Can Research Be Transpersonal?
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Abstract

Individually, conventional and narrow forms of research cannot adequately address transpersonal topics or experiences. Blending several methods together—each for a specific purpose—increases the match between research and the transpersonal. However, the most faithful matches occur only when research methods and approaches can be expanded, extended, enriched, and enlivened, in terms of the very transpersonal qualities that they are used to explore. This paper presents several areas in which research can be expanded, so that it might become more inclusive and better able to honor and appreciate the richness, breadth, depth, and subtlety of the exceptional experiences that are of interest to transpersonal psychology.

Article

During the past decade, the research methods and approaches available to psychologists have greatly increased and expanded. Once limited to quantitative—and more particularly, to experimental, quasi-experimental, and correlational—designs, one's research toolbox now includes a variety of qualitative methods, as well. These qualitative methods often have been borrowed from other disciplines—from anthropology, sociology, education, and even from philosophy (indirectly, in terms of phenomenological approaches) and theology (in the form of hermeneutics). We now can augment our psychological studies with field studies, grounded theory, textual analysis, discourse analysis, and with additional methods from naturalistic, feminist, narrative, and heuristic research approaches.

Even with this greater range of methods, "research" still seems not to fit very well with the experiences and topics of interest in transpersonal psychology or transpersonal studies, more generally. If research continues to be conceived and practiced in the usual, conventional, narrow ways, a tension or ill-fitting between research and the transpersonal does, indeed, appear to exist. However, if the assumptions, methods, and praxis of research can be expanded, extended, enriched, and enlivened, so that they better address the deep, expansive, subtle, and profound experiences that characterize the transpersonal, these tensions and ill-fittings can melt away.

So that they might more appropriately address transpersonal topics, research methods can be expanded in the two ways suggested by the prefix *trans* in *trans*personal. One meaning of *trans*—as *through*—emphasizes the interconnections or tying together of what presently comprises us and our world. Another meaning of *trans*—as

beyond—reminds us of the *something else*, the *more* of ourselves and of the world that we have not yet fully glimpsed, actualized, or understood. This meaning of *trans* suggests other forms of knowing, being, and doing beyond those conventionally recognized—beyond what is available to us if remain wedded solely to an ego-centric view of our nature and possibilities.

In this brief article, I suggest ways in which our present research methods can be expanded, and new methods created, so that their range can extend further in both of these directions (*through* and *beyond*) and render them more suitable for transpersonal studies. The key to these suggested expansions is *inclusivity*—a multiplicity of methods can encompass a greater breadth and depth of a topic, and each particular method also can be extended so that it can reflect more facets of a topic or experience than had been possible previously.

About research in general

Before describing ways in which research can be expanded, it may be useful to consider the essential nature of research, itself, as a particular approach to knowing. The roots of the word *research* suggest a searching again, anew, back; and a going about again; or circling around again. The word *respect* suggests something similar—the idea of looking again, carefully, paying special attention, honoring, and doing all of this without preconceived bias or prejudice. Still another related word, *revision*, makes similar suggestions. In defining revisionism, American literary critic, Harold Bloom, writes: "[Revisionism] is a re-aiming or a looking-over-again, leading to a re-esteeming or a re-estimating. The revisionist strives to *see* again, so as to *esteem* or *estimate* differently, so as then to *aim* 'correctively' " (Bloom, 1975, p. 4). In re-visioning, re-specting, and re-searching, we look at something again and again, from differing perspectives, to encompass it more fully within our gaze, to learn more fully about its nature, and to be more open to the particular truths we may glean from it. We do this with an aim of profiting from the re-looking or fully looking. If we approach an object of our attention, or another person, or even ourselves, in this manner—with minimal pre-expectation, filtering, denial, or preference—we may be rewarded by auspicious surprises that can contribute to our ever-increasing store of knowledge and, hopefully, of wisdom.

This idea of re-looking, circling around a topic—especially an important topic—of inquiry again and again, hoping to understand it from a variety of perspectives, reminds me of a quote of Carl Jung, in the context of personal growth and development: "There is no linear evolution; there is only circumambulation of the self" (Jung, 1965, p. 196). Research may share commonalities with individuation.

I see similar processes in research, in practical work (e.g., clinical, counseling, spiritual guidance), in everyday life, and in pursuing one's own spiritual path—being mindful, making careful observations, exercising discernment, noting patterns, attempting to identify the possible sources of things, attempting to do these things without too much attachment, bias, or prejudice—and doing this so that we and others may benefit from what is learned. All of this is engaging in disciplined inquiry. In *research*, we go about

this more carefully and more formally. The African-American folklorist and writer, Zora Neale Hurston, has put this nicely: "Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose" (Hurston, 1942/1996, p. 143).

With this as preface, we now can explore three major areas in which disciplined inquiry can be expanded and can become more transpersonally relevant.

Goals (who is involved and how? who benefits and how?)

Typically, the goal of research is considered to be the acquisition of new knowledge or information which benefits, primarily, the field of inquiry. In transpersonal research, this goal of information continues to be present, but it is supplemented by additional goals of assimilation, integration, and transformation. It is too much to expect a narrowly or artificially addressed topic or assessment to involve oneself, one's research participants, or one's audience—unless the latter is quite specialized—in a personally meaningful way. This, of course, accounts for the frequent dim views of laboratory research, experimentation, or exact but, too often, insufficiently-relevant operational definitions and assessment inventories. Judiciously selecting a topic that is very meaningful to one's likely participants—and this usually involves choosing a topic of great relevance, heart, and meaning to the investigator, as well—can allow the participants to re-visit, examine, assimilate, and integrate important areas, concerns, or issues of their lives. A "research" session, in other words, may become an opportunity for practical application—a clinical or educative opportunity. This is especially likely to happen if *qualitative* research methods are used, because these allow for greater self-searching, self-expression, and self-work on the part of the research participants. Researchers such as Pennebaker (1995) and Wickramasekera (1989) have documented the health and well-being benefits, to research participants, of disclosing and assimilating meaningful experiences—especially experiences that had previously been kept to themselves and not shared with others (as is often the case with profound transpersonal experiences). As the investigator works, qualitatively, with these same important issues and topics, she or he may learn something new or resonate to something familiar, which, in turn, can provide occasions for self-transformation. If the research findings are presented to audiences in a sufficiently rich and particularized manner, the audience, too, may experience transformation. Thus, the typical boundaries among research, practical (especially, clinical) applications, and psychospiritual growth and development melt away during rich qualitative studies of meaningful topics; these three goals can be interconnected and satisfied simultaneously.

Choosing a personally meaningful and important topic—which is virtually guaranteed, if one is addressing transpersonal issues—helps assure that one's findings will have applicability to others (will generalize well) and will be of use to others (will have pragmatic validity). Addressing large and significant issues assures that these apply to many persons; this can make studies with relatively small sample sizes efficient and profitable for all concerned.

Purposes and methods

Research projects may be expanded in terms of the sorts of research questions that are asked and the methods that most suitably serve each of these types of questions. The types of questions that usually interest us in research may be described conveniently in four categories: outcomes, processes, conceptualizations, and experiences. Exploring more of these categories can enhance the breadth and depth of one's investigation and honor more fully the expansive aspects of a transpersonal topic.

Outcome-related questions focus on causal aspects and are especially helpful in evaluating the effectiveness of interventions or programs. Experimental, quasi-experimental, single-subject, and action research designs are fitting matches for these kinds of questions, which explore the unique fruits or outcomes of particular practices or experiences. These may readily be designed so as to address transpersonal topics. For example, a doctoral student at our Institute recently used a quasi-experimental approach to study the impacts of an intensive period of work with mandalas upon the self-schema of pre-adolescents (Stein, 1996). In an era in which major professional organizations (e.g., the American Psychological Association) are demanding that practitioners use only clinical interventions that have been "empirically validated," it would be helpful to use well-accepted experimental designs to provide the kinds of verification that are well understood and expected by such organizations. Transpersonal experiences and practices (e.g., forms of meditation, contemplation, or prayer; forms of intention-setting; experiencing of non-ordinary states of consciousness) can be assessed, as potentially effective interventions, using these familiar methods. We need not exclude or abandon older and more limited methods, but can continue to use them in the particular contexts for which they are most suitable. Using more conventional methods to address our topics allows us to communicate well with our colleagues in, especially, the psychological and wellness areas, using a language that they understand and value.

Process-related questions explore how an experience or process may develop through time, the nature of the atmosphere that surrounds an experience or process, what sets the stage for a particular experience, and which factors favor or impede an experience. Case studies—in which participants can retrospect about complex and subtle experiences and the dynamic interactions of experiences with other aspects of their lives—and correlational methods are especially suitable for studying process in transpersonal contexts. Again, at our Institute, dissertations have used case studies to address the physiological, psychological, and spiritual changes and challenges experienced as one progressively changes one's diet from a more typical meat-and-dairy product diet to a vegetarian to a vegan to a primarily living food (mainly sprouted and uncooked plant sources) (Amlani, 1998) and ways in which exceptional human experiences (notably mystical and unitive) occurring in nature (and, especially, at early ages) influenced people's lives and their attitudes and actions on behalf of protecting the natural environment (Dowdall, 1998). The latter study also was balanced by the use of correlational analyses. Correlational analyses (in this case, factor analyses) were used in a recent dissertation (Upton, 1998) exploring whether factors similar to the "big five" that are currently popular in personality theory (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion,

agreeableness, and negative affectivity) could be found in the transpersonal domain, and whether any newly identified transpersonal factors were strongly or weakly associated with the "big five" personality factors. Indeed, five transpersonal factors were identified (God-centered spirituality, permeable states of consciousness, tolerance of ambiguity, self-expansiveness, and inner peace), and many of these correlated strongly with the openness factor of the "big five."

Conceptualization-related questions help us understand our topics theoretically and historically. We look "above" or "beneath" descriptive findings, in search of hidden underlying factors that might account for these findings or to learn whether these findings might be manifestations of some more general principles or processes. Here, theoretical, historical, archival, and hermeneutical methods are applicable. In the transpersonal area, the theoretical excursions of Ken Wilber and Michael Washburn (see Rothberg & Kelly, 1998)—as they present their models of psychospiritual development—are familiar examples of this approach. Other examples include Jenny Wade's (1996) recent extensions of developmental and consciousness models to include prenatal, perinatal, and near-death findings and possible stages, and Hillevi Ruumet's (1997) recent helical model of psychospiritual growth and development.

Experience-related questions are, perhaps, the most relevant questions for transpersonal investigators. Here, we ask about transpersonal experiences themselves, seeking to provide rich, "thick," and deep descriptions, at as many levels as possible. The aim is to map the variety of transpersonal experiences. Such maps may eventually help us understand the territories of the transpersonal realm. Further, experiential maps of particular types of experience may help those who have parts of such experiences gain a better idea of how the rest of the experience may unfold, serving a useful preparatory, fear-alleviating, educational function. Qualitative methods using in-depth interviews, narratives and stories, and methods derived from feminist, phenomenological, heuristic, intuitive, and organic approaches (see Braud & Anderson, 1998) are relevant here. In a recent dissertation project at our Institute, Genie Palmer (1998) used a qualitative, descriptive approach (among many others) to explore persons' experiences of exceptional human experiences (EHEs) and how these experiences played roles in the experiencers' spiritual development and transformation. The types of EHEs investigated included mystical and unitive, psychic, unusual encounter, unusual death-related, and exceptional normal experiences (see White, 1998), and the participants worked with these experiences by disclosing them in the form of EHE autobiographies, working either alone or in group settings. An aim of this work was to develop workable models for future use in counseling persons with EHEs.

The selection and possible blending of research methods are determined by the nature of the research questions—which of the four types of questions is of greatest interest to the investigator. The methods include a mix of quantitative and qualitative tools, involve old and new principles, and are able to satisfy both nomothetic (universalistic) and idiographic (particularistic) aims.

Use of multiple, alternative modes of knowing and new ways of working with data and expressing findings

Before beginning an investigation, the transpersonal researcher seeks information about what already is known about the topic in a greater variety of sources. In addition to reviewing prior findings in a narrow disciplinary domain (of, for example, psychology), the investigator also explore other literatures for knowledge, understanding, and inspiration. Literature searches and reviews may range into the behavioral sciences, the social sciences, the human sciences, the humanities, the arts, and—perhaps most usefully—the various spiritual, wisdom, and indigenous traditions that are rich in transpersonal content. Additionally, the transpersonal researcher does not confine herself or himself to only the most recent offering in any area. Rather than review only what has recently been published—within a typical temporal window of 5 years or so—older and classical writings can be consulted, with rich rewards. Wisdom has no expiration date, and older findings—if they were gathered carefully in the first place—do not suddenly cease to be true or relevant after a short, or even long, passage of time.

In original research projects, the transpersonal researcher gathers information from research participants and also from his or her own experiences. In doing this, one honors the *beyond* meaning of *trans* by exploring new ways of knowing, being, and doing. A guiding analogy might be that, in conventional research, one looks at the world (acquires data) using one eye (the eye of the conventional senses and the collection of words from one's participants), works with those data using one brain ("left-hemispheric," analytical, linear, logical, word-based thought), and expresses those findings using one mouth (word-rich, linear prose). These strategies provide access to only a limited slice of the spectrum of available possibilities. The transpersonal researcher attempts to broaden each of these aspects—attempting to see with multiple eyes, process data in multiple ways (using many brains), and express findings in multiple ways (using many mouths).

In using *many eyes*, all forms of knowing are invited and welcome. Here, we are re-advocating what William James (1912/1976) called "radical empiricism"—including only what is based in experience, but including everything that is based in experience. In one's research projects, one attempts to access as many levels of knowing as possible—both in one's participants and in oneself. These sources include: conventional sensory information about the outer world, proprioceptive and kinesthetic information about one's inner world, thoughts, images, feelings, bodily knowings, tacit knowings, intuitions, direct knowing—including paranormal modes and a mode of knowing through being or becoming the object of one's inquiry, as in the profound absorption of attention and intention in an object of knowing as described in the *samyama* processes of the yoga sutras of Patanjali (see Taimni, 1975)—meditation, deep contemplation, entering silence and emptiness, entering various altered states of consciousness and partaking of the different varieties of non-ordinary knowing available therein, accessing one's dreams, using all faculties of the imagination—here, useful hints are available from artists and poets, particularly the Romantic poets—and attending to the "accidents" and

synchronicities in one's environment as one goes about one's studies (i.e., learning what the universe at large has to day about one's work).

In using *many brains*, one treats one's data in conventional, analytical, rational, word-based ways, but also in transrational, emotional, intuitive, and bodily ways—exploring one's data and topic in various states of consciousness, using imagery, noting mythic/archetypal content that the data might provoke in one's own experiences (e.g., Amlani, 1998), engaging in the very activities that are being studied while processing the data, engaging in rituals to focus attention—if this fits with one's style—and, again, exercising all of the faculties of one's imagination. One may work with the same collected data many times, at different levels, emphasizing, in turn, the different processing modes just mentioned. In a study of "being-movement," for example, Jan Fisher (1998), as researcher, engaged in such movement herself on numerous occasions during the conduct of her research project—before, during, and after the data-collection and analysis phases for each of her participants—in order to understand the process she was studying from the inside and in an embodied way, to honor its nonverbal and prereflective nature, and to be on an equal footing with her co-researchers.

In using *many mouths*, one expresses one's findings not only in themes and linear prose, but also in alternative forms, using narratives, poetry, metaphor, symbols, artwork, perhaps even fiction. Expressing one's findings in as many modalities as possible—especially those rich in particular concrete, personal, and bodily examples or illustrations, and expressed in the unique voices of different experiencers—increases the likelihood that the audience of one's research report will be able to connect with, appreciate, and resonate with the portrayed experiences. Today, even reader-interactive or audience-interactive modes can be used in presenting one's findings (e.g., using audio-visual attachments or even interactive CD-ROMS whereby readers can share in the experiences of the research participants). In a recent dissertation at our Institute, Wendy Rogers (1998) explored women's experiences of loss of fertility during the child-bearing years using the heuristic research approach developed by Clark Moustakas (1990). Her report included a reader-interactive creative synthesis in which the reader was invited to appreciate the experiences of her participants more fully by handling stones (suggesting the weighty nature of the experiences) upon which experiential qualities had been painted, and placing and moving these along a traditional Celtic knotwork pattern on a fabric (the spiral nature of the pattern suggesting a winding course with no beginning or end). Another dissertation worker (Fagen, 1998) presented—without interpretation—the images that the incubated dreams of her participants had yielded, as part of her study of the effects of nonverbal dreamwork—here, she allowed the process that was being studied to speak with its own voice. Readers could be aided in their appreciations of these various modes of expressing ones findings by giving them suggestions to approach the portrayals in particular ways or by inviting readers to partake of creatively expressed findings via certain induction or preparatory procedures. Findings could be dramatized for audiences using performative modes of expression. An even bolder suggestion is that findings could be psychically impregnated onto research reports, via nonlocal (unconfined by space or by time), direct intentionality.

Intentionality also can be used, deliberately, at all stages of a research endeavor. The investigator can set firm, yet gentle, intentions—before the study and, possibly, even ritualizing these intentions—that appropriate persons volunteer for the study, that they be able to access and express the most useful material about the studied topic, that their information be received, interpreted, and expressed well by the researcher, and that the audience of the final report receive this information accurately and benefit from the research findings. Other participants can frame suitable intentions at appropriate phases of the project. Such direct intentionality can have real influences upon the physical world (Braud, 1994a, 1994b; Schlitz & Braud, 1997). In addition to direct, "paranormal" influences of intention, keeping the optimal audience in mind from the very beginning of an investigation can inform all aspects of the study's design, conduct, and reporting, in a teleological fashion.

Related to expression is the issue of audience consideration. One of transpersonal psychology's charges or responsibilities is to take its findings directly to those who can most use them, rather than have these findings languish in dusty journals read only by professionals. Therefore, the transpersonal researcher publishes findings not only in the form of peer-reviewed articles in specialized professional journals, but also in more accessible forms of semi-popular and popular books and magazine articles, as well as in professional and public lectures, workshops, and trainings. This favors a wider dispersion and a democratization of knowledge.

Conclusion

There has been space for only a sampling of ways in which our research methods and approaches can be expanded so that they might better address transpersonal concerns. Additional expansions are possible in terms of (a) the *worldview and assumptions* that contextualize and inform the research (pluralistic worldviews may be entertained, as well as seemingly paradoxical assumptions about the nature of reality—e.g., reality may manifest complementary qualities of separateness/connectedness, locality/nonlocality, material/nonmaterial, and so on), (b) the *researcher's stance* toward the topic and toward the research participants (particularly, the researcher's own prior preparedness or adequateness—*adaequatio* (see Schumacher, 1978)—as a sensitive tool for probing the breadth and depths of experiences that one has personally undergone), (c) the possible use of *integral research teams* (composed of sets of individuals, each with well-developed epistemic skills in particular areas, such as thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuiting), (d) *alternative approaches to validity* (which involve accessing and telling the whole truth about some particular experience—see Anderson, 1998) that include contributions from not only the intellect, but also from the body, emotions, intuitions, aesthetic aspects, the coherence of all of these, and the agreement or disagreement of these with what already has been learned in various cultural, spiritual, and wisdom traditions, and (e) increasing not only the breadth of our studies, but also their *depth*—through endeavoring to plumb the depths of a given experience, not only can we appreciate the experience more fully, but we also can increase the possibility of

encountering the universal lessons latent deep within all particulars. These, and many other, ways of expanding research are described in detail elsewhere (Braud & Anderson, 1998).

Any or all of these research expansions can be applied in the study of transpersonal topics that involve "humanity's highest potential, and . . . the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness" (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992, p. 91). These same methods can be applied, as well, to more conventional topics in the psychological, social, and human sciences, in order that we might more adequately identify, appreciate, understand, and encourage our fullest qualities and potentials.

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