When an electron is energized by a quantum of light it jumps to a higher orbit. This transition does not occur gradually, but suddenly. One instant the electron is in its natural orbit, the next instant it occupies an expanded orbit. This instantaneous transition within the subatomic environment is a metaphor that describes the sudden psychological transformation that was the focus of William R. Miller and Janet C’dé Baca’s research.

Quantum Change: When Epiphanies and Sudden Insights Transform Ordinary Lives, is a text that charts new and unfamiliar territory. Psychologists Miller and C’dé Baca sketch their investigation into a phenomenon that is relevant to both the transpersonal psychologist and the clinician—a profound, rapid, and enduring shift in personality that occurs as a result of a numinous or noetic intrapsychic experience. This is a topic worthy of focused and critical analysis that has received little press in psychology circles. Written in familiar prose that is reminiscent of Raymond Moody’s (1975) pioneering Life After Life, this book targets a lay audience and communicates understanding to those who may have an unexpected first person encounter with the phenomenon. But for the scholar, Quantum Change tantalizes more than it illuminates. Much of the text is composed of first person narratives—raw data from the perspective of the researcher. For more thorough and rigorous discussions the reader must look to the professional literature. (C’dé Baca & Miller, 2003; C’dé Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; Miller, 2004; Miller & C’dé Baca, 1994).

Miller and C’dé Baca begin their narrative by noting the prevalence of the phenomenon within biography and literature—St. Paul and Ebenezer Scrooge are two prominent examples. This abundance is contrasted with the dearth of investigation within the field of psychology. William James (1985) expressed great interest in the topic in his seminal work The Varieties of Religious Experience in which he dilated on two types of change: gradual change that occurs in a linear manner, and sudden discontinuous transformation. Aside from James, the authors argue, few psychologists have investigated the topic in detail, choosing instead to focus on progressive learning and conditioning. The authors observe, “there has not even been a term in behavioral science to name this phenomenon of sudden broad transformation that is so widely described in art and literature” (p. 6). Thus, Miller and C’dé Baca looked to the theological literature and the study of conversion to find an analogous experience that had been studied in depth. Yet the parallels between quantum change and religious conversion are not perfect; quantum change is, in the words of the authors, “a much larger phenomenon” (p. 7).

Their research entailed the collection of dozens of stories from participants from New Mexico. Narrative analysis revealed two broad types of quantum change with qualitative differences. Insightful quantum change is infused with a noetic quality and includes a transforming revelation. It is a profound “aha” experience that often leaves the individual stunned. In one example, a woman in a mediocre marriage of...
almost twenty years suddenly awakened to a clear understanding that she was more than her life expressed. She and her husband separated three days later when her husband refused to attend couples counseling. Though a small part of her yearned to return to her old life, her new awareness recognized she was embarking upon a more authentic path.

The mystical quantum change, or epiphany, is explicitly transpersonal and includes the sense of being acted upon by an Other. It is similar to a mystical experience, yet quantum change, by definition, implies a restructuring of psychological variables. The transformation that occurs due to a mystical quantum change is not the necessary aftermath of a mystical experience. The authors observe, “just as not all quantum changes are mystical . . . not all mystical experiences lead to quantum changes” (p. 20). In one remarkable example, a man was tape recording a letter to his friend as he drove across eastern Oregon. He finished the first side of the tape as he pulled over for a meal. On the second side his voice sounded distinctly different and he struggled to find words. Shortly after eating, as he drove across the “boring” plains, he had a mystical experience that he compared to the experience of Saul on the road to Damascus—a powerful encounter with God (his description) that was unitive, ineffable, and suffused with love. The plains looked beautiful; everything appeared different. He never again doubted the presence of the Divine.

Despite the differences between the two types, most quantum experiences share similar characteristics. Four characteristics emphasized by the authors are vividness, surprise, benevolence, and permanence. The vividness of the experience includes profound emotion combined with the certainty that something happened. That something is unexpected, often uninvited, and almost always considered very positive. Its effects are enduring, and the aftermath includes profound shifts in values, relationships, emotions, and behavior.

These experiences are not the consequence of a significant external event. Such an event may occur in conjunction with quantum change, but the external event is not necessarily the cause of transformation. It is possible that nothing in the external environment might trigger the quantum change that radically alters the internal landscape of the individual.

Much of the authors’ discussion is descriptive; at this early juncture they merely attempt to map the experience. Only in the second to last chapter do Miller and C’de Baca attempt to grapple with the causes and reasons for quantum change. In this task they are justifiably circumspect. They offer several psychological hypotheses, most of which demur to the materialistic paradigm that dominates the physical sciences including most of psychology. Their last hypothesis, however, breaks from materialism to propose a “sacred encounter.” This hypothesis is how the majority of their participants interpret their experience.

The study of quantum change is in its infancy and is similar to the early investigation of the near-death experience (NDE) in its search for common phenomenological makers and resulting aftereffects—many of which resemble the aftereffects of a quantum change experience. Like the NDE it is an event shrouded in mystery whose unpredictable nature leads to methodological challenges and research quan-
daries. Yet surprisingly, this phenomenon appears to have escaped the attention of transpersonal theoreticians and researchers. Surely this type of experience falls within the rubric of transpersonal and should therefore be of interest to both transpersonal scholars and clinicians. If individuals can undergo a radical reorganization in values and behaviors due to a brief mystical or noetic encounter, what might this suggest regarding the developmental process? What are the ontological implications of such experiences on matters of spirit? From a clinical perspective, how might these experiences impact the recovery effort of those who suffer from mental illness? The nascent study of quantum change, like the study of NDEs thirty years ago, raises more questions than it answers. Miller and C’de Baca’s book serves as an introductory chapter to a story still in the writing.

REFERENCES


The Authors

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Reviewer

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