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Transpersonal Psychology and the Paranormal

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Abstract

This paper considers two main questions: (1) What is the relationship between paranormal experience and transpersonal experience? (2) What is the relationship between transpersonal psychology and parapsychology? I look at examples of experiences that may be considered both paranormal and transpersonal and at how these two realms of experience have been associated throughout history and across cultures. I question whether distinctions need to be made between the paranormal and the transpersonal and examine potential pitfalls in various approaches that have been taken. In this context I look critically at Green & Green's (1986) and Rowan's (1993) distinction between transpersonal and extrapersonal experience, before examining other ways in which the relationship between the transpersonal and extrapersonal has been understood. In particular I consider the relevance of Wilber's (e.g., 1996a) notion of the pre-trans fallacy and of his spectrum of consciousness model (e.g., Wilber, 1996b). I suggest an approach that attempts to distinguish transpersonal and extrapersonal experience in terms of the transformational meaning and effect that these experiences have on the person or society. This allows a psychological understanding of the various warnings that are often given about the dangers of dabbling with the paranormal and occult. Finally, I discuss the differences between parapsychology and transpersonal psychology in terms of the contrasting perspectives and research paradigms that these disciplines take on paranormal experience. These approaches are considered in terms of Wilber's quadrant model (e.g., Wilber, 1997) in an attempt to understand how they provide alternative views that are complementary rather than opposed.

Introduction

In this paper I consider two main questions:

1. What is the relationship between paranormal and transpersonal experience?
2. What is the relationship between transpersonal psychology and parapsychology?

In the course of this discussion I shall also address a number of related issues such as the nature of the transpersonal, the definition and purpose of transpersonal psychology, and the role and value of transpersonal experiences in the transpersonal life.

The Transpersonal and the Paranormal

To provide an initial reference point for the later discussion, I have selected two extracts of accounts of unusual experiences.

“Quite early in the night I was awakened ... I felt as if I had been aroused intentionally, and at first thought some one was breaking into the house ... I then turned on my side to go to sleep again, and immediately felt a consciousness of a presence in the room, and singular to state, it was not the consciousness of a live person, but of a spiritual presence. This may provoke a smile, but I can only tell you the facts as they occurred to me. I do not know how to better describe my sensations than by simply stating that I felt a consciousness of a spiritual presence ... I felt also at the same time a strong feeling of superstitious dread, as if something strange and fearful were about to happen.”

E. Gurney: *Phantasms of the Living*, cited in James (1901/1960), p.76-77.

“As I was looking on, she (Saint Teresa of Avila) was raised about half a yard from the ground without her feet touching it. At this I was terrified, and she, for her part, was trembling all over. So I moved over to where she was and I put my hands under her feet, over which I

remained weeping for something like half an hour while the ecstasy lasted. Then suddenly she sank down and rested on her feet and turning her head round to me, she asked me who I was, and whether I had been there all the while."

Anne of the Incarnation at Segovia, cited in Broughton (1991), p. 53.

An interesting aspect of these experiences, to which I wish to draw attention, is the way in which each has elements that could be considered both "transpersonal" and "paranormal". In the first example, for example, there is the sense of a presence, which is spooky and frightening and yet also "spiritual". In the second case, Saint Teresa's spiritual ecstasy is accompanied by an apparently paranormal bodily levitation. This combination of spiritual and paranormal features seems to be a common feature of a whole range of extraordinary phenomena, from shamanic ecstasy to near-death experiences, UFO encounters and alien abductions.

Throughout history, and in most cultures, the paranormal has been an important feature of human experience that has almost always been intimately connected in some way with religion and spirituality, whether considered an aspect of the divine and/or demonic. Some obvious examples of these connections are divination and oracles, voices and visions, stigmata, magic and miracles, hauntings and apparitions, spirit journeys, supernatural encounters, possession, and the wide range of mediumistic and spiritualistic phenomena.

It is only relatively recently that the realm of the paranormal has been largely stripped of its spiritual context in western industrialised culture. This has resulted, for some, in a complete sceptical dismissal of the paranormal, on the scientific materialist grounds that the world is a physical, rational place in which there is no room for either the spiritual or the "paranormal" (which, almost by definition, cannot exist). For others, notably the parapsychologists, it has resulted in the attempt to view the paranormal as comprising a range of natural and lawful phenomena that exist just outside the current boundaries of

scientific knowledge. From this perspective, parapsychology is promoted as a form of leading-edge scientific exploration¹.

Yet despite this humanistic and scientific perspective, it has proved rather difficult, even in modern society, to divorce the area of the paranormal completely from that of religion. This is shown, for example, by the early history of the *Society for Psychical Research* (founded in 1882), the first organisation devoted to scientific investigation of the paranormal. For a large number of the founder members of the SPR, the primary purpose of such study was an attempt to prove the reality of religious belief in life after death. Thirteen of the nineteen members of the first Council were spiritualists, even though most of the research was carried out by non-spiritualists (Nicol, 1982).

Conversely, a significant number of the key figures in transpersonal psychology have had a serious interest in the paranormal or the occult. We may begin with William James, who as well as being one of the earliest pioneers of transpersonal psychology, was a member of the Society for Psychical Research, and himself carried out scientific investigations of the celebrated trance medium Mrs Leonore Piper.

James, in fact, saw no fundamental distinction between the areas of the paranormal and religion. Thus he writes in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901/1960, p. 69):

“Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”

James is careful to define the notion of an “unseen order” in a way that includes phenomena generally associated with the area of the paranormal.

¹ Ironically perhaps, this scientific and humanistic perspective on the paranormal was first proposed by Prospero Lambertini (1675-1758) who carried out extensive research into paranormal phenomena on behalf of the Church and who, in 1740, became Pope Benedict XIV (see Haynes, 1970). Lambertini concluded that most paranormal experiences are neither divine nor demonic but are simply unknown natural phenomena or the result of natural human abilities. This “enlightened” view undoubtedly enabled and sanctioned later scientific studies of Mesmerism and other supposedly paranormal phenomena, even though most scientists then, as now, chose to ignore this area of research.

For example, he goes on to recount a number of experiences of “presence” and apparitions such as the one cited earlier, in which the paranormal aspects are at least as apparent as the spiritual or religious.

Another important figure in this context is Carl Jung whose archetypal psychology remains one of the most influential approaches in the study of the transpersonal. Jung had a life-long interest in the paranormal and himself regularly experienced psychic phenomena, including visions and apparitions weird synchronistic event, premonitions, telepathic communications, psychokinetic phenomena, and also a profound transformational near death experience. Jung’s doctoral dissertation (1902) was a study of the mediumistic trances of his fifteen-year old cousin H el ene Preiswerk, and one of the major reasons that Jung eventually broke with Sigmund Freud was the latter’s uncompromisingly dismissive and aggressive attitude to the “Occult”.²

In the modern era a number of important figures in transpersonal psychology also have a serious interest in parapsychology and the paranormal. These include Stanislav Grof, Willis Harman, Charles Tart and, of course, David Fontana who, as well as being Chair of the BPS Transpersonal Psychology section, was until recently the President of the Society for Psychical Research.

If we look beyond the personalities involved to the content of the two areas, it becomes clear that the realm of the paranormal continues to overlap extensively with that of the transpersonal. This is clearly shown by the large range of topics that are investigated by both parapsychologists and

² The occasion of one of Jung’s most interesting and celebrated paranormal experiences was a heated debate with Freud on the topic of precognition and parapsychology during Jung’s second visit to Freud’s home in Vienna.

“While Freud was going on this way, I had a curious sensation. It was as if my diaphragm were made of iron and were becoming red-hot – a glowing vault. And at that moment there was such a loud report in the bookcase, which stood right next to us, that we both started up in alarm, fearing the thing was going to topple over on us. I said to Freud: ‘There, that is an example of a so-called catalytic exteriorisation phenomenon.’

‘Oh come,’ he exclaimed. ‘That is sheer bosh.’

‘It is not,’ I replied. ‘You are mistaken, Herr Professor. And to prove my point I now predict that in a moment there will be another loud report!’ Sure enough, no sooner had I said the words than the same detonation went off in the bookcase ... Freud stared aghast at me.”

transpersonal psychologists (see also Neher, 1990). Among the most important of these we may note those listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Areas of common interest in transpersonal psychology and parapsychology

- Auras and subtle energy systems
- Channelling and mediumistic experiences
- Experiences of Angels
- Experiences of synchronicity
- Lucid dreaming
- Near death experiences (NDE)
- Out of body experience (OOBE)
- Past life memories
- Possession
- Prophecy and precognition
- Reincarnation experiences
- Sense of Presence
- Shamanic experience
- Spiritual healing
- Stigmata, and other bodily transformations
- Telepathy, clairvoyance and the "siddhis"
- Trance
- Experiences of UFOs, alien contact or abduction
- Psychokinetic phenomena
- Witchcraft and Magic

Of course, even though these topic areas are common to both parapsychology and transpersonal psychology, the particular research questions, approaches and methodologies of the two disciplines may be quite different. This is one of the issues that I wish to address in this paper. Before we can understand this fully, however, we need to begin by digressing briefly in order to consider the definitions of the transpersonal and transpersonal psychology.

The Transpersonal and Transpersonal Psychology

The term “transpersonal” first became widely used in the late 1960s to refer to areas of human experience that seem to take the person beyond the normal boundaries of the personal domain to the realm traditionally associated with religion, spirituality, meditation and mysticism.

From a comprehensive survey of 40 definitions published from 1968–1991, Lajoie & Shapiro (1992) identified five key themes or concepts that they believe characterise transpersonal psychology. These are:

- An interest in states of consciousness
- A concern with humanity’s highest or ultimate potential
- The notion that human experience may develop beyond ego or personal self
- The related notion of transcendence
- The importance of the spiritual dimension in human life.

On this basis, Lajoie & Shapiro (ibid., p. 91) define transpersonal psychology as:

“... concerned with the study of humanity’s highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness.”

However, as Walsh & Vaughan (1993) argue, states of consciousness do not define the field. For example, prayer, compassionate action, selfless love, and spiritual healing, may be considered to be transpersonal phenomena, but they are not precisely “altered states of consciousness”, if only because they clearly involve a strong behavioural component. Furthermore, the notion of “highest potential” is problematic. (How can we ever know what is the highest?) There is also the related problem that such a definition makes certain metaphysical assumptions, for example about the existence of a spiritual reality or the importance of “unitive experience”.

Walsh & Vaughan (1993) also make the important point that, in practice, much of the concern in transpersonal psychology is patently not with the

highest or the “spiritual”. For example, there is a growing interest in “trough” rather than “peak” experiences, such as the spiritual emergencies, or the dark night of the soul (e.g., Grof & Grof, 1991; Hale, 1992). Also there are many realms of experience that may be “transpersonal” in the sense that the person appears to be taken “beyond the self” but in other respects could be considered “primitive” by some people. Perhaps the clearest examples may be seen in Grof’s (1988) comprehensive list of transpersonal experiences, based on his work with LSD and holotropic breathwork™. Thus Grof includes in his list:

- Identification with Animals
- Identification with Plants and Botanical Processes
- Experience of Inanimate Matter and Inorganic Processes
- Embryonal and Fetal Experiences
- Ancestral Experiences
- Past Incarnation Experiences
- Phylogenetic Experiences
- Spiritistic and Mediumistic Experiences
- Experiences of Animal Spirits

The important question here, of course, is whether such experiences should be counted as genuinely transpersonal, or whether they are, as Wilber (e.g., 1996a, 1997) would argue, largely *prepersonal*. I shall return to this issue in a moment, but in the meantime wish to observe that there is a danger in Lajoie & Shapiro’s position that we may be tempted to smuggle in our own religious preferences and prejudices and to consider only certain sorts of experiences as genuinely “spiritual”. Thus certain other forms of apparently spiritual experience may be rejected because, for example, they do not conform to a particular theological or metaphysical view. In this way shamanic, mediumistic or spiritist experience may be dismissed by some as “primitive” forms of religion that have no genuine or “higher” spiritual or transpersonal value. It may be further argued by such people that

transpersonal psychology should study only the kind of exalted and refined states of consciousness achieved by the Christian or Sufi mystics or by certain advanced yogis or meditators. This kind of argument is not only characteristic of the religious fundamentalists but may also be found at times in the writings of certain influential and enlightened proponents of transpersonal psychology, including John Rowan and Ken Wilber. This highlights some of the important central questions that I wish to address in this paper and I shall return to this issue shortly.

Because of these kinds of difficulties in the definition of the transpersonal, Walsh & Vaughan (1993) offer an approach that makes as few metaphysical and evaluative assumptions as possible. Their own preferred definition is:

Transpersonal experiences may be defined as experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans.) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos.

In my view this definition provides a useful “neutral” position from which to approach this whole area. It also provides a context for considering the central issues addressed by this paper concerning the relationship between the transpersonal and the paranormal.

The Transpersonal and the Extrapersonal

Grof's (1988) list of transpersonal experiences includes a considerable number of experiences of a clearly “paranormal” kind (Table 2).

Although Grof accepts these paranormal experiences as genuinely transpersonal, several influential writers seek to disagree or to reformulate the problem. John Rowan (1993) develops a distinction made by Green & Green (1986) between the transpersonal and the “extrapersonal”. Rowan's main purpose in doing this, it seems, is to attempt to distance transpersonal psychology from the lunatic fringe and from certain undesirable tendencies and features that he identifies with the popular new-age and other related movements. Rowan illustrates this distinction with some examples of approaches and experiences that he divides into the two camps (Table 3).

Table 2: Transpersonal experiences of a paranormal Kind

- Past Incarnation Experiences
- Psychic Phenomena Involving Transcendence of Time
- Spiritistic and Mediumistic Experiences
- Energetic Phenomena of the Subtle Body (Chakras)
- Experiences of Animal Spirits
- Encounters with Spirit Guides and Suprahuman Beings
- Visits to Other Universes and Meetings with Their Inhabitants
- Synchronistic Links between Consciousness and Matter
- Supernormal Physical Feats
- Spiritistic Phenomena and Physical Mediumship
- Recurrent Spontaneous Psychokinesis (Poltergeist)
- Unidentified Flying Objects (UFO Phenomena)
- Ceremonial Magic
- Healing and Hexing
- Siddhis
- Laboratory Psychokinesis

Extracted from Grof, S. (1988). *The adventure of self-discovery*. Albany: State University New York Press.

At first sight, and at one level, I can see what Rowan is getting at here, and I accept that it is important to make this kind of distinction. However, I do not fully agree with the way that Green & Green, or Rowan, attempt to conceptualise the matter. Green & Green argue that the difference is basically between the divine and non-divine (spiritual vs. non-spiritual). This is a problematic position to adopt for many reasons. Firstly, as argued above, much of the interest that many of us have in transpersonal psychology is manifestly not with the divine or spiritual, or is only arguably so (e.g., lucid dreams, creative inspiration, experiences of love and merging). Secondly, as Rowan recognises, this view is problematic because it could be argued (as does Wilber, 1997) that nothing is really non-divine.

Table 3. The extrapersonal and the transpersonal

EXTRAPERSONAL	TRANSPERSONAL
Spoon-bending Levitation Extra-sensory perception Dowsing Working with crystals Clairvoyance Telepathy Radionics Radiesthesia Blindsight Fire-walking Bloodless skin-piercing Out-of-body experiences Paranormal generally Fakirism Mind over matter The psychic	Higher self Deep self (Starhawk) Inner teacher Transpersonal self (psychosynthesis) High archetypes (Jung) The soul (Hillman) The superconscious (psychosynthesis) Creativity (surrendered self type) Some peak experiences Intuition (surrendered self type) Some healing Some near-death experiences Upper chakras Subtle energy systems Guidance self (Whitmont) The Self Transfigured self (Heron)

Rowan, J. (1993). *The transpersonal: psychotherapy and counselling*. London: Routledge.

Despite this reservation, Rowan is tempted to concur with the thrust of Green & Green's position, although his own approach is more psychologically informed. In his book *The Transpersonal* (1993), Rowan uses the term "extrapersonal" to distinguish it from both the prepersonal and the transpersonal levels of Wilber's spectrum model. However the conceptual

nature of the extrapersonal is not clearly defined and Rowan is largely content to rely on examples of extrapersonal and transpersonal to make his point. More recently, however, Rowan has revisited this distinction and has argued that:

... extrapersonal events or experiences are deeply ambiguous, each of them coming from a variety of different origins and having to be inspected and evaluated separately in each case. They do not belong to a single structural level in Wilber's sense. Hence nothing much can be said, in my opinion, about the "underlying structure, meaning or form."

(Rowan, 1998)

This is an important observation that both moves the debate forward and can help to clarify the issues involved.

Transpersonal, Psychic and Religious Experience

If, following Walsh & Vaughan's (1993) example, we define the area of the transpersonal in terms of experiences where the sense of identity or self extends beyond the individual or personal, then this has certain fundamental methodological and conceptual implications. Perhaps most important is the need to approach the transpersonal from the perspective of the experiencer rather than from any prior, external, set of assumptions or beliefs. Thus if, for the individual, an experience has the consequence of extending his or her sense of identity or self beyond the purely personal, then such an experience is, according to this definition, transpersonal. This is true irrespective of the particular trigger, content or context of the experience. It could, for example, be the result of a telepathic experience, or a UFO encounter, of visiting a clairvoyant, or walking over live coals, or even watching a spoon mysteriously bend on a TV show. If the effect of this experience is in some way to transform the person's sense of self to encompass a wider or deeper reality, then I would argue that the experience is genuinely transpersonal.

In this way, I am attempting to define the distinction between the extrapersonal and transpersonal not in terms of its manifest content, but in

terms of its form – i.e., the transformational meaning or effect that it has on the person. For this reason it is not possible, I believe, to draw up precise lists of experiences that are extrapersonal and/or transpersonal, based purely on considering the phenomenological content or context of the experience itself. In this sense, therefore, there are flaws in the approaches adopted by both Grof and, until recently, by Rowan.

In my opinion, a psychic experience *may* be genuinely transpersonal (although my guess is that most are not). Conversely, apparently “spiritual” activities such as prayer or meditation may, for many people, have absolutely no transformational effect whatsoever. In these cases we should not, I believe, consider such experiences to be truly transpersonal, even though the content and context of the experience is religious or spiritual.

This is one important way in which transpersonal psychology may be considered quite distinct from the psychology of religion. For example, the question of what social factors influence people to engage in religious practices, or how religious belief develops in childhood, or patterns of religious behaviour, are the legitimate concern of the psychology of religion. They are, however, of only incidental interest in transpersonal psychology, because they do not directly address the issue of transformation beyond the realm of the personal. Conversely, transpersonal psychology will take an interest in the processes by which the sense of identity can develop beyond the personal, irrespective of whether or not this transformation occurs within a religious or obviously “spiritual” context. If people are transformed in this way by watching soap operas then, as transpersonal psychologists, we should be interested. If we are not, then I fear that we simply reveal our own prejudices and spiritual snobbery.

The Pre-Trans Fallacy

It should be clear that I am not arguing that *any* kind of personal transformation equates with transpersonal development, but only transformation beyond the personal. In this way I believe it is important to recognise the distinction emphasised by Ken Wilber (e.g., 1996a) in his discussions of the “pre-trans fallacy”. Wilber argues that theoretical and

practical confusion arises in this area if we do not acknowledge the difference between the prepersonal and transpersonal. Prepersonal states occur when the individual has not yet fully achieved a stable sense of selfhood and personal identity, or has regressed to more primitive, childlike states. In contrast, transpersonal states represent a genuine progressive evolution beyond the personal level. One important way of recognising the difference is that in prepersonal states the individual has no clearly defined sense of self to draw on and therefore is fragile and unintegrated in experience. In transpersonal states, on the other hand, the sense of self is transcended but not destroyed. In practice this means that the person who has developed transpersonal awareness can (and most of the time does) operate from the position of a stable, integrated self. The transpersonal therefore transcends and includes the personal, whereas the prepersonal is a primitive anticipation or reversion that excludes the personal.

The Prepersonal and the Paranormal

One of the reasons that some may be suspicious of, or tempted to dismiss, the “psychic” and paranormal is the belief that these represent primitive or prepersonal modes of experience which, for this reason, are not genuinely transpersonal. The problem with this argument, however, is that it is based solely on examining the content or context of the experience, rather than its underlying structure, meaning or form.

I agree with Wilber (e.g., 1996a, 1996b, 1996c) that magical and mythic-membership *thinking* are prepersonal because the sense of self is not yet fully differentiated from the body and from social roles³. This is true whether these modes of thought are manifested ontogenetically in early childhood, or phylogenetically in “primitive” society. There is a danger in this view, however, that we are tempted to attribute any and all experiences of a seemingly transpersonal nature in childhood or in “primitive” societies to the prepersonal structures of magical or mythic thinking. Wilber himself recognises this danger (e.g., 1996c, 1997) and he is careful to argue that some forms of at least

³ It is vital that we do not confuse prepersonal magical thinking with higher forms of symbolic or archetypal-intuitive thought which, as manifestations of Wilber’s “subtle” level are essentially transpersonal.

quasi-transpersonal experiences are possible in childhood (i.e., before the stable sense of personal identity has been achieved). In such cases, however, these are either temporary states (i.e., not integrated structurally into the personality) or else represent the “trailing clouds of glory” of the “eternal indestructible drop” that, in Buddhism, is believed to continue from our previous existences. In the latter case, therefore, transpersonal experiences in childhood may be a kind of karmic trace memory of transpersonal achievements from another life, carried forward into this life via the eternal indestructible drop or “soul”.

In the course of human evolution, the matter is rather more complicated. Wilber (e.g., 1996c) argues that we must distinguish between (1) the ordinary mode of consciousness generally achieved by individuals within a particular stage of evolution, and (2) the advanced mode of consciousness that this evolutionary stage makes possible for the more enlightened members of the society. Wilber’s argument is complex, detailed and controversial but, for example, he believes that even in the animistic and magical hunter-gatherer societies of the Palaeolithic period, experiences of psychic awareness and shamanic ecstasy were possible (the low subtle). However, experiences of blissful union with the archetypal-divine (the high subtle) were not – these became possible, Wilber argues, only with the development of settled farming communities in the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods.

The point that I want to emphasise from this is that, in Wilber’s spectrum model, “magical thinking” is not the same as psychic or paranormal experience. Magical thinking is prepersonal because it is based on a failure to fully differentiate the self from the natural world. Psychic experience, on the other hand, is an aspect of the low subtle which is transpersonal in the sense that it implies an opening up to an unseen reality beyond the purely personal or social worlds. It may be true that psychic awareness and shamanic ecstasy (rather than states of mystical union with the archetypal-divine) are associated with earlier stages of human evolution but nevertheless they are (at least potentially) transpersonal and, as transpersonal psychologists, they are worthy of our serious consideration. Indeed one way of reading Wilber’s spectrum model is to conclude that psychic experience (the low subtle) may

be the primary or initial gateway to the transpersonal. This is true, I believe, for many people in our society today, for whom psychic experiences may be more common and more profound than the more abstract, refined and seemingly unattainable states reported by long-term meditators, high yogis or Christian saints.

If someone experiences telepathic communication, or has an out-of-body, or near-death experience, or receives a channelled message from their long-deceased mother, or experiences healing, then this may very well make them consider the meaning of their life and current preoccupations in a different light. This might then lead to the kind of fundamental personal transformation that, I believe, is the true hallmark of the transpersonal. In the case of the near-death experience, there is considerable evidence that such transformation is quite typical (e.g., Ring, 1984; Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995). People who have these experiences therefore often report that the experience has changed their life in a transpersonal direction – for example, it has made them more interested in spiritual matters, or less materialistic, or more compassionate, or less afraid of death, or simply a “better” person (Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995).

However, it is important to realise that a psychic or other “paranormal” experience is not *necessarily* transformational, and in most cases is almost certainly not so. In this sense, therefore, even though technically within Wilber’s model, psychic experiences are “low subtle” (and hence transpersonal) this does not, in my opinion, mean that they are necessarily transpersonal in their effects. This is in fact a general problem with Wilber’s model and also, I believe, with other approaches that attempt to define the transpersonal in terms of obtaining certain experiences or the achievement of specific states of consciousness (e.g., Grof, 1988; Tart, 1975). If a “transpersonal” experience has no transformational effect, then it has simply been an entertaining diversion. This is true, I believe, no matter how extraordinary, ecstatic, delightful, or profound the experience may seem to be.

This helps to put into context the debate concerning the validity of psychedelic experience in relation to “genuine” mystical experiences. The philosopher Roger Scruton (Whitby, 1986) has argued that psychedelic

experience has no spiritual significance, no matter how profound and wonderful it seems, because the person knows that it was brought on by the ingestion of a chemical substance. It is therefore, he argues, very difficult for the person sincerely to attribute the experience to a manifestation of the divine. The unspoken implication in Scruton's argument seems to be that therefore the psychedelic experience will not spiritually transform the person's life. But what if it did? Certainly the evidence from Walter Pahnke's famous Good Friday experiment (Pahnke, 1963; Doblin, 1991) was that several of the trainee ministers who ingested psilocybin in the context of a religious service later reported that their lives had been spiritually deepened and transformed.

In my opinion, an experience of union with God is just that – an experience, an appearance, ephemeral and passing. In fact, we might well argue (as does Wilber, 1997) that union with God, or union with the Ground or Source, is our permanent and inevitable natural state. As Wilber puts it, we can never be separate from the Ground or Source (God) because if we did we would cease to exist. Union with the Ground is not only possible - it is mandatory. Most of the time we may not experience this union, but it is always there. In which case this raises the question: just what precisely is the significance of these *experiences* of union?

In my opinion, such experiences can be significant, but only to the extent that they serve to structurally transform the person's sense of self in a transpersonal direction. If transformation does not occur, then these experiences may simply be the icing on the cake – a kind of spiritual sugar that makes life more palatable. This is not necessarily a reason to dismiss them, although there is perhaps a danger of addiction. In this way some people may become transpersonal chocaholics, or spiritual materialists (Trungpa, 1973), desperately seeking experiences to quench what seems to be a "spiritual" craving, or possibly to mask an underlying sense of personal inadequacy. Because of this, there can be a problem with transpersonal theories that give pre-eminence to the achievement of altered states of consciousness. Such theories may serve simply to encourage a quest for pleasurable or exciting experiences. To the extent that these produce no

genuinely transformational consequences, I consider this to be a barren spiritual path.

An important corollary of this is that these kinds of experiences are not *necessary* for such transformation. The transpersonal life may therefore be lived (and often is) in the most abject circumstances of privation, or suffering, or spiritual emergency, where there is very little chance of experiencing bliss, or union with God, or “cosmic consciousness”.

The Low-Subtle and the Siddhis

In relation to the paranormal, it is interesting that a similar warning is routinely issued to transpersonal practitioners in the case of psychic experiences. Thus the yogi or meditator is cautioned on the dangers of being seduced by the *siddhis*, i.e., the psychic and paranormal powers that are believed to result from the practice of yoga or meditation. It is important, it is taught, to renounce or let go of these *siddhis* in order for further spiritual development to become possible. This is undoubtedly true, but unfortunately it can come across as a specific prejudice against the paranormal. In my opinion, a similar warning needs to be given at every level of the spectrum. John Rowan, for one, recognises this. Thus he writes (e.g., 1993) that the major challenge of each stage of development is to dare to let go of the attractive and seductive features of one’s current stage. For example (in crude terms) the challenge of the transpersonal (low subtle) is to relax one’s grip on the rigid sense of personal identity. At the high subtle, the challenge is to let go of the fascination with the psychic (low subtle), whereas at the “causal” (mystical) level, the challenge is to let go of our attachment to our symbols and to blissful states of union with spiritual archetypes. At the “ultimate” level, perhaps, the challenge is to let go of our attachment to everything.

Wilber (1995) argues that the psychic level represents the lowest manifestation of the transpersonal because it is still closely related to the world of conventional reality. In other words, the low subtle is relatively “gross” in comparison to the increasingly refined high subtle and causal levels (see Wilber, 1995, p. 607-610). Although I would not frame it in exactly these

terms⁴, I agree with Wilber and Rowan that it is important to recognise and encourage structural development beyond the level of the low subtle. In this respect, the challenge to renounce the psychic may be particularly difficult for many people, precisely because these areas can be so fascinating and seductive.

Yet this should not lead us to underestimate, devalue or dismiss the relevance of the low subtle realm. For many people, psychic or other paranormal experiences may be the critical factor that can promote *structural* development to the level of the transpersonal. Thus many of the “spiritual emergencies” discussed by Grof & Grof (1991) involve encounters with the low subtle realms such as NDE, past-life memories, kundalini awakenings, shamanic crises, possession states, ESP, channelling, and UFO experiences. As Grof and Grof show, such experiences may often be crucial in leading the person towards profound personal and spiritual transformation, or *spiritual emergence*.

The Dangers of “Dabbling” with the Paranormal

This discussion helps also to place into context the warnings that are often given about the low subtle, for example the psychological and spiritual dangers of dabbling with the paranormal and the occult. In my view these very real dangers result when (commonly) paranormal experiences lead to regression into prepersonal modes of being. Thus for many people, a paranormal experience may not encourage transformation to the level of the transpersonal but rather produces a retreat into prepersonal superstitious and magical thinking. As a direct consequence the person may then become open to abuse and exploitation by unscrupulous or dangerous people who are desirous and capable of manipulating this regressive and vulnerable position.

In my opinion the answer to this problem is not to make people afraid of the paranormal with indiscriminating warnings about the dire consequences of any such involvement since, counter-productively, this only serves to bring

⁴ There is a danger in Wilber’s formulation that the ordinary world of personal and social experience may be considered relatively unimportant. In my opinion the transpersonal is not fundamentally separate from the ordinary world. It is therefore important always to bring the transpersonal into our everyday lives and, in this way, to “ground” our mystical experience.

about a retreat into superstitious and magical thinking. Rather it is important, I believe, to encourage people to face up to their paranormal experiences, to find a way of integrating them meaningfully into their lives and, ultimately, to allow them to lead towards development beyond the self. Indeed this is very much the approach taken by Grof & Grof (1991) in their discussion of how to work with spiritual emergencies.

Transpersonal Psychology and Parapsychology

I wish finally to turn to the question of the relationship between transpersonal psychology and parapsychology. I have shown how many topic areas are common to both transpersonal psychology and parapsychology, and have discussed how the paranormal may be understood from a transpersonal perspective. This raises the question of how a parapsychological approach to these topics differs from that of transpersonal psychology.

From the perspective of transpersonal psychology, paranormal experiences are of interest if they can promote the kind of transpersonal development that I have been emphasising. From the perspective of parapsychology, on the other hand, paranormal experiences are of interest only to the extent that they are able to demonstrate objectively the reality of paranormal phenomena and/or lead to an understanding of the paranormal processes involved. These are quite different agendas.

Consider, for example, the case of the near-death experience. To a parapsychologist, the near-death experience is studied as a potential source of scientific evidence for post-mortem survival of the personality. The question that parapsychological research wishes to answer is “does the near-death experience provide convincing evidence that the human personality survives bodily death?” To the transpersonal psychologist, on the other hand, the near-death experience is of more importance in the context of its potential transformational effects. For example, the transpersonal psychologist is interested in the extent to which the person may be led to take a wider or deeper, less personal and more transcendent view of life. In a sense, therefore, the issue of whether the NDE provides objective proof of survival is

of less concern than the subjective experience, beliefs and behaviour of the experiencer. The point is that the NDE may be a valid and profound experience, which can transform the person's life to a more transpersonal basis even if the experience does not itself prove survival of the personality. Even more critically, the NDE can be transpersonally valid even if survival of bodily death does not actually occur in any objective (evidential) sense, i.e., even if the NDE is a kind of illusion.

Another way of making the same point is to realise that the parapsychologist is not directly interested in the subjective meaning that the NDE may have for the experiencer. The parapsychologist is therefore unlikely to explore in detail the phenomenology of the experience, or the impact that the NDE may have on the individual's life, unless this could provide evidence for paranormal features. As a result, the kind of methodologies used by the transpersonal psychologist and the parapsychologist will be very different. The parapsychologist is mainly concerned with collecting data that are capable of objective verification. The transpersonal psychologist, on the other hand, is interested in the phenomenology, subjective interpretation and structural consequences of the experience, irrespective of whether any objectively verifiable information may be obtained.

Let us consider a concrete example. A feature of the advanced stages of the NDE is an encounter with deceased relatives, or other figures. Typically the person may receive a message, for example that it is not time to die and that it is important to return because there is some significant purpose to fulfil in life (Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995). To the transpersonal psychologist, such encounters are of direct interest in their own right, particularly as these profound and moving experiences may lead to a significant change in the person's sense of identity and spiritual outlook. To the parapsychologist, however, such a message is of no real interest, because it contains no information that can be directly checked with objective facts. If, on the other hand, the message had been that it was important to return to life because there was a chest of money hidden in the brickwork of the house which should be used to help the poor, then this would provide the parapsychologist with potentially verifiable information.

This difference in approach between transpersonal psychology and parapsychology echoes the basic difference discussed by Allport (1955) between the humanistic and positivistic camps in psychology. Thus the transpersonal psychologist is interested in meaning and in personal significance; the parapsychologist is interested in information and in statistical significance.

Another very useful way of understanding this difference in approach is to relate it to Ken Wilber’s quadrant model (e.g., Wilber 1995, 1997). Wilber argues that different approaches to knowledge may be understood in terms of where the focus of interest lies. Firstly an approach may focus on either interior or exterior aspects of the phenomena being investigated. Secondly it may concern itself with either individual or collective phenomena. The combinations of these interior-exterior and individual-collective dichotomies result in four main approaches to knowledge. (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Ken Wilber’s Quadrant Model

		Interior Interpretive, Hermeneutic, Consciousness	Exterior Monological, Empirical, Positivistic, Form
Individual	Approach Validity Claim Examples	Intentional Truthfulness Freud, Jung, Aurobindo	Behavioural Truth Skinner, Empiricism
Collective	Approach Validity Claim Examples	Cultural Justness Kuhn, Weber	Social Functional fit Systems Theory, Marx

Adapted from Wilber, K. (1997). *The eye of spirit: an integral vision for a world gone slightly mad*. Boston & London: Shambhala.

According to this interpretation, transpersonal psychology is primarily an interior-Individual discipline, although it may also extend to the interior-collective. For example a transpersonal psychologist may study the phenomenological and structural aspects of the NDE (interior-individual) but may also be interested in how the NDE is experienced in various cultures (interior-collective)⁵. Parapsychology, on the other hand, is principally an exterior-individual discipline in which phenomena are validated against publicly verifiable data. (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Transpersonal disciplines and parapsychology in the Quadrant Model

	Interior	Exterior
Individual	Transpersonal Psychology	Parapsychology
Collective	(Transpersonal Psychology) Transpersonal Sociology Transpersonal Anthropology	Sociology and Anthropology (functionalist approaches)

Towards an Integral Approach

One of the major implications of Wilber's quadrant model is the importance of honouring all four quadrants and, ultimately, seeking an integration of the different approaches to knowledge. In terms of the relationship between transpersonal psychology and parapsychology, perhaps the most crucial initial advance would be for each discipline to acknowledge the validity and value of the other's contribution. For example, transpersonal psychologists can only benefit, I believe, by becoming informed about parapsychological research in their areas of interest. Similarly, parapsychologists may benefit from a fuller understanding of the phenomenological and structural aspects of the experiences they investigate

⁵ It is important also to recognise the role that other transpersonal disciplines might play, for example transpersonal sociology or transpersonal anthropology (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

since this may not only suggest methodological refinements but may also lead to further ideas for empirical studies.

Conclusions

I have argued that the paranormal is an aspect of human experience that has the potential for promoting transpersonal development. Paranormal experiences can lead to such transformation by encouraging the individual to consider the significance of the wider or deeper reality beyond the world of the ordinary self and its concerns.

In most cases, however, paranormal experiences will have no transformational effects on the individual, or may possibly lead to regression to primitive modes of superstitious or magical thinking. Because of this it is not possible to say whether a paranormal experience is prepersonal or transpersonal simply by assessing the phenomenological content or context of the experience. Rather the distinction needs to be made by considering the prepersonal or transpersonal consequences that the experience may have for the experiencer.

Transpersonal psychology and parapsychology differ widely in their philosophical and methodological approaches to paranormal phenomena. However, each discipline may be enriched through mutual recognition and an understanding of the contribution that can be made by the other.

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