

Whose Psychology Is This Anyway?

By: Tad Spencer

Where are we when we go beyond the personal? It is a place where we deepen our understanding of the many cultures, belief systems and points of view in the modern world. It is a place where we realize the interconnectedness of Life. It is a place where we look closely at our selves—from our psyche to our highest numinous, spiritual potential. Transpersonal psychology is this philosophical and practical realm. It, in short, incorporates the science of Western psychological theories and the wisdom of various cultures and spiritual traditions.

Several main arteries pump life through transpersonal psychology. The first is the presupposition of a vital spiritual element within every human being. To help access this element, transpersonal psychology turns to meditation as an important aid for self-discovery, ego-transcendence, and connection with the world. Rather than looking at the human psyche through a single lens of psychoanalysis, humanistic or cognitive psychology, transpersonal psychology utilizes many methods from these theories and weaves them together with a thread of contemplative practice.

Another artery of transpersonal psychology is the concept of non-dualism. Non-dualism is a shift away from black and white, “I” vs. “other” thinking. We all are an inseparable part of something greater—a cell in the body of the Universe. The imagined barrier between self and exterior eventually melts away in a healthy integration.

Finally, transpersonal psychology is rooted in wellness—focusing on health rather than pathology. In many therapy methodologies, the goal is simply to rid the individual of diagnosable illness. The client is often (explicitly or implicitly) encouraged to fortify the ego—a kind of psychological immune system. In Freudian terms, this is called “ego strength”—a desirable outcome. Transpersonal thought challenges this foundation, asking the important question, “How is it possible to understand psychological wellness only by studying pathology?” In this, there is hope and optimism for humanity—eyeing transcendence beyond the cramped confines of ego and perceived illness/neurosis.

Transpersonal psychology can provide a unique insight into one of the most popular psychological treatment fields today—addiction. Addiction is derived from a Roman slavery term meaning, “turning oneself over to a master.” This is an important starting point, since addiction seems to mean that one hands over control of his/her own life to something external—a kind of perverse blind faith. This implies a desire for alleviation of pain, if not something greater like ego-transcendence.

There are many different approaches to addiction treatment (particularly substance abuse): from pharmacological and detoxification treatments, to group therapy, to intensive individual counseling. Each of these methods has merit, and often when employed together, they produce positive results. If we look at the example of alcoholism, we can see many possible inroads for transpersonal psychology. The Latin root of alcohol is “spiritus,” or spirit. In a letter to the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Carl Jung said, “(the alcoholic’s) craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness; expressed in medieval language: the union with God...you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: spiritus contra spiritum (spirit against spirit)” (Seeburger, 1996). Jung, one of the earliest “transpersonal psychologists,” saw the connection between substance craving and spiritual growth craving. This is a key connection that most traditional psychological treatment programs miss or ignore. These programs tend to look at addiction strictly from a behavioral definition. Transpersonal psychology can widen the scope, looking at a person’s deeper, perhaps spiritual longings, as well as find ways to appreciate the individual’s story and promote long-term growth, not simply the change of behaviors or removal of symptoms.

Another pioneer in the transpersonal psychology field, William James, helped lay the foundational stones for Alcoholics Anonymous. In his book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James calls the alternative at “the crisis point” (a point where the person “hits rock bottom”) a “conversion” experience. Alcoholics Anonymous turned this into their infamous phrase, “Let go and let God.” This is not necessarily a religious element, but James notes that there is a spiritual-based alternative to the resignation of addiction. In our modern terminology, this seems to imply a spiritual emergency at the point where one is too terrified by “reality,” that s/he must build a defense shield through a substance or compulsive behavior. In Buddha dharma, this could be viewed as reinforcement of the “cocoon”—a complicated barrier constructed through the ego that is comprised of habitual patterns, psychological self-defense

mechanisms, and fear (Hayward, 1998). Using this metaphor, it is safe to say that addicts wish to fortify the walls of the cocoon, and they do so with each occurrence of use or addictive behavior. As those who practice shamatha meditation describe, the only way to move toward enlightenment and transcend the traps of the ego (true, profound spiritual growth) is to break through the walls of the cocoon. The method for doing so is meditation. Not surprisingly, there is new evidence that meditation is effective in substance abuse education, prevention, and treatment. “Meditation-based interventions were associated with a lesser incidence of alcohol or drug problems” (Stimmel, 2002).

Some addiction treatment plans utilize the wealth of benefits in meditative practice; however, I would argue that most do not use it in a way to promote ego-transcendence or deeper spiritual growth. Most treatment programs do not have the knowledge or training to deal with the potential spiritual emergencies that seem to lie at the heart of addiction. Transpersonal psychologists do. This can be the field’s unique contribution: a more holistic interpretation of addiction, and a growth-prompting treatment plan.

As a field, transpersonal psychology has grown tremendously over the past century—from being just an inquiry into mystical experience (William James), to working directly with altered states of consciousness in a laboratory setting (Stanislov Grof). Both practitioners and academicians have worked hard to bring legitimacy and recognition to the transpersonal psychology field. This is no small task, primarily because the field is so frustratingly difficult to define. It brings together elements of psychology (which is broad enough on its own—psychology can be applied to almost anything in life) and spirituality (a nebulous term). When we try to meld those two, difficulties with understanding and width of scope are inevitable.

Where does that leave the field right now, in 2002? There are flashes of evidence out in the world that the themes of transpersonal psychology are slowly gaining acceptance. If nothing else, there appears to be a strong interest in spirituality. (For anecdotal evidence of this, look to the recent creation of a national Center for Spirituality in England, as well as the growing number of spirituality-themed books in the mainstream.) Interest in spirit is a reasonable place to start. When a person is worried about a spiritual issue in his/her life and feels afraid of going to a traditional psychologist for fear of being stigmatized, there is a good chance that the person would prefer to go to a transpersonal psychologist. For a nation that is

driven by economics, this bit of “reverse-channel marketing” (where consumers create the demand for greater product distribution and/or changes) might help convince the psychology elite that this is an important field to investigate more in depth.

But transpersonal psychology can begin to make important contribution beyond these shores, as well. For example, many indigenous cultures throughout the world may only receive minimal benefit from Western psychologists attempting to provide help. It may become a matter of trying to fit these people into “our system of diagnosis.” Can an aboriginal issue fit within the context of the DSM-IV? (Perhaps, but keep in mind that the APA did not add a classification for religious and/or spiritual concerns until the ripe old year of 1994.) Transpersonal psychology hopes to move beyond that, to listen to the person’s experience in a more open, appreciative and maieutic style. This makes transpersonal psychology adaptable and malleable to the needs of diverse populations. There are tremendous possibilities for providing service to the entire world, not just Western cultures that seem to have been taught to work within, and in support of, the ego.

I strongly believe that transpersonal psychology is the direction in which most of psychology must go. As our world becomes more diverse, as we witness the rapid destruction of the Earth as home, and as interest in spiritual matters continues its growth and prominence, psychology will need to find ways to address all these areas: diversity, human-Earth relationship, and spiritual/consciousness development.

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