

Transpersonal Inquiry and the Next Generation of Transpersonal Researchers and Scholars¹

Investigación Transpersonal y la Próxima Generación de Investigadores y Académicos Transpersonales

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Abstract

This short essay relays the history of how Rosemarie Anderson and the late William Braud came to the conclusion that the essential dynamic for transpersonal and spiritual research and scholarship is the inquirers' willingness to engage the Sacred in a journey of transformation—a journey that implicates both their understanding of the topic and themselves as human beings. Following this historical overview to transpersonal research methods, the essay explores some of the unique characteristics of transpersonal researchers and scholars and unique risks involved in transpersonal research and scholarship especially projection and narcissism. The essay concludes, with a brief discussion of the role of independent scholarship among the next generation of transpersonal researchers and scholars, their needs for training and networking, and recent progress made to meet some of these needs worldwide.

Keywords: transpersonal psychology, transpersonal research methods, spiritual transformation, William Braud, Rosemarie Anderson

Resumen

Este breve ensayo relata la historia sobre cómo Rosemarie Anderson y el recientemente fallecido William Braud, llegaron a la conclusión de que la dinámica esencial para la investigación y estudio de lo transpersonal, es la voluntad de los investigadores para comprometerse con lo Sagrado, en un viaje de transformación —un viaje que implica tanto la propia comprensión del tema de estudio como a ellos mismos como seres humanos. Siguiendo una visión histórica de los métodos de investigación transpersonal, el ensayo explora algunas de las únicas características de los investigadores y estudiosos transpersonales, así como los riesgos involucrados en la investigación y estudio transpersonal, especialmente la proyección y el narcisismo. El ensayo concluye con una breve reflexión sobre el papel que tiene la formación para la nueva generación de investigadores y académicos transpersonales, sus necesidades de aprendizaje y trabajo en equipo, así como los logros conseguidos hasta ahora para satisfacer estas necesidades en todo el mundo.

Palabras clave: psicología transpersonal, métodos de investigación transpersonal, transformación espiritual, William Braud, Rosemarie Anderson

Received: October 9, 2015

Accepted: December 20, 2015

The field of transpersonal psychology has changed radically since 1992, when the late William Braud and I joined the Core Faculty at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP), now Sofia University. Not only has transpersonal psychology expanded and diversified as a field but we are no longer the only academic field interested in spiritual and related phenomena. Investigation of topics, such as compassion, forgiveness, altruism, and mindfulness, are now commonplace in mainstream psychology and the health sciences worldwide. The subject matter of human spiritual experience is no longer radical and no longer defines transpersonal psychology as a unique field of study. Therefore, especially in hindsight, what William Braud and I learned about the essential nature of transpersonal research and scholarship in response to our doctoral students' needs in the 1990s and 2000s becomes more relevant now than we could have ever foreseen at the time. When we founded the field of transpersonal research methods with the publication of our first book, *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences: Honoring Human Experience* (Braud & Anderson, 1998), we could not have imagined that the epistemological perspectives and transpersonal research methods we generated together in those early years would be a crucial element distinguishing transpersonal psychologists from mainstream scholars now investigating spiritual phenomena. My British transpersonal colleague, Les Lancaster, has already expressed similar views in his recent address at the Alubrat Transpersonal Research Colloquium in Brazil in September 2015 (Lancaster, 2015).

In this short essay, I first tell the history of how William Braud and I came to conclusion that the essential dynamic for transpersonal research and scholarship is the inquirers' willingness to engage the Sacred in a journey of transformation—a journey that implicates both their understanding of the topic and themselves as human beings. Second, I reflect on some of unique characteristics of transpersonal researchers and scholars. Third, I discuss some of the risks involved in transpersonal research and scholarship especially projection and narcissism. In conclusion, I discuss the role of independent scholarship among the next generation of transpersonal researchers and scholars, their needs for training and networking, and progress made to meet some of these needs worldwide.

The History of Transpersonal Research Methods as a Unique Discipline

William Braud's and my position on the nature of transpersonal research and scholarship comes from hard-earned experience. Since both of us were trained as experimental psychologists and had conducted and supervised quantitative research for over two decades at mainstream universities before joining the field of transpersonal psychology, we knew the value of experimental design, precise observation, record keeping, and the statistical and analytical procedures of mainstream psychology. We knew the assets and limits of these procedures. When we joined the Core Faculty at the ITP we were prepared to help dissertation students conduct research using the experimental and quantitative research methods we had used ourselves for years. However, we were soon faced with dozens of dissertation students who wanted to study topics, such as internalized racism and healing the pain, the union of body and spirit in female mystics, the spiritual dimensions of chronic pain, running as a path of transformation, healing from childhood sexual abuse, and the feminine culture shadow among women espionage agents—all topics of intimate and passionate concern for each of them and usually grounded in personal experience. In advising them, our conventional training and expertise had not prepared us well to help them study these "farther reaches of human nature" as Abraham Maslow (1971) put it so well. Little we suggested to them by way of experimental or quantitative approaches satisfied them—or us—because they reduced the topics to procedures too narrow for the topics.

Soon, we trained ourselves in phenomenological, heuristic research, grounded theory, and narrative methods of inquiry and taught them to our students. However, soon, even these qualitative methods eventually fell short of the expansive nature of the topics studied unless we modified and expanded them to include the personal transformation of the researcher *as* data. Innovative methodological procedures were needed to tap the researcher's and the research participants' transformation in the course of the study. Our task was a humble one of responding to our students' needs and to create research methods that served the unique needs of transpersonal researchers and scholars. In founding the field of transpersonal research methods with our first book, *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Braud & Anderson, 1998), William Braud and I summarized the matter like so:

In transpersonal psychology—which concerns itself with issue of consciousness, alternative states of consciousness, exceptional experiences, transegoic development, and humanity’s highest potentials and possible transformation—this tension between subject matter and research is strongly felt. Both students and practitioners ask whether it is possible to research the transpersonal without violating, distorting, or trivializing what we are studying. Is it possible to live, appreciate, and honor our transpersonal aspects and our most purposeful human qualities while, at the same time, conducting systematic research into these most significant facets of our being?

We maintain that it is possible to conduct significant and satisfying research on all facets of human experience—even the most sensitive, exceptional, and sacred experiences—but only if we modify our assumptions about research and extend our research methods so that they become as creative and expansive as the subject matter we wish to investigate. (p. 4)

Soon thereafter, we concluded that the essential quality of transpersonal research and scholarship is the inquirers’ encounter with the Sacred, an intention that invites personal transformation of inquirers’ understanding of the topic and of their awareness in general. Whether the methods used are quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, art-based methods, scholarly exposition, hermeneutics, or mix of these modalities, the key to a far-reaching understanding of spiritual and transpersonal topics is the inquirers’ intention to engage the Sacred in the course of a study. Our second book, *Transforming Self and Others Through Research* (Anderson & Braud, 2011) elaborates on the epistemological and methodological stance of transformation of self and others as essential for transpersonal research and scholarship and provide detailed methods and procedures for doing so.

With many mainstream researchers and scholars in psychology and the health sciences studying spiritual and related topics, the unique contribution of transpersonal psychology as a field lies in recognizing that the conduct of transpersonal research and scholarship implicates an encounter with the Sacred, an intention which invites transformation of the researchers’ understanding of the topic and themselves. As a field, we must differentiate ourselves epistemologically and methodologi-

cally as investigating human experience as intimate participants. In agreement with Jorge Ferrer’s (2002) participatory paradigm, we are participants in what it means to be in the world and human in the world. We are intimates in this grand unfolding. In transpersonal research and scholarship we are never truly outside the experiences we study—objectively. Let us be intimates to the topics we study. This we can do well and uniquely so.

Unique Characteristics of Transpersonal Research and Scholarship

Transpersonal research and scholarship needs to be as rigorous and precise in data collection and analysis as researches in other fields. However, in my experience, studying of transpersonal topics thoroughly and well is often more difficult, challenging, and time consuming than the study of the topics studied in mainstream psychology and throughout the human sciences. Not only are the topics themselves expansive but the methods needed to study them require and invite a level of personal engagement unlike more conventional forms of research. That is, engaging in research as the art of transformation requires additional qualities—qualities often found among mainstream researchers—but not necessarily crucial to the successful completion of an inquiry. According to my current understanding, the essential qualities for a transpersonal inquirer to bring to research and scholarship are:

Risking Personal and Professional Transformation

Most of us in transpersonal psychology have been attracted to this field because we have the opportunity to engage a spiritual journey of transformation, to go beyond our current understandings of ourselves and others, and transcend conventional ways of being in the world. We sense or know that there is a grand mystery afoot in the human animal’s participation in the world. Risk attends intimate participation in the Sacred. In my own experience advising several hundred dissertation students in research courses and direct research supervision, the transpersonal researcher’s willingness to change inevitably signals the breadth of transformation that unfolds in the course of a study—and often unfolding for years thereafter. Typically, the greater the personal involvement and passion is, the greater the transformation. Some aspects of the Self you know at the start are

likely to change, perhaps dramatically. Best to know this likelihood ahead of time. Get support. Take breaks when you need them. Be brave.

Choosing a Topic That has Heart and Meaning

There is no better starting point for a transpersonal inquiry project than a topic we love—about which we have passion and enthusiasm. Etymologically from the Greek, enthusiasm means *en-theo*, in God. Let enthusiasm guide. Typically, such a topic is grounded in the researcher's own experience. Trained initially as an experimental social psychologist, I was taught to follow an established line of research published in journals, find the most recent articles, and design a study that comes cogently next, and explore relevant hypotheses. While this traditional strategy works well for mainstream researchers and scholars, transpersonal researchers are more often keen to study topics that are related to personal experience whether there is any literature on the topic or not because transpersonal psychology tends to attract people who are passionate about making a positive difference in the world in arenas that have uniquely touched their own lives.

Incorporating Transformative Ways of Knowing

Unlike what is likely to be encouraged in mainstream research historically, transpersonal researchers and scholars are expected to bring all their personal expertise and skills to the fore in the conduct of a study. That is, being rigorous and precise does not mean casting aside our personal talents, skills, and spiritual training. Intuition and creativity are particularly important. Since intuition and creativity are highly variable person to person, as transpersonal inquirers, we must attend to what we uniquely bring to the conduct of research. There may be as many ways of being intuitive and creative as there are people. Every human being is a "theater" of creative possibilities. Moreover, as I have said elsewhere in relationship to intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 1998, 2011), what we often think of as the fault lines or wounds in our life histories and personalities may turn out to be our greatest resource as soulful researchers and scholars. That is, our unique sensitivities may alert us to what others may not notice or think important about a topic. My colleague, Robert Romanyshyn (2007) has explored the understanding of the "wounded researcher" from the perspective of

Depth Psychology in ways entirely relevant to transpersonal research and scholarship.

Understanding that Data and Knowledge Beyond Personal Awareness is out of Sight and out of Mind

We cannot see, hear, or understand what remains outside or beyond our developmental awareness. Data and knowledge beyond our current level of development is out of sight and out of mind. I also know from my own experience and that of others that "glimpses" of states of high levels of consciousness are easily mistaken for having "arrived" at that stage of development. Beware. Fleeting glimpses may provide what my colleague Hillevi Ruumet calls "coming attractions" but they do not represent steady levels of integrated awareness. Therefore, I urge transpersonal researchers and scholars to acquire knowledge of several models of spiritual development and make an honest effort to be realistic about one's personal level of spiritual integration on the developmental spectrum. Humility is advised. With a realistic evaluation of one's own development level, transpersonal inquirers will have some awareness of the blind spots related to their research topics that exceed their own level of development.

Unique Risks of Transpersonal Research and Scholarship

Containing and Scrutinizing Personal Projections

At every juncture of a study, transpersonal researchers and scholars must be prepared to scrutinize and contain the nearly inevitable projections implicit in all investigations. Such is standard practice throughout science, of course. In experimental and quantitative research, the terms experimental bias and demand characteristics have long acknowledged the limitations embedded in a researcher's biases and projections. However, in transpersonal research and scholarship, the risks are uncannily higher because of the personal involvement of the inquirer in an investigation and subtle and beguiling nature of spiritual projections. Enthusiasm is a great starting point of transpersonal studies but personal enthusiasm must never lead data analysis or interpretation. Allow me an example. Over the last two decades, I have actually had dissertation students send me their first draft, telling me that everything they thought about the topic

was confirmed by their research participants. The first time this happened, I felt almost had to peel myself off the ceiling. The next day I responded by advising my supervisee that the purpose of research is go beyond the researcher's original understanding and that I could easily see in her draft that she had excluded data that disagreed with her own experience of the phenomenon under study. To her credit, she "got" it and reanalyzed and rewrote her draft. The next draft was fabulous, articulating nuances which agreed and disagreed with her original understanding of the topic. That's the point of research from my point of view. Yes, there may be those rare occasions when a specific study affirms the researcher's original understanding. However, this is not the way science usually progresses and particularly unlikely for thesis and dissertation studies.

Self-aggrandizement and narcissism

Anyone who has been involved in religious or spiritual communities knows that from experience and observation that self-aggrandizement and narcissism are common among both leaders and followers. The transpersonal community worldwide is no different, no better, no worse. To their credit, Jorge Ferrer (2002) and Harold Walach (2008) have already addressed the narcissistic tendencies within transpersonal communities.

Having supervised transpersonal researchers for more than twenty years, my own experience leads to me to conclude that self-regard and self-love do not come easily or readily to many drawn to the field of transpersonal psychology at least in the West. Perhaps healing family-of-origin wounds motivate their attraction to the field; I do not know. Whether and I like it or not (and usually I do not), as a supervisor of transpersonal research, I often find myself serving as a make-shift therapist. However, I am not a therapist and research supervision is not therapy. Therefore, all I can do is be compassionate and tell my students the truth of what I see and intuit, namely that they need to scrutinize their motivations, research designs, and interpretation of findings courageously. Knowing that my supervisees are good people who want to do their best, years of coaxing and bulldozing them through narcissistic penchants to the other side have lead me to wonder about positive function of narcissism among individuals attracted to transpersonal psychology. Might narcissistic regression serve transformation as other forms of regression serve personal growth? Perhaps there no other

choice for some transpersonal researchers and scholars other than to regress toward narcissism before they can love themselves enough to be wrong even about their research findings? Sometimes I get so sad about this, I weep.

The Next Generation of Transpersonal Researchers as Independent Scholars

The era of independent transpersonal researchers and scholars is suddenly upon us. About three years ago, the emails began. I am a public name in transpersonal research having authored two books on transpersonal research (Anderson & Braud, 2011; Braud & Anderson, 1998) and many journal articles on the topic. I was surprised at the sudden and steady number of emails I received from prospective transpersonal researchers from all over the world—India, Australia, South Africa, Canada, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States to name only recent solicitations—seeking advice on how to get started on a transpersonal research projects, how to collect data, where to publish studies, and so on. They did not have transpersonal colleagues in their community or at local universities with whom to share their transpersonal research interests. They do not know where to get advice and had no one to talk to about their interests.

These independent researchers and scholars have jobs outside the transpersonal community, make an honest living, have families, and yet dedicate considerable personal time to research and scholarship in transpersonal psychology. Usually, they have doctoral degrees and teach as adjunct faculty at local universities. Typically, they support their research and travels to conferences from their own resources. They want to study topics, such as group dream work, the spiritual dimensions of chronic pain, memoir writing to reclaim a sense of self, spiritual dimensions of end-of-life care, the therapists as a surrealist artist, direct encounters with the wilderness, and mitigating childhood sexual abuse through spiritual-attuned trauma therapy. These researchers are deeply concerned about making a difference. However, they do not have colleagues or communities of transpersonal researchers locally with whom to converse and seek advice.

Training and Networking the Next Generation of Transpersonal Researchers and Scholars

While there will always be solo scholars—like Ken Wilber—capable of writing great books

alone amid stacks of books, the rest of us typically need a community of like-minded researchers and scholars to help us develop ideas, get feedback, and share ideas. I am old enough to remember when university departments in psychology and other fields served as the “heartbeats” for research and scholarly interests. Monthly colloquia were scheduled and well attended. Researchers and scholars from within the university and from the community attended. Over time, these attending created groups and networks related to special interests. Now, aside from prestigious and well-endowed universities, universities do not prioritize research support, faculty development, or research colloquia and most universities are downsizing full-time faculty. Unfortunately, too, the handful of graduate schools with masters and doctoral programs in transpersonal psychology are now under significant financial pressure and several have closed. The few transpersonal degree programs that remain can no longer serve as the physical locale where transpersonal researchers and scholars converge. To serve the needs of transpersonal researchers and scholars at disparate locals worldwide, we must utilize electronic platforms on the internet to bring them together, provide training and resources, and networking opportunities.

After a flurry of emails from transpersonal researchers wanting research support in the summer of 2013, I initiated a post-doctoral training program in transpersonal research to meet some of these needs. Soon thereafter, Pier Luigi Lattuada, Giovanna Calabrese, Regina U. Hess and I co-created The First Transpersonal Research Colloquium (TRC), which immediately followed the EUROTAS annual conference in Milan in June 2015. The First TRC attracted 27 transpersonal researchers from Australia, Europe, North America, and South Africa. Our newly launched website, www.transpersonalresearchnetwork.com, archives the abstracts provided by the TRC presenters and invites transpersonal researchers to network and connect. In September 2015 in Salvador, Brazil, the Alubrat Transpersonal Conference opened with a Transpersonal Research Colloquium in kindred spirit with the Milan TRC in June. The Ibero-American Transpersonal Association (ATI) is trying to add a Research Forum to their website, www.ati-transpersonal.org. The next TRC will be held in the United Kingdom near London in September 2016, immediately preceding the annual conference of the British Psychological Society Transpersonal Section. Good ideas spread. I am gratified by the success of our common efforts to form worldwide communities among transpersonal researchers and scholars. Other networking initia-

tives are needed especially on important research topics, such as inter-religious peacemaking, clinical applications of transpersonal psychology, meeting the psycho-spiritual needs of refugee communities, and in languages other than English and Spanish.

Author's Note and Acknowledgements

¹ An earlier version of this article was written in preparation for a video interview with me on the topic of training and networking the next generation of transpersonal researchers and scholars. The video interview was shown at the Alubrat Brazilian Transpersonal Research Colloquium in Salvador, Brazil on September 4, 2015. I was interviewed by Canadian transpersonal researcher Jacqui Linder. Canadian broadcaster Mike Linder recorded the video interview via Skype. The video interview is available on my YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/c/RosemarieandersonVideo>. I wish to thank Mike and Jacqui Linder for offering their skills and time to this endeavor and the Alubrat 2015 Conference organizers for the opportunity to reflect on important developments taking place in the transpersonal research community worldwide.

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