mental health with psychological disturbance, and analytical intellect with contemplative ways of knowing. It finds wisdom in Western psychology and philosophy, Eastern spirituality, postmodern insights, and worldviews of indigenous traditions. Such overlaps between psychology and spirituality have been present in both psychology (e.g., the work of William James, Carl Jung, and Abraham Maslow) and in the spiritual traditions (which have their own rich views of development, cognition, social interactions, emotional and behavioral suffering, and methods of healing). The work of Ken Wilber (Integral Psychology) and Stanislav Grof are at the forefront of transpersonal psychology today. Among its important projects are describing the stages and processes of transpersonal development, researching the psychological effects of meditation, exploring spiritual emergencies (those mystical or spiritual experiences

which also create acute debilitating psychological suffering), and identifying the transpersonal dimensions of nature experiences.

Transpersonal psychology is a field of inquiry which includes theory, research, and practice, offering insights and applications based on research and experience and methods for evaluating and confirming or disconfirming its findings. It is scientific in the broad sense of the phenomenological or "human" sciences. Research in transpersonal psychology uses both qualitative-phenomenological methods and quantitative methods such as experimental designs. In recent years, the [Journal of Transpersonal Psychology](#) has published reviews of research on psychospiritual problems, mystical experiences, meditation, and measures of transpersonal development. Still, most of the work and practice of transpersonal psychology concerns psychotherapy and self-development.

Meditation, contemplative prayer, and similar forms of open-ended phenomenological inquiry are core practices for transpersonal psychology. These practices lead to an expanded awareness, a greater sense of presence, and a greater degree of self-integration or self-transcendence. While such practices have been successfully used for self-regulation, relaxation, and pain control and for self-exploration and psychotherapy, they have traditionally been used for self-transcendence and self-liberation. Despite their many surface forms, meditation and contemplative practices can be a means of disidentifying from our "masks" or personalities and realizing our fundamental nonduality.

Ritual is another core practice for transpersonal psychology. For many individuals and in many cultures and spiritual systems, ritual is the central means of discovering connections with each other, with communities, with the Earth, and with the cosmos. Other practices that are associated with transpersonal psychology include shamanism, lucid dreaming, visualization, chanting, transpersonal uses of music and art, and religious uses of psychedelic drugs.

Transpersonal psychology arose in the 1960's out of work by Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, Anthony Sutich, and others in humanistic psychology. The work of William James on mysticism, Carl Jung on the collective unconscious, and Roberto Assagioli on psychosynthesis anticipated the

development of transpersonal psychology. Interest in the psychological implications of Buddhism, Yoga, shamanism, psychedelic states, and holistic medicine fueled its development. At the present time, transpersonal psychology is gaining acceptance by many psychologists, and a number of professional organizations have been established worldwide. The Association for Transpersonal Psychology has published the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology since 1969. Its influences are found in a number of other psychological and psychiatric journals and books, both scientific and popular. Conferences and training programs sponsored by professional organizations such as the Association for Transpersonal Psychology and the International Transpersonal Association also provide training in transpersonal psychology and contribute to developments in the field.

Most transpersonal psychologists are involved in counseling and psychotherapy. Transpersonal psychotherapists may deal with spiritual crises or other explicitly transpersonal content, or they may bring a transpersonal context and processes to a broader range of psychological issues such as addictions, emotional distress, relationships, and life transitions. Art therapists, music therapists, dance therapists, and body-centered psychotherapists often use transpersonal principles in their work as well.

Transpersonal studies are arising in a number of fields, including medicine, education, anthropology, and organizational development. There are also strong connections between transpersonal psychology, ecopsychology, and deep ecology. Many people find transpersonal experiences in contact with

nature, and many nature-based personal growth practices such as wilderness retreats, rites of passage, and other earth-centered rituals have transpersonal dimensions. Similarly, some environmental activists bring a transpersonal perspective into their work. Deep ecologists such as Arne Naess, Warwick Fox, and John Seed and ecopsychologists such as Theodore Roszak and Ralph Metzner have promoted a kind of self-transcendence or transpersonal identity as a basis for environmental action. They argue that when one's identity expands or deepens beyond the individual self to include the Earth (i.e., a kind of self-transcendence), environmental action is more likely to be based on love, joy, and caring than on fear, shame, or sacrifice and that such a transpersonal attitude leads to action which is more effective and more sustainable.

Transpersonal psychology proponents believe that the practices they are developing benefit both psychology and the spiritual disciplines. Psychology can expand toward a fuller and richer accounting of the full range of human experience and potential and incorporate practices that develop this potential. The spiritual disciplines can incorporate insights and skills related to human development and healing to deal more skillfully with the psychological issues that arise with spiritual development. They can more effectively use these issues as gateways, rather than obstacles, to self-realization and authentic service.

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