

# Transpersonal Psychology

**Author:** Dorothy M. Neddermeyer, PhD

Transpersonal Psychology is a branch of psychology that is concerned with the study of those states and processes in which people experience more depth and breadth of who they are, or a greater sense of connectedness with others, nature, or the spiritual dimension. The term 'transpersonal' means 'beyond the personal' and a common assumption in transpersonal psychology is that transpersonal experiences involve a higher mode of consciousness in which the ordinary mental-egoic self is transcended.

Transpersonal Psychology is a relatively new development in academic psychology that has yet to be recognized formally by the American Psychological Association. In 1997 the British Psychological Society approved the formation of an academic Transpersonal Psychology Section, as well as one for the related area of Consciousness and Experiential Psychology.

Among the topics currently being explored by Transpersonal Psychologists are:

Channeling, Altered states of consciousness, Mind-Body relationship, Dream consciousness, Psychedelic experience, Mystical experiences, Spiritual emergencies and crises, The Dark Night of the Soul, Near-death experiences, death and dying, The psychology of meditation, Buddhist psychology, Ecological consciousness, Psychology of Self and self-realization, The Higher Self, Self-transcendence, and Paranormal experiences to name a few.

While Transpersonal Psychology is a branch of psychology, it recognizes the importance of a non-parochial and integrative approach in which other disciplines are acknowledged to have their own contributions to make it a combined exploration of the transpersonal. These other disciplines include philosophy, psychiatry, sociology, politics, education, anthropology, history, literary studies, religious studies, biology and physics.

Transpersonal psychology is, in the broadest sense, a scientific enterprise—it is not a religion or ideology. Individual transpersonal psychologists may or may not have their own religious or spiritual beliefs, although most will be engaged in some kind of transpersonal practice (e.g., meditation, ritual, service, devotion, transpersonal therapy, reflective living, political action). However, it is my opinion that the transpersonal psychologist needs to have a strong foundation in spiritual beliefs to be highly effective. Otherwise, in effect it would be the blind leading the blind. Although, there is currently a predominance of Buddhist-inspired transpersonal psychologists, other traditions are also represented. These include Christian, Jewish, Sufi, Hindu, Taoist, Tantric, Magical, Gurdjieffian, and Theosophical.

While Transpersonal Psychology represents a paradigm shift in consciousness, science and culture, it seeks to distance itself from the kind of uncritical adoption of so-called New Age beliefs that characterizes certain elements of the so-called counter culture.

Transpersonal Psychology has very little, if anything, to do with crystals, UFOs, alien abductions, chakras, auras, angels, psychism, aromatherapy, levitation, fire walking, or the millennium, except as these phenomena, practices or experiences may be investigated in terms of their transformational consequences.

Although many would argue this point, Transpersonal Psychology is not metaphysics. This leads to a problematic viewpoint, because many would claim that transpersonal experiences imply a metaphysical belief in a spiritual, divine, or transcendent realm. However, there are some transpersonal psychologists who understand the transpersonal in more immanent terms, for example the developing of a greater sense of connectedness with the deeper Self, the world of nature, or the social, interpersonal dimension. In practice it is important that transpersonal psychologists are clear and open about their own metaphysical assumptions.

Transpersonal Psychology does not denounce rationalists. Although it can be argued that the highest states of transpersonal consciousness are ineffable and beyond a rational appreciation, Transpersonal Psychology does not dismiss or devalue rational and intellectual analysis, which can add much to our knowledge and understanding in these areas. However, it is important also to acknowledge the reality and importance of non-rational modes of knowing, such as intuition, integrative awareness and contemplation.

Pioneers of Transpersonal Psychology include:

**Roberto Assagioli:** The founder of psycho-synthesis, a transpersonally-based approach to therapy and personal growth.

**Sri Aurobindo:** Developed a model of the evolution of consciousness, based on Eastern philosophies.

**Teilhard de Chardin:** Developed a model of the evolution of consciousness that integrates biological science with Christian theology.

**Stan Grof:** Used LSD to explore trans-personal experiences and Holotropic Breathwork.

**Aldous Huxley:** Investigated the apparent expansion of consciousness using mescaline, which contributed to his analysis of the elements of the “Perennial Philosophy.”

**William James:** Contributed through his ground-breaking work on paranormal experiences and the varieties of religious experience.

**Carl Gustav Jung:** Introduced the concepts of the collective unconscious and archetypes, and his understanding of religious archetypes from a psychological perspective.

**Abraham Maslow:** Published his studies of self-actualization, peak experiences, self-transcendence, and metamotivation. He was one of the key founders of both the “third force” (humanistic psychology) and “fourth force” (Transpersonal Psychology). Together

with Anthony Sutich and Stan Grof, he was responsible for the establishment of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology (1969) and the Association for Transpersonal Psychology (1972).

**Charles T. Tart:** Pioneered empirical research into altered states of consciousness.

**Ken Wilber:** Developed a brilliant model of the evolution of consciousness that integrates the philosophies and psychologies of West and East, ancient and modern, Currently, he is the leading theorist in Transpersonal Psychology.