

The Role and Scope of Transpersonal Psychology

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Rejoinder to Fontana and Slack

In a previous article (Daniels and McNutt, 1997) we raised a number of issues related to the role and scope of transpersonal psychology. Two seminal articles written by Fontana and Slack (1996a, 1996b) initially prompted our discussion. These articles were instrumental in facilitating the formation of the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the BPS.

In their reply to our paper, which was published in the same issue, Fontana and Slack (1997) expressed surprise that we should focus our criticisms on their work. Our justification for this is the central role that these articles have played in helping to acquaint the broad population of British psychologists with transpersonal psychology and also in clarifying the terms of reference for the newly established Transpersonal Psychology Section. As such, many people have without doubt looked to these articles to define the field of transpersonal psychology and to elucidate its concerns and methods. We repeat what we said in our previous article - that we applaud Fontana and Slack's substantial efforts. Transpersonal psychologists in Britain, including us, owe them a major debt of gratitude. In this context, their protest that we should focus on their work is surprising. We should also not forget the leading positions that these two individuals occupy within the Transpersonal Psychology Section. This means that many people will continue to approach Fontana and Slack for direction and guidance in this area.

In their reply, Fontana and Slack raise a number of substantive and forcefully argued objections to our own criticisms. We feel that these objections deserve to be addressed, not only in the interests of clarity and lively debate, but also because there are important issues at stake both for the Transpersonal Psychology Section and for the field as a whole.

The "Pressing Need"

Fontana and Slack (1997) give two answers to our question about the "pressing need" to bring the area of the transpersonal under psychological investigation. Firstly, they point to the current upsurge of general interest in such matters, which demands that psychology should also concern itself with this area. Secondly, they argue that because of psychology's own particular knowledge and techniques, it can offer helpful findings and guidelines that complement those offered by others. We could not agree more. However we note that this seems to represent a clear (and welcome) shift of position and rhetoric from that found in their earlier papers (1996a, 1996b). In these, they had seemed more worried that "areas of human functioning which are properly the concern of scientific psychology are currently being taken over from outside by ... lay initiatives and movements" (1996b, p. 269). They drew an explicit analogy with the need experienced by the medical profession to separate the "wheat from the chaff" in the area of complementary medicine. From this, they argued that psychology should similarly aim to make "authoritative pronouncements on the psychological efficacy or otherwise of the practices, techniques and traditions covered by the transpersonal area" (1996a, p. 2). This appears to us to be a quite different agenda, about which we continue to have serious reservations.

The Question of "Scrutiny"

In our article, we wondered what kind of psychological "scrutiny" Fontana and Slack had in mind for the transpersonal. In their reply, they define scrutiny as "close investigation" (p. 10), using a variety of methods, with the aim of becoming more informed about an area. This seems an excellent definition of scientific scrutiny, and is one that we are happy to endorse in relation to the transpersonal. However, there is a difference between this kind of scientific scrutiny of the transpersonal (which we support) and the more evaluative examination or auditing that we felt was implied by their earlier articles (which we question). This brings us to the central issue of the "authority" that transpersonal psychology may seek to claim.

The Issue of Authority

Fontana and Slack chide us for using the term "authority" in our characterisation of their position, pointing out that "there is no mention of 'authority' in the long extract from our work with which they preface their article" (1997, p. 10). This is technically correct. However the extract we quote does use the adjectival "authoritative", from which we felt justified in inferring the noun. They go on to note that "authority suggests compulsion, rules and regulations, a desire to assign to oneself rights over lives of others" (ibid.). In denying that this view in any way represents their own position, they arraign us for misinterpreting and seriously misrepresenting them. We find this unequivocal clarification to be helpful and reassuring, although in the vehemence of their own denial, perhaps they can understand the strength of our reaction to their earlier statements.

In fact we feel that the issue of "authority" is rather complex and cannot be easily dismissed. In our opinion there are valid forms of consensual authority that do not imply compulsion or the appropriation of rights over other people's lives - for example genuinely democratic authority and authentic spiritual authority (cf. Welwood, 1983).

There is also the authority of truth which science may perhaps legitimately claim to seek. However, scientific truth is always an ideal - a far goal that can never be achieved in any final sense (unlike logical or mathematical truth). We must therefore be careful not to confuse the potential authority of science with the actual authority that scientists or scientific bodies may wish to claim. For this reason we doubt that it will ever be possible for transpersonal (or other) psychologists to make "authoritative pronouncements" about anything. What we can and should do as psychologists, however, is to offer *information and informed opinions*. Our various audiences may then take these into account (along with a range of other considerations) when making up their own minds about such questions as what constitutes wheat and chaff in the area of the transpersonal.

This is not just an idle semantic or academic distinction but has important practical and political consequences. Fontana and Slack speak of their concern over "lay initiatives and movements claiming to foster personal

growth, self-awareness, spirituality, creativity, the 'higher self' and other pretentious-sounding human qualities" (1996b, p. 269). It is in response to this concern that they argue that "scientific psychology must be able to make authoritative pronouncements on whether or not these various initiatives and movements have any efficacy" (ibid.). We continue to disagree. For the reasons we have discussed, and also because of the complexity of the issues involved, we believe that such pronouncements are not possible. Scientists can point out the complexities. They can quote research evidence that may support or undermine claims that are made. They can alert their audience to related dangers and other difficulties. In other words, scientists can give information and informed opinions. This may be what Fontana and Slack mean, but if so we feel they could modify their language accordingly.

There is perhaps a lesson for transpersonal psychologists in the controversy that emerged in the early 1970s over the psychological and therapeutic claims being made by Scientology. These concerns prompted the Government enquiry (Foster, 1971) that first recommended statutory registration of psychotherapists and that led eventually to the formation of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP). Despite the serious reservations about the activities of the Church of Scientology shared by many within both Governmental and psychotherapeutic circles, it has not become possible in more than twenty-five years to say categorically whether or not Scientology has any therapeutic efficacy. Indeed the Working Party that was set up following the Foster Enquiry did not directly address this question. Instead it turned its attention to the much more effective practical strategy of attempting to define the kind of formal training that could provide a basis for the registration of psychotherapists. In this way certain allegedly "therapeutic" approaches such as Scientology could be operationally dismissed.

We may all have our opinions about the effects of Scientology (and other related movements). Some of our opinions may be better informed than are others. But no matter how informed, no matter how much scientific research these opinions are based upon, they remain opinions. We translate these opinions into authoritative pronouncements at our own and other people's peril. Scientists, we believe, have a right and a duty to use whatever

knowledge they possess in an attempt to raise social, political and ethical awareness. In our opinion, however, the making of pronouncements is not an effective means to this end.

Transpersonal Psychology and Professional Training

This brings us to an important issue that we did not directly explore in our previous article, but that arises from the above discussion and also from comments made by Fontana and Slack in their reply to our paper. This issue relates to the question of what kind of training or experience can best inform a person about transpersonal psychology? Fontana and Slack (1997) argue for the importance of formal qualifications in psychology which "are not the only important criteria, but ... do suggest an underpinning of professional knowledge" (p. 11). Professional knowledge yes - but of transpersonal psychology? The vast majority of British undergraduate courses in psychology provide, at best, minimal grounding in humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Although we very much hope that the establishment of the Transpersonal Psychology Section will help to remedy this lamentable situation, it remains the current position.

It could be argued, as perhaps Fontana and Slack are doing, that a formal training in psychology provides general psychological expertise that is readily transferred to the field of transpersonal psychology. In our opinion this is partially true, but in many ways it ignores the radical agenda that has always been an important aspect of both humanistic and transpersonal psychology.

Transpersonal psychology, in our view, is not simply an "area of psychology" (ibid. p. 10) in the sense that it is a subset of traditional psychology. We should not forget that humanistic and transpersonal psychology are self-styled third and fourth forces that advocate so-called "new paradigm" approaches to psychological understanding and investigation. A formal training in psychology that is based almost entirely and fundamentally on the "old paradigms" is therefore unlikely to offer any particular expertise in these areas.

On the contrary, it is interesting to note that many of the most informed and influential figures in "transpersonal psychology" are not themselves psychologists in the established sense and would not, we understand, be eligible for Membership of the BPS. Off the tops of our heads these would include Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, Roberto Assagioli, Roger Walsh, Huston Smith, Fritjof Capra, Rupert Sheldrake and Stanislav Grof. Perhaps most significantly, they also include Ken Wilber - without doubt the leading "transpersonal psychologist" of the current era - who has no formal background or qualification in psychology (his professional training is in biochemistry and biophysics).

For these reasons, we do not believe that transpersonal psychology can be fully subsumed within the established profession of scientific psychology (such as is represented by bodies such as the BPS). This does not mean, of course, that we question in any way the value or role of the Transpersonal Psychology Section within the BPS. On the other hand, we would like to see a broader, more inclusive understanding of transpersonal psychology than one that seeks to define itself as primarily the concern of formally qualified psychologists.

In our opinion it is more accurate and meaningful to consider transpersonal psychology as not so much an area of (scientific) psychology, but as an area of what we might tentatively call "transpersonal studies" (cf. Walsh and Vaughan, 1993a, 1993b). Such a view is, we believe, more consistent with the history of transpersonal psychology, the influences that have shaped it, the nature of its developing agenda, and its de facto status within present-day thought and culture. In fact we very much agree with Roger Walsh's (1993, p. 135) assessment that "during its first twenty-five years transpersonal psychology has become an international, interdisciplinary transpersonal movement".

It is also worth noting in this context that the Association for Humanistic Psychology and Association for Transpersonal Psychology are open to people from a wide variety of backgrounds and who have no formal training in psychology. Furthermore, the Journal of Humanistic Psychology and Journal

of Transpersonal Psychology have always represented and encouraged an interdisciplinary approach.

An important implication of our argument is that an appropriate education in transpersonal psychology requires more, or other, than is currently offered by a formal training in scientific psychology. In our view this education should include, as a bare minimum, a study of psychology, philosophy and religion (not necessarily formal) and should also involve some relevant transpersonal work, practice or experience (cf. Davis and Wright, 1987, Vaughan, 1982).

Transpersonal Psychology and Other Disciplines

This brings us to the question of the relationship between transpersonal psychology and other transpersonal disciplines. As we argued in our earlier article, we believe that the field of the transpersonal needs to be investigated in a multidimensional and multidisciplinary fashion. Transpersonal psychologists therefore need to be aware of, and should attempt to forge links with, others that seek to investigate the transpersonal from different perspectives.

Fontana and Slack (1997, p. 11) ask us to inform them of "equivalent sections within transpersonal sociology, transpersonal psychiatry, transpersonal anthropology and transpersonal ecology" so that they may "initiate dialogue and co-operation". We know of no such "sections". But we were not necessarily referring to the establishment of formal contacts between official bodies. Our intention was simply to point out that transpersonal psychology should be seen as part of a larger transpersonal movement in which progress will be enhanced by mutual awareness and exchange of ideas between the different transpersonal disciplines. This can occur through individual study of different perspectives, and by personal contact and dialogue. It will also undoubtedly be facilitated by the continued development of multidisciplinary vehicles of communication (e.g., networks, conferences, journals, and courses). It does not depend, however, upon the existence of representative organisations for each discipline. On the other hand, where these emerge, they will certainly have a valuable role to play in

encouraging interdisciplinary contact and co-operation. Although we know of no formal organisations that represent transpersonal sociology, transpersonal psychiatry, transpersonal anthropology or transpersonal ecology, there is a developing body of published literature for each of these disciplines to which the interested reader is referred (see, for example, Walsh, 1993; Walsh and Vaughan, 1993a, 1993b).

Transpersonal Psychology and the "Establishment"

We would like to end our discussion by considering some general implications of the development of a link between transpersonal psychology and the psychological "establishment" that is implied by the formation of the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the BPS.

Perhaps it is true to say that humanistic and transpersonal psychology has always had an uneasy relationship with the academic and scientific establishments. For a variety of reasons - historical, cultural, political and philosophical - they have tended to view each other with mutual suspicion and sometimes contempt. One of us (Daniels) well remembers that, when he first developed an undergraduate course in humanistic and transpersonal psychology in the early 1980s, the proposal was nearly thrown out in Committee because of fears expressed by some members that I would indoctrinate students with some kind of subversive hippie ideology. I am glad to say that reason won the day and I was allowed to proceed.

Yet, of course, there *is* something deeply radical in humanistic and transpersonal psychology and these approaches have themselves often been scathing in their attacks upon the scientific and political establishments. For this reason, perhaps there are some people both inside and outside the Section who remain uneasy about the fact that transpersonal psychology has now become, in a sense, part of the establishment. Some may fear that woolly-headed transpersonalists will subvert scientific psychology, while others may fear that transpersonal psychology will sell out to the scientific establishment.

We believe such fears are ungrounded and that the polarisation of views that they indicate is unhelpful. There are undoubtedly tensions and

differences of opinion between transpersonal and traditional psychology that cannot be ignored, but we hope that mutual understanding, toleration, and collaboration will prevail, together with a willingness to learn and change on both sides. It is possible that these tensions and differences will themselves provide the kind of dynamic melting pot that may lead to creative advances in psychological theory, method and practice. The Transpersonal Psychology Section is in an excellent and perhaps unique position to be able to facilitate these kinds of exchange, development and transformation. We therefore look forward with hope and expectation to the Section playing a major role in the evolution of both transpersonal and mainstream psychology.

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