

CORE CONCEPTS IN TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Introduction

A lot of my teaching and some of my writing for the past 25 years has focused on introducing and surveying transpersonal psychology. I have collected definitions of transpersonal psychology from various sources and worked to refine my own. However, I have noticed that certain concepts, phenomena, or research have been more useful in “getting” this field. Rarely do the formal definitions make the lights go on for students about what transpersonal psychology stands for. Rather, in our discussions, there will usually be one concept or phenomenon which does it.

I saw the clearest example of this in a colleague. For a number of years, she had invited me into her History of Psychology course for a lecture on transpersonal psychology. She was not a transpersonalist, but she was open enough to feel the students needed some exposure to this field. And she was a doodler. For a few semesters, I watched her sit in the back of the room and doodle while I defined transpersonal psychology and gave its history. Then one semester I decided to emphasize peak experiences in my presentation. When I got to a personal example of a nature-based peak experience, she stopped doodling and sat up. I saw the light go on for her. We shared a profound love for the canyon country, and this was her bridge. For Janis, it was a combination of ecopsychology and peak experiences which triggered a shift in her felt sense of transpersonal psychology.

I have been reflecting on the concepts which have been most useful to me and to my students in understanding, defining, and communicating about this field. Here is my list to stimulate discussion. I would appreciate seeing your additions and clarifications. (By the way, I apologize for not having references here. Let me know, and I can help track them down.)

CORE CONCEPTS

1. INTERSECTION OF PSYCHOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY (or THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES)

This is the simplest definition I have come across, and this is where I begin defining transpersonal psychology. Not only does it show its relationship to both fields, it also helps make the point that transpersonal psychology has

contributions for both psychology and spirituality. For example, transpersonal psychology brings to psychology an appreciation for spirituality and mystical states of consciousness, and it brings to spiritual work an appreciation for the psychological obstacles to self-realization and ego-transcendence.

2. CONTEXT, CONTENT, AND PROCESS (Vaughan, F. (1982). The transpersonal perspective: A personal overview, *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 14 (1), 37-45.).

Context: the philosophical assumptions of a field, its orientation, attitude, and approach; guides research and practice. Characteristics of a transpersonal context include self-transcendence, nonduality, optimal mental health, and the intrinsic health and wisdom of each person and each part of the whole.

Content: the material dealt with by a field, its topics of research, theory, and practice. Examples are transpersonal, mystical, shamanic and similar states, self-transcendent consciousness, the difficulties that arise in the spiritual journey such as spiritual emergency, the relationship between transpersonal states and psychopathology, transpersonal ecopsychology, and so on.

Process: the various practices used by a field. Transpersonal processes include practices drawn from spiritual traditions which might be useful to psychologists (such as meditation) and psychological methods which might be useful to those on spiritual paths (such as dealing with anxiety or self-pathology).

Using these concepts, there are two ways to define transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal psychology can be defined as a field or area of study, i.e., the overlap of spirituality and psychology. By this definition, transpersonal psychology holds no particular view or context, and it is defined by its CONTENT and PROCESSES. This definition is the same as definitions of other areas of psychology, such as developmental psychology, personality theory, or clinical psychology. Transpersonal psychology has a focus but there can be different theoretical approaches within that focus, e.g., behavioral, psychodynamic, or cognitive.

Transpersonal psychology can also be defined by its CONTEXT as a metatheory or paradigm (comparable to behaviorism or cognitive psychology). This definition focuses on its particular views, principles, and beliefs.

I do not think transpersonal psychology has differentiated itself well as a field based on content and process and as a metatheory based on its context. This has created some confusion in definition.

3. SELF-TRANSCENDENCE AND DISIDENTIFICATION (Abraham Maslow and many others)

Maslow suggested self-transcendence as the highest need in his Hierarchy of Needs and suggested that it appears in some self-actualizers as a need to find communion and connection to the cosmos. This relates to his Theory Z. Theory X refers to people motivated by fear, image, and other deficiency-motivations. Theory Y refers to people motivated by a chance to grow and develop, i.e., to self-actualize. Maslow suggested a further expansion, or Theory Z, to refer to those motivated by peak experiences and other experiences of connection to the whole and self-transcendence.

Miles Vich (founding editor of JTP) said, "Self-transcendence is the central defining characteristic of transpersonal psychology." Self-transcendence: a sense of self which is not based on (or identified with) the individual as a separate entity, disconnected from other parts of the whole. Knowing the self as part of a larger whole, going beyond identification with personal history, body, self-images, and object relations to a deeper identification which is more integrated and includes spiritual dimensions. .

Disidentification: loss or disintegration of the ordinary sense of self. A necessary step toward the transpersonal, but is not transpersonal in and of itself. One kind of disidentification is letting go of the sense of a separate self. Self-transcendence is movement toward nonduality.

Many would also say that self-transcendence must include embodiment, groundedness, autonomy, personalness, and self-knowledge (i.e., an expanded, more realized sense of self identity), too.

I think it is especially helpful to distinguish self-actualization and self-transcendence, as Maslow did. Self-actualization: fulfilling one's individual potential and living in an existentially authentic way. Self-transcendence: finding oneself at home in, and part of, the cosmos, beyond individual needs and identity. (Note: I still get excited by this concept. I feel Maslow laid out an agenda for transpersonal psychology that the field is still pursuing.)

4. TRANSPERSONAL ECOLOGY AND TRANSPERSONAL ECOPSYCHOLOGY (Warwick Fox *Transpersonal Ecology*; Davis *Intl J of Transpersonal Studies*)

Well, OK, these terms aren't widely used, but they should be! They refer to the intersection of nature, spirit, and psyche. There are several examples or analogies from this area that apply to transpersonal psychology and which seem to help people "get it." It is a way to talk about connections that transcend individuals and about nonduality. Individual organisms exist in, and are part of,

an ecosystem. One can focus on individual organisms (CF, the personal) or on the larger, integrated ecosystem (CF, the transpersonal). Many people know the concept of Gaia, that the Earth functions as a single organism, and can relate to transcendence this way, too.

5. VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE (William James)

William James took a particularly psychological approach to the study of religious experience and mysticism. He examined a variety of such experiences and identified their common characteristics, regardless of the theory or dogma around them. This approach reflects some of the essence of transpersonal psychology.

6. SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION; FIRST-HAND and SECOND-HAND RELIGION (William James)

First-hand religion is based on direct experience of the sacred, also called mystical experience. Second-hand religion is based on another's experience, authority, or dogma. This distinction is often framed as the difference between spirituality (first-hand) and religion. (second-hand). Transpersonal psychology is interested primarily in first-hand religion.

7. COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS and ARCHETYPES (Carl Jung)

It could be argued that this is the main transpersonal concept. Jung extended Freud's topographical model of consciousness (Conscious, Preconscious, Unconscious) by distinguishing between a personal and a collective (or transpersonal) unconscious. All of humanity, and perhaps sentient beings beyond the human, share the collective unconscious. One of Jung's original references called it the *Überpersonliche* (literally, overpersonal or transpersonal) unconscious.

Archetypes are primordial patterns in, and expressions of, the collective (transpersonal) unconscious. They are tendencies to perceive the world in certain ways which are shared by all human consciousness, similar to original patterns, prototypes, or Platonic forms. Examples include the persona (the mask we present to the world), the shadow (repressed elements of the self), anima and animus (feminine and masculine archetypes), the hero, God, the Devil, earth mother, sage, fool, divine child, and many others. Archetypes manifest personally in dreams and culturally in symbols and myths, fairy tales, rites, and art. A central archetype is the self, symbolized by the mandala, which unifies opposites and reaches its full development in what Jung called "individuation." While the archetypes themselves are generally beyond consciousness, Jung also said that mystical experience is the direct experience of archetypes.

8. PEAK EXPERIENCE (Abraham Maslow)

Maslow was looking for a way to do good psychological research on mystical and other extremely positive experiences as part of his studies of psychological health. He settled on the term "peak experience" because it was more neutral and did not trigger the rejection of his peers as the term "mystical" did. His definition: "The most wonderful experience or experiences of your life, happiest moments, ecstatic moments, moments of rapture" (Maslow, 1962). Maslow hypothesized that virtually everyone has had a peak experience, though some have them more often and more deeply than others, and some careful research bears this out. Research also connects peak experiences with other expressions of mental health and pro-social values and behaviors. This concept is related to a broad range of transpersonal experiences and states.

9. PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY, HIERARCHY OF NEEDS, AND DEVELOPMENTAL SPECTRUM, (Abraham Maslow, Ken Wilber)

There are many variations on this theme and some important critiques of a simplistic or rigid view of it, but I still think it is extremely useful in clarifying misconceptions about transpersonal psychology.

Reality is ordered (e.g., matter, mind, soul, spirit) and identity and consciousness develop in a orderly fashion. This ordering has been seen as a hierarchy (linear with higher levels either incorporating or replacing lower levels) or as a nested hierarchy or holoarchy (with more expanded levels incorporating and extending more narrow levels...think of nested boxes or circles).

Maslow's needs hierarchy reflects this as does Wilber's developmental spectrum. Wilber: Three broad stages of identity: prepersonal, personal, transpersonal. Here, transpersonal refers to an organization of identity and self-reflective understanding. It is not the same as spirit. An infant is spirit, as is a meditation master. However, a meditation master knows her/himself in a transpersonal way, and an infant only "knows" him/herself in a prepersonal way. This is similar to many other developmental models, as Wilber has shown.

I will also point out that while the Perennial Philosophy was prominent in the early days of transpersonal psychology, important questions have arisen about its truth, and it is less in favor now, in my opinion.

10. PRE-TRANS FALLACY (Ken Wilber), REDUCTIONISM AND ELEVATIONISM (Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan).

These concepts stem from Wilber's developmental spectrum model. Failing to distinguish prepersonal states from transpersonal states leads to a fallacy. Neither is characterized by a coherent, integrated, and consistent sense of self, but they are very different. In prepersonal states, a healthy personality has not yet developed; in transpersonal states, it has been transcended. Engler's aphorism, "you have to be somebody before you can be nobody" refers to this distinction, too. Note that this concept presumes some kind of hierarchical or holoarchival organization of reality.

Walsh and Vaughan put different words to it, but the idea is the same. Reductionism reduces all non-personal experience to prepersonal levels; elevationism elevates all non-personal experience to the transpersonal. So, a Freudian who says all meditative experience is regressive and pathological is an example of reductionism. A "new-age" transpersonalist who says all psychotic experience is really mystical awakening is an example of elevationism.

11. EXTRAPERSONAL AND TRANSPERSONAL (Elyce and Elmer Green, JTP).

Transpersonal refers to states of a higher order of integration and development toward unity or nonduality. Extraperpersonal refers to states outside normal consciousness which are not necessarily more integrated. Various kinds of anomalous states, such as experiencing ghosts and shamanic states, might be extraperpersonal but not transpersonal.

This is very close to Ken Wilber's distinction between "translation" and "transformation." The former extends in a horizontal way without fundamentally changing identity (or the level of identity), while the latter is a vertical, so to speak, shift in the fundamental nature of one's identity.

12. SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY (Stan Grof), POSITIVE DISINTEGRATION (Dembrowski), MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE WITH PSYCHOTIC FEATURES (David Lukoff et al.), NADIR EXPERIENCE (Abraham Maslow), a similar concept was introduced by Roberto Assagioli. (See a new book by Fransje DeWaard, *Spiritual Crises*)

I have found the concept of spiritual emergency to be one of the most useful examples of a concrete contribution of transpersonal psychology, especially when introducing transpersonal psychology to people who are new to it or skeptical about it.

Sometimes, a spiritual awakening, very strong peak experience, or mystical experience can be so disturbing that one is not able to function for a time. The "spiritual emergence" becomes a "spiritual emergency" or a "positive disintegration." This experience shares many characteristics with brief psychotic

reactions and other forms of psychopathology and is easily misinterpreted. Thus, it can also be called a “mystical experience with psychotic features.” However, handled well, a spiritual emergency has the potential for an extremely positive resolution.

Maslow referred to a similar idea in a footnote to a discussion about peak experiences. He pointed out that sometimes an extremely negative (or “nadir”) experience can have an extremely positive outcome.