

Finding Meaning Through Transpersonal Approaches in Clinical Psychology: Assessments and Psychotherapies

Harris Friedman*
Walden University

Abstract

Meaning is not a given, but constructed. Transpersonal psychology focuses on the interconnectedness of the person to that which can give meaning, such as relatedness to others, the world as encountered, and the cosmos as a whole. Clinical approaches to transpersonal psychology involve assessments and psychotherapies. Transpersonal assessments provide a basis for grounding meaning in some consensual realms, while transpersonal psychotherapies provide ways to further develop meaning, either to address psychopathology or encourage growth toward greater holism. Categories of transpersonal psychotherapies are identified, including attentional, biochemical, depth psychological, existential, and somatic, and some of their common features are explored in regard to creating and enhancing meaning.

Meaning is not an ontological given, but rather appears more as a socio-psychological and cultural construction. It serves the external adaptive purpose of unifying actions and the internal adaptive purpose of unifying cognition and affect. Meaning also appears always positioned in a relational framework that involves grounding persons as interconnected with something other than the individual self, namely others, the world as encountered, and the cosmos as a whole. One way to conceptualize a basis for meaning is from the perspective of transpersonal psychology, which provides a way to understand meaning in consensual ways through transpersonal assessments and to enhance meaning through transpersonal psychotherapies.

What is Transpersonal Psychology?

Hartelius, Caplan, and Rardin (2007) studied numerous definitions of transpersonal psychology, and divided these, through using content analysis, into three themes. The first involves understanding persons as extending beyond ordinary conceptions of separateness by recognizing them as profoundly interconnected (including with other humans, the world of all living beings and non-living things, and ultimately the cosmos as a whole). The second involves employing a holistic integrative approach emphasizing that persons have transcendent capacities that defy materialistic limitations and can be seen as spiritual. The third involves psychological transformations in which the first two perspectives are applied to fostering individual and systems growth toward greater wholeness. Historically, transpersonal psychology evolved during the turbulent 1960s within the US from three social movements: multiculturalism (from increased exposure to non-Western spiritual traditions), psychedelic exploration (from expanding perceptions of reality), and rapid social change (from questioning authority). Initially, transpersonal psychology emphasized altered states of consciousness (gained from psychedelic and spiritual practices) and increased sense of empowerment (gained from social activism), and later sought to transform lives and the world.

The founding of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* marked the beginning of the discipline of transpersonal psychology, and its first issue included Maslow's (1969) attempt to define it. As one of the founders of humanistic psychology, Maslow later became dissatisfied with its human orientation, refocusing his interests in a cosmic-centered psychology in which interconnectedness became more important than the isolated human. My own transpersonal work similarly focused on an expanded sense of self-concept as a type of interconnectedness (Friedman, 1983), a central theme reflected by the work of many others (e.g., Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). My approach to self-expansiveness includes the study of individuals identifying with all possibilities existing within space-time, as well as that which might transcend space-time (e.g., Friedman, in press).

Transpersonal psychology was and remains, however, somewhat of a pariah in modern academic circles, despite that mainstream psychology has accepted much of what transpersonal psychology first introduced. The area of

consciousness studies, for example, is now legitimate, but it was taboo when transpersonal psychology was among the first areas to take its study seriously. Transpersonal psychology also respectfully explored spiritual claims from various non-Western (e.g., Eastern and indigenous) cultures, which until recently mainstream psychology tended to denigrate as so-called “exotic” cultural beliefs, yet now multiculturalism is commonplace within mainstream psychology. Transpersonal psychology also challenged many limitations of the scientific method, and helped pioneer important methodological shifts, such as when qualitative approaches became more accepted, alongside quantitative approaches, within psychology. In many other areas, transpersonal psychology has led the mainstream into positive directions.

However some approaches of transpersonal psychology have not yet been integrated into the mainstream. For example, transpersonal psychology proposed state-specific sciences (Tart, 1975), in which research can be legitimately gathered while researchers are in alternate consciousness states, a stance yet too radical for widespread acceptance. This approach, although seemingly out of bounds to many, may be more valid for studies in some contexts, such as involving exceptional experiences incomprehensible within Western cultural frameworks. Many traditional meditation systems use intense practices to alter consciousness, and have made cumulative internal observations that have consensually been refined and tested across millennia. Within these cultural contexts, these observations constitute empirically valid data, but derived from radically different types of science than customarily used within the West. Western meditation studies typically involve only beginners taught to meditate in short-term training of a few weeks or so, which contrasts with studies of those who have been practicing authentic spiritual traditions over most of their lifetimes. Consequently, state-specific methods that allow entrance into the worldview of those experiencing phenomena such as obtained via long-term meditation may actually be more scientifically appropriate than using conventional scientific approaches in these types of applications. In this regard, transpersonal psychology pioneered many human science methods involving alternative epistemological and ontological assumptions about knowing, as well as about the self as knower, but yet has a long way to go for wider acceptance (see Braud & Anderson, 1999).

In addition, transpersonal psychology takes data from all spiritual, not just Western, traditions. This differentiates it from psychology of religion, which has primarily been focused on the Judeo-Christian tradition, and which tends to study demographics and other externals, rather than experience. The psychology of religion, even when studying non-Western traditions, still also tends to retain the cultural baggage of Western monotheistic assumptions, while transpersonal psychology provides ways to escape these cultural traps. However, transpersonal psychology can get into its own unique cultural traps by becoming overly enthusiastic about exotic traditions, such as by “going native” (Friedman, 2009; 2010). In this regard, it is crucial for transpersonal psychology to learn from various traditions, but in creative scientific ways that do not abandon science (see Friedman, 2002).

Clinical Approaches to Transpersonal Psychology

As can be seen from this discussion, constructing meaning involves relating to that which is larger than the individual, and transpersonal psychology provides an excellent way to frame meaning. The remainder of this paper focuses on clinical applications of transpersonal psychology toward enhancing understanding and change through assessments and psychotherapies.

Transpersonal Assessments

One area of clinical application in transpersonal psychology involves using assessment strategies, including measures. I have been involved in reviewing over 100 measures that have promise in this area (e.g., Friedman & MacDonald, 1997; MacDonald & Friedman, 2002), as well as have constructed my own measures (e.g., Friedman, 1983; Pappas & Friedman, 2012). It should be noted that some humanistic and transpersonal psychologists object to all assessment, especially when involving tests, dismissing them as useless or worse (e.g., seeing them as inherently reductionary and harmful); in contrast, I have written about their appropriate use in transpersonal contexts (Friedman & MacDonald, 2006). Relating explicitly to the area of meaning, one measure with which I have reviewed and worked is the Purpose of Life Test¹ (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). However, insofar as transpersonal measures imply some type of an interconnection of individuals with something beyond themselves, I consider all to be relevant to meaning.

It should also be noted that all responsible intervention rests on a theoretical model and has to involve assessment to guide and evaluate it. Transpersonal psychology involves negotiating special difficulties in which proper assessment is crucial. For example, both the initial manifestation of higher consciousness and spiritual experience often share similarities

¹ As an aside, I worked with Maholick in the early 1970s in pioneering the use of this measure.

with many types of mental illness, and it is difficult to differentiate psychoses from such emergences (see Johnson & Friedman, 2008). To treat individuals as if they were psychotic when they might only be in a temporarily unbalanced transition toward a more evolved spiritual life could be potentially iatrogenic, but this unfortunately is all too common in mainstream practice. And such grievous practices are avoidable by being knowledgeable about transpersonal issues. For example, near death experiences can be initially quite disruptive, but often result in long-term positive psychological growth, yet few psychologists recognize these dynamics (Fracasso, Friedman, & Young, 2010).

Transpersonal Psychotherapies

There are many transpersonal psychotherapies that can enhance meaning (Rodrigues & Friedman, in press). These provide a way for psychotherapists treating not only psychopathology but also facilitating the optimum development of human potential, including toward developing higher states of consciousness and possible spiritual experiences. In fact, the impact of transpersonal psychotherapies of the field of psychotherapy has been greater than most might imagine. For example, many psychotherapies now applied widely within the mainstream first were studied and introduced to the West via transpersonal psychology, such as the burgeoning area of mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness approaches to psychotherapy are seldom labeled explicitly as transpersonal approaches, despite that they were introduced to the West in early transpersonal writings (e.g., Goleman, 1981). Transpersonal psychotherapy is also likely to become more important through the resurgence of psychedelic clinical applications (Friedman, 2006), as well as through anticipated advances in the neurobiology of altering consciousness (Krippner & Friedman, 2010). Finally, transpersonal psychology is forging a role in social change and other larger systems applications (e.g., involving peace; Machinga & Friedman, in-press). Transpersonal perspectives thus provide an inclusive, as well as increasingly coherent, framework for these and many other applied efforts.

Some psychotherapies explicitly embrace being called transpersonal (e.g., psychosynthesis; Assagioli, 1993). However, many more psychotherapies might be seen as transpersonal due to containing some transpersonal elements, such as by using underlying transpersonal models or employing transpersonal techniques, but the term transpersonal may not explicitly be used when describing them. In fact, there is a plethora of nomenclature used to describe these many transpersonal approaches, such as the numerous variants of mindfulness incorporated into extant psychotherapies (e.g., dialectical behavior therapy; Linehan, 1993). It is also important to note that, although many of these variants of mindfulness psychotherapies attribute their origin to Buddhist or other Eastern spiritual traditions, mindfulness also has a long history within Western psychotherapeutic traditions (Friedman, 2010). It should also be mentioned that there are techniques stemming from spiritual traditions that are neither Eastern nor Western, such as shamanism, which are used by many psychotherapists and also are not often explicitly labeled as being transpersonal (e.g., exorcism approaches for healing dissociated states; Ferracati, Sacco, & Lazzari, 1996). The following lists five general categories of transpersonal psychotherapies, based on techniques emphasized, along with examples of these psychotherapies (from Friedman & MacDonald, 2012):

Attentional. Using various attention-altering strategies, individuals can enter transpersonal states of consciousness. This can be achieved through approaches such as guided imagery, hypnosis, meditation, neurofeedback, and prayer.

Biochemical. Using various substances, such as psychedelic (or entheogens), individuals can also enter transpersonal states of consciousness. Psychedelics were a major part of the early transpersonal movement and, after being banned for decades, are again now becoming legitimate (Friedman, 2006). Research studies are showing that psychedelics can be useful for a variety of problems, and these substances might work simply at a biochemical level (as in affecting neurotransmitters), or they might work through transpersonal means by altering consciousness.

Depth psychological. Using various verbal (or in some cases, art or other expressive) approaches to psychotherapy, depth psychological approaches derived from psychoanalysis can result in transpersonal states of consciousness being entered. Jung (1970) first used the term transpersonal (in writings translated into English in the 1940s), and analytic therapy involves deep layers of both conscious, unconscious, and even collective unconscious material, the latter of which is seen as transpersonal (Levy, 1983). Assagioli (1993) contemporaneously with, but independently, of Jung developed psychosynthesis, a psychotherapy that proceeds from a conventional deficit-oriented analysis to a transpersonal synthesis.

Existential. Using verbal approaches for an exploration of meaning (e.g., logotherapy; Frankl, 1959), existential approaches can focus not merely on a human-centered, but also include transpersonal, perspectives. These would include exploring the unavoidability of death and deeper implications of embodiment, which align well with transpersonal approaches.

Somatic. Using somatic approaches, transpersonal states of consciousness can be entered. One such explicitly transpersonal somatic therapy is holotropic breathwork (Grof, Grof, & Kornfield, 2010), which was developed as an alternate to using psychedelics when their use was banned. This type of breathwork can facilitate deep regressive experiences, including into transpersonal realms. Working with the body is used in many psychotherapeutic approaches (e.g., bioenergetics; Glazer & Friedman, 2009), as well as across cultures for transpersonal purposes, such as yogic pranayama for spiritual healing. Besides breath work, other somatic approaches to transpersonal therapy are common, such as drumming, photic stimulation, and repetitive movements used to alter consciousness.

In addition to categorizing various transpersonal psychotherapies according to their aims and approaches, there are other commonalities that can lead them to being viewed as transpersonal. These include an emphasis on immediate experience, in contrast to merely conceptualizing about experience, in an expanded way. These foster expansion of self-concept toward it becoming more complex, integrated, interconnected, and whole, and possible even felt as sacred. In addition, they are not limited to treating dysfunction, but also are growth oriented. And the nature of the psychotherapeutic relationship is crucial to transpersonal psychotherapies, such as acknowledging the profound interconnectedness of psychotherapist and client, allowing for the possibility of exchange of information across many potential channels (as in possible subtle energies), accompanied by openness about the sacredness of both psychotherapist and client. Thus, despite whatever technique a transpersonal psychotherapist might be using, it can still be from a transpersonal perspective. Even using simple operant conditioning can be done with mindfulness such that the client is seen not just a rat being conditioned, but a sacred being as a biopsychosocial-spiritual whole being treated.

Conclusion

Insofar as transpersonal psychotherapies can lead to clients experiencing and forming stable understandings of interconnectivity with aspects of the cosmos that go beyond their being isolated as individuals, this can foster a greater sense of meaning. The utilization of transpersonal models for developing such holistic, in the sense of incorporating the entire cosmos into an expansive self-concept (Friedman, 1983; in press), perspectives could lead in many fruitful directions relevant to making meaning. Programs with criminal offenders could develop transpersonal self-expansiveness resulting in increased empathy toward potential victims. Corporate leaders could develop transpersonal self-expansiveness focusing on the need for greater environmental and social justice. Politicians could develop transpersonal self-expansiveness leading toward more concern for all of their constituents, and their goals could not be limited by material achievements but focus, instead, toward graver issues, such as achieving world peace. A transpersonal perspective can also largely avoid metaphysical language and be scientifically accessible, and is consequently likelier to be received positively in a wider way than parochial religious approaches based on traditions that could be divisive. Transpersonal clinical psychologists, using assessments and psychotherapies, could thus operate from the largest, and most inclusive, perspectives within science to heal (as in making whole) individuals and systems through approaches that are simultaneously scientific and sacred, building a solid basis for achieving a sense of meaning in a world that appears increasingly devoid of meaning.

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*The author can be contacted at harrisfriedman@hotmail.com. Parts of this paper are based on the Introduction in the following: Friedman, H., & Hartelius, G. (Eds.). (in-press). *The Wiley-Blackwell handbook of transpersonal psychology*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.