Transpersonal Education: An Educational Approach for the Twenty-First Century?

Scott Buckler, PhD
University of Worcester
s.buckler@worc.ac.uk

Abstract

Maslow was instrumental to the development of both humanistic and transpersonal psychology advocating that humanistic psychology should be subsumed by transpersonal psychology [1]. However the transpersonal has remained a lucid term with over-simplified definitions relating to spirituality [2-5], although three encompassing themes have been identified: beyond-ego psychology, integrative psychology and transformative psychology [6]. Although transpersonal psychology has been applied to a number of fields, (e.g. counselling, coaching, psychotherapy), there has been a paucity of research in relation to mainstream education. This paper initially introduces and discusses transpersonal psychology and how it differs to humanistic and positive psychology, before hermeneutically analysing previous research on transpersonal education, to propose a transpersonal education for the twenty-first century.

1. Defining the transpersonal

Transpersonal psychology can be dated to Maslow's writings circa 1966; indeed Maslow perceived humanistic psychology as a transitional field of psychology subsumed within transpersonal psychology [7]. However, since its inception, transpersonal psychology has remained relatively unknown outside relatively small intellectual circles [11] despite Fontana asserting that the transpersonal is 'arguably the oldest branch of psychological enquiry' [12].

Yet what is transpersonal psychology? Simply defined, the transpersonal has been interpreted as 'beyond the person': 'trans' translated from Latin as 'beyond' or 'through', and 'personal' from the Latin for 'mask' [8-10]. Unfortunately ascertaining deeper interpretations of the nature and content of transpersonal psychology is problematic due to the variety of perspectives and themes within the field. While Daniels lists a range of areas related to transpersonal psychology, reluctantly summarising these as 'spirituality' [13], Rowan adopts a different perspective, specifying boundaries to the concept, in that the transpersonal is not extrapersonal, is not associated with the right brain, is not the New Age, is not religion or spirituality [14]. An additional interpretation of transpersonal psychology is that it is a combination of elements blending Western psychology with Eastern contemplative traditions [15-17].

Through an analysis of thirty-five years of research into transpersonal psychology, Hartelius, Caplan and Rardin identified three encompassing themes: beyond-ego psychology, integrative/holistic psychology, and the psychology of transformation [18]. The first theme, beyond-ego psychology, examines the ego, its pathologies and the concept of exploration beyond the ego. The second theme attempts to identify how a single psychology for the whole person can be constructed, an approach which combines different psychological perspectives. The third theme is concerned with understanding and cultivating growth as individuals and as communities. Hartelius et al respectively refer to the themes as the content (the actual transpersonal states), the context (through which human experience is studied, for example, the beliefs, attitudes and intentions), and the catalyst (where such growth relates to personal and social transformation). Succinctly defined, Hartelius et al concluded that 'transpersonal psychology studies human transcendence, wholeness, and transformation' [19]. From this definition, transpersonal psychology aims to transform humanity, both individually and collectively, for the positive. Such a positive approach features within a more-widely recognised approach to psychology: positive psychology.

2. Positive psychology vs. humanistic psychology

Maslow originally used the term 'positive psychology' [20], although the term has become synonymous with the partnership of Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi. According to Robbins, positive psychology focuses on positive

subjective experiences (e.g. 'flow', joy, optimism, well-being, contentment, happiness, satisfaction), the personality traits of thriving individuals (e.g. character strengths and virtues), also the enhancement of social institutions to sustain and develop positive subjective experience [21], or what Seligman refers to as the 'three pillars' of positive psychology [22]. Although positive psychology and humanistic psychology may appear synonymous in approach, especially given that both share a common foundation [23], Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi criticise humanistic psychology as lacking an empirical research tradition which they assert is required for any psychological approach, given the positivist nature of the psychology [24]. In defence of humanistic psychology, Taylor identifies a range of themes that have been empirically researched [25], while others have provided counter-arguments against positive psychology, which relate specifically to the inherent value system adopted by positive psychology [26-28]. Such arguments centre on the way in which positive psychology enforces a neo-liberal economic and political discourse, whereby values such as moderation, responsibility and work ethic are central to the effective operation of a neo-liberal economy [29].

One area within positive psychology that has received significant attention is Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow', a state where one is absorbed, there is a sense of self-control, a loss of self-consciousness where action and awareness merge, associated with a transformation of time [30,31]. Although Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi report that flow enables a person to grow and to achieve their potential through obtaining this pleasurable state [32], Boniwell warns that such flow activities can be morally good or bad, for example citing the workaholic who ignores spending time with their children, or the compulsive gambler [33]. An additional criticism is raised by Buckler who discusses the similarities between the flow experience and Maslow's concept of self-actualisation, suggesting that there is little to distinguish between each state, and that both have inherent flaws [34].

Martin highlights the similarities between positive psychology and educational psychology whereby the latter focuses on 'creating conditions for optimal human learning and development in educational contexts and beyond' for example through emphasising positive levels of self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-regulation [35]. A final criticism against positive psychology is raised by Leontiev who states that positive psychology is more of an ideology and lacks a unified theoretical explanatory model [36].

Given the ongoing tension between positive psychology and humanistic psychology, such sibling rivalry is unlikely to resolve within the foreseeable future, despite both sharing the same foundation. Yet Maslow critiqued his own humanistic psychology, superseding this with transpersonal psychology, in turn advocating that research should focus on self-transcendence (specifically in relation to the plateau experience) [37]. Consequently although positive psychology may continue to receive attention, the reader should be critically aware of some of the tensions, similarly developing a further awareness of the differences between positive psychology, humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology.

3. The transpersonal related to education

Rothberg advocates that the area of education 'is one of the most significant areas of future inquiry and exploration in the transpersonal field' [38]. Cunningham supports this assertion, reporting that, 'dialogue on the topic of education in transpersonal psychology is indeed one of the most crucial needs now facing transpersonal psychology today' [39]. Yet Rothberg warns against the controversies and challenges of such a discussion, whereby he identifies the potential misunderstandings and tensions alongside cultural, intellectual, political, economic and academic contexts [40].

Perhaps this is the fundamental reason why, since its inception, transpersonal psychology related to education has remained significantly dormant. Indeed Maslow's writings seldom discuss education, despite every student teacher being aware of how the hierarchy of needs relates to motivation. Consequently in an attempt to promote discussion of the transpersonal within education, or more succinctly, 'transpersonal education', a series of considerations are synthesised from available literature.

It must however be highlighted that the majority of sources appear dated demonstrating the limited focus on transpersonal education since the inception of transpersonal psychology, possibly due to the issues raised above by Rothberg and Cunningham: consequently, a hermeneutic approach has been adopted, which in essence compares interpretations from the past with those from the present. Robson defines hermeneutics as both a philosophical orientation and a methodology in an attempt to make sense of the world [41], through recovering and reconstructing the intentions of others through analysis of meaning [42-46]. This hermeneutical approach will adhere to three themes: the policy, principles and practices related to transpersonal education.

3.1. Policy

According to Moore, transpersonal education should attempt to combine the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains, in that the mind and body should no longer be considered as separate entities (which he describes as jockey and horse) [47]. Such mind/body integration is similarly promoted by Roberts and Clark [48], while Rothberg advocated that transpersonal education should develop unite the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual domains [49].

Such a unified attempt to develop and integrate the aforementioned domains would support Maslow's assertion that the purpose of education is for a child to become a healthy, self-actualised (or self-transcended) adult [50,51]. To promote such a personal transformation, Maslow discussed the need for both parents and teachers to continue to personally develop to prevent 'their own distorted patterns of behaviour' being conveyed to the child [52]. Indeed, this relates to Firman and Gila's concept of 'the primal wound', whereby experiences beginning in early childhood and continuing through life results in a violation of our individuality affecting our intrinsic, authentic self, where 'we are torn away from human being and thrust toward human nonbeing, and our sense of self is profoundly wounded' [53]. Such wounding may be overt or covert, yet such wounding Firman and Gila assert, can be a social, political or cultural phenomenon [54]. Consequently, teachers and parents should resolve their primal wounds, moving towards their own personal transformation, which in turn will limit subsequent 'wounding' to children. One way to achieve this is to promote effective communication across the interpersonal, intrapersonal and transpersonal domains [55].

3.2. Principles (General)

A series of principles for transpersonal education can be deduced through the literature: arguably many of these themes resonate within the education profession as models of effective practice. Such an example advocated by Maslow [56] and Moore [57] is that learning should be joyful. This could be achieved through promoting intrinsic learning [58] through learner autonomy [59, 60], in that learning should be a process of self-discovery [61]. Such education should be value-free and promoted by the teacher in the role of a facilitator [62-64]. Maslow further suggests that such a model would promote lifelong learning [65].

3.3. Principles (Specific)

Alongside the general principles for transpersonal education, specific principles can be identified which outline operational considerations. Central to transpersonal education is the discovery of the inner depths of the individual and the essential human nature [66], alongside facilitating an appreciation of awe and beauty, especially in relation to the interrelation of all things [67, 68] or what Maslow terms 'a unitive experience' [69]. This can be achieved through an openness to experience [70], [71], through a pragmatic approach of linking theory to practice [72].

3.4. Practices

To promote the transpersonal, a series of practices have been advocated, although it must be noted that those presented here are representative and not an exhaustive list. Practices such as relaxation and meditation are promoted by Roberts and Clark [73], although mindfulness practice has recently received significant attention, where a person concentrates on a physical task (e.g. breathing, eating, drinking, exercise, etc.) in an attempt to synthesise mind and body [74, 75]. In returning to the policy that transpersonal education should unite a range of dimensions, Walsh has identified seven practices: redirecting motivation, transforming emotions, living ethically, developing concentration, refining awareness, cultivating wisdom, practicing service and generosity [76]. A further area originally advocated by Maslow for future research, especially in relation to self-transcendence is that of the plateau experience [77]. The plateau experience, Maslow asserts, is less emotive than the peak experiences associated with self-actualisation: instead they are a noetic awareness characterised by mindfulness, serenity and a unitive perception [78, 79]. Furthermore, Maslow considered that such characteristics could be developed within children [80].

4. Conclusions and future directions

The policy behind transpersonal education is that it should bring a synthesis of different domains (e.g. cognitive, affective, psychomotor) to promote personal transformation by developed facilitators (e.g. teachers, primary caregivers) through effective interpersonal, intrapersonal and transpersonal domains.

The principles behind a transpersonal education should be value-free and joyful, promoting learner autonomy through a process of self-discovery. Additionally, transpersonal education should encourage exploration of the essential human nature and the way in which the person relates on a larger scale to other people and nature, whereby a sense of awe and beauty can be promoted. Such experience should capitalise on linking theory to practice through experience.

In practice, a transpersonal education can be promoted through a range of practices advocated by

Walsh, for example developing concentration through mindfulness, or through further analysis of the plateau experience which Maslow reports is characteristic of self-transcendence, and implicitly, the transpersonal.

The themes identified above are not new: arguably many of the individual elements have been advocated and utilised within education previously, yet this paper attempts to synthesise such elements, while promoting a transpersonal education. How could such a transpersonal education be utilised within the education context? Moore provides three suggestions: (i) apply the transpersonal to existing subjects; (ii) select activities and studies which lead to an awareness of the transpersonal; or (iii) incorporate many new areas into the curriculum.

In conclusion, in 1975 Kantor suggested that a thorough investigation of man's inner world is required to rival and surpass space exploration in interest and importance [81]: indeed through a hermeneutical perspective, at a time of monumental social, economic and political change, one could question the exponential budgets invested in particle accelerators and the theoretical musings of the edges of the universe at the expense of the wonder of that central to us… the wonder of being human, or human being.

5. References

[1] Maslow, A.H. (1987). *Motivation and Personality: Third Edition*. Delhi: Pearson Education, Inc. (p.293)

[2] Daniels. M. (2005). *Shadow, Self, Spirit: Essays in Transpersonal Psychology*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

[3] Rowan, J. (2005). *The Transpersonal: Spirituality in Psychotherapy and Counselling – Second Edition*. London: Routledge.

[4] Sandage , S.J. & Jankowski, P.J. (2010). Quest and spiritual development moderated by spiritual transformation. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 38:1, 15-31.

[5] Fontana, D. (2003). *Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*. Leicester/Oxford: BPS Blackwell.

[6] Hartelius, G., Caplan, M. and Rardin, M.A. (2007). Transpersonal psychology: Defining the past, divining the future. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 35(2), 135-160.

[7] Maslow, 1987, op cit.

[8] Fontana, D. & Slack, I. (2005). The Need for Transpersonal Psychology. *Transpersonal Psychology Review: Special Issue*, Winter 2005, 7-11.

[9] Daniels, 2005, op. cit.

[10] Ferrer, J.N. (2002). *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

[11] Daniels, 2005, op. cit.

[12] Fontana, 2005, op.cit., p.3.

[13] Daniels, 2005, op. cit.

[14] Rowan, 2005, op. cit.

[15] Ferrer, 2002, op. cit.

[16] Miller, C. (1991). Self-actualization and the consciousness revolution. *Behaviour and Personality*, 6:5, 109-126.

[17] Fontana and Slack, 2005, op. cit.

[18] Hartelius, Caplan, Rardin, 2007, op. cit.

[19] Hartelius, Caplan, Rardin, 2007, ibid., p.145.

[20] Maslow, 1987, op. cit., p.354.

[21] Robbins, B.D. (2008). What is the good life? Positive psychology and the renaissance of humanistic psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 36, 96-112.

[22] Seligman, M.E.P. (2002). *Authentic Happiness*. New York: Free Press.

[23] McDonald, M. & O'Callaghan, J. (2008). Positive psychology: A Foucauldian critique. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 36, 127-142.

[24] Seligman, M.E.P and Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55, 5-14.

[25] Taylor, E. (2001). Positive Psychology and Humanistic Psychology: A Reply to Seligman. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 41:1, 13-29.

[26] Held, B. S. (2002). The tyranny of the positive attitude in America: Observation and speculation. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58, 965–991.

[27] Miller, A. (2008). A critique of positive psychology – or 'the new science of happiness'. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 42:3-4, 591-608.

[28] Sundararajan, L. (2005). Happiness donut: A Confucian critique of positive psychology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 25:1, 35-60.

[29] McDonald and O'Callaghan, 2008, op. cit.

[30] Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Inc, Publishers.

[31] Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness,* London: Rider.

[32] Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Csikszentmihalyi, I. (Eds.) (1988). *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[33] Boniwell, I. (2006). *Positive Psychology in a Nutshell: A Balanced Introduction to the Science of Optimal Functioning*. London: PWBC.

[34] Buckler, S. (2011). *The Plateau Experience: Maslow's Unfinished Theory*. Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing.

[35] Martin, J. (2006). Self research in educational psychology: A cautionary tale of positive psychology in action. *The Journal of Psychology*, 140:4, 307-316, (p.308).

[36] Leontiev, D. (2006). 'Positive personality development: Approaching personal autonomy'. In Csikszentmihalyi, M. and Csikszentmihalyi, I.S. (Eds.) (2006). *A Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

[37] Buckler, 2011, op. cit.

[38] Rothberg, D. (2005). Transpersonal Issues at the Millennium. *Transpersonal Psychology Review: Special Issue*, Winter 2005, 81-102, (p. 89).

[39] Cunningham, P.F. (2006). Transpersonal Education: Problems, Prospects and Challenges. *The International Jounral of Transpersonal Studies*. 25, 62-68, (p. 63)

[40] Rothberg, 2005, op. cit., p. 89.

[41] Robson, C. (2002). *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers (Second Edition)*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

[42] Braud, W. & Anderson, R. (1998).*Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences: Honouring Human Experience*. London: Sage Publications, Ltd.

[43] Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education: Sixth Edition*. London: Routledge.

[44] Fielding, N. (2010). Mixed methods research in the real world. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13:2, 127-138.

[45] Haslam, S.A. & McGarty, C. (2003). *Research Methods and Statistics in Psychology*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

[46] Kincheloe, J.L. & Berry, K.S. (2004). *Rigour and Complexity in Educational Research: Conceptualizing the Bricolage*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

[47] Moore, T.W. (1975). Transpersonal Education: A Preview. *Journal of Education*, 157:4, 24-39.

[48] Roberts, T. and Clark, F.V. (1976). 'Transpersonal Psychology in Education'. In Hendricks, G. and Fadiman, J. (Eds.) (1976). *Transpersonal Education: A Curriculum for Feeling and Being*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall (3-23).

[49] Rothberg, 2005, op. cit.

[50] Maslow, A.H. (1971). *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. London: Penguin Books.

[51] Rothberg, 2005, op. cit.

[52] Maslow, 1971, op. cit., p. 181.

[53] Firman, J. and Gila, A. (1997). *The Primal Wound: A Transpersonal View of Trauma, Addiction, and Growth*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, (p. 93).

[54] Firman and Gila, 1997, ibid.

[55] Weinhold, B.K. (1975). 'Transpersonal communication in the classroom'. In Hendricks, G. and Fadiman, J. (Eds.) (1976). *Transpersonal Education: A Curriculum for Feeling and Being*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall (123-150).

[56] Maslow, 1971, op. cit.

[57] Moore, 1975, op. cit.

[58] Maslow, 1971, op. cit.

[59] Kirchschenbaum, H. (1975). 'What is Humanistic Education?'. In Roberts, T.B. (Ed.) (1975). *Four Psychologies Applied to Education: Freudian, Behavioural, Humanistic, Transpersonal*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company (327-329).

[60] Rogers, C.R. (1961). *On Becoming A Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. London: Constable.

[61] Rogers, 1961, ibid.

[62] Maslow, 1971, op. cit.

[63] Rogers, 1961, op. cit.

[64] Kirschenbaum, 1975, op. cit.

[65] Maslow, A.H. (1970). *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*. New York: Penguin Compass.

[66] Maslow, 1970, ibid.

[67] Rothberg, 2005, op. cit.

[68] Moore, 1975, op. cit.

[69] Maslow, 1971, op. cit.

[70] Rogers, 1961, op. cit.

[71] Roberts, T. and Clark, F.V. (1976). 'Transpersonal Psychology in Education'. In Hendricks, G. and Fadiman, J. (Eds.) (1976). *Transpersonal Education: A Curriculum for Feeling and Being*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall (3-23).

[72] Rothberg, 2005, op. cit.

[73] Roberts and Clark, 1976, op. cit.

[74] Kabat-Zinn, J. (2001). *Full Catastrophe Living: How to Cope with Stress, Pain and Illness Using Mindfulness Meditation*. London: Piatkus Books.

[75] Rothberg, 2005, op. cit.

[76] Walsh, R. (1999). *Essential Spirituality: The 7 Central Practices to Awaken Heart and Mind. Exercises from the World's Religions to Cultivate Kindness, Love, Joy, Peace, Vision, Wisdom, and Generosity*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

[77] Krippner, S. (Ed.) (1972). The Plateau Experience: A.H. Maslow and Others. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 2:2, 107-120.

[78] Cleary, T.S. & Shapiro, S.I. (1995). The Plateau Experience and the Post-Mortem Life: Abraham H. Maslow's Unfinished Theory. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 27:1, 1-23.

[79] Buckler, 2011, op. cit.

[80] Krippner, 1972, op. cit.

[81] Kantor, R. (1975). 'The affective domain and beyond'. In Roberts, T.B. (Ed.) (1975). *Four Psychologies Applied to Education: Freudian, Behavioural, Humanistic, Transpersonal*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company (406-416).