

The Concept of Transliminality

The Origins of Transliminality

- Psychologists have long speculated about threshold processes (see James, 1982; Myers, 1903; Usher & Burt, 1909; Freud, 1933; etc.).
- The origins of transliminality trace back to 1991, when it was first conceptualized as “an openness or receptiveness to impulses and experiences whose sources are in preconscious (or unconscious) processes” (Thalbourne, 1991, pp. 181-182). This conceptualization does not account for the loss of this material to the subconscious or unconscious mind.
- While many representations in consciousness ultimately have their origins in preconscious processes, the transliminal material represented in consciousness is recognized as having three specific sources: the ‘subliminal’ mind (the ‘subconscious’ or ‘unconscious’), the ‘supraliminal’ mind (for example, states of consciousness and conscious activity), and the external environment.
- Empirical evidence for a factor that was to become known as transliminality arose from a study by Thalbourne and Delin (1994). They administered a series of tests to samples of manic-depressives, schizophrenics and university students. It was found that scores on belief in the paranormal correlated with scores on measures of creative personality, mystical experience, magical ideation, and history of manic-like and depressive experience.
- Principal components analysis (a form of factor analysis) was conducted, and a single factor was identified, which was called transliminality.
- Transliminality is currently defined as “a hypothesised tendency for psychological material to cross (*trans*) thresholds (*limines*) into or out of consciousness” (Thalbourne & Houran, 2000, p. 853). This definition is in current use, and essentially describes the nature and process of transliminality.
- Subsequent “top-down purification”¹ analyses of this measure (Lange, Thalbourne, Houran & Storm, 2000) reduced the 29-item Transliminality scale to 17 items. This Rasch-scaled version of Thalbourne’s (1998) original measure, termed the Revised Transliminality Scale (RTS), validates a common dimension underlying seven psychological domains: (1) Hyperæsthesia (heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli); (2) Hypomanic or Manic Experience (though these are fleeting); (3) Fantasy-Proneness; (4) Absorption; (5) Positive (and perhaps obsessional) Attitude towards Dream Interpretation; (6) Mystical Experience; and (7) Magical Ideation. These are *constituents* of transliminality because they correlated significantly and positively with each other. The concept of transliminality bridges psychological concepts that have previously been regarded as independent domains. Accordingly, the psychological material that is hypothesized to cross thresholds can encompass a wide range of imagery, ideation, affect, and perception.
- The various descriptions of processes that suggest a ‘transliminal’ component tend to converge in meaning—they all refer to material either coming into, or going out of consciousness, or both.

¹ “Top-down purification” refers to a set of Rasch scaling procedures that identify and remedy differential item functioning in questionnaires; i.e., response biases related to extraneous variables such as respondents’ ages, genders, or even cultures. Furthermore, Rasch scaling yields measures that have *interval-level* properties. These biases can elicit spurious factor structures of test items, as well as erroneous findings from statistical analyses. Therefore, the techniques overcome the limitations of classical test theory.

Psychological Correlates of Transliminality

- Not only are there constituents of transliminality, but there are also many *correlates* of transliminality (these are referred to as correlates because, unlike constituents, they do not correlate with all constituents).
- Thalbourne et al. (1997) found three correlates: Eysenck's P (Psychoticism), Eysenck's E (Extraversion), and Eysenck's N (Neuroticism). (See Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991.) Thalbourne (1998) then found another eight correlates:
 - (i) The Dissociative Experiences Scale (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986);
 - (ii) The Questionnaire of Experiences of Dissociation (Riley, 1988);
 - (iii) The Launay-Slade (1981) Hallucination Scale;
 - (iv) Unusual Experiences (short version) from the Oxford-Liverpool Inventory of Feelings and Experiences (Claridge, 1997);
 - (v) Reading about Eastern religions (Haraldsson, 1981);
 - (vi) Belief in life after death (Thalbourne, 1996a).
 - (vii) Vivid religious or spiritual experience (Haraldsson, 1981);
 - (viii) Depressive Experience (Thalbourne & Bassett, 1998).
- Given that the Launay-Slade Hallucination Scale (Launay & Slade, 1981) already correlated with transliminality, Thalbourne (1999) hypothesized that vivid visual imagery would also correlate with transliminality. The hypothesis was not confirmed. However, in a study on creativity, Thalbourne's (2000b) hypothesis that transliminality would correlate with the Creative Personality Scale was replicated, although transliminality failed to correlate with the Revised Barron-Welsh Art Scale (Welsh & Barron, 1963).
- Looking further into the nature and correlates of transliminality, Thalbourne and Houran (2000) used two measures: the Mental Experience Inventory (Kumar & Pekala, 1992) and the AT-20 Scale (MacDonald, 1970) to measure tolerance of ambiguity. They found that participants scoring high on transliminality also tended to:
 - (i) "believe in more psi related and unusual events;
 - (ii) "to report more paranormal and unusual experiences;
 - (iii) "to have a greater sense of being high and that the mind is tremendously powerful;
 - (iv) "to be more given to introspection and daydreaming;
 - (v) "to experience altered consciousness".

There was no significant correlation with age or tolerance of ambiguity.

- Transliminality also correlated with experience of Kundalini ("energy-like sensations . . . which surge upwards through the body," Thalbourne & Fox, 1999), "general afterlife belief" (Thalbourne, 1998-1999); and Openness to Experience as measured on the Quickscales (J. M. T. Brebner, personal communication, June, 2000)—a 30-item short version of the NEO PI-R personality inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992).
- Studies by Storm and Thalbourne (1998-1999, 2001a) and Thalbourne and Storm (2002-2005) found transliminality correlated with four 16PF factors and these correlations were twice replicated. Highly transliminal participants were more likely to be 'expedient' and 'nonconforming' (Factor G), 'imaginative' and 'idea-oriented' (Factor M), 'receptive', 'open-minded', and 'intuitive' (Factor TM), and 'unrestrained' (Factor SC).
- Finally, scores on the Transliminality Scale have also correlated with *I Ching* effects (Houran & Lange, 2009; Storm & Thalbourne, 1998-1999, 2001b), but the effects have not always replicated (Storm & Thalbourne, 2001a; Thalbourne & Storm, 2002-2005).

For an up-to-date review of research using the Transliminality Scale, see Thalbourne (2010).

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