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Edward R. Canda
University of Kansas

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East/West Philosophical Synthesis in Transpersonal Theory

EDWARD R. CANDA
University of Kansas
School of Social Welfare

Transpersonal theory is a perspective on human behavior and development that synthesizes philosophical and scientific insights from Eastern and Western traditions of thought. This article presents challenges from transpersonal theory to ethnocentric limitations of conventional developmental theories in social work. Three fundamental philosophical assumptions of conventional theories are critiqued: that linear, rational thinking is the standard for optimal cognitive development; that autonomy is the standard for psychosocial maturity; and that ordinary waking dualistic consciousness is the standard for normal mental operation. Limitations of transpersonal theory are also examined. Based on the challenges and insights of transpersonal theory, suggestions for innovation in teaching and philosophizing about human behavior in social work are offered.

The profession of social work commonly espouses a commitment to understand and respond to human diversity in a culturally-sensitive manner (DeVore and Schlesinger, 1987; Lum, 1986). However, human development theories prevalently taught within Human Behavior in the Social Environment (HBSE) courses are constrained by Euro-American philosophical and cultural assumptions. For example, Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg and related theorists are all white Euro-American males who have expounded theories of development that are culturally bounded (Longres, 1990). Their cultural conditioning and research approaches predispose them to evaluate human behavior according to standards of autonomy, rational thought, linear development, and dualistic (subject/object dichotomy) world view. When this culture-bound developmental perspective is taught to Euro-American students without significant alternatives, students can easily become myopic, since the perspective is likely to be consistent with their own cultural conditioning. The situation becomes like the Korean proverb

about a frog in a well—the naive frog is certain that it understands the whole world. When this perspective is taught to minority and international students, their own understandings of human behavior may be neglected or derided. If we are truly to understand the diverse world of human behavior, it is necessary for us to get out of the well.

Transpersonal theory attempts to transcend "the well" of ethnocentric conceptions of human development by synthesizing philosophical and scientific insights from Eastern and Western traditions of thought. Although many of these theorists are Euro-American white males, they attempt to transcend their own cultural constraints by drawing upon insights from Hindu Vedanta, Buddhism, shamanism, and other mystical (i.e., rooted in spiritual experience) philosophies (Underhill, 1961; Woods, 1980). The assumptions of these philosophers provide contrast and alternative to the Western secular academic assumptions that limit conventional developmental theories in HBSE courses. They also provide rich possibilities for articulating an holistic, post-positivistic perspective for social work in general.

In the following discussion, major transpersonal theoretical concepts will be introduced through a critique of three developmental assumptions that are commonly taken for granted in HBSE content. These conventional assumptions have been selected for critique because they are pervasive and fundamental. These assumptions are that: (a) *Linear, rational thinking is the standard for optimal cognitive development.* (b) *Autonomy is the standard for psychosocial maturity.* (c) *Ordinary waking consciousness is the standard for normal mental operation.* Suggestions for innovation in teaching and philosophizing about human behavior in social work are presented.

Historical Background of Transpersonal Theory

Transpersonal theory is an outgrowth from humanistic psychology (Boucouvalis, 1980; Vich, 1990). Humanistic psychology developed in reaction to the environmental determinism of behaviorism and the psychodynamic determinism of Freudianism. In the 1960s and 1970s, humanistic psychological research began to emphasize distinctively human functioning, especially

optimal functioning, such as creativity and peak experiences. Many humanistic psychologists, such as Maslow (1970), came to the conclusion that spiritual issues of meaning and purpose, and experiences of transcendence of ego-boundary through love and mystical communion, represent the highest reaches of human nature and deserve to be studied in their own right. Thus, transpersonal psychology is described as the "fourth force" of psychology (Maslow, 1969). The principal predecessor of this recent trend was Carl Jung (Campbell, 1971). His ideas have become influential in contemporary transpersonal theory. The term transpersonal refers to the experience of transcending the boundaries of personal, individual self-identity. Since conventional Western psychology did not offer adequate concepts and frames of reference to describe this, the language and ideas of mystical philosophies and religiously based psychologies have become important sources for transpersonalists. Transpersonal thought now extends beyond psychology; it has become a transdisciplinary theoretical perspective on human behavior and development (Washburn, 1988).

Linear/rational Thinking as the Standard for Cognitive Development

Piaget's (1970) influential cognitive development theory posits a series of stages through which a person with adequate neurological capacity progresses. This progression occurs through the elaboration of increasingly comprehensive and sophisticated thinking strategies in response to challenges of new experience. The highest stage, which many adults do not reach, is called formal operational thought. This stage emphasizes the ability to engage in logical thought with completely abstract concepts. Kohlberg (Kohlberg, Levine, and Hewer, 1983) extends this model to moral development; Fowler (1981; 1982) extends it to faith development.[1] Implicit in this view is an emphasis upon cognition as central to development (in contrast to feeling or intuition). Further, the type of thought emphasized follows the Aristotelian and rationalist standards of linear rationality (e.g, deduction or induction), causality, and mutual

exclusivity of opposites. In social work literature, this type of thinking has been criticized as inadequate for its allegedly male perspective bias (Davis, 1985) as well as its philosophical and scientific reductionism and simplification (Haworth, 1984).

Transpersonal theorists contend that linear, rational thinking is a useful but limited type of mental operation. They identify four ways in which this type of thinking is surpassed. First, in agreement with the objections of feminists and postpositivists, they assert that holistic, integrative thinking is essential. Wilber (1979, 1983) postulates that proficiency at holistic thinking and envisioning occurs in some adults in a stage subsequent to formal operational thought. This is a transitional stage to fully transpersonal experience. For example, holistic and systemic models in social work emphasize understanding of the person in context of interconnections with the environment. An individual cannot exist as an isolate, but only in relation and in process. This is similar to a basic premise of Buddhist philosophy that no thing is self-existent, but rather is mutually constructed and co-originated with every other thing (DeBary, 1969).

Second, some transpersonalists, most notably the Jungians, emphasize that rational thinking does not make a whole person. Rather than using the hierarchy image of stepwise development, they use the image of completion and expansion of self. Thus, the whole person grows in a continual process of reconciling and integrating the contrasting psychological functions of thinking, felling, sensing, and intuiting, as well as other complementary psychological characteristics (Campbell, 1971). Such wholeness is reflected in Hindu and Buddhist religious mandala paintings, hence Jung appropriated the word "mandala" to name the symbols of wholeness depicted in many forms of religious and psychotherapeutic art (Jung, 1959).

Third, human development can transcend both rational and integrative thought and experience. In Wilber's (1980; 1983) and Ajaya's (1983) schemes, cognitive development beyond the holistic/systemic enters the realm of transpersonal psyche, what Jung called the collective unconscious and what Assagioli (1976) called the transconscious. A person proficient at this level is described as able to integrate insights from panhuman symbolic

themes of meaning, called archetypes, as well as religious revelations and extra-sensory perception. Grof (1988) offers a compendium of such clinically observed experiences.

Fourth, optimal human development is recognized by transpersonalists to transcend all forms of dualistic consciousness. Even the realm of archetypal experience assumes that there is a subject (an ego) experiencing an object (an archetype). Systemic analysis assumes the fundamental reality of things in relationship, pattern, and process. Beyond the systemic and archetypal modes of consciousness is a way of experiencing that transcends the fiction of separate selfhood altogether. Swami Ajaya (1983) refers to this as unitary consciousness, the highest attainment in Vedanta. The person who is proficient at this level realizes that the beginning and end of development are really the same. The life course of developing from dualistic consciousness to nondualistic consciousness is actually a process of realizing what was fundamentally real and true from the beginning. Only the perspective has changed.

In this view, subject, object, and interrelation only exist as epiphenomena of dualistic consciousness. Existentially, we deal with distinctions. Essentially there are no distinctions. Even to posit contradiction between distinction and nondistinction is an error. This is why some forms of Buddhist philosophy view clinging to any names, forms, or philosophical postulates as an obstacle to enlightenment (Murti, 1980). This level of attainment is rare, but it is possible nonetheless, according to the transpersonalists. Indeed, their teleology posits this awareness as the goal of complete human development.

Transpersonalists who adopt a primarily Buddhist/Vedantic philosophical vantage, such as Wilber and Ajaya, posit a radical elimination of all distinctions at this level. Transpersonalists who adopt a primarily Judeo-Christian vantage, such as Washburn (1988), posit a complete reconciliation of opposition between self and the "Dynamic Ground" of reality while retaining an ontological distinction between them. From both vantages, rational and integrative ways of experiencing the world are incorporated and subsumed within the highest level of transpersonal consciousness.

Individual Autonomy as the Standard for Development

Erik Erikson's (1980) psychosocial development model, and similar stage theories by Levinson (1978) and other conventional theorists commonly appropriated in social work (Brennan and Weick, 1981; Erickson and Martin, 1984) portray individual development as a course of autonomous ego formation. These models follow the Freudian assumption that the neonate is psychologically undifferentiated from the nurturing environment. Gradually, self-awareness forms. The child increasingly asserts independent initiative. Separate identity is firmly (often defiantly) established in adolescence. From this point, one needs to establish mature relationships. Similarly family systems theorists emphasize the importance of avoiding enmeshment and codependency (Barnard and Corrales, 1979; Wechter, 1983). Therefore, it is often assumed that people who do not separate their understanding of self and self-needs from their connection with others are having a developmental problem. From these conventional perspectives, people who report spiritual experiences of dissolution of ego boundaries or fusion with the universe are likely to be considered to suffer from a pathological regression to infantile dependency or ego boundary maintenance problems (Freud, 1989).

As Gilligan (1982) and Randour (1987) have pointed out, the theme of autonomy seeking to balance with intimacy is not compatible with the psychological and spiritual experience of many women, who might rather emphasize a developmental theme of connectedness seeking to balance with autonomy. Likewise, Eastern philosophies refute autonomy as a norm. For example, Tu (1989) and Kalton (1988) point out that Confucianist developmental theory views the interdependency of individual identity and community membership to be natural and morally correct. Thus, for an individual to assert his or her own desires in disregard for social commitments would be narcissistic, immoral, and immature. As the anthropologist Hall (1977) observes, community-defined identity (rather than individualist identity) is common beyond Euro-American cultures.

Further, transpersonal theory embraces the mystical assertion that autonomous self-identity itself is a delusion. In Buddhist terms, entities are void, not self-existent. They are marked

by co-origination and co-dissipation. In so far as human beings must deal existentially with the experience of separateness, the ideal is one of harmony and complementarity (including harmony with opposition and conflict). Transpersonal theorists emphasize the risk of narcissism in individualism, whereas the conventional theorists emphasize the risk of pathologic fusion in unitive mystical experiences.

Wilber (1983) criticizes a serious theoretical and therapeutic problem, called the pre/trans fallacy, that emerges from the Freudian heritage of the autonomy assumption. This is the diagnostic error of confusing pre-egoic fusion (e.g. infantile symbiosis) with trans-egoic transpersonal experiences (e.g. unitary consciousness). Conventional developmental theory makes no distinction between these, so it cannot distinguish between a spiritual growth crisis, in which the person breaks through the ego boundary to transpersonal levels of awareness, and a psychotic episode that reflects ego boundary confusion or regression (Bragdon, 1990). Failure to make this distinction can result in the punishment and pathologizing of people who are striving to actualize their fullest human potential. The difficulty of differentiating these types of experiences is compounded by culturally and spiritually variant assumptions about the nature of reality, which often go without examination in clinical diagnostic interviews. However, insights from transpersonal and transcultural studies are being applied in recent efforts to address this challenge (Canda, 1988a).

Ordinary Waking Consciousness as the Standard for Mental Functioning

Conventional developmental theories reveal a bias in favor of ordinary waking consciousness as a standard for normalcy, both by commission of faulty assumptions and by omission of important human behavior information. As the preceding discussion indicated, developmental theories stemming from both Freudian and Piagetian heritages commit the error of assigning so-called altered states of consciousness to irrationality or psychopathology. This seems reflective of a general Western cultural bias, since surveys of world cultures document that most cultures recognize various types of dreams, visions, trance

states, and transcendental modes of consciousness to be normative and extremely important (Achterberg, 1985; Bourguignon, 1976 and 1979; Kleinman, 1980).

Conventional theories also commit the error of omitting these altered states of consciousness from serious consideration. The developmental schemes rarely mention such modes of experience, outside the context of developmental problems. Thus, with regard to these aspects of human experience, the theories are superficial and scant.

Transpersonal research into consciousness has reaffirmed traditional mystical assertions that diverse states of consciousness are available as positive resources for human growth and insight. Research areas include meditation, voluntary control of autonomic functions, psychotropic and psychedelic drug therapy, and crosscultural studies of trance and ritual healing (Grof, 1980; Grof and Halifax, 1977; Keefe, 1986; Lukoff and Lu, 1988; Masters and Houston, 1966; Pelletier and Garfield, 1976; Roberts, 1989; Tart, 1975). Of course, Jung, as a predecessor of contemporary transpersonalism, emphasized the healing and transformational forces inherent in the collective unconscious, as revealed by dreams, visions, and therapeutic techniques such as active imagination (Dalby Clift and Clift, 1984). Another early forerunner of transpersonal psychology, William James (1985), documented a wide variety of growth promoting religious experience.

Grof's (1988) typology of clinically observed transpersonal experiences include visions that relate symbolically and literally to visionary re-experience of birth as well as transpersonal experiences, such as experiential mergence with other beings, extrasensory perception, contact with spirits and divinity, and cosmic consciousness. In such experiences, it is often difficult to verify by scientific standards whether their internal subjective components are valid. However, this conventional standard of validity is itself questioned by transpersonal theorists. At the very least, these experiences have the status of reality in the psyche (that is, experiential, phenomenological reality) as Jung pointed out. Further, there are externally manifest components of these experiences that can be confirmed, for example, physiological changes as correlates to consciousness change and

psychosocial functioning improvements in response to integration of peak experiences. Therefore, these experiences deserve further study as possible strengths and resources to be considered in social work practice.

Transpersonal theorists make a further refutation of waking consciousness as a norm on philosophical grounds. As previously discussed, conventional cognitive theorists usually describe the cognitive activity of people in the waking state in dualistic and egoic terms. Yet, transpersonal theorists operate from a premise that dualistic thinking is limited in usefulness, and when engaged in exclusively, is deluded. Indeed, to make dualistic consciousness the norm is to set up prejudices and barriers against people attaining their highest potential.

Cautions about Transpersonal Theory

Transpersonal theory requires further refinement in order to become a comprehensive and adequate transcultural perspective on human behavior. In its present forms, it is most useful as counterpoint to conventional theory. There are several limitations that need to be considered when using it for social work purposes.

First, transpersonalists accept many of the assumptions of conventional developmental models up to the transpersonal levels of development. Their main contention with conventional theory is that it does not go far enough. Thus, many objections to conventional theory pertaining to culture, gender, and other biases apply to transpersonal theory up to the transpersonal levels (McDonald, 1989).

Second, the structural stage theorists, most prominently Wilber, use a hierarchical model of stepwise development that runs the risk of being self-serving. That is, the highest level of attainment coincides with their own views of what is best, most mature, most civilized, most spiritually aware. Conveniently, that places everyone who disagrees at a lower level of development (Tomecek, 1990). This condescension is very evident in Wilber's (1982) attempt to apply his theory to social development, in which he places shamanistic cultures at a low level of development. Wilber bases this on allegations that they do not emphasize unitary consciousness and also that they mistakenly

believe their own psychological projections to be spirit entities. However, in the views of traditional Native American spiritualities, the spirit world is real and has practical importance for daily life (Black Elk and Lyon, 1990; Lame Deer and Erdoes, 1972). It is also the case that "unitary consciousness" is not regarded universally as the epitome of human development; to impose that standard on all people may be a form of religious imperialism.

Third, many transpersonal theorists, such as Wilber and Washburn, base their developmental models primarily on intellectual analysis, interpretations of philosophical texts, and their own spiritual experiences. These are valuable. However, with the exception of clinical case studies, serious systematic empirical research, whether experimental, qualitative or quantitative is in an early stage (Lukoff and Lu, 1988; Lukoff, Zanger, and Lu, 1990). Further research is necessary to overcome the inheritance of theoretical biases from their conventional and philosophical sources. It is also necessary to examine the accuracy and applicability of the models to people of diverse spiritual perspectives and cultural backgrounds.

Fourth, Eastern and Western scientific and philosophical ideas are sometimes mixed together without sufficient regard for their original and precise context-specific meanings. Complex and contrasting Eastern and Western philosophies are sometimes over-simplified. Future work in East/West philosophical dialogue needs to be conducted in order to carefully re-examine the intellectual and mystical bases of transpersonal theory.

Finally, the macro socio-political and ecological implications of transpersonal theory need to be further developed. This has not been a strong emphasis in the transpersonal psychological work, but some work is beginning in the field of psychological theory and ethics (Fox, 1990; Seed, Macy, Fleming, and Ness, 1988).

Implications for Education

In the classroom as well as in scholarly dialogue, conventional and transpersonal theories can be placed in dialectic relation to each other in order to provide breadth and diversity of

perspectives. Developmental models of Wilber, Jung, Washburn, and Grof are easily available and they are having a broad public impact through transpersonal and so-called New Age publications. Students need to be familiar with them as an aspect of popular culture that clients with strong spiritual concerns are likely to be aware of. Students also need to grapple with the challenges transpersonal theory presents to the biases of conventional theory. Further, transpersonal theorists are progressing in an effort to develop assessment standards and helping strategies and techniques that can be applied in clinical practice with persons who deal with transpersonal experiences.

Transpersonal theory challenges students to identify the limits of their understandings of human behavior and to grow beyond them. It raises profound and practical questions regarding the development of spiritually and culturally-sensitive practice (Canda, 1988b). This requires more than just a cataloguing of alternative ideas in the classroom. A comparative method of teaching and dialogue that focuses on existential (not just intellectual) self-clarification and mutual understanding is necessary to explore these limits and their implications for practice (Canda, 1989; Krill, 1990). How do the students' own philosophical, religious, and political views relate to the various developmental theories? How do their own developmental experiences of relationships, cognition, and altered states of consciousness bear on their evaluation of these theories? How can they weave together a usable and coherent conceptual framework for practice, drawing on the insights of diverse models of development?

Implications for Philosophical Innovation

Transpersonal theory can facilitate current philosophical efforts to develop meaningful alternatives to positivistic and reductionist thinking in social work. Transpersonal theory counters the egocentrism of developmental theories that assume the individual is the primary unit for understanding of human behavior. It counters the ethnocentrism of developmental theories that discount all nonWestern and non-scientific insights as invalid and unworthy of attention. It counters the dualism of developmental theories that are limited to linear thinking and dichotomous conceptual categories.

Current social work philosophical writings emphasize the importance of holistic understandings of human behavior (Imbrogno and Canda, 1988; Imre, 1984; Saleebey, 1989; Weick 1987 and 1990; Weick, et al., 1989.). From the transpersonal view, this is a significant advance beyond reductionist understandings. However, while these versions of holism transcend reductionism, they rarely consider options beyond dualism. Hence scholarly debates occur from opposite sides of polarities: positivist versus postpositivist; atomistic versus holistic; quantitative verses qualitative; absolutist verses deconstructionist; male voice versus female voice; strengths perspective versus problem focus. The transpersonal perspective offers many insights that support efforts to reconcile these opposites. It also suggests many nonWestern philosophical perspectives that have long existed as viable alternatives to reductionism and dualism.

Transpersonal theory also challenges philosophical and empirical inquiry to extend beyond a focus on processes, patterns, and relationships between individuals and the external social environment. Holistic understanding of human behavior needs to include the inner realms of experience, such as the phenomenology of consciousness, as well as the mutual interdependency between human consciousness and the external environment. Further, social work philosophy needs to begin considering the implications of nondualistic consciousness. It may be worth examining the claims of current transpersonal theory, and many mystical traditions, that unitary consciousness is the foundation for reconciling dichotomies, including the dichotomy between philosophy and service (Patel, 1987).

In summary, transpersonal theory attempts to synthesize insights from Eastern and Western philosophical and scientific perspectives in order to present an holistic and nondualistic understanding of human development. Its contrast to conventional American social work assumptions poses major challenges for teaching, philosophizing, and practice. Perhaps an exploration of its insights and limitations can assist philosophers of social work to transcend the dichotomous thinking that remains from the positivist/materialist heritage.

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Notes

1. Both Kohlberg and Fowler speculate on the possibility of people trancending dualistic moral thinking and achieving an awareness merged with God or the universe. Fowler also believes in the possibility of God intervening in the developmental process at any time. Kohlberg and Fowler regard nondualistic consciousness as very rare. Since this traspersonal aspect of their theories is barely addressed in social work literature, this discussion does not examine it. For example, see the accounts of human development in the recent texts by Longres (1990) and Pillari (1988).