

Preface: Unrealized Potentials, Anomalous Experiences, and Humanistic Psychology

Journal of Humanistic Psychology

1–8

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00221678211055034

journals.sagepub.com/home/jhp

Karel James Bouse¹, Stanley Krippner²,
David Luke³, Christine Simmonds-Moore⁴ ,
Steve Taylor⁵, Chris Roe⁶ ,
Charmaine Sonnex⁷,
and Malcolm Schofield⁸ 

Keywords

humanistic psychology, Skinnerian operant, unrealized potentials

For half a century, mainstream psychology had been proposing that human experiences, such as ecstasy and anguish, are effects of neurophysiological processes. The major topics of psychology classes were neuron networks, genetic effects, the behavior of rodents, and statistical tables. Early humanistic psychologists asked, “Where is the experience in all of this? Where is the human in all of this? What does it all mean? And what will be the impact on

¹Institute of Esoteric Psychology, Loudon, TN, USA

²California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, USA

³University of Greenwich, UK

⁴University of West Georgia, Carrollton, USA

⁵Leeds Beckett University, UK

⁶University of Northampton—Waterside Campus, UK

⁷The University of Buckingham, UK

⁸University of Derby, UK

Corresponding Author:

Karel James Bouse, Institute of Esoteric Psychology, 224 Mialaquo Circle, Loudon, TN 37774, USA.

Email: kjb@institute-ep.com

my life?” Mainstream psychology had developed useful tools to describe, measure, and explain human conduct, with explanations ranging from Freudian psychodynamics to Skinnerian operant conditioning. But exploration of the existential issues of human life, of meaning and intention, were sidelined. It took a “humanistic revolution” to deepen and broaden the scope of psychology to include humanistic psychology (and existential psychology in Europe).

The search for meaning is an example of how humanistic psychology deepens psychological science. Humanistic psychology has broadened psychology by studying areas neglected by the mainstream. In his groundbreaking book titled *Human Potentialities*, Gardner Murphy (1958) described *human nature* as “a reciprocity of what is inside the skin and what is outside” (p. xiii). He called for the exploration of neglected areas of human nature, adding that “new fields, such as parapsychology, point to unrealized potentials” (p. 9).

Humanistic psychology has always taken an interest in these “unrealized potentials,” examining experiences that would have been pathologized or ignored only a few decades ago. In 2000, the American Psychological Association published a book that I co-edited, *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*, which aroused so much attention that a second edition was published in 2014. This anthology triggered both academic interest and scientific exploration of many topics that have always been featured by humanistic psychology. Since its publication, there has been a volley of articles on the topic in mainstream psychological books and journals (e.g., Taves, 2020). This special issue of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* continues this trend by providing readers with what might be their first exposure to the disciplined study of synesthesia, ritual, time expansion, psychedelics, and the “dark side” of unusual experiences.

Synesthesia

Christine Simmonds-Moore uses the term *exceptional experiences* (eXe), originally proposed by Rhea White (1997) in her work on what she called “Exceptional Human Experiences.” Using a definition similar to White’s, Simmonds-Moore describes eXe as experiences that fall outside of the normal ways in which people experience and understand reality. For her, synesthesia experiences belongs in this category, and her article supports that contention. However, I would have preferred that Simmonds-Moore use the term *ordinary* instead of *normal*. To label an experience “normal” implies that dissimilar experiences are “abnormal,” thus buying into the medical model and its categories.

In any event, Simmonds-Moore correctly notes that classifying an experience as “exceptional” does not imply veridicality. Far too many researchers avoid mentioning their participants’ extraordinary experiences in the fear that peers and colleagues would assume that the researcher accepted the participant’s terminology as a valid description of reality. This is especially crucial when a participant describes an “alien abduction,” an “out of body” experience, or a “past life” scenario. Once an investigator realizes that an agnostic position is feasible, fears of academic censure, a grant proposal’s rejection, or peer disapproval can be dismissed.

Simmonds-Moore’s article includes research in which synesthesia was induced by hypnosis, a procedure that she suggests “may be the most promising means to create Synesthetic experiences . . .” I would add that psychedelics often produce synesthesia, but their effects are so unpredictable that the hypnosis route may be a better choice. Because reports of synesthesia correlate positively with several anomaly-prone variables, it would make sense for researchers in consciousness studies to check for synesthesia experiences when describing the phenomenology of an eXe. Simmonds-Moore notes that synesthesia is one of several individual difference variables that exhibit a greater tendency toward various forms of sensory sensitivity. She mentions the lack of systematic research on the etiology of sensitivity in synesthesia, seeing this area as a clue to understanding individual differences in the reports of usually unseen phenomena. Semantic information is at the heart of most synesthetic experiences, helping to ascertain the meaning of material that might be pre-linguistic, including transpersonal and “extrasensory” information. Rather than relegating synesthesia to a footnote, Simmonds-Moore proposes that these eXes be considered as complicated synesthesias. The entire article is filled with provocative insights and directions for research that will become required reading for serious students of this topic.

The “Dark Tetrad”

Malcolm B. Schofield and his associates have contributed an article that explores the relationship among religious, paranormal, and scientific beliefs and the “Dark Tetrad” of narcissism, psychopathy, sadism, and Machiavellianism. They discovered that religious beliefs were significantly correlated with sadism and negatively related to psychopathy; the latter finding corroborates data from similar studies, but the former finding came as a surprise. The authors’ hypothesis was that “Dark Tetrad” components would be negatively related to religious beliefs. Schofield and his associates suggest that one aspect of the sadism scale is that in a “just world” people “get what they deserve,” a point of view taken by many highly religious people.

But sadism in religious groups is often more directly expressed. An example can be found in Nuala O’Faolain’s (2020) recollections of her childhood years in Roman Catholic parochial schools. She recalled nuns wearing a leather strap attached to their habits, with the head nun having a double-thickness strap. O’Faolain felt the strap many times, noting that “it reduced me to a sniveling supplicant, squeezing my red hot hands between my knees and begging for forgiveness.” She recalled being chastised, along with her classmates, for “sins of pride,” which included talking about future vocations other than entering a convent. “Breaking the will” of “prideful” girls was seen as a teacher’s duty. O’Faolain claimed that the church developed the concepts of sexual wickedness and material sin, which were used to facilitate the expression of sadism.

O’Faolain also recalled grown men sharing their school tales, especially their memories of brutality: “an ear deaf from a blow; a stammer from constant humiliations; a terrible episode of incontinence from fear, and—over and over again—a brain never used because all the boy wanted from school was to get away from it.” She added that the Sisters of Mercy “should not stand in the pillory alone. A great many of the ‘religious’ should be standing beside them.” Examples can be found in so many other religions, even in their scriptures, that the sadism/religion link should not have come as a surprise. The “gentle, loving God” all too often is eclipsed by the “wrathful, angry God.”

Psychedelically Induced Anomalous Experiences

In his article, David Luke discusses psychedelically induced anomalous experiences, focusing on 10 of the most common “transpersonal or parapsychological experiences.” One of the 10 cited is synesthesia, but Luke does not explain how it merits the transpersonal or parapsychological label. Nor does he justify sleep paralysis, another experience on his list. One could extrapolate to claim that transpersonal and parapsychological experiences may emerge from synesthesia and sleep paralysis; historically, sleep paralysis was often linked with spirit possession, which does merit a place on Luke’s list.

When Luke mentions people most readily associated with the discovery and popularization of psychedelics, he honors such pioneers as Aldous Huxley and Humphrey (sic) Osmond, but fails to mention such women as Laura Huxley and Jean Houston, much less the Mexican curandera Maria Sabina, now recognized as the co-founder of ethnomycology. Indeed, most of Luke’s article bypasses the transpersonal and paranormal delimitations, using the term *anomalous experiences* to refer to those distinct from one’s ordinary state of awareness or contravening assumptions about reality. Technically,

experience is not a synonym for *awareness*; indeed, the definition would be better stated as “those experiences associated with one’s ordinary state of awareness.” As for the experiences contravening one’s assumptions of reality, a neglected topic in the field, they are important in assessing the social impact of anomalous experiences, especially regarding the origins of religions and the production of creative breakthroughs.

Luke is to be congratulated for including parapsychological data in his article. This controversial field is typically overlooked by other authors, even though its inclusion would add another dimension to the discussion. Luke’s treatment of near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, and entity encounters is enhanced by the inclusion of “non-local” phenomena. Moreover, his 10th category is devoted to telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis. Perhaps more than his other categories, this one clearly calls into question one’s “assumptions about reality.” This discussion is grounded by a review of neuroscientific findings, most notably data noting reduced cerebral blood flow in key “hub regions” of the cortex. Luke’s inclusion of neuroscience throughout his article provides authority that would be lacking without this material.

Time Expansion Experiences

Taylor uses the term *Time Expansion Experiences*, or TEEs, to describe episodes where one’s “normal experience of time slows down or expands significantly.” Again, I would have preferred that he use *ordinary* instead of *normal*, because there is nothing abnormal or pathological in the dozens of cases he discusses. In addition, it would have been useful to cite the classic work of M. D. Cooper and Milton Erickson (1959), which laid the groundwork for future experiments.

Taylor, however, did not perform experiments, but worked with people who reported TEEs and their likely “triggers.” He found a range of triggers that included automobile accidents as well as psychedelic drugs. He also found TEEs in near-death experiences, mystical experiences, and, to a lesser extent, visits to new locations and significant life changes. He drew upon his “information-processing theory of time perception” to explain this phenomenon, proposing that the more information people processed during a period of time, the longer they perceived that period of time to be. New experiences tend to stretch time. Young children often report time expansion, while time seems to be accelerated by older adults. When new experiences are lacking, as is the case of boredom, anxiety, and depression, time seems to expand. The same seems to be true of mindfulness and meditation. However, these states

are qualitatively different from those associated with accidents, psychedelics, and mystical experiences.

Taylor went into some depth elaborating his theory by drawing upon his two studies for examples. He suggested that time distortion may have been an adaptive trait, noting that some of his study participants reported that their TEE enabled them to take preventive action. But Taylor also found a link to “awakening experiences” and their potential for radical life changes. Finally, he noted that time is a social construct and that one’s ordinary sense of linear time may be an illusion, although a necessary one that helps people to order their experiences. In retrospect, this article is thought-provoking and a welcome addition to the literature on how culture impacts experience.

Pagan Ritual Practice

Charmaine Sonnex, Chris Roe, and Elizabeth Roxburgh discuss flow, liminality, and eudaimonia as aspects of pagan ritual practice, delimiting the term to religions and spiritualities inspired by pre-Christian traditions, principally from Europe. Like humanistic psychology, and unlike much other Western psychotherapy, Paganism emphasizes process rather than outcome. Pagan practices can be performed in solitary settings or in groups or covens.

The authors note the growth of Paganism in the United Kingdom, but bypass the Wicca movement in the United States and elsewhere (Chamberlain, 2016). Notably, Wicca advocates have succeeded in establishing the Wicca pentacle as an option for U.S. government-issued headstones in military cemeteries. Nor is shamanism mentioned; traditional shamanism is not a “religion,” although Paganism had its roots in this ancient practice.

Pagan ritual performance is typically liminal, enacted at twilight or during developmental “thresholds,” when the “flow” experience is conducive to the discovery of life’s meaning and purpose. This process shares humanistic psychology’s theories of optimal functioning as well as self-acceptance, positive interpersonal relationships, learning from direct experience, and eudaimonia, living in accordance with one’s “true self.” The shared commonalities have been overlooked for too long, and this article may well be a breakthrough for future researchers and practitioners.

Conclusion

This admirable collection of articles reflects the comment by Patrick Whitehead and Miles Groth (2019) in *Resituating Humanistic Psychology*, namely: “Experience never occurs in a vacuum” (p. 170). They further stated that environment shapes what one will become. These are recurring themes

in humanistic psychology, and this special issue provides in-depth examples of experience/environment interaction. It also reminds readers that anomalous experiences need not be transpersonal or paranormal. For example, I conducted a study on “transformative experiences” in which I was able to separate those that were spiritual from those that were secular. The latter appeared to be just as powerful as the former in facilitating major changes in beliefs and behaviors (Krippner, 2018). Simmonds-Moore and her associates (2019) elicited reports from a group of “skeptics” who participated in a laboratory study designed to evoke exceptional experiences. Many of them reported pseudo-hallucinatory effects, using language indicating that their experiences were unusual.

Unusual, extraordinary, and unexplained experiences, as well as encounters with the “unknown,” have long fascinated artists, scientists, and the lay audience; moreover, they have had a profound effect throughout history and across cultures. Ruth Richards (2017) has described *everyday creativity* as a survival strategy for the 21st century, something not restricted to an elite group of “geniuses.” The articles in this special issue indicate that there may be “everyday anomalies” as well, exceptional experiences that were adaptive in the course of human evolution and are still part of the human condition, ready to help people survive and thrive in uncertain times.

Editors

Karel James Bouse, PhD Institute of Esoteric Psychology kjb@institute-ep.com

Jacquie Lewis, PhD (Retired)

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Christine Simmonds-Moore  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4553-2575>

Chris Roe  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8294-4758>

Malcolm Schofield  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9676-0896>

References

- Chamberlain, L. (2016). *Wicca book of spells*. Creative Space.
- Cooper, M. D., & Erickson, M. D. (1959). *Time distortion in hypnosis: An experimental and clinical investigation* (2nd ed.). Ardent Media.
- Krippner, S. (2018). Transpersonal transformative experiences: Spiritual and secular. *Neuroquantology*, 16(10), 60–77.
- Murphy, G. (1958). *Human potentialities*. Basic Books.
- O'Faolain, N. (2020, March 3). Sadism of religious reflects values of society. *The Irish Times*. <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/sadism-of-religious-reflected-values-of-society-1.33029>.
- Richards, R. (2017). *Everyday creativity: Coping and thriving in the 21st century*. Lulu.com.
- Simmonds-Moore, C., Rice, D., & O'Gwin, C. (2019). My brain is cool: A thematic analysis of exceptional experiences among skeptics. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 83, 193–211.
- Taves, A. (2020, February 13). Mystical and other alterations in consciousness: An expanded format for studying nonordinary experiences. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15, 669–690.
- White, R. A. (1997). Exceptional human experiences and the experiential paradigm. In C. T. Tart (Ed.), *Body Mind Spirit: Exploring the parapsychology of spirituality* (pp. 83–100). Hampton Road.
- Whitehead, P., & Groth, M. (2019). *Resituating humanistic psychology*. Lexington.

Author Biography

Dr. Stanley Krippner is an internationally acclaimed and acknowledged psychologist and parapsychologist. He has received numerous awards for frequently groundbreaking work in the areas of dreams, consciousness studies, shamanism and hypnosis during his long career. He is a prolific author and editor, and is renowned as an educator and mentor. He is currently on the faculty of the California Institute of Integral Studies.