

# **The renewal of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology**

## **La renovación del Instituto de Psicología Transpersonal**

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### **Abstract**

The pioneering academic institution has offered postgraduate studies on transpersonal psychology since 1975. After 37 years the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP) has recently changed its name to Sofia University, offering the same programs plus some new degrees. Why this name change? Is the name change reflecting what is happening in the field of transpersonal psychology? How is transpersonal psychology nowadays in comparison with its beginnings? What are the lights and shadows we now face? This article explores these questions and many others, offering a review and an update of transpersonal psychology by one of the founders of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and a pioneer in the field.

**Keywords:** James Fadiman, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Sofia University, transpersonal

### **Resumen**

La pionera institución académica ha ofrecido estudios de postgrado en psicología transpersonal desde 1975. Después de 37 años, el Instituto de Psicología Transpersonal (ITP) ha cambiado su nombre por el de Universidad Sofia, ofreciendo los mismos estudios además de algunos nuevos. ¿A qué se debe este cambio?, ¿está este cambio de nombre reflejando lo que está pasando en el campo de la psicología transpersonal?, ¿cómo está la psicología transpersonal hoy en día en comparación con sus inicios?, ¿cuáles son las luces y sombras a las que nos enfrentamos hoy?. Este artículo analiza estas cuestiones y muchas otras, ofreciendo una revisión y actualización de la psicología transpersonal por uno de los fundadores del Instituto de Psicología Transpersonal y pionero de la disciplina.

**Palabras clave:** James Fadiman, Instituto de Psicología Transpersonal, Universidad Sofía, transpersonal

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Since 1975, the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP) has been a pioneering and legendary institution offering academic degrees worldwide. Recently ITP has changed its name to Sofia University and expanded its programs. Now we have the honour to talk about these changes with James Fadiman, the co-founder of the ITP (together with Robert Frager) and one of the pioneers of Transpersonal Psychology.

**1. Hello Jim, could you explain the reason for this change?**

The simplest explanation for the name change is that the institution has outgrown its prior label. Bob Frager and I have been seeking a name change for the past several years, so this is very much the direction we have wanted it to go. Sophia University is adding a number of new areas of study, including for the first time a completion bachelors degree in 3 different areas, as well as expanding some of its graduate offerings. The Name change, although it got the most attention is the least of the actual changes.

**2. Was it easy in 1975 to create an institution like ITP? How are the things nowadays in Transpersonal Psychology, in comparison with the seventies?**

In the 1970s, there was much more experimentation going on in higher education. In the Bay Area alone, several other new graduate schools in alternative psychology formed within a year or two of ITP. Fortunately, neither Bob nor I understood how difficult it was supposed to be to set up an entire institution. What we did was offer one semester of classes. During that semester, we worked with the students to determine what classes or other kinds of educational experiences they wanted for a second semester. In this way, over a period of a few years we built up a full curriculum. As the number of students increased, we added faculty and eventually staff. As we were not worrying about meeting any criteria except to offer a superior education, we could and did ignore all the official rules from the state, the federal government, and the American Psychological Association. I don't know if it could be done today. To my knowledge, no one seems to be trying to do so.

**3. ITP/Sofia University is now 37 years old and still growing. How do you feel when you think about that?**

That ITP/Sofia University is 37 years old and still growing seems to us an indication that, like a good tree in a good location, whose roots get deeper and whose trunk gets thicker, and as new branches extend from the trunk, there are more fruit each year. What we know about most organizations is that they are either growing or they are dying. From time to time, we are amazed that the institution has done so well. As it moves into this new phase, we remain optimistic that we are continuing to meet real needs.

**4. How has ITP/Sofia University been seen by traditional universities during this time?**

As we began as a clearly alternative institution, mainstream institutions basically ignored us. It seemed to them and to us that we were attracting entirely different students. As we have become more and more visible, and as more and more of our graduates are teaching in institutions, holding down clinical positions in hospitals and clinics, and setting up independent practices, we are getting more attention. However, we still hear very little from the mainstream but work with the growing number of institutions like ourselves.

**5. What are the benefits for the ITP taking the new name - Sofia University?**

The simple single benefit from becoming a university, and having a name to match, is that there are more opportunities to develop new programs and especially to cooperate with other universities. We are already working with a university in China, for example, to help them to develop their own psychology department. They are very excited at the idea of Sofia sending some of our graduate students to work with their students and are sending some of their faculty over to learn from us. Other possibilities are emerging as Sofia becomes more established and better known.

**6. As you may know, some transpersonalists do not like this name change. What would you say to them?**

A great number of our alumni were initially upset at the name change and let us know about it in every way possible. Most felt that they should have been consulted about the change. The institution didn't realize how deeply attached some of our older alumnae were to the name of the school they graduated from. Education about the expanded opportunities and giving them lots of personal attention seems to have cooled off much of the upset. However there are still a few highly vocal students who feel that the process was flawed, and that the name is terrible. Remarkably, there seem to have been little upset at the idea of expanding our degree programs beyond transpersonal psychology, but lots of upset about a name change. Personally, I don't fully understand how an institution changing its name in 2012 changes someone's degree given in 1995 or 2000, so I'm a little less sympathetic than I probably should be. Curiously, a number of other alternative graduate schools in the San Francisco Bay Area changed their names as well within the last eighteen months, so there may be other forces at work.

**7. I guess you know that some people think that ITP has changed its name because of the lack of respect and acceptance that Transpersonal Psychology experiences in mainstream Psychology. How would you respond to these people?**

It's an interesting speculation, but one that never occurred to any of us involved in the expansion of the institution or the name change. You can't run an educational institution based on the opinions of people who don't know what you're doing or who dislike what they think you're doing on principle.

**8. Although Transpersonal Psychology began officially in the sixties and has drawn a great deal of interest, it is quite unknown in academic Psychology worldwide in contrast to Humanistic Psychology which is more widely known. Perhaps that is why some people say "Transpersonal Psychology has died". Why do you think Transpersonal Psychology finds itself in this position?**

It feels a bit like the famous person writing to the newspaper that the report of his death was premature. I've yet to meet any of these people, but if I did, I would probably point to the ever increasing number of countries with thriving transpersonal psychology associations, far more than there are humanistic psychology associations. Any rumors as to the death of transpersonal psychology are total nonsense. That's fact, not opinion.

**9. Many psychologists feel attracted by Transpersonal Psychology initially but after time when they know the discipline better, move away from it because they feel ashamed of calling themselves "transpersonal psychologists". Why do you think that is?**

As long as we're talking about people disapproving or disavowing transpersonal psychology, my own feeling is that leaving is probably good for those people whose interests change and who need to describe themselves differently. On the other hand, I've been impressed with some of our graduates who have become intensely interested in psychoanalytic psychotherapy on the one hand, and Tarot reading and channeling on the other who still consider themselves and call themselves transpersonal psychologists. My hope is that the people who no longer are comfortable labeling themselves as transpersonal have found another label that makes them feel safer. It may take a little more courage to publicly espouse a worldview that is wider than the scientific-only paradigm.

**10. Since the foundation of Transpersonal Psychology, many new disciplines have been created studying more or less the same subjects studied by Transpersonal Psychology but most of the new researchers do not refer their investigations under the transpersonal framework, for example the fields of mindfulness, family constellations, meditation, consciousness studies, hypnosis, human development, altered states of consciousness, regression therapy, near-death studies, spiritual growth, search of the self, psychedelic therapy, parapsychology, inter-religious dialogue, etc. Why do you think these disciplines differentiate themselves from the transpersonal field?**

One of the goals of the original core of transpersonal psychologists who founded the Association and the Journal was that there needed to be a full psychology which included the spiritual, as well as the humanistic, the cognitive and the psychoanalytic. Such a psychology, we reasoned, would open up whole new fields of study. It is gratifying to see that this has been true. If many of these subfields of transpersonal psychology no longer use the label, it is probably because they see themselves as more specialized and are trying to obtain recognition for their specialization. Psychedelic psychotherapy, for example, an area of my own expertise, sees no particular advantage in adding the word transpersonal to its name since the fundamental ideas of transpersonal psychology are subsumed in the word "psychedelic." They are actively expanding public awareness about the specialization of using psychedelic substances for both transpersonal and non-transpersonal applications. It may be true that some people inside the transpersonal psychology movement have a desire for greater numbers of members or some other kind of recognition. Personally, I'm much happier seeing the general culture absorbing idea after idea that we have pioneered and developed, that urging people to come into any given organization. It must be kept in mind that the founders never imagined that the transpersonal point of view should be limited to psychology. Almost from the onset, there were transpersonal sociologists, transpersonal anthropologists, etc. For me at least, transpersonal is a stance, a point of view, a way to look at experience, not merely a psychology.

**11. What do you think transpersonal psychologists should do in order to integrate Transpersonal Psychology in the core education of future Psychologists?**

It's a challenging idea to consider how one might integrate transpersonal psychology into mainstream psychology. The central obstacle I've found is that traditional psychology has such a desperate emotional craving to be seen as and accepted as a science like biology, chemistry or physics, that adding in the recognition of the spiritual experiences of most of humankind would be for them a backwards step. Once mainstream psychology acknowledges that it will never be seen by those hard sciences as a possible companion, they may be able to integrate the transpersonal more easily.

The general decline in how society values mainstream psychology is matched by society's increased interest in so many aspects of transpersonal psychology, whether they are called that or not. I'm not optimistic about being invited into a declining academic discipline, and as you can tell from what I've just said, I'm not all that eager for transpersonal being saddled with all the defects of mainstream psychology. Roger Walsh said, in a wonderful speech some years ago, that the major problems facing humanity were transpersonal problems: war, excessive population, destruction of natural resources, and so forth. What he meant is that at the heart of all the great spiritual traditions and transpersonal psychology is a recognition of the fundamental unity of all human beings, and all other living systems. Operating from that premise makes war almost impossible, and leads to remedies for eco-destruction and injustice. It is a form of lunacy to see someone else as so separate from yourself, that you could shoot them, or to destroy an eco-system for short-term profit as if you were not linked to it. Rather than standing out in the cold in front of the closed door of academic psychology, we would do better and are doing better joining the ecologists, the climate change scientists, and the indigenous people in forging realistic alliances of mutual aid and respect.

**12. In autumn of 2013 Sofia University will launch a Bachelor of Arts program offering a BA in Psychology and a BA in Liberal Arts. Why has it been decided to offer a BA in Psychology now and not before?**

We have not done this before partly because we always considered ourselves a graduate institute, and partly because we did not yet have a visionary leader who could see that in the current economic and social environment, that we could perform a unique service by offering this degree.

**13. The BA in Liberal Arts includes the possibility of concentrating in one of three areas, one of which is Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) Studies. It looks as if while the ITP was a real pioneer creating academic degrees in Transpersonal Psychology worldwide, Sofia University will be a pioneer in creating an academic degree on LGBTQ Studies. Congratulations for taking up such a challenge - this subject is becoming more and more relevant worldwide and an academic degree may help foster increased understanding. Can you explain a bit about the connection between LGBTQ studies and the transpersonal orientation of Sofia University?**

Why us and why now? While I was not part of that decision-making, my guess is that it is about time that somebody offered a serious curriculum in these areas. Since the very word transpersonal includes the meaning of going beyond the personality, it looks like we are extremely comfortable in seeing that these diverse groups of people are no different from any other people in terms of their inner spiritual core. I'm fascinated by how this particular program will take form as we develop the curriculum, and as the first few years of students work with the faculty to determine what should be taught.

**14. As you know, Transpersonal Psychology is difficult to define and has had many definitions in its time. Why do you think it is so difficult to achieve a universal agreement for it? What would be your own definition of it?**

It is a kind of insiders joke that it is very hard to define transpersonal psychology. That's partly because it is more than a psychology, and partly because over the years, it has tended to include more and more areas of clinical practice and research. My own definition is simply that it is a full psychology that includes all of human experience, and its particular emphasis is on the higher ranges of human nature because those are less

studied in mainstream psychology.

**15. Many people understand that Transpersonal Psychology is fundamentally the study of the altered states of consciousness. Would you agree?**

That feels like, as least to me, to be a much more limited definition of transpersonal psychology. A more realistic definition is that it is about all states of consciousness, and that individuals become interested in unusual states more often than everyday consciousness. But what is acceptable in everyday consciousness turns out to be extremely culturally specific. It's always a good idea to be wary of any definition that tends to exclude much of what people in the field are actually doing.

**16. Many criticize transpersonalists, saying they claim go beyond their ego but what they are really doing is feeding their own “transpersonal ego.” Do you agree?**

Every field of study attracts some people who are incapable of understanding it. I can speak from personal experience. As an eager physics major, at some point, it became clear to me that I had no idea what was being talking about, but it took a while longer before I changed majors. That did not reflect poorly on physics, only on me. There was a period, for example, when Ken Wilber indicated that he was disassociating himself from transpersonal psychology because so many people in it were New Age kooks and there was a vast amount of literature that Ken thought was worthless. This was a little awkward for some of us since we were using Ken's books as foundation stones for teaching transpersonal theory. Our response to him was that we couldn't police the popular press nor stop people from advertising that they read auras or were reincarnations of priests from Atlantis. In fact, that so many unusual ideas tried to include themselves under the general rubric of transpersonal psychology suggested that we were getting more respectable. There's a Sufi saying attributed to Jesus, who says, “I can raise the dead, but I cannot help the stupid.” The question should not be, “What do people claim?” but, “What is the quality of their work?” and what is the quality of their own lives.

**17. If Transpersonal Psychology is a field in constant evolution, where is it going?**

If the transpersonal is a field in constant evolution, on the hard science side, it is moving towards the neuroscience laboratory as it is being accepted more widely as a necessary part of clinical education and on the philosophy side, adding indigenous experience and wisdom into the curriculum. The fascinating revelations about how the brain works, and how much we can learn from shamans are much a part of the transpersonal of tomorrow, as differing forms of meditation are part of the transpersonal of today.

**18. Some people believe that humanity is entering in a new transpersonal paradigm. If you also believe this, how can we prove it?**

I think that the idea behind the question is one that is found in spiritual texts, political tracts, sociological treatises, and even in myths still valued by many indigenous people, i.e. that a better version of human beings is coming into existence. There is lots of evidence that we treat each other better than we did some centuries ago. No one defends slavery, and most people feel that women are not inferior to men, and that economic and social justice are sensible and realistic goals. There is also lots of evidence of humanity's decline as well. I can't say that the word “proof” comes into my observations. Instead, I will continue to work to support and accelerate the positive trends and hope that they will become so prevalent, that they will

become self-evident proofs.

**19. Transpersonal Psychology has mainly been present in USA and Europe, but we are seeing a growing number of important Transpersonal Psychologists emerging in Latin America. What advice would you offer them for the immediate future?**

Fortunately, one of the basic tenets of transpersonal psychology is that there are many ways to tap into one's individual wisdom and the collective wisdom of humanity and the spirit world. Therefore, my advice would be to pay close attention to your own cultural traditions to see what doors can be most easily opened for individual transpersonal development. As to should you form this or that institutional structure, I'm not about to pretend that the structures we have designed to date are necessarily best for the next evolutionary round.

**20. Your last words for the transpersonal community Jim... Thank you.**

If this were a talk and I were asked to conclude it, I might say that Transpersonal psychology has come this far by remaining aware of the innate goodness in every human being and by treating even incredibly horrible behaviors as forms of ignorance or forgetting. What we know is that lighting a single candle can illuminate a vast sphere of darkness. So my own goal, and I would suggest considering it for yourself is when anyone else asks for your help in lighting their own candle, do so. We know that lighting someone else's candle does not diminish our own. Thank you for this opportunity to reflect on such interesting questions.

**Jim Fadiman, PhD** is a psychologist involved in Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology with degrees from Harvard and Stanford Universities. His major research has been on the beneficial aspects of psychedelic experience. He was a Research Associate with the International Foundation for Advanced Study in the late 1960s and later the president of the Institute of Noetic Sciences and The Association for Transpersonal Psychology. He has taught at San Francisco State University, Brandeis, and Stanford and been on the board of directors of academic institutions, profit and non-profit companies and associations. In 1975, with Robert Frager, he co-founded the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (now Sofia University). He has written numerous books, scientific papers and book chapters and has served on the editorial boards of several scientific journals. He has recently written *The Psychedelic Explorer's Guide: Safe, Therapeutic, and Sacred Journeys*. E-mail: [jfadiman@gmail.com](mailto:jfadiman@gmail.com) Website: [www.jamesfadiman.com](http://www.jamesfadiman.com)

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