International Journal of Children's Spirituality,
Vol. 12, No. 3, December 2007, pp. 249–262

The developmental impact of not integrating childhood peak experiences

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Much prior groundbreaking research has been done in recent years highlighting the qualities, quantities and means children have to enter transpersonal states of awareness. As important as this precedent research has been, in many ways it has yet to fully appreciate the gravity of childhood transpersonal experiences in terms of the impact on children and their personality development from not integrating their transpersonal experiences. This present study not only looks at the qualities, quantities and means of childhood transpersonal experiences but reveals reasons children have for not integrating such experiences and the resulting impact of not integrating their most meaningful moments. The research derives from dissertation interviews with 12 adults recalling their childhood peak experiences (CPEs). Qualitative thematic content analysis was applied to the interview transcriptions and revealed five main themes with more than 100 supporting sub-themes. The research has discovered a composite experience of CPEs that consists of (*a*) qualities of the CPE, (*b*) the reasons for not assimilating CPEs, (*c*) the experience of sharing CPEs, (*d*) the unassimilated positive qualities of CPEs, and (*e*) the intrapersonal and interpersonal impact of non-assimilation. The author terms this distinct composite process CPE non-assimilation and describes how it played out issue by issue in the developmental lives of 12 high-functioning adult professionals.

Keywords: *Childhood; Peak experience; Personal development; Socio-spiritual development*

Introduction

This study uniquely contributes to the fields of developmental and transpersonal psychology by way of looking at the nature of not assimilating what in many cases were children's highest, happiest and most meaningful moments. In particular this current study not only offers a detailed perspective on the nature of childhood peak experiences (CPEs) (which previous research thoroughly describes), but specifically focuses on the process and consequences of not incorporating them into one's developing identity. Participants described exactly what positive qualities of their CPEs were not

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ISSN 1364-436X (print)/ISSN 1469-8455 (online)/07/030249–14
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DOI: 10.1080/13644360701714928

assimilated into their evolving identity. This process here after is referred to as CPE non-assimilation. The five main themes of CPE nonassimilation derived from the research findings are as follows (*a*) qualities of CPEs, (*b*) reasons for not assimilating CPEs, (*c*) sharing of CPEs, (*d*) the unassimilated positive qualities of their CPEs, and (*e*) impact of non-assimilation. The research is de-limited to studying CPEs that were not assimilated. Therefore, this excluded researching the nature of assimilated CPEs.

Method

This study describes in broad qualitative detail the composite childhood experience of having CPEs and not assimilating them. The heuristic method of research as originated by Clark Moustakas (1990), served as the foundation for the study. The word heuristic derives from the Greek word *heuriskein*, which refers to a process of discovering or finding. The method is a qualitative inquiry 'aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 15). This method lively captured the dynamics and intensity of children's most meaningful experiences. Fourteen participants currently living in the San Francisco Bay area responded to the queries posted throughout the bay area. Twelve were selected after a preliminary discussion on the telephone and after completing a screening questionnaire. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 57 years. There were 10 females and 2 males. Two other males were rejected from the study, after it was mutually determined their experiences did not fit the research topic. Hoffman (1992) and Davis *et al.* (1991) explained that this similar female weighting of participants in their peak experience studies was due to either men's lack of awareness of such experiences or men's lack of interest in reporting such subjective experiences. During a private 1 to 1 1/2 hour interview participant's shared their personal stories of CPEs and non-assimilation. An interview style blending a semi-structured interview and an informal conversational dialogue best suited this heuristic research. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic content analysis was applied to the transcriptions individually and then to the whole of all the participants. The analysis yielded five main themes (outlined above) with many supportive sub-themes. A sub-theme consisted of at least three different participant's similar descriptions. For example, a theme was *quality of CPE*, and one of its sub-themes was a *sense of unity with all*. The themes revealed a tight range of common descriptions. A condensed and quantified group portrait depicting the participants' experience serves as the written explication (detailed individual data and a full listing of sub-themes can be found in Schlarb, 2004). Underlying the heuristic method's procedural steps of data collection, content analysis and explication of findings, are cyclical contemplative phases of immersion in the data and incubation away from conscious dwelling upon the data (where unconscious and tacit connections are made with the topic). Internal validity in this qualitative framework was sought as a thorough crosschecking with participants to check and verify that their experiences were accurately represented in the written research.

One might ask how useful adult reflections are on their childhood. It depends on what is being contemplated. For example, to gauge the phenomenological qualities

and immediate after effects of CPEs the field of human development would be well served by accounts given by children. However, the time lapse between their CPEs and their retrospective accounts in this study is enhancing for the purpose of discovering subjective childhood moments and the particular developmental impact of not integrating them into one's self-concept. In terms of limitations, the retrospective accounts provided by research participants are clearly open for recall bias if merely due to the time lapse separating them from their original experiences. Also confounding variables such as experimenter expectancy and demand characteristics are always important to be aware of in retrospective studies. For example, participants may very well have emphasized what they deemed relevant to the researcher and underreported experiences they imagined not relevant. However, it is likely that to even study the developmental impact of not integrating CPEs one would have to only interview adult participants. This is because perhaps just the act of a researcher interviewing a child regarding a recent CPE and following them overtime with follow up questions pertaining to their CPE and how it has or has not been integrated would in some ways help the child integrate the CPE and thus skew the results.

Retrospective accounts offer us a chance to peer into not only the CPE but as well the developmental impact of not integrating their CPEs, which was a research goal of this study obtained only with retrospection. The author considers that the participants' hindsight actually enabled them a deeper awareness of the what, when, and how their CPEs fit in or did not fit into their developing self-concept, including their experiential environment (family, peers, daily activities). Even though the accounts are retrospective, the results are still real and provide the basis for explicating and understanding novel experiences and their impact that evolved overtime. The author further considers the CPEs reported by the participants to be legitimate and consistent with what prior research on peak experiences has described. The fact that participants responded to the study with such descriptive, impactful accounts decades later stands as a testament itself regarding the vivid enduring power and dynamics of their CPEs. Adult retrospective studies on CPEs have their precedents in the research of Hoffman (1988, 1992), Hollander (1982), Hart (2003), Armstrong (1985), and Piechowsky (2001), to list a few.

Introduction to the findings

The nature of CPEs and their non-assimilation manifested in many phenomenological ways. The following thematic descriptions are thus an attempt to synthesize and distil the essence and underlying meanings and themes of the researched experience, as experienced by all the research participants. This description expands the themes listed in the introduction and contextualizes them in the flow of how they were reported. It is also important to note at the outset of this collective description that not all participants shared the exact descriptions as have been generalized and presented. However, drawing from the thematic content analysis originally done in the research, it is possible to present the findings that resemble the average experience of the 12 research participants. Furthermore, because it is impossible to

generalize all the participants' experience into one narrative description, the author has chosen to quantify how many participants shared in the experiences outlined below in the portrait, hopefully adding to the intellectual honesty and clarity. This group depiction then brings to life the processes and core experiences of the researched phenomena while maintaining the humanness of the experience by avoiding unnecessary abstraction.

Thematic group portrait

All the participants identified having profound peak experiences that occurred before adolescence. The average age of CPEs was 5 years. Three participants identified their CPEs to be their life's first memory. The experiences commenced by in large immediately after the children's normal and habitual routines were momentarily suspended. Ten participants considered their experiences to be spontaneous occurrences. For example, 'It just happened and I didn't think about it. It was more spontaneous'.

Characterizing the participants' individual experiences as a spiritual moment of communion with a higher realm, or a near-death experience (NDE), or peak experience in nature would not ultimately honour their diverse experiences. This is so because the participants often had more than one type of CPE at various stages of childhood.

Theme 1: qualities of CPEs

The qualities of the participants' CPEs can be generally characterized in the following way: (*a*) A sense of *unity* with everything: i.e., 'I was part of everything and everything was a part of me in one moment. There was just oneness, everything was connected in non-duality'. (*b*) *Non-ordinary perceptions* of physical reality: i.e., 'Everything was very defined, very three-dimensional, and organic things were extremely living'. (*c*) *Timeless* quality: i.e. 'There was definitely a timeless quality. It felt like I was kind of suspended in time'. (*d*) *Spontaneity*: 'I was suddenly in awe. I don't know if there was anything that really triggered them. No set of circumstances were needed'. (*e*) *Peace and bliss*: 'It was another timeless place of pure joy, peace and ecstasy. It was such a blissful feeling'. (*f*) Awareness of *grander presence or knowingness*: 'I was aware that I was a part of and at the same time connected to a great and powerful presence that was both within me and without me'. (*g*) Dramatic *shift in self-perception*: 'I lost the 'I', the personal reference. It felt like it was not from the eyes of my five-year old self'. Participants widely agreed that their CPEs consisted of equal affective and cognitive elements that stood out as non-ordinary and positively profound.

Nature provided the backdrop for 9 out of 12 of the participants' CPEs. For some of the participants, nature seemed to be the actual direct inspiration for the CPEs. For example, 'It was like being able to focus entirely on nature and feeling a connection to something bigger'. However, in other cases where one participant had a NDE under a collapsed sand dune, nature was in a way secondary to the affect and insight experienced during his CPE.

Following the initial CPE, participants commonly exercised a brief ability to continue having CPEs. The continued CPEs happened both spontaneously and in some cases after there was a conscious effort made to reengage that non-ordinary space. Participants would initiate continued CPEs by purposely placing themselves into the physical and mental places that provided the context for fostering what they now identified as CPEs. For example, 'I found that I could recreate the same feelings of peaceful connection. I liked it and I kept going back to it'. For others there was an obsession type quality to trying to re-experience it. However, for more than half of the participants the continued experiences were often less poignant and intense.

All of the participants felt very excited to tell the author of their often-closeted experiences. Their experiential qualities of CPEs were described in many ways that parallel what has previously been described as peak experiences associated with adulthood. For example, James (1936), Maslow (1999), and Jung (1969) all observed how an experience of *unity* was essential to transcendent experiences. Similarly, wholeness appears atop Maslow's list of B-values experienced during peak experiences. Maslow (1999) described the associations with wholeness as 'unity; integration tendency to one-ness; interconnectedness; simplicity; organization; structure; dichotomy transcendence; order' (p. 93). Just prior to his death, Maslow started to turn his attention to CPEs. Hollander (1982) also found that children experience 'a sense of unity felt either deeply within the self or through the external world' (p. 22). These considerations on the nature of unity as a primary quality of peak experiences stand parallel with this current study's findings where it was one of the most common overall (11 out of 12 participants) descriptive sub-themes. The participant's descriptions are comparable to what was outlined by Hoffman (1992) as

> uplifting experiences in places of scenic grandeur, inspiring encounters with nature in one's own back yard, near-death or crises episodes, peak moments during intense and personalized prayer, spontaneous moments of bliss or ecstasy, profound insights about self-identity, life and death, and related topics, exalted experiences in formal religious settings, uncanny perceptions with lasting import, unforgettable dreams. (p. 115)

Theme 2: reasons for not assimilating CPEs

As way of general comparison to the difficulties participants had integrating their CPEs, Maslow (1999) admitted that his research

> investigated this first phase only, that which comes easily and without effort as a spontaneous expression of an integrated person, or of a transient unifying within the person. The necessary passivity and receptivity of inspiration or of a peak experience must now give way to activity, control, and hard work. A peak experience happens *to* a person, but the person *makes* the great product. (p. 159)

It is precisely this making of, or integration of the peak experience into one's daily life that did not happen for the participants. Reasons for not assimilating their CPEs ranged between the intra- and interpersonal and the natural relational interplay between self and other. Strictly intrapersonal reasons for non-assimilation were often

difficult for participants to separate out. Children's psychological/emotional dependence on their parents perhaps made this distinction difficult. However, certain distinctive intrapersonal themes did emerge in the data that may be considered to stand relatively independent of external circumstances. These intrapersonal themes ranged from (*a*) personal confusion toward what was subjectively experienced and how to make personal meaning of it, (*b*) not having the subjective context to hold the experience including a lack of descriptive language, (*c*) having other developmental pursuits to address instead, (*d*) forgetting about the CPE, and (*e*) simply not making the personal time to focus on it because it began to loose its intense association in the memory. For example, one participant said, 'I did not have a context in myself to assimilate it'. Another said, 'I did not make time to draw it as a child' while still knowing it to be a mysteriously important experience. It was also explained, 'I was just unconscious of them for such a long time'. Also regarding the intrapersonal reasons, one participant described, 'That was very hard to own, something that incredible'. Another articulated that, 'Having the experience sometimes feels like owning an extravagant, very useful book of knowledge that is written in a language I can neither read nor understand. Parts of my identity do not feel accessible and it's such a loss'. Another asserted, 'Not having the words to describe the experience led to inhibiting the experience'. One participant also said, 'My consciousness got focused on the developmental tasks of shaping a persona'.

The dynamics between self and other played the most influential role in not integrating CPEs. Particularly all 12 participants identified reasons related to fears they had toward how they would be received by family if they had more openly integrated the inspired insight and affect into their daily lives. This lack of familial support was the most commonly described element of the entire study. One participant's simple description exemplifies this: 'My parents would have pushed it away and made it not special'. Another participant described, 'After the experiences were looked down upon by family, I started to feel that these experiences were a bit crazy'. These descriptions hold resonance with prior understandings in the field about the power of the family in regard to peak experiences. Firman and Gila (1997) authors of *The Primal Wound*, described how the wounding the child undergoes when there is an empathic failure by the parents to understand the child significantly impacts the child's relationship with themselves and their inner spiritual world. Also relevant to this lack of familial support for CPEs is Maslow's (1999) conclusion that if the family environment is oblivious to the inherent spiritual qualities in the child, the likelihood for not properly fostering those qualities and values is high. He considered it the parent's responsibility to create a *growth environment* that fosters children's capacities for peak experiences and helps them grow and not regress from such revealed and cherished capacities. Speaking to this, Atwater (1998) added, 'what ever the family suppresses, the child represses' (p. 121).

Ten out of 12 participants described how their families' views on religion impacted the non-assimilation of their highest and happiest experiences. This theme ranged from descriptions that described how CPEs were incongruent with traditional Christian (Christianity was the only religious descriptor used by participants) dogmas

held by the family, to descriptions that showed how the family's lack of religious belief or spiritual practice inhibited greater CPE integration. For example, 'I grew up in a Christian fundamentalist household, and my experience was so different from the Christian path laid out for me'. Another stated, 'It bothered them that I wanted to go to something that was religious [after my CPEs]'.

Furthermore, fathers' often played crucial roles in the non-assimilation of participants' CPEs. Nine out of 12 participants identified their fathers as a major contributing reason they did not more satisfyingly integrate their CPEs. There were several cases where the father was described as a source of emotional deprivation before the CPEs occurred. However, the vast majority of descriptions citing fathers attested to the generally fostering relationship they enjoyed with their father outside of their peak experiences. For example, it was explained,

> My father was very logical and stoic. So when I brought this to him. He said that is a story that is a fantasy your imagination is getting away with you. My father said that's not correct. I then began to, I just started really to doubt and question it.

Another participant said to this issue, 'I feel like it would not have been taken seriously, especially with my father. I would have lost my dad if I saw that as part of me'.

Speaking more broadly to the social theme, one participant remarked, 'It was like swimming up stream in western culture having this experience of what God really is. It was not until I got away from this culture did I remember I had my experience'. Hiding their highest and happiest moments from others commonly occurred among participants because they felt different from others and that others would not respect them. For example, 'I was getting no reflection from others that this was normal. So I thought "what does that mean"'. Another participant stated, 'There was a fear of socially being ridiculed'. Having to suppress the CPE to stay in connection with others due to a fear of loosing the given relationship rated as a significant theme (9 out of 12). For example, 'I cut off that part of myself, which could have brought me joy so I would be less ostracized and stay in at least a limited connection with others. I put a lid on it to connect with them on their level. I shrunk myself to fit in. It felt like a conflict to try and fit into small reality when I had this greater knowing'.

Theme 3: nature of sharing CPEs

Participants clearly linked their CPE non-assimilation with an unfortunate lack of having someone available to share and entrust their most meaningful moments. Their descriptions generally ranged between limited sharing to complete closeting of their experiences. Not possessing a suitable language to convey their non-ordinary experience occurred for half of the participants. From what was revealed in this current study, the author agrees with Robinson (1983), who in his retrospective study maintained that the experiences transcended language because they were ineffable, and also because children often lacked the language to articulate them.

Commonly held experiences pertaining to sharing CPEs centred on two main points. The first, and slightly more common, was that CPEs were not shared as children with even the closest family member. They attributed this to not hearing anyone remotely talking about such experiences and perspectives. For many this served as their deepest personal secret. To this experience, one participant asserted, 'It definitely felt like my own special place, special thing, and I didn't want to explain it to anyone'. Secondly, the limited sharing of their CPEs (in detail and with a limited number of persons) ranked behind the complete closeting of their CPEs. Here it was described, 'It was like a prized heirloom, that I would only pull out and share with people I thought would give me special recognition'.

Participants identified fears pertaining to sharing their experience as a major reason for completely keeping it a secret or sharing it in a limited way. The fear related to actual or imagined (due to others' pervading attitudes toward spirituality) reactions from friends and family. Fears that people's responses could detract from the personal significance of their CPE were common (8 out of 12). For example, 'I feared it could be taken away if shared'. Fear existed around being perceived as crazy or unusual if their experience was shared. 'If I had shared more they would have thought I was strange or insane or that something was wrong with me because it's not in their experience'. Four participants explicitly mentioned wishing for someone to come along whom they could entrust their experiences with throughout their childhood and adolescence.

Five participants recalled indirectly sharing CPEs. Some of the ways that they as children indirectly shared their experience are exemplified by the following descriptions: 'It was never expressed in words but definitely in art'; 'It came out through my philosophizing and writing poetry, as wells a through psychic games with my cousin and overcompensation with academics. It found what channels it could use and used them to be expressed'. There is a sense that the energy of their experiences had to be given some breathing room, even if it came through acting out that which was inspired from the CPEs. Waiting decades to more fully and intentionally disclose their CPEs was common for participants. Often those who waited to share their CPEs felt that they had finally found a respectful and supportive environment.

Davis *et al.* (1991) found, in the their study with adults on *the reasons for not reporting peak experiences,* that

> More than half of our respondents had told two or fewer people and one in five had told no one. Considering that they were defined as 'the best, happiest, most wonderful moments of one's life', we might have expected more open discussion of them. (p. 92)

This is a striking similarity and resonating summary to the general lack of sharing of CPEs by the participants.

Theme 4: unassimilated positive qualities of CPEs

The positive qualities of CPEs that were not assimilated into their developing sense of self ranged from the actual deepening of perspectives and affect during the

heightened experiences to the broader abilities of wilfully engaging and fostering CPEs and the ensuing deeper meaning in their lives. The experience with the greatest commonality in this section (10 out of 12) that remained unassimilated was that of an *expanded identity*. Exemplifying this, one participant said, 'The quality of expansiveness is what was not assimilated. I cut off a huge piece of myself, which I'm still trying to get back'. Furthermore, another participant stated, 'It was constricting to not integrate my energy or self, which felt bigger'.

Along with this unassimilated sense of expanded identity, nine participants claimed that the *confidence* they experienced during their CPEs quickly dissipated. This was then, in turn, associated with a loss of self-esteem. One participant simply said that what was not integrated was his 'higher confidence, higher self-esteem'. Loosing this connection to the experience compared to loosing a valuable personal resource. With non-assimilation came the loss of higher levels of self-worth. For example, 'My self-worth was sacrificed. I saw others as greater than me following the experience'. Believing in one's own deeper truth was also described to be a lost quality of the CPEs. One description exemplified this theme of unassimilated positive qualities by saying, 'It was almost as if I wasn't allowed to believe in my own truth from the experience'. Another participant articulated, 'It has taken me a very long time to embody that truth. Not just in my head but in my whole being'. Besides the descriptions of loosing contact with personal resources, there were nine participants who identified loosing a sacred or spiritual connection with life. For example, 'The sacredness of life, that everything is within it and within me, was lost'.

Eight participants reported the inability to purposely and effectively foster the deeper realms of insight and affect that were revealed during CPEs. Several predominant descriptions emerged related to this topic. One stated losing, 'the ability to foster and connect even deeper'. Another described this in the following way, 'It is a loss if you know you have experienced something meaningful or own something then all of a sudden you don't, you don't have a way to take it further'. These inabilities also included the desire to connect with others from the depth of unity and love that was experienced during the CPEs. There was a sense as children that conversations most people had were not representative of the depth of life that could be discussed. Also to the affective side of the CPEs one participant said, 'The great love I felt dwindled'. The acute sense of purpose and direction in life they felt during their CPEs lacked integration. For example, 'Had I honoured this part of me, I might have chosen differently in life areas of practicing a religion, choosing a partner with a similar spiritual orientation, and life work sooner'. Not following the purpose in life they were in touch with during their CPEs became a source of sadness during childhood that for many has persisted into adulthood.

Of the study's five themes, the theme, *positive qualities of CPEs that were not assimilated*, has less in common with any other prior empirical research. Much research has previously described the qualities of CPEs yet little has been empirically researched regarding exactly what are the unassimilated positive qualities of CPEs. A general parallel to the findings of this theme exists with Haronian's (1972) thoughts on the

Repression of The Sublime. Here he described in practical terms the sublime qualities that are too often repressed:

> be[ing] concerned for others, that we feel the need to communicate with others with the best of ourselves; and that we find the deepest satisfaction in service to others … expression of a profound urge to trust life, to give freely of oneself … we sense the sublime as the feeling of communion with and devotion to something that is greater than ourselves … a purpose, a goal, an ideal that he sees as greater and more important, more durable than his own transient existence and powers. (p. 2)

Again, the most commonly shared (11 participants) unassimilated positive quality of CPEs in this study was the experience of an *expanded identity*. Johnson (1991) spoke to this overall theme when he said, 'People are as frightened of their capacity for nobility as of their darkest sides' (p. 45). He went on to say, 'to own the gold in the shadow is terrifying. The gold is related to our higher calling and this can be hard to accept at certain stages of life' (p. 8). A majority of participants explained that although not assimilated as a child, their CPEs served as cloudy and unconscious inspiration. An equal number of them sought out settings as adults that would enable them to more consciously assimilate and reconnect with their deeper identities and capacities.

Theme 5: impact of not assimilating CPEs

Johnson (1995) exclaimed, 'No suffering is more unendurable than the presence of beauty that one cannot accept' (p. 35). This epitomizes the reported impact or consequences of not assimilating their CPEs. The impact varied between the participants' intra- and interpersonal lives. Low self-esteem ranked as the most commonly mentioned (10/12) intrapersonal impact. The most exemplary and direct of the descriptions is in the statement: 'It impacted my self-esteem greatly, because it impacted my not knowing myself. Forgetting my connection led to suffering'. This degree of impact commonly occurred. Eight participants identified an ensuing depression in the years following their CPE non-assimilation. For example it was said, 'Not integrating led to feelings of depression due to not using my greater self'. A couple of more descriptions of various intrapersonal consequences highlight this unfortunate experience. Regarding the impact on general personal development, it was said 'I think absolutely it was the starting point of closing myself off to my emotions and positive experiences. Perhaps that is why I do not have many memories of my childhood'. An intra-psychic split developed in 9 participants.

> This split was probably the most severe consequence from not integrating the experience. I had a very weak sense of self and on the other hand there was a very clear strong sense of self. It was like being two people, one that was the most pathetic creature and at the same time feel great.

Over half of all participants identified not understanding oneself as an impact. The following is exemplary.

> Because I have not integrated what I call my Being, I developed an identity crisis due to knowing there is this strong part of me but I never understood how to develop it. As a child I did not know that the experience was a tool. I did not know how to access that internal part of myself. That's why I don't focus on myself.

The deepest and most frequently felt impact of not integrating CPEs related to the quality of their interpersonal relationships, particularly family. Eleven participants had this experience which is highlighted by the following description.

> Not integrating it prevented me from having similar experiences around other people. I thought I had close and meaningful relationships because I was projecting my intelligence and capacity onto others, but I was relating to others in the abstract. It kept me distant from really appreciating others who I loved. You have to love your self in order to really love others, and for me that has meant owning the power and capacity for experiences like I had then.

A sampling of other predominant interpersonal impacts follows. In accordance with the experience of not being understood by others, one described, 'There was this feeling of only if they knew the truth of who I really am'. Furthermore, eight participants expressed that they were sometimes angry and frustrated at others for not seeing their deeper real self that was awakened during CPEs. The following description exemplified this theme.

> As a child I would get very upset at others for not seeing me for who I really was. As a teenager I knew I was going to leave the town, so I rebelled from the establishment. I was frustrated because I had this deep knowing that was not being recognized by parents or teachers while I was being taught things to fit into society. I ended up graduating top of my class.

One participant expressed the experience of chronically feeling alone in the following way.

> With this disconnection to my natural spiritual self I've felt alone and helpless a lot in my life. I was forgetting that part of me and I often felt very alone. Like I didn't fit in. I often wondered why I was here, and felt disconnected from others.

The sadness and confusion over not being able to express or embody this deep and inspired love with family and friends continued into adult years. Similar to these findings, Hart (2003) concluded

> Children who have spiritual questions and experiences are susceptible to the pitfalls of grandiosity, depression, boundary problems, spiritual bypassing (focusing on spiritual considerations to the neglect of more basic psychological or emotional development) and other difficulties just like adults. (p. 211)

Conclusion

This study, with its emphasis on the composite experience of CPE non-assimilation, presents a unique look into complex details of development often ignored by traditional developmental theory, as well as more recent theories that take into account the

role of childhood spirituality. This research has attempted to paint a clear picture of an often-unseen, protracted process that affects the core of children's intra- and interpersonal lives. The author believes that obtaining such detailed and personal accounts of the participants' experiences were made possible as a result of simply honouring their experiences and processes in ways they had longed for. The research suggests the likelihood that children may be having glimpses into and appreciation of a reality that is spiritually mature beyond their years much more frequently than was thought possible, and yet much of their experience goes unnoticed, let alone being fostered, by adults in their lives. This points to how adults may fail children on a fundamental level of personal development and offers parents, teachers, clergy, and therapists an opportunity to connect with the children in their lives at deeper levels that would have positive lasting influence. Fostering children at the depth of their inherent meaning-making capacity can have only unexpected positive repercussions as more and more children grow up staying connected to their greatest inner source for conscious and compassionate citizenry.

This discussion of CPEs naturally turns to the consideration of future research aimed at illuminating the developmental dynamics underlying CPE assimilation. Knowing what this current research has revealed regarding children's desire to share their experiences with persons whom they could trust, it would be valuable research to determine possible benefits of sharing CPEs. As well, research could exam the various ways children share their CPEs and respond to other's style of feedback pertaining to their CPEs. Some other potential research directions are (*a*) what would assimilation of CPEs look like at the time they happened, and any positive influence on development, (*b*) what, if any, would the positive potential or influence of non-assimilation look like, and (*c*) it could be interesting to apply quantitative research to a large population to obtain a better understanding of the prevalence of CPEs. One could think of many future clinical and educational studies aimed at further revealing aspects of our lives touched by early peak experiences.

Given what participants conveyed, perhaps the most reasonable and practical advice to give parents, educators, and therapists on helping CPE assimilation would be to honour the child as an individual. The research did reveal that in most cases an adult's attempt to explain the child's CPE was not helpful to the child. This is so in part because children will most likely have their own meaning with the CPE born out of their unique individual drives for understanding and growth. A balance that has been described by many, including Armstrong (1985), Hoffman (1992), Hart (2003), and others, must be struck between overly encouraging and dismissing CPEs. Here Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal distance can be creatively applied to a child's spiritual development. In this way, there may exist an optimal distance or interest the adult maintains in fostering the child's latent and overt spiritual capacities. Parents need not feel they have to take a special class on fostering CPEs; they don't have to try and honour CPEs as a *separate thing*. Just helping children honour their everyday ways of knowing and experiencing, as a general principle, may be enough to help them trust, explore, and incorporate their non-ordinary ways of knowing. Such a parental investment in fostering the whole of their child's experiences is

an investment in a richer and possibly healthier life not just for the child but also for themselves and their entire family. For a fuller discussion of factors associated with integrating CPEs refer to Schlarb (2004).

Given that these experiences occurred when children were often seeking out social cues and general direction on integrating or making sense of the vast world they were rapidly experiencing, we would expect children to turn to their parents for some understanding and validation of their CPEs, but because their CPEs were of such a subjective and profound nature it was difficult for their parents or peers to pay it tribute to the degree that participants felt adequate. This drive for external validation expressed itself in unique ways and in proportion to the intensity of their experiences as they manifested outside the children's habitual understanding of themselves. In Western society, where so much attention is placed on the central role of parents, this study is a natural revelation of the shortcomings of the insular nuclear family. It was clear that nearly all participants over time secured a community in which they were comfortable living into the inspiration of their CPEs. What the retrospective or longitudinal quality of this study offers is the notion that Western culture could benefit from more organized collective ritual experiences that pay tribute to and foster our inherent capacity as children for connecting with a genuinely transpersonal reality.

Notes on the contributor

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