

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Looking Closely at What Matters

The Spiritual Transformation Scientific Research Project

The Spiritual Transformation Scientific Research Program rigorously investigates various aspects of the sociocultural, psychological and neurological factors that underlie the processes of spiritual transformations of individuals and groups. The program sponsors conferences, awards research grants and conducts special activities to help create an interdisciplinary field in the human sciences for researching spiritual transformation using cutting edge methodologies and experimental designs that may potentially provide new insights in this area of investigation.

Research in the social sciences, particularly anthropology, reveals a universal tendency for people to understand themselves and their world in religious terms. In particular, a great many people have spiritually transforming experiences that cry out for explanation, which is often, but not always, provided by religion. Recent developments in evolutionary psychology support the near universal presence of religion, showing how religion may have emerged in natural history. Some research even suggests that humans are “hard-wired” to embrace religions and have spiritual experiences. Furthermore there is mounting evidence that spiritually transforming experiences also occur outside of religion.

“Spiritual transformation is really at the heart of a lot of religious experience,” says Sol Katz, director of the Spiritual Transformation project, which aims to illuminate the complex and varied landscape of spirituality. Katz, who also heads the Child Development Center at the University of Pennsylvania, notes “Spiritually transformative experiences can totally change one’s life, everything from religious conversion to the embrace of a lifetime of prayer and religious dedication.” Yet strangely we know little about them from a scientific point of view.

This artificial separation of the spiritual and secular sides of a person, for example, has prevented medical science from discovering the health value of a patient’s spiritual resources. Gail Ironson, Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of Miami, for example, is looking at spiritual transformation in the face of illnesses like AIDS. Such traumatic experiences often lead people to re-examine their lives, their values, and their worldview, and rethink their relation to what they hold sacred. Ironson hopes that the research will “provide helpful insights for people dealing with catastrophic illness in terms of the kinds of interventions and beliefs that can produce beneficial health outcomes.”

“Many aspects of human beliefs and practices and experiences like spiritual transformation can be studied scientifically,” notes Katz. “In fact, there are really important questions already being posed and already being answered. How often does spiritual transformation occur? What kinds of experiences occur? At the other end of the spectrum, there are breakthrough areas in the neurosciences where we can look at the brain activity of living people under fairly normal circumstances. And you can actually look to see that things are different.” W. Bradford Wilcox, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, poses the question “what is the effect, if any, that spiritual transformation has on family formation among unwed parents in urban America?” Unwed mothers and fathers in urban America often have a spiritual awakening in connection with the birth of a child or some other significant event in their lives; this event can sometimes have profound spiritual results.

The Spiritual Transformation Scientific Research Program that Katz directs has provided more than two million dollars in funding for research into this area. Almost 500 applicants from leading research universities around the world applied for funding. Twenty-four grants were awarded to well-known researchers in the fields of anthropology, biology, neurosciences, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, theology and religious studies.

Harold D. Delaney at the University of New Mexico is heading a team to look at the antecedents of spiritual transformation during the college years, a time when faith is often shaken, re-examined, and reconfigured into lifetime patterns. What happens during such dramatic changes? What leads a college student to question the

faith they grew up with? What background experiences determine whether this questioning results in the rejection or re-embrace of long held beliefs? Delaney argues that "spiritual transformation may be conceptualized as a maturing of spiritual character in terms of faith, hope and agape."

Peggy C. Giordano, Distinguished Research Professor of Sociology at Bowling Green State University, is heading a research project looking at adults who successfully turned around lives of crime and delinquency. Much research has been done on the conditions that lead young people into such troubled personal circumstances, but little is known about those inspiring cases where people have emerged out of those circumstances.

What kind of dramatic spiritual transformation leads troubled young people to a brand new view of themselves, their world, and their relationship to that world? Giordano hopes her research will illuminate "how spiritual experiences stimulate a new sense of direction, foster new social experiences, and provide a blueprint for productive life changes."

Katz believes the research will return the kind of quality results that will capture the interests of funding agencies, once they see the value of the projects. "We have a project out of the University of Chicago with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). They're going to do a national survey, a totally balanced survey that allows you to generalize to the whole United States about the phenomenology of spiritual transformation. How often does it occur? What's going on? What lies behind it? What are the antecedents? What are the consequences of it? What differences does it make in people's lives?"

Roberta G. Sands, professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, is looking at a common spiritual transformation within Judaism. Sands's project, titled *Baalei Teshuvah's Spiritual Transformational Soul Work*, seeks to understand the process by which secular Jews embrace Orthodoxy. (*Baalie Teshuvah* is the name given to a Jew who embraces orthodoxy.) Sands and her colleagues "wonder what kinds of changes *baalei teshuvah* make in their identities, family relations, and connections with other people and institutions, and how integrated they become into the larger Orthodox community." When a secular Jew, whose Judaism is primarily cultural, becomes a religious Jew, what happens? How does the embrace of the Jewish religious faith influence their understanding of themselves, their world and their relationship to other Jews? Spiritual transformation is a widespread and meaningful part of human experience. Learning more about it will greatly enrich our understanding of ourselves and others.