

TRANSPERSONAL RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP: REFLECTIONS ON THE LAST TWENTY YEARS AND FORWARD

Rosemarie Anderson, Ph.D.
Palo Alto, CA

I am delighted to join the Editorial Board of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology (JTP)*. Now retired and Professor Emerita at Sofia University, I have the more time to devote to the activities I love. I wish to thank *JTP* Editor, Marcie Boucouvalas, for her kind invitation to join the editorial Board, when John Levy's recent death created an open space on the editorial board.

Much has changed in the field of transpersonal psychology since 1992, when the late William Braud and I joined the Core Faculty at the *Institute of Transpersonal Psychology*, now Sofia University. Both of us had been trained as experimental psychologists and as professors had taught experimental design and conducted and supervised quantitative research for over two decades. We knew the value of precise observation, record keeping, and the statistical and analytical procedures traditionally used to study human behavior. Like other experimental psychologists at the time, we also knew the limits of experimental methods and quantitative assessments as applied to complex behaviors that are subtle, subjective, and inward and, therefore, not readily amenable to external observation or easily reported by the individuals experiencing them. Nonetheless, we both approached our new roles as Core Faculty at ITP as an adventure into possibilities and were prepared to help dissertation students conduct research using the experimental and quantitative methods we knew and had used ourselves for years. However, once at ITP, we were faced with dozens of dissertation students who wanted to study topics, such as profound grief in response to natural world, the healing presence of a psychotherapist, transformation while trekking in the wilderness, the spiritual dimensions of chronic pain, and the embodiment of the Sacred in sexual intimacies—all topics grounded in the researcher's personal experience. In advising them, our conventional training and expertise had not prepared us well to help them study these "farther reaches of human experience" as Abe Maslow (1971) put it so well. Little we suggested to them by way of experimental or quantitative approaches satisfied them—or us—because they often reduced the topics to procedures too narrow for the topics at hand.

Soon, we trained ourselves in phenomenological, heuristic, grounded theory, and narrative research methods and taught them to our students. That worked for a while. However, soon, even these qualitative methods fell short of the expansive nature of the topics studied unless we modified them to include the

Email: rosemarie.anderson@sofia.edu

Copyright © 2015 Transpersonal Institute

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. 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)

With increasing numbers of mainstream researchers using conventional, objectivistic methods to study spiritual topics, such as mindfulness, compassion, altruism, and so on, the need for transpersonal psychologists to recognize research as a journey of transformation is more important than ever. The title of William Braud's and my second book, *Transforming Self and Others Through Research* (Anderson & Braud, 2011) expresses this understanding succinctly. Recognizing the vital dynamic of spiritual transformation as an encounter with the Sacred Other in the conduct of research and scholarship signals transpersonal psychology's unique contributions as a field—at least to psychology and the human sciences, if not to the humanities and beyond. We must differentiate ourselves methodologically as interested in understanding human experience as intimate participants. Let us do what we can do well and uniquely so.

What follows is a brief summary of the essential qualities for a transpersonal inquirer to bring to research and scholarship at this profound juncture in the field of transpersonal psychology according to my current understanding:

- *Research as Sacred Encounter.* As immediately above, 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.

The degree to which the topic implicates the inquirers' personal history and their willingness to change intimates the breadth of transformation that unfolds. That is, the more commitment, personal involvement, and passion the greater the change. Usually, the changes are not in social relationships or the general circumstances of their lives but in the awareness that they bring to their interpersonal relationships and professional lives. Indeed, sometimes the changes can be dramatic and unsettling as may be the case in all change and transition.

- *A Topic That has Heart and Meaning and Implicates the Inquirer's Expertise Holistically.* Whatever method used, transpersonal inquirers study topics that hold heart and meaning for them and invite all their personal capacities and professional expertise to the engagement of the topic. Intuition and imaginal variation are especially relevant. Of course, some will say that intuition is not relevant to quantitative research but that is simply not so. As is well known among mathematicians and scientists, intuition often leads to the most surprising and important insights (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 1999). Unfortunately, some transpersonal psychologists act as though statistics and numbers are aligned with the devil. This is not a bit helpful and seriously undermines the ability of transpersonal researchers to engage in dialogue and collaboration with colleagues in other fields who use quantitative approaches.
- *A Realistic Understanding of One's Own Level of Psycho-spiritual Development.* We cannot understand anything well that is beyond our own level of development. Typically, we cannot even hear, see, or grasp data that lies beyond our developmental awareness. However, unfortunately, it is far too easy to mistake "glimpses" of high levels of consciousness or transcendence for having "arrived" at that stage of development as a steady state of integration. Glimpses are beguiling. 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. Developmental models immediately relevant to transpersonal psychology include those of integral psychologists Suzanne Cook-Greuter (2013) and Ken Wilber (2000); organizational psychologist Brian Hall (2000); and transpersonal psychologists Hillevi Ruumet (2006), Jenny Wade (1996), and Michael Washburn (2003). If nothing else, knowledge of models of psycho-spiritual development will help the transpersonal researcher and scholar to discuss developmental implications of findings and analyses.
- *Spiritual Values of Generosity, Inclusion, Kindness, Compassion, and Humility.* In transpersonal psychology, there have been far too many combative, even vitriolic, "debates" among individuals historically identified with the field. Controversy itself is fine and healthy for any field but attack is not. Anyone who has been in the field of transpersonal psychology for a decade or so is aware of many long-standing controversies. Not only do these hostilities divide the transpersonal community but professionals outside transpersonal psychology have noticed that we do not always "walk our talk." That is, we do not always live up to the spiritual values we promote and that duplicity undermines our public credibility. What saddens me the most is that

all of these hostilities could have been avoided if the researchers and theorists involved had looked for what was valuable in the work of another and then proposed their own theories and resolutions in that larger context. Of course, spiritual development is also relevant to how one approaches potential controversy in the same way that it applies to recognizing what might be outside one's current understanding of anything.

- *Gesturing Toward the Future*. In my view, transpersonal researchers and scholars are responsible to the past, the present, and the future. From a primordial point of view, we are responsible to all the animal and hominid ancestors who lived and died to make us who we are. To the present, we are responsible to live with sacred intent and engagement in all our professional activities whatever they are. For the future, we are required to understand every day that we are dots in a passing spectacular. In the modern world, which values self-aggrandizing motives, spiritual values such as humility and spiritual discernment are rare. For myself, I follow and act as best I can from what I intuit from the future of the best of what wants to happen. I make a lot of choices every day. Each of us plays a part in this grand unfolding. As transpersonal psychologists, perhaps we can be a bit more conscious of what we're doing, what we are seeding for the future.

As a new member of the *JTP* Editorial Board, I hope to encourage articles on innovative developments in transpersonal research and theory, contribute articles on lessons learned in the course of supervising transpersonal research for over two decades, report on the Transpersonal Research Colloquium (TRC) recently held near Milan in June 2015 and the forthcoming TRC near London in September 2016, and speak ever more boldly. Thank you for the opportunity to collaborate.

REFERENCES

- ANDERSON, R., & BRAUD, W. (2011). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- BRAUD, W., & ANDERSON, R. (1998). *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- COOK-GREUTER, S. (2013). Nine levels of increasing embrace in ego development: A full spectrum theory of vertical growth and meaning making. [Electronic Version]. <http://www.cook-greuter.com/> Retrieved November 22, 2015.
- HALL, B. (2000). *The genesis effect: Personal and organizational transformations*. Makati City, Philippines: Don Bosco Press.
- MASLOW, A. (1971). *The farther reaches of human nature*. New York, NY: Viking.
- ROOT-BERNSTEIN, R., & ROOT-BERNSTEIN, M. (1999). *Sparks of genius: The thirteen thinking tools of the world's most creative people*. New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- RUUMET, H. (2006). *Pathways of the soul: Exploring the human journey*. Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing.
- WADE, J. (1996). *Changes of mind: A holonomic theory of the evolution of consciousness*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- WASHBURN, M. (2003). *Embodied spirituality in a sacred world*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- WILBER, K. (2000). *Integral psychology: Consciousness, spirit, psychology, therapy*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.

The Author

Rosemarie Anderson, Ph.D., is Professor Emerita, Sofia University and co-author with the late William Braud of *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences: Honoring Human Experience* (SAGE, 1998) and *Transforming Self and Others Through Research: Transpersonal Research Methods and Skills for the Human Sciences and Humanities* (SUNY Press, 2011). Many of her articles on transpersonal research, intuition, body intelligence, embodied writing, and spiritual development are available at <https://sofia.academia.edu/RosemarieAnderson>. Keynote addresses and videos are available on her newly launched YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/c/RosemarieandersonVideo>. For current activities, visit her consulting website, www.rosemarieanderson.com.