

**Living Transcendence and Spiritual Exemplarity:
A Phenomenological Inquiry from Diverse Perspectives**

Amir Freimann

A thesis submitted for the degree of
“Doctor of Philosophy”
Dissertation by Publications

University of Haifa
Faculty of Education
Department of Counseling and Human Development

November 2024

Living Transcendence and Spiritual Exemplarity:
A Phenomenological Inquiry from Diverse Perspectives

By: Amir Freimann

Supervised by: Prof. Ofra Mayseless

Advisory Committee: Prof. Tobin Hart (UWG) and Prof. Aostre Johnson (SMC)

Thesis submitted for the degree of

“Doctor of Philosophy”

Dissertation by Publications

University of Haifa

Faculty of Education

Department of Counseling and Human Development

November 2024

Recommended by: Prof. Ofra Mayseless  Date: _____

(Supervisor)

Approved by: _____ Date: _____

(Chairperson of PhD Committee)

Dedication

Dedicated to my mother Rachel, whose loving presence accompanied me throughout this research and dissertation writing; I feel it now, at the completion of this dissertation, as I felt it when you were sitting by my side and helping me with my *ktiva tama* (“penmanship”) at first grade. To my father Gideon, who is like a solid anchor for me; thank you for giving me the confidence to pave my own path and for insisting, to this day, that I finish what I had started. And to my love Ruti, whose generosity of heart endlessly inspires me; finally, after five long years, our private joke is materializing: you can now be called (with the right accent) Frau Doktor Freimann.

Acknowledgements

Sometime toward the end of 2017 I received an auspicious phone call from my friend Ofra Mayseless: “Amir, you are nearly sixty, aren’t you?” she asked, “don’t you think it’s time that you became a doctor?” “This specific thought had not occurred to me until this moment,” I replied. “Well, think about it,” Ofra said, “and if you decide that you want to do doctoral research, I would be happy to be your supervisor. And I’d go along with any topic you want to research.”

It’s not every day that one receives such an invitation, and after weighing the pros and cons for a few weeks, I decided to take the leap. I had to start by getting a master’s degree, so it is now seven years later that this dissertation has been completed. None of it would have happened if it were not for my dear friend and PhD supervisor, Ofra.

I learned, in the process of working with Ofra on this research, that she cared about my (and her other students’) growth and maturation as a whole person much more than as an academic researcher. I also related to this research as part of my spiritual journey and would not have embarked on or persisted in it otherwise. Ofra’s friendship, wisdom, experience, and care supported and nourished me in this endeavor all along the way. Our frequent conversations were open, excited, and creative, and included diverse areas of our lives and experiences as part of this spiritual research journey. I could not have asked for a better supervisor, collaborator, and companion. I am deeply grateful to her for her mentorship and for our friendship.

I consider myself incredibly fortunate also to have Tobin Hart and Aostre Johnson on my advisory committee and am deeply grateful to them for joining me on this journey. Tobin had been a friend for a decade before this research started, and I asked him to be on my committee. Our friendship has been filled with spiritual, intellectual, and relational depth and warmth since

then. My friendship with Aostre started only shortly before the beginning of this research and grew and deepened throughout this mutual journey. The Zoom meetings the four of us had from time to time were filled with the special joy of mutual exploration, deep listening, and heartfelt appreciation, care, and respect for each other. I hope that the dissertation conveys and transmits a taste of that delightful joy.

I am grateful to my fourteen research collaborators, who joined me at a crucial point in the research process — the analysis of the interviews. The collaborative analysis process we went through (and I had the privilege of meeting with either of the two collaborator groups every week for more than five months) added depth, breadth, richness, and nuance to the research. For that period, we became an ad-hoc community of collective inquiry. We benefited from it, and so did the research.

I am grateful to my love, Ruti, for the support, encouragement, and care she gave me. She provided me with solid ground and shook the ground beneath my feet when that was needed. Many of our conversations during meals and walks in the fields helped me make breakthroughs in the research, even if they were not specifically about it.

I would like to mention two other sources of support and grounding that helped me during this research. The first is our dog, Corgi, who made me get out of my chair many times each day to let him out and then to let him back in — out and in, out and in. As annoyed as I sometimes was when my thought was interrupted by his high-pitched barks at the door, I believe that he took care not only of my physical health but also of my mental health. The second is the fifty-some trees in the orchard behind our house, which I planted with my dad during the first months of the COVID pandemic. I feel that they took care of me as much as I took care of them.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Abstract.....	vii
Structure of the Research	1
Researcher's Positionality, Rigor and Credibility in Qualitative Research	7
Integrative Introduction.....	10
Aim and main questions	10
General theoretical background.....	10
Peak experiences of transcendence vs <i>Living Transcendence</i>	12
Research related to <i>Living Transcendence</i> with spiritual teachers, masters or exemplars	15
Spiritual exemplars: roles and functions, and their perception by and effect on others	20
The Present Research.....	23
Research Manuscripts	27
Manuscript 1.....	27
Exemplar Methodology	37
Method.....	38
Themes Constructed from Spiritual Exemplars' Descriptions.....	46
Manuscript 2.....	78
Manuscript 3.....	126
Discussion	176
The experience of <i>Living Transcendence</i>	176
Spiritual exemplars' perception by and effect on other people	178
Relationship between <i>Living Transcendence</i> and spiritual exemplars' perception by and effect on other people	182
Questioning of assumptions of the PhD student	184
Limitations and Future Research	186
Bibliography	190

Living Transcendence and Spiritual Exemplarity: A Phenomenological Inquiry from Diverse Perspectives

Amir Freimann

Abstract

Spiritual development is considered a core aspect of human development. While there are many definitions of spiritual development, a commonly accepted one in the literature is that spiritual development is “the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental “engine” that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution” (Benson et al., 2003: 205-206). Despite its centrality, “self-transcendence and character traits associated with spirituality are typically neglected in systematic research” (Sperry, 2001: 42). Such neglect is particularly evident in relation to the “vertex of maturity” (Piaget, 1970a) towards which spiritual development leads and to those who embody and exemplify it.

The research addresses this lacuna by shedding light on the characteristics of *Living Transcendence* and of spiritual exemplarity in different religious traditions and spiritual paths. *Living Transcendence* is a term referring to a relatively constant, stabilized spiritual “state of being,” considered by many religious traditions to be the desideratum and holy grail of the “search for the sacred.” Spiritual exemplars are individuals who are perceived by others as exemplifying the desideratum of their religious tradition or spiritual path. In other words, *Living Transcendence* and spiritual exemplarity represent the vertex or summit of spiritual

development and its exemplification in individuals, respectively. The study of these two related phenomena and of the relationships between them aims at shedding light on spirituality and spiritual development.

The research addresses the questions: How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars? And how are spiritual exemplars perceived by and what are their effects on other people? It explores these questions from the perspectives of (1) spiritual exemplars, who describe their experience of *Living Transcendence*; (2) experts in the religious-spiritual field, who describe individuals they regard as spiritual exemplars; and (3) research collaborators, who describe the effects on themselves of analyzing interviews of a large number of spiritual exemplars.

The research consisted of three studies, corresponding to these three angles. They will be referred to here as Study 1, corresponding to the perspective of the experts on spiritual exemplars; Study 2, corresponding to the perspective of spiritual exemplars on their experience; and Study 3, corresponding to the perspective of research collaborators on spiritual exemplars they studied.

Study 1, whose title is *What makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another?*, included thematic analysis of descriptions of 180 spiritual exemplars. These descriptions were provided by 77 experts in the spiritual and religious field, who were asked to describe people they considered spiritual exemplars and specifically relate to what it was that made them spiritual exemplars. Its primary research question was: What makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another? Additional questions were: How do people recognize certain individuals and perceive them as spiritual exemplars? How do they describe or explain their recognition and perception? In the thematic analysis of the descriptions, fifteen categories of exemplar characteristics were developed and organized into three themes: *Concrete-Performative* (e.g., practices, actions), *Descriptive-Qualitative* (e.g., presence, humility) and *Relational-Impactive* (e.g., love, gratitude). Salient features of spiritual exemplarity were its multifacetedness and elusiveness. The findings

underscored the important role of relational feelings, subjective impressions and felt impact in the perception of spiritual exemplars. They also suggested that a spiritual exemplar is commonly perceived as an archetype of integration and wholeness. Such wholeness can manifest in a multitude of ways and be pointed at from different angles, but is itself illusive or hard to describe.

Manuscript 1, describing this study and its findings, was accepted for publication in *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*.

Study 2, whose title is *Living Transcendence: A phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars*, included thirty-two of the 180 spiritual exemplars recognized and described in Study 1. Those exemplars were interviewed about their experience of *Living Transcendence* and the interviews were analyzed. The research question was: How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars? Four qualities of the experience of *Living Transcendence* were described: *Noetic* (pre-conceptual, non-discursive, non-symbolic knowing / awareness / consciousness of ultimate reality or truth), *Affective* (supremely positive affective qualities of joy, happiness or bliss and love), *Embodied* (somatic and/or energetic presence or sense of a spiritual essence) and *Relational* (a sense of connectivity or "inter-being" with everything, God or the Whole). Characteristics of the experience were found to be its constancy over time, amid and through the fluctuations of normal life and various crises, and its association with an unusual type of volitionality, that is, the will to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling." While the presence and prominence of each of these qualities and characteristics varied between individuals, they appeared to be facets of one essence. The experience of *Living Transcendence* appeared to be constantly and consistently unitive, connective and supremely positive, and to inextricably permeate all other experiences and contextualize them.

Manuscript 2, describing this study and its findings, has been published in *The Humanistic Psychologist*, <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000359>

Study 3, whose title is *Self-transformative research: Effects on researchers of a holistic collaborative study of spiritual exemplars*, was done with fourteen research collaborators, who analyzed interviews of twenty of the spiritual exemplars of Study 2. The research question was: What happens to research collaborators interested in spirituality as they get exposed to a large number of spiritual exemplars? The data collected suggests that the research collaborators both formed and experienced the process as holistic and self-transformative in different ways. The main effects described were “self-reflection and insight,” “opening and broadening” and “fostering spiritual self-reliance.” From the findings it appears that spiritual exemplarity is determined by “sympathetic resonance” between the exemplar and the person perceiving them as such. The conditions which contributed to the effects of the process included the collaborators’ affinity to and personal interest in the research subject, the multi-modal research method, and maybe the unique characteristics of spiritual exemplarity.

Manuscript 3, describing this study and its findings, was has been published in *Journal of Contemplative Studies*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57010/TIWG2652>

The research helps fill a hiatus in the scientific literature in the psychology of religion and spirituality and humanistic and transpersonal psychology. The significance of *Living Transcendence* and of spiritual exemplars for religious and spiritual practitioners and seekers, and for religious traditions and spiritual paths themselves, has been abundantly expounded on in traditional texts. This abundance has not been matched, however, by scientific research on this subject. This research aims at contributing to a systematic study of *Living Transcendence* and spiritual exemplars and laying foundations for further research of these constructs.

The study of *Living Transcendence* and spiritual exemplars holds promise for addressing religious diversity and the religious/secular dichotomy by further illuminating the common essence of mysticism across cultures and religious traditions and supporting religious and cultural pluralism. Focusing on the lived experience of this essence, rather than on abstract concepts and dogmas, can be in the service of facilitating inter-religious and inter-cultural

dialogue and creating bridges of shared interest, understanding, appreciation and dialogue among the world religions and cultures.

Structure of the Research

The structure of this research, which consists of three closely related studies, is described here by recounting the research process step by step. Its purpose is to explain the rationale for each of the studies as it emerged in the research process, its contribution to the entire research, and the relationships between the three studies. The relevant literature will be reviewed in the following section, *Integrative Introduction*.

I embarked on this research with the aim of shedding light on the experience of a relatively constant, stabilized, enduring and long-lasting state of spiritual transcendence, regarded in many traditions as the desideratum and “holy grail” of spiritual life, practice and development. Maslow (1969) termed it “high plateau” and described as living “at a constantly high level in the sense of illumination or awakening.” I termed it “*Living Transcendence*.” The “transcendence” part of the term refers to the experience of the sacred and the “living” part was added in order to emphasize the ongoingly lived nature of the experience, which distinguishes it from peak experiences of transcendence. It also highlights that transcendence is approached here from the phenomenological perspective rather than from a psychological one (e.g., as a concept contrasted with self-centeredness) or a theological one (e.g., as a concept contrasted with immanence).

My interest in the study of *Living Transcendence* was both academic and personal. Academically, I had been aware that many religious traditions put great emphasis on the relatively constant and stabilized spiritual state, and de-emphasize transient, fleeting peak experiences of transcendence. In the scientific literature in the psychology of religion and spirituality and humanistic and transpersonal psychology, on the other hand, there has been much interest in and abundant research on peak experiences of transcendence. There has also been much interest in and research on ways of inducing such experiences, such as meditation, prayer, dance, lucid dreaming, self-inquiry and ingestion of entheogens. The study of the relatively constant and stabilized spiritual state, on the other hand, has been scarce. This

reverse order of priorities in scientific research seemed to me to be attributable to the relative ease of recruiting participants and isolating parameters for the study of peak experiences of transcendence, contrasted by the rarity of potential participants in a study of *Living Transcendence* and the challenge of operationalizing it into research.

Personally, my interest was in making a shift from peak experiences of transcendence, which I had had plenty of, to *Living Transcendence*. I believed that by engaging with people who were in that state and interviewing them about their experience, I would be engaging with and activating that state in myself. I believed that by shedding light on the phenomenological characteristics of *Living Transcendence*, the research would help clarify its significance and how it differs from peak experiences of transcendence, and hopefully provide some clues on what enables some individuals to abide in *Living Transcendence*. Such clarifications would be of value, I believed, not only for myself but also for many others, for culture, and for the relevant fields of research.

Having determined that the research would aim to shed light on the phenomenological characteristics of *Living Transcendence* as it is experienced by individuals in different religious traditions and spiritual paths, the question of informant definition and sampling came to view. I assumed some or many of those who evince the experience of *Living Transcendence* to be perceived by others as exemplifying the desideratum of their tradition – saints, gurus, spiritual masters, teachers, exemplars and the like. To avoid emic terms of specific spiritual-religious traditions, I decided against terms such as “saints” (Christian), “sages” (Taoist), “bodhisattvas” (Buddhist) and “gurus” (Hindu). The term “spiritual master” had already been defined as “a charismatic mediator who authoritatively teaches traditions, personally supporting religious vitality” (Sharma & Kennick, 2012), a definition which seemed too narrow and limiting for the research. The term “spiritual teacher” did not fit because it implied that the individual had students whom they taught, which was not always necessarily the case for those who evince *Living Transcendence*. The term “spiritual exemplar” seemed to fit best as a tradition-neutral

term. It also connected the research to the exemplar methodology, which I decided to use. I defined “spiritual exemplar” as an individual perceived by others as exemplifying the spiritual or religious life.

The exemplar methodology, defined as "a sample selection technique that involves the intentional selection of individuals, groups, or entities that exemplify the construct of interest in a highly developed manner" (Bronk, 2012a), seemed to fit my intention of selecting participants for the study of a relatively more stabilized, enduring and long-lasting state of transcendence, which I called *Living Transcendence*. Exemplar methodology has so far been applied mainly in studies of moral and ethical development. In the spiritual domain, it was applied so far in research on the experience of adolescent spiritual exemplars of different traditions and cultures (King et al., 2014a). I assumed that among people, who are perceived by others as spiritual exemplars, there would be a relatively high rate of people who live in a relatively stabilized, enduring and long-lasting state of transcendence, which I called *Living Transcendence*.

At this point both the construct to be studied and the desired informants were defined, and the research question was formulated: How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars?

The basic strategy of exemplar nomination, used in all the above studies, was that researchers first designed exemplar nomination criteria, which were then shared with nominators who used them to identify potential exemplars (Bronk et al., 2013a). In this research, however, building on the principles of Zagzebski's (2010, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) "exemplarist moral theory," I decided to impose as minimal constraints as possible on the exemplar nomination process and ask nominators to nominate spiritual exemplars they knew, with the term loosely defined. I also decided that the nominators would be experts (rather than laypersons) in the religious and spiritual field from different cultures, traditions and paths. In so doing I also followed King, Muller and Furrow's (King et al., 2013) suggestion, that "broad criteria capable of 'catching' a range of behaviors in different cultures" be used, allowing expert

nominators from different cultures and traditions to "interpret the criteria for themselves... and thereby infuse the data with cultural and contextual variability" (pp. 46-47).

I then searched for and selected 300 experts in the religious and spiritual field. More than half of these experts were academic scholars and in choosing them, I gave preference to scholars of living religions, making effort to include academic scholars (mainly in psychology and anthropology of religion and spirituality) of different traditions from all over the world. The other half of these experts included authority figures in different traditions, leaders of interfaith dialogue, authors of books on spirituality and religion, spiritual or religious magazine and website editors and interviewers, and long-time spiritual seekers or practitioners. In selecting them I used different sampling strategies, namely the reputational case sampling (in which individuals are selected based on their reputations; see Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Miles & Huberman, 1994), intensity sampling (in which individuals, groups, or settings that experience the phenomenon intensely are selected; see Kuzel, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990), and snowball/chain sampling (in which one participant recommends other potential participants; see Babbie, 1995). I obtained the experts' email addresses through directory profiles, my personal connections and the snowball/chain method, and sent them the following introductory email:

The study is designed to shed light on the living experience of individuals who are perceived as enlightened / self-transcendent / Self-realized / God-realized / spirit-medium / awakened / surrendered / fully integrated or otherwise an inspiring exemplar of their religious / spiritual path, from different traditions and paths around the world. Such individuals will be referred to here as "spiritual exemplars." ... Should you agree to participate in the study, you... will be asked to name 2-3 people you consider spiritual exemplars and to describe each of them in writing.

Of the 300 experts who were sent the email, 84 agreed to participate and provided a signed consent form as per the request and regulation of the IRB at the university. In that form they

were assured that their identity would be concealed but the information they provided and excerpts from their replies may be included in publications or presentations. Each of them was then sent an email, in which she or he was asked to name 2-3 spiritual exemplars they knew, "people that impressed you as the most enlightened, awakened, God-realized, spiritually developed, surrendered, etc.," and to describe each of these spiritual exemplars "specifically indicating what it is that makes each of them exemplary."

Of the 84 experts who initially agreed to participate, seven dropped out and 77 provided me with descriptions of 180 spiritual exemplars (an average of 2.4 exemplars per informant). The process of obtaining these descriptions lasted a few months, and as the informants' descriptions of their spiritual exemplars kept coming in, it became clear to me that the information I was receiving was significantly different than I had expected. I had assumed that most of the exemplars that would be described would be relatively well-known figures, and that many of the exemplars would be described by several informants. However, about 20% of the exemplars described were little known or even completely unknown and only a third of them were well-known (over 100,000 results in Google search). This surprising fact, coupled with the wealth and thickness of the descriptions and the intimate nature of many of them, seemed to me to merit research. I formulated the research question as "how are spiritual exemplars perceived by individuals who regard them as such?" and set out to explore it by conducting, together with the Advisory Committee members, thematic analysis of the 180 exemplar descriptions. The background leading to this research question, the research method, the findings and discussion are presented under the title "Study 1" and are described in detail in Manuscript 1 below.

Of the 180 spiritual exemplars described by the informants of Study 1, 110 were alive at the time of this research. Of them, I selected and approached 62 exemplars with two intentions in mind: first, to have similar representation of male and female exemplars; and second, to include equal numbers of exemplars from the Abrahamic, Eastern and Shamanic/Indigenous traditions and from New Age, Pagan and unaffiliated spirituality, in order to achieve variability.

Each of the selected exemplars was contacted by email, inviting them to participate in a study "on the topic of *Living Transcendence: A Phenomenological Study of Spiritual Exemplars*." The exemplar was told that, if they agreed to participate, they would be interviewed by Zoom about their experience of *Living Transcendence*. Of these 62 exemplars approached, thirty did not respond or rejected the request. Those who agreed signed an informed consent, assuring their confidentiality and anonymity. Thirty-two exemplars were interviewed in the study, referred to hereinafter as "Study 2." The question that Study 2 explored was the main question of this research: How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars? The background leading to this research question, the research method, the findings and discussion are presented under the title "Study 2" and are described in detail in Manuscript 2 below.

When I came to analyze the interviews with the spiritual exemplars, I decided to recruit analysis collaborators who would help me with the analysis. This decision came out of my understanding that involving other people in the analysis would help in obtaining a wider and less biased perspective and improve the rigor of the analysis. Fourteen people joined me as collaborators and for 5.5 months they analyzed interviews with 25 of the exemplars, wrote their impressions of those exemplars and discussed them in biweekly meetings. During that period, many of the collaborators indicated that their involvement in the research was important and significant to them. I therefore considered that it might be worth studying and writing about the process that the collaborators underwent, and decided that the research question of this study, hereinafter referred to as "Study 3," would be "what are the effects of spiritual exemplars on researchers who analyzed interviews with a large number of them?" The background leading to this research question, the research method, the findings and discussion are described in detail in Manuscript 3 below.

The structure of this research became, consequently, that of the originally-intended Study 2 "sandwiched" between Study 1 and Study 3. The original question, regarding the characteristics of the experience of *Living Transcendence* by spiritual exemplars, expanded to

include the characteristics of spiritual exemplars and their effects on others – the informants who described them and the collaborators who were exposed to them. The final research questions are, therefore, two-fold: (1) How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars? (2) How are spiritual exemplars experienced by others: (a) how are spiritual exemplars perceived by individuals who regard them as such, and (b) what are the effects of spiritual exemplars on researchers who analyzed interviews with a large number of them?

Researcher's Positionality, Rigor and Credibility in Qualitative Research

I grew up in an idealistic (socialist and Zionist) environment that was pretty much devoid of religious or spiritual contents. At some point in my adolescence, I realized that in order to make sense of life I had to find the answers to the big questions (Who am I? Why am I here? And what is all this?) and that I had to do that by myself and for myself. This was the beginning of my existential/spiritual search.

Starting from my mid-twenties, my search led me to study for several decades under the tutelage of a Zen master in a Zen monastery in Japan and then a Western Advaita teacher in a small spiritual community in the US. After leaving that community and teacher, I extensively explored the spiritual teacher-student / master-disciple relationship in different traditions and wrote a book (Freimann, 2018) and a paper (Freimann & Mayseless, n.d.) on the topic.

My interest in and approach to the subject of this research was influenced by my interest in personally making the shift from peak experiences of transcendence to *Living Transcendence*. My biases at the time of the research were toward monotheism and transcendence over polytheism and immanence. I was aware that if I designed the study, nominated the exemplars, conducted the interviews and analyzed them on my own, the effect of my biases on the study results would be multiplied and undermine the rigor and believability

(Koch & Harrington, 1998) of the research. I therefore used several strategies to mitigate my biases.

- I designed the research and conducted it in ongoing consultation with my three Advisory Committee members, each of whom represented different spiritual and cultural backgrounds and biases. Differences in our perspectives and interpretations, revealed in the consultations we had, often challenged my assumptions and expectations and made me reflect on them, open and broaden my perspective.
- Tradition-neutral terms, “*Living Transcendence*” and “spiritual exemplar,” were chosen to avoid emic terms of specific spiritual-religious traditions.
- To mitigate the effect of my biases in the nomination of spiritual exemplars, I asked 300 experts in the religious-spiritual field from different traditions and cultures to nominate and describe people they considered spiritual exemplars. In approaching those experts, “spiritual exemplar” was broadly and loosely defined, and references were made to similar terms used in the Abrahamic, Eastern, and indigenous-shamanic traditions and in humanistic / transpersonal psychology.
- When choosing potential interviewees out of the nominated spiritual exemplars, I made effort to enroll equal numbers from the Abrahamic, Eastern and indigenous-shamanic traditions and from pagan, New Age and unaffiliated exemplars. I also made effort to enroll similar numbers of male and female exemplars. Of the 32 exemplars enrolled, I had previously known only a few.
- The analysis of the interviews with the spiritual exemplars was done mainly by fourteen research collaborators. The research collaborators met regularly in focus groups to refine and unify their coding system. Those meetings were facilitated by two of the focus group participants rather than by me.

- Throughout the process of interview analysis by the research collaborators, I actively sought feedback from the collaborators about my positionality and how they saw it affecting the interviews. The fact that some collaborators often had other impressions of interviewees than my own made me reflect on my biases and how they affected my interviews and interpretation of the data.
- During the analysis processes I conducted, I documented my reflections (van Manen, 1990) and often sent them to the Advisory Committee and asked for feedback on them. I recorded all my discussions with the Advisory Committee and often returned to them and took notes while re-listening to them, as a way of further reflecting on things that were said in them.

The above measures mitigated to some degree my biases and contributed to a more balanced study design and data collection and analysis. Nevertheless, in qualitative studies it is assumed that the researcher is not neutral and my perspectives affected my focus, choices and insights throughout the research process.

Integrative Introduction

Aim and main questions

The aim of this research is to shed light on two closely related phenomena, which in many religious traditions represent the vertex of spiritual development: *Living Transcendence* and spiritual exemplarity. More specifically, its aim is two-fold: (1) To shed light on the experience of *Living Transcendence* as described by individuals, who were regarded by others as spiritual exemplars, from diverse traditions and spiritual paths. (2) To shed light on the perception of spiritual exemplars by and their effects on other people.

The main questions that the research explores are: (1) How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars? (2) How are spiritual exemplars experienced by others: (a) how are spiritual exemplars perceived by individuals who regard them as such, and (b) what are the effects of spiritual exemplars on researchers who analyzed interviews with a large number of them?

General theoretical background

There are many definitions and little consensus on any definition of spirituality (Chiu et al., 2004; Gall et al., 2011; Sessanna et al., 2007). A common denominator of many of the definitions of “spirituality” is, however, their reference to a directional movement – a search, quest, journey – toward a *telos*, a desideratum, a holy grail, an ultimate value. For example, according to de Brito Sena et al.’s (2021) recent review, the most cited references to definitions of spirituality in scientific journals are Hill and Pargament’s (2003) definition of spirituality as “a *search* for the sacred” and Koenig et al.’s (2001) definition of spirituality as “the personal *quest* for understanding answers to ultimate questions” (p. 18). Schnieders (2005) defines spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-

transcendence *toward* the ultimate value one perceives" (p. 16) and Barber (2019) as a *journey* in *search* of truth.

Related to the understanding of spirituality as a directional movement is the concept of spiritual development. Spiritual development has been defined as "the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred" (Benson et al., 2003: 205). Another definition of spiritual development is as referring to "a process of increased depth of awareness, connection to the transcendent, and search for ultimate meaning as well as engagement in spiritual practices" (Russo-Netzer, 2018). There are differences between traditions with regards to the nature of spiritual development, which "can be seen primarily as intrapersonal (as changes residing within the individual) or interpersonal (residing among individuals in relationship to community)" and where "In some models, spiritual development may be seen as unexpectedly sudden... In other systems, change is seen as gradual" (Friedman et al., 2024: 153). Nevertheless, whether intrapersonal or interpersonal, sudden or gradual, intentional and effortful or spontaneous and effortless, included in the concept of spiritual development is a "vertex of maturity" (Piaget, 1970a) towards which it leads.

Many religious traditions consider a constant, stabilized spiritual "state of being" (Bravo et al., 2018; Brown & Ryan, 2003) to be the desideratum and holy grail of the "search for the sacred." This state is central and important for religious and spiritual practitioners and seekers, and much has been written about it in traditional scriptures and popular spiritual literature (Ferrer & Tarnas, 2002; Osborne, 1966; Underhill, 1911). It is called *baqā* in Sufism (Böwering, 1988), *samādhi* or *moksha* in Hinduism (Chidananda, 1984; Forman, 1999; Osborne, 1966b), *devekut* in Judaism (Cohn, 1987), *nirvāṇa* or *bodhi* in Buddhism (Goleman et al., 1985), *daigo* or *satori* in Zen (Dōgen et al., 1996a; Harvey, 1990; Jiyu-Kennett, 2005), *theosis* or "union with God" in Christianity (Perrin, 2007; Taylor, 2013c), enlightenment, awakening or self-realization in the modern East-meets-West spirituality (Dawson, 2006; Gleig, 2010). In Hinduism, for

example, it is described as "neither spasmodic nor ecstatic but natural and continuous... a lofty plateau" (Osborne, 1966a). In Christianity, it is described as a state in which "the transcendental consciousness can dominate the normal consciousness" (Underhill, 1911: 75). Maslow referred to it as "high plateau," which he described as living "at a constantly high level in the sense of illumination or awakening." Speaking about his own "high plateau" experience at the end of his life, he said that "This type of consciousness has certain elements in common with peak experiences... These elements are present, but are constant rather than climactic" (cited in Krippner, 1972: 113-114).

Many religious traditions also reserve a special place for those who exemplify this desideratum of the tradition. Often, the ultimate personification of that ideal is the founder of the religion, its "original saint" (Scheler, 1987). Accounts of the lives and persons of these founders, in which myth and fact are inextricably interwoven, play an important inspirational, directive and educational role for the adherents. In addition to the founders, many traditions also have "entire classes of holy persons... [who] function as paradigms for piety and [whose] holiness inspires cultic veneration" (Cohn, 1987: 88) and who exemplify "the ideal of the tradition in its concrete manifestations in the lives of humans" (Goshen-Gottstein, 2017). They are the saint in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the *wali* in Sufism, the sage in Taoism, the *tzadik* in Judaism, the *rsi* and *guru* in Hinduism, the *arahant* in Theravada, and the *bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism.

Peak experiences of transcendence vs *Living Transcendence*

Many religious traditions make a distinction between transient, fleeting experiences, referred to as religious (James, 1958), spiritual (Underhill, 1911), mystical (Stace, 1960), peak (Maslow, 1964, 1971) or self-transcendent (Yaden et al., 2017) experiences, and an ideal stabilized and ongoing spiritual state. According to Ferrer (Ferrer & Tarnas, 2002), "as it has often been stressed in the religious literature, the goal of the spiritual quest is not to have

spiritual experiences, but to stabilize spiritual consciousness, live a spiritual life, and transform the world accordingly."

Here, the above transient and fleeting spiritual experiences will be referred to as "peak experiences of transcendence" and the more stabilized and ongoing spiritual state as "*Living Transcendence*." Spiritual transcendence (Johnstone et al., 2017; Seidlitz et al., 2002), the transcendent experience (Levin & Steele, 2005) or simple "transcendence" has been defined as "a sense of cosmic unity or an emotional connection with higher powers beyond the self" (Johnstone et al., 2017: 175) and as "the capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and space to view life from a larger, more objective perspective" (Piedmont, 1999) and as synonymous to "spirituality" in suggesting that which is "lofty, idealistic, elevated or pious" (Long, 2000). It is elusive to definition yet is characterized by epistemological certainty and doubtlessness. The many names given to this experience or state of consciousness in different traditions are not interchangeable, yet there is considerable overlap among them. Here, transcendence is referred to as direct, experiential knowing, sensing and feeling of what the experiencer perceives as the sacred, the divine, the absolute or the ultimate reality (in short, "experience of the sacred"). It is not used here to denote a motivational construct, as suggested by Piotrowski et al. (2021) or as a holistic psychological construct (self-transcendence), as suggested by Maslow (1971), nor does it posit the existence of a transcendent entity or realm.

The "transcendence" part of the term *Living Transcendence* refers to the experience of that which is "lofty, idealistic, elevated or pious" (Long, 2000), as described above. The "living" part was added to "transcendence" in order to emphasize that the experience is stabilized, ongoing and integrated into life, characteristics which distinguish it from peak experiences of transcendence. It also highlights that transcendence is approached here from the phenomenological perspective rather than from a psychological or philosophical one. The phenomenological approach focuses on exploring the meaning of human experiences (Giorgi,

1997) from the subjective, first-person perspectives of the individuals experiencing them. It asks, "what is it like for [one] to undergo the experience, the concrete way it feels to undergo it" (Sebastián, 2012) and attempts "to grasp the fullness of a given human experience in as rich a language or mode of expression as possible" (Schneider, 2008). This research aims at exploring the experience of *Living Transcendence* from the first-person perspective of individuals experiencing it.

To illustrate the distinction made in different traditions between peak experiences of transcendence and *Living Transcendence*, in Hinduism, for example, "The supreme experience is held... to be neither spasmodic nor ecstatic but natural and continuous and should therefore not be characterized as a 'peak' but as a lofty plateau" (Osborne, 1966a). In the Zen tradition, Zen patriarch Dogen explained that "traditionally, *daigo* is final, absolute enlightenment, contrasted to experiences of glimpsing enlightenment, *shōgo*" or *kenshō* (Dōgen et al., 1996: 209). In Sufism, the terms *fanā* (extinction or annihilation in God, referring to an ecstatic state) and *baqā* (subsistence or permanence in God, referring to a grounded, ongoing experience) represent "progressive stages of the spiritual journey... with the latter constituting a more advanced stage" (Murata, 2018). And in Christianity, a person who has *mystical experiences* is, according to Underhill (Underhill, 1911), "no mystic," because "a true mystic is the person... in whom the transcendental consciousness can dominate the normal consciousness" (p. 75), a state that referred to as *theosis* or "union with God" (Kourie, 2016).

Maslow made a similar distinction between peak experiences of transcendence and the spiritual "high plateau," which he described as living "at a constantly high level in the sense of illumination or awakening." Speaking about his own "high plateau" experience at the end of his life, he said that "This type of consciousness has certain elements in common with peak experiences... These elements are present, but are constant rather than climactic" (cited in Krippner, 1972: 113-114).

Of the different characteristics of peak experiences of transcendence, *transiency*, initially

identified by James (1958) and re-introduced by the researchers and scholars who succeeded him (Pahnke, 1963; Stace, 1960), is particularly relevant to the distinction between them and the *Living Transcendence*. Indeed, phenomenological research to date of peak experiences of transcendence has suggested that they are usually of short duration (Greeley, 1974; Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017), with “the average spiritual experience last[ing] about 18 minutes” (Yaden & Newberg, 2022: 227).

Research related to *Living Transcendence* with spiritual teachers, masters or exemplars

Peak experiences of transcendence have been studied extensively over the last century (James, 1958; Maslow, 1964, 1964; Pahnke, 1963; Stace, 1960; Tavel et al., 2022; Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Yaden et al., 2017). Currently there is agreement amongst scholars on many of the phenomenological characteristics of such experiences. According to Stace (Stace, 1960), the primary feature of such experiences is “the apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate... it entirely transcends our sensory-intellectual consciousness” (p. 14). Additional characteristics described by James (1958) are ineffability (“defies expression”), a noetic quality (“insight into depths of truth”), transiency (“cannot be sustained for long”), and passivity (“as if his own will were in abeyance”). Stace (1960) added to these characteristics a sense of “objectivity or reality”, positive feelings (“blessedness, joy, peace, happiness, satisfaction, etc.”), a sense of sacredness (“feeling that what is apprehended is holy, sacred, or divine”), paradoxicality, and persisting positive changes (notwithstanding transiency of the experiences themselves). Pahnke’s (1963) nine categories (unity, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, objectivity and reality, paradoxicality, alleged ineffability, transiency and persisting positive changes in attitude and behavior), which were based on the results of his Good Friday Study, included the same characteristics described by James and Stace, as did Greeley’s (1974) descriptors of mystical experience and

Hood's (1975) Mysticism Scale items. Yaden et al. (2017) described two subcomponents of transient self-transcendent experiences: reduced self-salience ("fading bodily and social boundaries" (p. 8)) and "connection to other people and things in the environment beyond the self" that "may extend beyond interpersonal domains to include one's spatial environment" (pp. 8, 10).

In contrast to the abundant study of the phenomenology of peak experiences of transcendence, phenomenological study of *Living Transcendence* is scarce (Gruel, 2015; Hamel et al., 2003). The first studies of the experiential characteristics of *Living Transcendence* across different cultural and historical contexts were conducted at the beginning of the 20th century by Bucke (1901) and James (1958). Bucke described the characteristics of the experience of more than a dozen men, who included the founders of some of the great traditions (Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed) as well as figures such as Dante, Francis Bacon and Walt Whitman, who displayed what he called *cosmic consciousness*. Based on the writings of some of them and their depictions by others, Bucke characterized *cosmic consciousness* as consciousness "of the life and order of the universe," accompanied by "an intellectual enlightenment or illumination... a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense... a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life... (p. 3).

James (1958) dedicated a few of his seminal Gifford Lectures to the characterization of "the ripe fruits of religion in a character", which he called "Saintliness". Quoting examples from the writings of (mostly Christian) theologians and mystics such as Henry Thoreau, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Voysey and from records collected by his colleague E.D. Starbuck, James suggested that the following characteristics of saintliness were the same in all religions:

1. A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power...
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.
3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of

the confining selfhood melt down. 4. A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections, towards "yes, yes" and away from "no," where the claims of the non-ego are concerned. (pp. 212-213)

Following studies included a study of spiritual masters (Sharma & Kennick, 2012), defined by those authors as individuals who "authoritatively teach traditions" and "support religious vitality" (p. 28). Another study was of spiritual exemplars (Scarlett, 2012) who, according to the author, included Lincoln, Mother Teresa, John Muir, Nelson Mandela and Atticus Haygood. Another study was done on religious geniuses (Goshen-Gottstein, 2017), defined by the author as individuals who bring about "deep transformation within a religious tradition" (p. 12). These studies were mainly based on second-hand textual descriptions of historical and well-known religious and public figures. They focused on their figures' character traits, actions and teachings, such as founding, reforming or revolutionizing a tradition or institution, and/or their being "apt to have accomplished a great deal and been successful in their missions" (Scarlett, 2012), rather than on their figures' experience. The traits of the "religious genius," described by Goshen-Gottstein (2017), include love, purity, humility, self-surrender and "expanded awareness of reality" (pp. 44-50).

There are a few phenomenological interview-based studies, which focused on the first-hand experiences of well-known spiritual teachers/masters (Costeines, 2009; Kilrea, 2013; Nagle, 2004) and of individuals with self-reported regular experience of "spiritual awakening" (Taylor, 2013a) or with "nondual consciousness" (Fire, 2010a). All of them were doctoral dissertations which, with the exception of the last one, remained unpublished.

Nagle's (2004b) doctoral study focused on the lived experience of three advanced yogis. Nagle concluded that the yogis' experience included the experience of "oneness or unity with the universe... a state of consciousness beyond mind, thought and sense awareness... freedom from suffering, negative emotions, desire and attachment... unending, supreme bliss and peace... universal love and compassion" (pp. 397-398).

Costeines' (2009) doctoral dissertation was based on a qualitative study of "nondual consciousness" as experienced by sixteen "purportedly enlightened spiritual teachers" (p. 73). Costeines concluded that the participants' "stable traits" included "nondual ontology, disidentification from mental constructs, timeless awareness, mental lucidity, nondual action, beatific peace, spontaneous joy, absence of neurotic suffering, unitive relationships, unitive love awareness of spiritual immortality, and awareness of positive cosmology" (p. iii).

Kilrea's (2013) doctoral dissertation was based on her dialogue-style interviews with four well-known spiritual teachers with "a body positive approach to the experience of spiritual enlightenment" (p. 75). Kilrea concluded that each of the participants reported that they were "feeling the body and its sensations more fully, and experience greater pleasure and well-being as a result of this transformation... [with] acute awareness of their emotional and cognitive experience and a transformed relationship to their thoughts, emotions, and sensations" (p. iii).

In Taylor's (2013) doctoral dissertation, the researcher interviewed 25 individuals who felt they had "undergone the transformational experience of 'spiritual awakening' or 'enlightenment'" (p. 80), all of whom "reported a shift into a new psychological state, with a new sense of identity, new modes of cognition and perception, a new relationship to their surroundings and to other human beings... and new values" (p. 5). A significant number of the participants also reported "initial and ongoing difficulties and fluctuations in their state, including psychological disturbances, cognitive problems, difficulty dealing with practical and organisational tasks, confusion, and physical problems" (p. 5).

Fire's (2010) doctoral dissertation on "the felt experience of nondual consciousness" was based on her interviews with eight participants "with regular experience of nondual consciousness" (p. 80). Its results suggested that "the experience of nondual consciousness is a profoundly meaningful one... unmistakably and deeply felt... in the moment, and in the body" and that the participants experienced "more letting go and allowing, more ease, more trust, and more clarity" (pp. 234-235).

Some themes are common to all or most of the above phenomenological studies. These are the awareness of oneness (also referred to as nondual consciousness, nondual ontology or unity with the universe); transformed or new modes of cognition and perception (also referred to as consciousness beyond mind); absence of or freedom from neurotic suffering, negative emotions, desire and attachment; supreme bliss and peace (also referred to as beatific peace); and universal or unitive love. Other themes, such as a new or transformed relationship to the body, identity or values, were indicated in only one or two of the studies.

Finally, a series of studies of youth spiritual exemplars in different traditions and cultures was conducted over the last decade. It started with King, Clardy and Ramos' (King et al., 2014) study, which aimed at developing "theory about psychological constructs relevant to spiritual development in diverse adolescents" (p. 186). It included in-depth interviews with 30 spiritual exemplars aged 12 to 21 years from six countries and eight religious traditions, who were nominated "for living with profound spirituality within their own culture." The analyses of the data revealed that "the exemplars' spirituality consisted of heightened transcendence, resolute commitment to an ideology, and behaviors consistent with their belief system" (p. 206). The authors also concluded that, for those adolescent spiritual exemplars, "spirituality was more than a feeling of transcendence; it was a means for understanding themselves and the world around them and also shaped their behavior" (p. 206).

Two additional studies of the same adolescent spiritual exemplars followed. In King, Abo-Zena and Weber's (King et al., 2017) study, the authors explored the role of social influences on the religious and spiritual development of youth spiritual exemplars, and in Abo-Zena and King's (Abo-Zena & King, 2021) study, the authors sought to understand how youth spiritual exemplars "incorporate social influences in their own spiritual developmental trajectories" (p. 1).

Each of the above phenomenological studies of spiritual teachers, masters or exemplars focused on a specific, pre-defined group: Nagle's (2004a) on a specific tradition, King, Clardy

and Ramos' (King et al., 2014) and the following studies of King, Abo-Zena and Weber's (King et al., 2017) and of Abo-Zena and King's (Abo-Zena & King, 2021) on adolescent spiritual exemplars, and Costeines' (Costeines, 2009b), Kilrea's (Kilrea, 2013b), Taylor's (Taylor, 2013b) and Fire's (Fire, 2010b) on pre-determined spiritual schemes. Bucke's (1901) and James' (1958) studies, which were not as focused on a pre-defined group, were based on their subjects' books, diaries and letters and on their descriptions by others rather than on phenomenological interviews. In sum, no comprehensive interview-based research, unrestricted to a pre-defined scheme, has been done yet on the phenomenological characteristics of *Living Transcendence*.

The current research is geared to addressing this gap by focusing on a variety of traditions and spiritual paths without restriction to pre-defined spiritual schemes, and by using first-person live descriptions of experience rather than written texts. It aims to shed light on the experience of *Living Transcendence* as depicted by spiritual exemplars from diverse traditions and spiritual paths. The main question it explores is: How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars?

Spiritual exemplars: roles and functions, and their perception by and effect on others

In almost every area in which human aspiration for excellence or virtue is expressed, exemplars of that area serve several functions for those who aspire to develop, thrive and excel in that area. Their example "seems to be a very effective way to remind ourselves of the kind of persons we wish to be" (Croce & Silvia Vaccarezza, 2017). In addition, exemplars attract, inspire and give confidence that success might be achievable also for others (Moberg, 2000), and admiration of them motivates emulation (Zagzebski, 2017b). Furthermore, exemplars' embodiment of "ideal conceptions" allows for an understanding of what these conceptions, which are often abstract, vague or unclear, actually mean. Finally, reflecting on the choices and

practices of exemplars can provide important clues about what is required, to come closer to the ideal (Harrison & Gayle, 2020a).

The study of exemplars has been in existence since ancient times. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle wrote that practical wisdom is best studied "by studying the persons to whom we attribute it" (Aristotle, 1962): 6.5 1140a25). In the *Analects of Confucius* (Leys, 1997), the authors explain moral concepts by articulating the features seen in moral exemplars (Olberding, 2012). More recently, starting with Oliner and Oliner's (Oliner & Oliner, 1988) study of altruistic exemplars and Colby and Damon's (Colby & Damon, 1992) study of moral exemplars, numerous studies were conducted on exemplars of leadership, morality, care, bravery, wisdom and other virtues (e.g., (Becker & Eagly, 2004) (Dunlop et al., 2012)(Matsuba & Walker, 2004) (Walker & Frimer, 2010).

In the religious and spiritual domain, many traditions reserve a special place for those who exemplify this desideratum of the tradition. As mentioned above, accounts of their lives and persons play an important inspirational, directive and educational role for the adherents. For example, the words and actions of Muhammad are recorded in the Ḥadīth, the source for religious law and moral guidance in Islam (Sayeed, n.d.). The New Testament records the life events and person of Jesus, and the imitation of Christ has been viewed as the fundamental purpose of Christian life (Burridge, 2007). And the Buddha's actions and responses to different situations, recorded in the Buddhist scriptures, are commonly referred to by Buddhists as worthy of emulation (Flores, 2009). In addition to the founders, many traditions also have "entire classes of holy persons... [who] function as paradigms for piety and [whose] holiness inspires cultic veneration" (Cohn, 1987: 88) and who exemplify "the ideal of the tradition in its concrete manifestations in the lives of humans" (Goshen-Gottstein, 2017).

Such exemplars have been said (Oman, 2013; Oman & Thoresen, 2003a) to play an important role in religious and spiritual formation, development, transformation and thriving in these traditions. As Bandura (Bandura, 1986a) points out, "Modeling influences can serve as

instructors, inhibitors, disinhibitors, facilitators, stimulus enhancers, and emotion arousers...

People can acquire abstract principles but remain in a quandary about how to implement them if they have not had the benefit of illustrative exemplars" (pp. 50, 73). Learning from such "illustrative exemplars" was named by Oman and Thoresen (2003b) "spiritual modeling", and they wrote:

Throughout history, religious traditions have emphasized the importance of keeping company with good or holy persons, arguing that people tend to become more like persons with whom they associate... Relationships with spiritual models may determine how people engage themselves in a variety of organizational and nonorganizational spiritual practices, what sorts of religious coping strategies they employ, under what conditions they act morally consistent with their beliefs, and the nature of their beliefs about what is sacred and ultimate. (Oman & Thoresen, 2003c).

Bandura (Bandura, 1986b) agreed with Oman and Thoresen on the "paramount role of spiritual modeling in the development and exercise of spirituality," and emphasized that the spiritual modeling framework could be applied not only to organized religions, but also to the "growing pluralization of spiritual interests and manifestations" in modern society (p. 170). Oman et al. (2008), who explored the integration of spiritual modeling in education, argued that "There is good reason to believe that regularly exposing students to spiritual models (both religious and non-religious) can help them absorb and emulate the models' character strengths" (p. 82).

The special place and role of spiritual exemplars in many religious and spiritual traditions, and the claims made by the above scholars and others (Bandura, 1986b; Oman, 2013; Oman et al., 2007, 2009; Oman & Thoresen, 2003a, 2003b) regarding the importance of "spiritual modeling" have not been met, however, by abundance of research. Specifically, none of the above-mentioned studies of religious and spiritual teachers, masters or exemplars explored the questions of (a) how people characterize those they regard as spiritual exemplars,

and (b) what happens to people as they are exposed to a large number of individuals, nominated by others as spiritual exemplars.

The aim of the present research is to address this hiatus, broaden the scope of our knowledge regarding spiritual exemplars and enrich it by exploring how spiritual exemplars are experienced by others and how they affect others. To this effect, the research seeks to obtain rich and varied information about the perception of spiritual exemplars by individuals who regard them as such, varied in their spiritual perspective and focus (academics, practitioners), tradition, gender, age and geographical places. It also seeks to shed light on the effects of spiritual exemplars on researchers who analyzed interviews with a large number of them.

The Present Research

This research is geared toward addressing the above lacunas by exploring the related constructs of *Living Transcendence* and spiritual exemplarity from three angles in three studies. It explores how *Living Transcendence* is experienced by spiritual exemplars in Study 2, by analyzing in-depth phenomenological interviews with thirty-two spiritual exemplars of different traditions and paths. It explores the perception of spiritual exemplars by others and their effects on others in two ways: in Study 1, by analyzing descriptions provided by experts in the religious-spiritual field, of individuals they regard as spiritual exemplars; and in Study 3, by analyzing descriptions provided by research collaborators, who analyzed interviews of a large number of spiritual exemplars, about the effect that such study had on them. Based on the exploration in these three studies, an additional question will be discussed: What is the relationship between the experience of *Living Transcendence* by spiritual exemplars and their perception by and effect on other people?

Study 1

Study 1, whose title is *What makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another?*, was done by thematic analysis of descriptions of spiritual exemplars, provided by individuals who recognized and described others as such. Its primary research question was: What makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another? Additional questions were: How do people recognize certain individuals and perceive them as spiritual exemplars? How do they describe or explain their recognition and perception?

In this study, 300 experts in the religious-spiritual field from different traditions were asked to nominate spiritual exemplars they knew and describe them "specifically indicating what it is that makes each of them exemplary." Spiritual exemplars were initially defined as "individuals, who are perceived as enlightened / self-transcendent / Self-realized / God-realized / spirit-medium / awakened / surrendered / fully integrated or otherwise an inspiring exemplar of their religious / spiritual path." This process used the exemplar methodology, defined as "a sample selection technique that involves the intentional selection of individuals, groups, or entities that exemplify the construct of interest in a highly developed manner" (Bronk, 2012b). The study adopted a novel recognition-followed-by-description-and-characterization method for exemplar nomination. This method was inspired by Zagzebski's (Zagzebski, 2010)(Zagzebski, 2015a)(Zagzebski, 2015b)(Zagzebski, 2017) "exemplarist moral theory," which postulates that direct recognition of exemplars precedes their characterization and the description of the qualities they exemplify.

Descriptions of 180 spiritual exemplars were provided by 77 expert informants and were thematically analyzed. Thematic analysis is a flexible research tool that is recommended for topics that have not been extensively explored before (Braun & Clarke, 2006), such as in this study. It is used to reveal patterns and meanings in a text by identifying recurring themes, and to interpret different aspects relevant to the research question. In this study, the exemplars' descriptions were analyzed using "open coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and the coded "meaning units" that emerged were used to create descriptive categories. These steps in the

analysis process were accompanied by continuous and documented reflection and critical discussion with the Advisory Committee (van Manen, 1990).

Manuscript 1, describing this study and its findings, was accepted for publication in *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*.

Study 2

Study 2, whose title is *Living Transcendence: A phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars*, was done with thirty-two of the spiritual exemplars, recognized and described in Study 1. Those exemplars were interviewed by the PhD student about a variety of issues with a focus on their experience of *Living Transcendence* (a relatively stabilized elevated spiritual state). The interviews were analyzed by the PhD student and a group of co-researchers who viewed, analyzed and discussed their insights in focus groups in a process of collaborative analysis (Cornish, Gillespie, and Tania 2014). They all used thematic analysis with a focus on phenomenological perspective exploring the meaning of human experiences (Giorgi, 1997) from the subjective, first-person perspectives of the individuals experiencing them. Such perspective attempts "to grasp the fullness of a given human experience in as rich a language or mode of expression as possible" (Schneider, 2008). The research question was: How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars?

Manuscript 2, addressing this question, has been published in *The Humanistic Psychologist*, <https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000359>

Study 3

Study 3, whose title is *Self-transformative research: Effects on researchers of a holistic collaborative study of spiritual exemplars*, was done with fourteen research collaborators, who analyzed interviews of twenty of the spiritual exemplars of Study 2. The research question was:

What happens to research collaborators interested in spirituality as they analyze interviews with a large number of spiritual exemplars? The collaborators watched and analyzed video-recorded interviews with twenty exemplars and discussed their insights in group meetings, fashioned as focus groups (Hennink & Leavy, 2014; Moloney 2011; Nyumba et al. 2018). At the end of the 5.5-month process individual interviews and group explorations were conducted with the research collaborators about the effects of participation in the process on them. The texts from these interviews and group discussions were analyzed by the PhD student to answer the research question.

Manuscript 3, on this research question, has been published in *Journal of Contemplative Studies*, Manuscript 3, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57010/TIWG2652>

The three manuscripts included below are the final versions available (the final versions sent to the journals following revision). Since each manuscript was submitted separately, there is some repetition in the literature review, the method and the bibliography sections.

Research Manuscripts

Manuscript 1

Was accepted for publication in *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* on 19 February, 2025.

Archive for the Psychology of Religion - Decision on Manuscript ID APR-23...



Archive for the Psychology of Religion/Archiv Für Reli
To amirfreimann@gmail.com; Amir Freimann



19/02/2025

Archive for the Psychology of Religion

APR-23-0114.R1

What makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another?

18-Feb-2025

Dear Mr. Freimann:

It is a pleasure to accept your manuscript entitled "What makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another?" in its current form for publication in *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*.

Thank you for your fine contribution. On behalf of the Editors of *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, we look forward to your continued contributions to the Journal.

With best regards,

Professor Kevin L. Ladd

Statement of Authorship

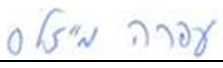
Principal Author

Title of Paper	What makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another?		
Publication Status	☐ Published ☐ Accepted for Publication ☒ Submitted for Publication		
Publication Details	Archive for the Psychology of Religion		
Name of Principal Author (Candidate)	Amir Friemann		
Contribution to the Paper	Ofra Mayseless, Tobin Hart and Aostre Johnson		
Certification:	This paper reports on original research I conducted during the period of my Higher Degree by Research candidature and is not subject to any obligations or contractual agreements with a third party that would constrain its inclusion in this thesis. I am the primary author of this paper.		
Name and Signature	Amir Freimann 	Date	20/11/2024

Co-Author Contributions

By signing the Statement of Authorship, each author certifies that:

- the candidate's stated contribution to the publication is accurate (as detailed above);
- permission is granted for the candidate to include the publication in the dissertation

Name of Co-Author	Ofra Mayseless		
Contribution to the Paper	Supervision, conceptualization, development of methodology, analysis, validation, review		
Name and Signature	Ofra Mayseless 	Date	20/11/2024

Name of Co-Author	Tobin Hart		
Contribution to the Paper	Supervision, analysis, validation, review		
Name and Signature	Tobin Hart 	Date	20/11/2024

Name of Co-Author	Aostre Johnson		
Contribution to the Paper	Supervision, analysis, validation, review		
Name and Signature	Aostre Johnson 	Date	20/11/2024

Title: What makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another?

Authors: Amir Freimann, Ofra Mayseless, Tobin Hart and Aostre Johnson

Submitted to: *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*, accepted for publication. The text below is the revised text sent to this journal.

Abstract

Objective: The aim of the present study is to shed light on the recognition and perception of spiritual exemplars by those who consider them as such. **Methods:** The authors asked 300 experts in the religious and spiritual field from different cultures and traditions to nominate and describe spiritual exemplars. With the term "spiritual exemplar" broadly defined and without providing nomination criteria, the experts were asked to choose spiritual exemplars they knew and describe them "specifically indicating what it is that makes each of them exemplary." Seventy-seven expert informants provided descriptions of 180 spiritual exemplars of all major religions as well as non-denominational and secular ones. The experts' descriptions of their nominees were thematically analyzed in a dynamic, spiral five-step procedure. **Results:** Fifteen categories of exemplar characteristics were developed and organized into three themes: *Concrete-Performative* (verifiable facts about the exemplar, e.g., their role, practice, actions), *Descriptive-Qualitative* (impressions of the exemplar's qualities, e.g., presence, humility, integrity) and *Relational-Impactive* (the exemplar's personally-felt impact on the informant, e.g., love, gratitude, transmission). Salient features of spiritual exemplarity, derived from the descriptions, were its multifacetedness or well-roundedness, and its elusiveness or indescribability. **Discussion:** The findings underscore the important role of personal acquaintance, relational feelings, subjective impressions and felt impact in the recognition and perception of spiritual exemplars. Through the eyes of many expert informants, a spiritual exemplar is an inspiring archetype of multifaceted wholeness, exemplifying the unity of the divine and the human, the sacred and the mundane.

Keywords: exemplar methodology, spiritual exemplar, expert informants, thematic analysis, multifaceted wholeness

Exemplars have been serving as inspiring, motivating and guiding models of virtue and excellence in various fields such as morality, wisdom, care and bravery since ancient times (Bronk, 2012b; Olberding, 2012). The study of spiritual exemplars, however, has been sparse (Oman & Thoresen, 2003) and focused on text-based study of well-known figures (Goshen-Gottstein, 2017; Sharma & Kennick, 2012) or on exemplars' self-reports of their experience and understanding (Costeines, 2009; James, 1958; King et al., 2014). The present study pioneers in its portrayal of spiritual exemplars from the perspective of those who perceive them as such.

The psychological roles that exemplars play in general and in the religious and spiritual field in particular will first be described, followed by reviewing the study to date of spiritual exemplars and its lacunas. The state of the art of exemplar methodology will be described and the innovative methodological approach of this study, that responds to these lacunas, will be presented.

Exemplars: Generic Roles and Roles in the Religious and Spiritual Domain

In almost every area in which human aspiration for excellence or virtue is expressed, from boxing to singing and from compassion to bravery, a special place is reserved for exemplars of that area. These are individuals who are perceived as embodying an ideal of excellence or virtue, the highest human potential or the "vertex of maturity" (Piaget, 1970) toward which development in that area leads.

For those who aspire to develop, thrive and excel in any area, its exemplars serve several functions. Their example "seems to be a very effective way to remind ourselves of the kind of persons we wish to be" (Croce & Silvia Vaccarezza, 2017: 6). In addition, exemplars attract, inspire and give confidence that success might be achievable also for others (Moberg, 2000), and admiration of them motivates emulation (Zagzebski, 2017). Furthermore, exemplars'

embodiment of "ideal conceptions" allows for an understanding of what these conceptions, which are often abstract, vague or unclear, actually mean. Finally, reflecting on the choices and practices of exemplars can provide important clues about what is required, to come closer to the ideal (Harrison & Gayle, 2020).

The study of exemplars has been in existence since ancient times. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle wrote that practical wisdom is best studied "by studying the persons to whom we attribute it" (Aristotle 1962: 6.5 1140a25). In the *Analects of Confucius* (Leys, 1997), the authors explain moral concepts by articulating the features seen in moral exemplars (Olberding, 2012). More recently, starting with Oliner and Oliner's (1988) study of altruistic exemplars and Colby and Damon's (1992) study of moral exemplars, numerous studies were conducted on exemplars of leadership, morality, care, bravery, wisdom and other virtues (e.g., Becker & Eagly, 2004; Dunlop et al., 2012; Matsuba & Walker, 2004; Walker & Frimer, 2010).

In the religious domain too, a special place is reserved in many traditions for those who exemplify the ideal state, desideratum and holy grail of the tradition. Often, the ultimate personification of that ideal is the founder of the religion, its "original saint" (Scheler, 1933/1987). Accounts of the lives and persons of these founders, in which myth and fact are inextricably interwoven, play an important inspirational, directive and educational role for the adherents. For example, the words and actions of Muhammad are recorded in the Ḥadīth, the source for religious law and moral guidance in Islam (Sayeed, n.d.). The New Testament records the life events and person of Jesus, and the imitation of Christ has been viewed as the fundamental purpose of Christian life (Burridge, 2007). And the Buddha's actions and responses to different situations, recorded in the Buddhist scriptures, are commonly referred to by Buddhists as worthy of emulation (Flores, 2009).

In addition to the founders, many traditions also have "entire classes of holy persons... [who] function as paradigms for piety and [whose] holiness inspires cultic veneration" (Cohn, 1988: 44) and who exemplify "the ideal of the tradition in its concrete manifestations in the lives

of humans" (Goshen-Gottstein, 2017: 11). They are the saint in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the *wali* in Sufism, the sage in Taoism, the *tzadik* in Judaism, the *rsi* and *guru* in Hinduism, the *arahant* in Theravada, and the *bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism.

The importance of such exemplars for religious and spiritual formation, development, transformation and thriving is evident in these traditions (Oman & Thoresen, 2003; Oman, 2013). As Bandura (1986) points out, "Modeling influences can serve as instructors, inhibitors, disinhibitors, facilitators, stimulus enhancers, and emotion arousers... People can acquire abstract principles but remain in a quandary about how to implement them if they have not had the benefit of illustrative exemplars" (pp. 50, 73). Learning from such "illustrative exemplars" was named by Oman and Thoresen (2003) "spiritual modeling", and they wrote:

Throughout history, religious traditions have emphasized the importance of keeping company with good or holy persons, arguing that people tend to become more like persons with whom they associate... Relationships with spiritual models may determine how people engage themselves in a variety of organizational and nonorganizational spiritual practices, what sorts of religious coping strategies they employ, under what conditions they act morally consistent with their beliefs, and the nature of their beliefs about what is sacred and ultimate. (pp. 150, 157-158).

Bandura (2003) agreed with Oman and Thoresen on the "paramount role of spiritual modeling in the development and exercise of spirituality," and emphasized that the spiritual modeling framework could be applied not only to organized religions, but also to the "growing pluralization of spiritual interests and manifestations" in modern society (p. 170). Oman et al. (2008), who explored the integration of spiritual modeling in education, argued that "There is good reason to believe that regularly exposing students to spiritual models (both religious and non-religious) can help them absorb and emulate the models' character strengths" (p. 82).

The Study of Spiritual Exemplars

The study of spiritual exemplars, conducted so far, can be divided to two types. The first relies on second-hand (and sometimes much more distant) textual descriptions of well-known religious and public figures. Studies of this type focused on the characterization of the spiritual paragons' personality, values, words and actions. They emphasized the exoteric or "performative" dimension of those figures, such as founding, reforming or revolutionizing a tradition or institution, and/or their being "apt to have accomplished a great deal and been successful in their missions" (Scarlett, 2012: 184). The second type of research relies on first-hand accounts – letters, diaries, autobiographies of and interviews with the spiritual exemplars themselves. Studies of this type focused on the spiritual exemplars' experience and understanding, conveyed from the exemplars' perspective.

The first studies of spiritual exemplars across different cultural and historical contexts, conducted at the beginning of the 20th century by Richard M. Bucke and William James, represent these two types of study. Bucke (1901/1905), who found and described more than a dozen people who displayed what he called *cosmic consciousness*, based his analysis on a survey of texts, depicting well-known figures from different cultures and historical periods. James (1902/1958), on the other hand, who dedicated a few of his seminal Gifford Lectures to the characterization of "the ripe fruits of religion in a character", based that characterization on numerous first-hand reports of religious figures across different traditions (although mostly Christian). From their self-reports, James concluded that there was "a certain composite photograph of universal saintliness, the same in all religions" (p. 271). The "ripe fruits" were, according to James, asceticism, strength of soul, purity and charity.

Additional text-based studies of religious and spiritual exemplars, published more than a century later (Sharma & Kennick, 2012; Scarlett, 2012; Goshen-Gottstein, 2017), belonged to the first type. In the introduction to Sharma and Kennick's (2012) book *Spiritual Masters of the World's Religions*, they defined "spiritual master" as "a charismatic mediator who authoritatively teaches traditions, personally supporting religious vitality" (p. 28). In his paper *Spiritual*

Exemplars, which introduced this topic of a special edition of *Religions*, Scarlett (2012) proposed that the main criteria for qualifying an individual as a spiritual exemplar were goodness, noble purpose, success, integrating faith and reason, respect for diversity and strong positive faith. In Goshen-Gottstein's (2017) book *Religious Genius* this key term was reserved for an individual whose understanding "brings about new understanding of reality... that leads to deep transformation within a religious tradition... A Religious Genius will accordingly have high positive output, effectively addressing challenges and issues that are fundamental to a tradition" (pp 12-13).

Of the second type of study, the first after James' (1902/1958) was Conway's (1988) doctoral study on "The criteria for spiritual realization." In that study, Conway surveyed two dozen spiritual teachers "representative of different sects within the Great Traditions." The participants were asked to respond, via Likert-type scale ratings and open-ended commentary, on 20 previously-selected "possible aspects of spiritual realization" according to existing literature. Conway found that the criteria most consistently affirmed by the participants included "Equanimity, bliss, unattachment to extraordinary experiences, compassionate serving of sentient beings, freedom from exclusive sense of "me," intuition of nonduality, love of God/Supreme Reality... etc." (in the Abstract of the paper). Based on his findings, Conway concluded that teachers from different traditions "seem to share most if not virtually all of the most important altered traits of consciousness" (ibid). Considering the methodology used, however, Conway commented that, in his study, what was measured was only "people's thoughts about the criteria for spiritual realization" (p. 331).

Several phenomenological studies of current spiritual teachers/masters followed. These interview-based studies focused on the first-hand experiences and/or understandings of spiritual teachers/masters, including less publicly known ones. Each of them focused on a different, pre-defined group: one on a specific tradition (Nagle, 2004), others on a pre-determined spiritual scheme (Costeines, 2009; Kilrea, 2013) and others on a specific age group (King et al., 2014;

King et al., 2017; Abo-Zena & King, 2021).

Nagle's (2004) doctoral study aimed at determining whether "the theory of the Self presented in the *Upanishads* could be verified in contemporary human experience" (p. vi), specifically with the lived experience of three advanced yogis, nominated by experts for having "attained Self-realization." Based on her participant observations and interviews with the yogis and key informants, Nagle concluded that "the experience of the Self described in the *Upanishads*... has been replicated in the lived experiences" of those yogis (p. 404).

Costeines' (2009) doctoral dissertation on "What enlightenment means" was based on a qualitative study of "nondual consciousness" as experienced by sixteen "purportedly enlightened spiritual teachers" who "best represented the criteria for the stage of nondual consciousness" (p. 73). Costeines conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the participants and concluded that the participants' "stable traits" included "nondual ontology, disidentification from mental constructs, timeless awareness, mental lucidity, nondual action, beatific peace spontaneous joy, absence of neurotic suffering, unitive relationships, unitive love awareness of spiritual immortality, and awareness of positive cosmology" (p. iii).

Kilrea's (2013) doctoral dissertation on "the everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment" was based on her dialogue-style interviews with four well-known spiritual teachers. Kilrea reported that each of the participants had undergone "a radical inner transformation characterized by a loss of their previous sense of identity, worldview, way of relating, and usual sense of being" and reported that they were "feeling the body and its sensations more fully, and experience greater pleasure and well-being as a result of this transformation " (p. iii).

Finally, a series of studies of youth spiritual exemplars in different traditions and cultures was conducted over the last decade. It started with King, Clardy and Ramos' (2014) study, which aimed at developing "theory about psychological constructs relevant to spiritual development in diverse adolescents" (p. 186). It included in-depth interviews with 30 spiritual

exemplars aged 12 to 21 years from six countries and eight religious traditions, who were nominated "for living with profound spirituality within their own culture." The analyses of the data revealed that "the exemplars' spirituality consisted of heightened transcendence, resolute commitment to an ideology, and behaviors consistent with their belief system" (p. 206). The authors also concluded that, for those adolescent spiritual exemplars, "spirituality was more than a feeling of transcendence; it was a means for understanding themselves and the world around them and also shaped their behavior" (p. 206).

Two additional studies of the same adolescent spiritual exemplars followed. In King, Abo-Zena and Weber's (2017) study, the authors explored the role of social influences on the religious and spiritual development of youth spiritual exemplars, and in Abo-Zena and King's (2021) study, the authors sought to understand how youth spiritual exemplars "incorporate social influences in their own spiritual developmental trajectories" (p. 1).

As mentioned above, each of these studies either emphasized the exoteric or "performative" dimension of its studied spiritual exemplars or focused on their self-described experience and understanding. In none of them was the spiritual exemplars' perception by others or their impact on others directly explored by asking those who nominated or regarded them as such.

The aim of the present study is to address this lacuna, broaden the scope of our knowledge regarding spiritual exemplars and enrich it by exploring what makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another. To this effect, the focus of the present study was not narrowed to famous or known exemplars, nor to spiritual exemplars of a specific tradition, culture, gender, age or spiritual scheme. Rather, it sought to include a variety of spiritual exemplars rather than use constraining specifications. To obtain rich and varied information about the perception of spiritual exemplars by others, descriptions of such exemplars were obtained from expert informants, varied in their spiritual perspective and focus (academics, practitioners), tradition, gender, age and geographical places. To further obtain nuanced, authentic and in-depth

information, the authors adopted a novel approach of nominating or identifying spiritual exemplars and describing them, different from the one commonly used in exemplar methodology.

Exemplar Methodology

Exemplar methodology was defined by Bronk (2012) as "a sample selection technique that involves the intentional selection of individuals, groups, or entities that exemplify the construct of interest in a highly developed manner" (p. 1). Damon and Colby (2013) maintained that the exemplar approach "is necessary for providing an *accurate, nondistorted* account of any psychological phenomenon under investigation" (p. 15). With the exception of the research on adolescent spiritual exemplars, exemplar methodology has largely been confined to studies of moral and ethical development (Bronk, 2012).

The first issue that researchers have to address when using exemplar methodology is that of nomination – how exemplars are recognized and/or chosen as study participants. The nomination strategy and process have crucial implications for any exemplar research, and much attention is usually given, therefore, to its design. Thus, Bronk (2012) posited that "[a] systematic and thoughtful approach to devising nomination criteria... is key because who the exemplars are and which criteria are considered will significantly impact the study's findings" (p. 6).

In previous studies of exemplars, one basic strategy of exemplar nomination has been commonly used. According to Bronk, King and Matsuba (2013), "researchers first design nomination criteria that will be used to qualify potential participants as exemplars... [these] are shared with nominators who use them to identify potential exemplars" (pp 3,4).

Common to all the exemplar studies conducted so far is that nomination criteria were primary and limiting. For example, the participants in Nagle's (2004) study were nominated by experts for having "attained Self-realization," and one of the selection criteria in Kilrea's (2013)

study was "a body positive approach to the experience of spiritual enlightenment." A different approach to exemplar nomination, that was adopted in the present study, was implied by Algoe and Haidt's (2009) and Haidt's (2013) work on the "other-praising" emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration, and especially by Zagzebski's (2010, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) "exemplarist moral theory". Both Haidt and Zagzebski suggest that we identify exemplars "readily and spontaneously" (Harrison & Gayle, 2020) by the emotional response they evoke in us, before we are able to explain the cause for those emotions. Haidt uses the term "elevation" to describe that emotional response, while in Zagzebski's model it is *admiration* which "reveals the admirable" and is accompanied by the motivation "to emulate the admired person" (Zagzebski, 2017: 32). In Zagzebski's approach, the direct recognition of exemplars is the point of origin and characterizations and definitions follow.

Current Study

In this study, an innovative approach to exemplar methodology, inspired by Zagzebski's (2017) "exemplarist moral theory," is applied in a study of spiritual exemplars from multiple spiritual traditions and approaches. Its objective is to shed light on the recognition and perception of spiritual exemplars by those who regard them as such. The primary question it explores is: what makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another? In other words, it asks, how do people recognize certain individuals and perceive them as spiritual exemplars? How do they describe or explain their recognition and perception? The study explores this question by analyzing descriptions, provided by experts in the religious-spiritual field, of individuals they perceived as spiritual exemplars, using a free-listing procedure.

Method

The Term "Spiritual Exemplar"

Building on the principles of Zagzebski's "exemplarist moral theory," the authors decided to impose as minimal constraints as possible on the exemplar nomination process and instead

use the experts' descriptions of their exemplars to inductively characterize the exemplars. In so doing they also followed King, Muller and Furrow's suggestion, in their paper *Cultural and Contextual Issues in Exemplar Research* (2013), that "broad criteria capable of 'catching' a range of behaviors in different cultures" be used, allowing experts from different cultures and traditions to "interpret the criteria for themselves when making their selections of potential participants and thereby infuse the data with cultural and contextual variability" (pp. 46-47).

Nevertheless, several choices had to be made in formulating the request to the experts. The first choice was between the different terms previously used to denote those who exemplify the ideal of their spiritual-religious tradition or path. The terms "religious genius" (Goshen-Gottstein, 2017) and "spiritual master" (Sharma & Kennick, 2012) were excluded because of their previous definitions, which linked them exclusively to religious traditions. The term "spiritual teacher" was decided against because it implied that the individual had students whom they taught, which is not always the case (e.g., the Christian saint or the Buddhist *arahant* or *bodhisattva*). The term "exemplar" seemed to fit best the authors' intention, as a broad and tradition-neutral term, and also as connected to the exemplar methodology used.

The second choice that had to be made was between the terms "religious exemplar" and "spiritual exemplar". After some deliberation, and in light of their intention to broaden the scope, the authors decided to use the term "spiritual exemplar," in order to accommodate exemplars both from within and outside religious traditions.

To indicate that the term "spiritual exemplar" included exemplars from within and without the traditions, the authors decided that, when introducing it to the experts, reference would be made to similar terms used in the Abrahamic traditions (e.g., God-realized), the Eastern traditions (e.g., enlightened), the indigenous-shamanic traditions (e.g., spirit-medium) and in humanistic / transpersonal psychology (e.g., self-transcendent).

Procedure

This study is the first of a large research project, whose goal is to shed light on spiritual exemplarity from different angles. At its first stage, 300 experts in the religious and spiritual field were selected, whom the authors intended to ask to nominate and describe their spiritual exemplars.

While some studies of exemplars relied on lay conceptions (e.g., Walker & Pitts, 1998), the expert approach was used in most of them. The rationale for this is that experts in every field are epistemically advantaged over lay people in describing exemplars (Zagzebski, 2010), in articulating their perceptions, insights and experiences, and in making the shift from the exemplar to the "abstract conceptual schemata" they exemplify (Olberding, 2012: 28). In Colby and Damon's (1992) study of moral exemplars, for example, the nominators were "people who reflect systematically about moral ideas as part of their professions" (p. 27) from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Likewise, In King, Clardy and Ramos' (2014) study of adolescent spiritual exemplars, the nominators included spiritual leaders and scholars from a wide range of religious and spiritual backgrounds. In this study, we expected that the experts would be able to provide thicker, richer and more nuanced descriptions than lay people. Both scholars and practitioners in the field of the study may be considered experts (Bronk, 2012), and it was decided to include both to allow for a broader perspective and greater variability.

The authors selected the experts using different sampling strategies, namely the reputational case selection (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Miles & Huberman, 1994), opportunistic, snowball/chain and intensity sampling (Kuzel, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). With regards to the primary occupation or function of the experts (many of whom indicated several occupations or functions), more than half of them (161, 54%) were scholars. In choosing them, preference was given to scholars of living religions and effort was made to include scholars of different traditions from all over the world. Of the remaining experts, 46 (15%) functioned primarily as authority figures in different traditions, 17 (6%) as leaders of interfaith dialogue and heads of organizations and networks bringing together spiritual authority figures of

different traditions, 18 (6%) were authors of books on spirituality and religion, 27 (9%) were spiritual or religious magazine and website editors and interviewers, and 31 (10%) were long-time spiritual seeker or practitioners.

The experts' email addresses were obtained through directory profiles on the websites of the organizations that the experts were affiliated with, personal connections that the first author had from previous research work (Freimann, 2018), and the snowball/chain method. The first author wrote introductory emails to each of them, in which the purpose of the study and the request were described as follows:

The study is designed to shed light on the living experience of individuals, who are perceived as enlightened / self-transcendent / Self-realized / God-realized / spirit-medium / awakened / surrendered / fully integrated or otherwise an inspiring exemplar of their religious / spiritual path, from different traditions and paths around the world. Such individuals will be referred to here as "spiritual exemplars." ... Should you agree to participate in the study, you... will be asked to name 2-3 people you consider spiritual exemplars and to describe each of them in writing.

A consent form, approved by the institutional ethics committee of the University of Haifa as part of the entire research project, was attached to the email. It repeated the above description of the purpose of the study, definition of spiritual exemplars, and the request. It also specified the voluntary nature of participation and the right to stop participating in the research at any time, and assured confidentiality and anonymity.

Of the 300 experts who were sent the email, 84 agreed to participate and provided a signed consent form. Each of them was then sent an email, in which she or he was asked to name 2-3 spiritual exemplars they knew, "people that impressed you as the most enlightened, awakened, God-realized, spiritually developed, surrendered, etc., at least 1 of whom is alive," and to describe each of these spiritual exemplars in a third to two-thirds of a page, "specifically indicating what it is that makes each of them exemplary."

Additional requests were to indicate the expert's acquaintance with each exemplar, and provide information about themselves, including "(a) religious, spiritual or philosophical background or affiliation; (b) years of engagement with that tradition, school, etc.; (c) whether [they] considered [themselves] a thinker, seeker, practitioner, researcher, teacher, etc. in that tradition, school, etc."

Of the 84 experts who initially agreed to participate, 7 did not provide descriptions of exemplars. The remaining 77 experts who nominated and described their spiritual exemplars will be referred to hereinafter as informants. They sent descriptions of 180 spiritual exemplars, an average of 2.4 exemplars per informant.

Participants

Of the 77 informants, 35 (45%) were female and 42 (55%) were male. In response to the questions about their years of engagement or affiliation with a religious or spiritual path, the majority (40) indicated between 25 and 49 years, followed by 24 over 50 years and 13 between 10 and 24 years of engagement or affiliation. In terms of their adherence to a single tradition, they divided between 20 categorized as "strict exclusivity", 26 as "openness to other traditions" and 31 as "multifaith, non-denominational or transpersonal".

In terms of their main role or position, most informants indicated several roles and positions. For example, Informant 192 wrote, "My own spiritual background is in the Sufi tradition. I have been a practitioner for forty-five years. I am also an academic who teaches Islamic Studies and Sufism, but I consider this secondary to my practice." Thirty-four of them, however, identified primarily as "scholar" or "thinker", 24 as "authority figures" (leader, influencer, teacher, coach), 17 as "practitioner" or "seeker" and 2 as "media person" (editor, interviewer). In response to the question about their current main tradition, the main groups were multifaith, non-denominational or transpersonal (19), Buddhist (15) and Hindu (14), followed by Christian (9) and Shaman/Indigenous (6).

With respect to the informants' acquaintance with their exemplars, in 91 of the cases (50%) the informant indicated a close acquaintance with the exemplar, including 41 cases (23%) in which personal friendship or close discipleship were indicated. With regards to 49 (27%) exemplars, the informant indicated they had a distant personal acquaintance. In 40 cases (22%) the informant never met the exemplar and knew them only from reading their books or listening to or watching their talks.

Data Analysis

Once all the exemplar descriptions were obtained, thematic analysis of the descriptions was conducted. Thematic analysis is a flexible research tool that is recommended for topics that have not been extensively explored before (Braun & Clarke, 2006), such as in this study. It is used to reveal patterns and meanings in a text by identifying recurring themes, and to interpret different aspects relevant to the research question.

The analysis process followed a dynamic, spiral five-step procedure, in which codes were generated, categories developed from the codes, and themes and subthemes constructed from the categories. *First*, the first author immersed himself in the descriptions by reading all of them several times. *Second*, he conducted "open coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), using Dedoose qualitative data analysis application. The author read through the texts noting "meaning units" and patterns that emerged, first within descriptions of individual exemplars and later across different exemplars. These "meaning units" and patterns served as a basis for code generation. Emerging codes were applied to excerpts in each description, with multiple codes applicable to each excerpt. The codes were refined, merged or omitted in the process in order to ensure that they accurately described the data. *Third*, the coded "meaning units" were then used to create descriptive categories, from which a framework could be constructed for further analysis. These three steps in the analysis process were accompanied by continuous and documented reflection and critical discussion with the other three authors (van Manen, 1990).

As a result of the discussions, some new coding categories were created and some were dropped or merged.

The fourth and fifth steps were done in discussions of all four authors. In the *fourth* step, the categories were re-examined, compared for possible inter- and intra-exemplar connections, and grouped into clusters of similar issues (themes). In the *fifth*, the authors contemplated the meanings of the themes, in order to allow for a theoretical "bigger picture" to emerge. Finally, all the interpretations were grounded in direct excerpts from the descriptions.

The first author is a Jewish doctoral student who spent several decades as a spiritual practitioner under the tutelage of a Japanese Zen master and then a Western Advaita teacher. His interest in spiritual exemplarity is interwoven with his interest in the spiritual teacher-student relationship and in perennial philosophy. The second author is a professor of psychology and studies spiritual development and spiritual experiences both inside and outside religious traditions, using qualitative methods. In her own spiritual path she does not belong to a certain tradition and did not have an experience with a spiritual exemplar. The third author serves as a professor of psychology who has been tracking the nature of consciousness and psychospiritual development. The fourth author is an Emeritus Professor of Education who taught courses and researches and writes about spiritual dimensions of human development and education. She has studied and practiced in Sufi, Christian and Buddhist contemplative traditions. Considering that a close relationship with a spiritual exemplar or mentor tends to create a bias in the evaluation and text analyses of other exemplars or mentors, having researchers both with and without such a personal experience helped mitigate such a bias and contributed to a more balanced analysis.

For anonymity purposes, each of the informants was given a 3-digit identification number between 100 and 400, and each of the exemplars was given an identifier, consisting of the initials "SE" for "spiritual exemplar", their informant's 3-digit number followed by a period, and

another digit. Thus, if Informant 321 nominated two exemplars, they were given the identifiers SE321.1 and SE321.2.

Findings

Descriptive demographics of the spiritual exemplars are presented first; then, the themes, subthemes and categories, constructed from the exemplars' descriptions; and in the third part, general qualities derived from an overview of the descriptions are referred to.

Spiritual Exemplar Demographics

Of the 180 exemplars described, 110 (61%) were alive at the time. More than 80% of the exemplars were over 60 years old, half of them were over 70 years old. The female:male ratio among the exemplars was 40:140. In 71% of the cases the informant personally knew the exemplar, including a personal relationship or discipleship in 51% of the cases.

Regarding the exemplars' religious or spiritual affiliations, 55% of them were affiliated with Eastern traditions (22% Buddhist and 33% Hindu), 18% with the Abrahamic traditions (11% Christian, 4% Sufi, 2% Jewish and 1% Muslim), 9% with Shamanic or indigenous traditions and 18% were described as New Age, multi-faith, non-denominational, pagan, secular, psychology or unknown.

The media presence of each exemplar was determined by conducting a Google search of their full name in quotation marks with the word "spiritual". Of the exemplars described, 37 had under 1K results, 33 had between 1K and 10K results, 50 had between 10K and 100K results, 37 had between 100K and 1M results, and 23 had over 1M results. Of the sixty exemplars who had more than 100K results, five were described by three or more informants each, three by two informants each, and the remaining 52 were described by one informant each.

Themes Constructed from Spiritual Exemplars' Descriptions

In thematic analysis of the descriptions of the 180 spiritual exemplars, 15 categories were developed from the codes and organized into three main themes. The first theme refers to visible, verifiable facts about the exemplar's role, practice, actions, etc., and it is called here *Concrete-Performative*. The second theme consists of statements about the exemplar's qualities, as perceived and described by the informant, and is called here *Descriptive-Qualitative*. This theme includes two subthemes: one of statements about the exemplar's spiritual state and the other of statements about their human nobility. The third theme includes testimonies about the exemplar's impact on the informant and the relationship between them, and is called *Relational-Impactive*.

The different codes that were generated by engaging with the exemplars' descriptions, the categories that were developed from them, and the subthemes and themes that were then constructed from the categories, are presented in Table 1 below. The numbers in the table represent the number of exemplars, from whose descriptions at least one instance of the category, subtheme or theme were generated. For example, if the codes "Teacher," "Author," "Healer" and "Practice" were generated for an exemplar, that exemplar was counted as 1 in the "Role" and 1 in "Practice" categories, and then as 1 in the *Concrete-Performative* theme. The percentages are the relative frequencies and were obtained by dividing the number of exemplars in each rubric by the total number of 180 exemplars. These counts and frequencies aimed at helping to "highlight patterns in the data" (Guest et al., 2012: 134). Using exact numbers instead of vague words such as "many," "most" or "few" allows clarity and transparency for readers, especially with regards to how common or rare are the various themes in this diverse sample. The numbers provided were determined based on the number of exemplars, for which a particular category, subtheme or theme was mentioned, with the rationale that, in quantifying qualitative data, "the number of individuals independently

expressing the same idea is a better indicator of overall thematic importance than the absolute number of times a theme is expressed and coded" (ibid: 141).

Table 1*Codes, Categories, Subthemes and Themes*

Codes	Category	Subtheme	Theme
Teacher, leader, healer, author	Role (86, 48%)		
Practice	Practice (16, 9%)		
Specific actions	Specific actions (21, 12%)		Concrete-Performative (108, 60%)
Embodiment of spiritual essences	Embodiment of spiritual essences (60, 33%)		
Presence, power, depth, equanimity, peace	Presence (29, 16%)		
Knowing, understanding, wisdom	Knowing (57, 32%)		
Communication with non-humans, energy, intuition, paranormal powers	Special powers (17, 9%)		
Spiritual impartation ability, transformation facilitation in others	Effect on others (34, 19%)		
Selflessness, kindness, goodness, compassion, love	Goodness (31, 17%)		
Ease of being, lightness, honesty, humility, simplicity, unassuming, humor, authentic, transparent	Humility (57, 32%)		
Trustworthiness, consistency, integrity, reliability and ethical conduct	Integrity (40, 22%)		
Dedication, perseverance, struggles, overcoming challenges, growth out of crisis	Overcoming odds and emerging a better human being (22, 12%)		
Transmission, inspiration, upliftment	Transmission (48, 27%)		
Transformation facilitation, encouragement, confirmation, support, teaching	Transformation facilitation (67, 37%)		
Awe, admiration, gratitude, love	Relational feelings (38, 21%)		
		Spiritual State (121, 67%)	
		Human Nobility (102, 57%)	
			Qualitative-Descriptive (156, 87%)
			Relational-Impactive (109, 61%)

Notes: 1) Codes were generated first, categories were developed from the codes and finally themes and subthemes were constructed from the categories. 2) In the table, the numbers in

parentheses represent the counts and percentages of exemplars, from whose descriptions at least one instance of the category, subtheme or theme were generated.

Concrete-Performative

As a sociologist and semi-skeptic, I tend to be dubious of "gurus," "spiritual masters" and the like and know fairly well the "game" as it is played. [SE217.1, New Age] to me was no exception to this in that respect, but her dedication and charity work were her ultimate vindication.

The *Concrete-Performative* theme refers to visible, verifiable facts about an exemplar which the informant included in their description. Statements included in this theme were excerpted from 108 exemplar descriptions (60%). They were usually provided as introductory information or as supportive of the informant's impression of the exemplar. In a few cases, such as the one above, it was provided explicitly as the primary rationale for that impression. From these statements, the following categories were developed: role, practice and specific actions.

Role. The largest category (86 exemplars, 48%) includes the main roles that the exemplars played: author, healer, teacher and leader.

Practice. Another visible and sometimes quantifiable action that was mentioned in the descriptions of 16 of the exemplars (9%) was their practice. For example, SE192.3 (Secular) "has had a very disciplined meditation practice for about fifty years."

Specific actions. These were referred to in 21 descriptions (12%), as in the description of SE134.3 (Secular) who "founded... an international federation of communities spread over 37 countries, for people with developmental disabilities and those who assist them."

While statements of the *Concrete-Performative* type included visible, verifiable indicators, in some of them the informant appeared to be pointing at a quality less verifiable. For example, in describing SE311.1 (Hindu) as an author, his informant mentioned that he had "watched him write several books and he seem[ed] to be able to channel directly from 'the source'. His books and his teachings reach into the hearts and minds of his followers."

Descriptive-Qualitative

[SE344.1, Hindu] demonstrated the cosmic energy in action — miracle energy, so I saw things my mind could not grasp... But in the end what made him exemplary for me was his pure love and dedication to his master and to humanity.

The *Descriptive-Qualitative* theme refers to statements regarding exemplar qualities conveyed in a seemingly objective fashion, which are nonetheless subjective and difficult to verify. Such statements were included in the descriptions of 156 exemplars (87%), and usually constituted the main bulk of each description. In the analysis of those statements, the categories that were developed were organized into two main subthemes: the essence of the exemplar's *Spiritual State* (121 exemplars, 67%) and their *Human Nobility* (102 exemplars, 57%).

Spiritual state. This subtheme of the *Descriptive-Qualitative* theme includes the categories of embodiment of spiritual essences, presence, knowing, special powers and effect on others.

Embodiment of spiritual essences. This category was developed from descriptions of 60 exemplars (33%). Of these, some exemplars were described as embodying the qualities or essences of their tradition while others were described as embodying universal essences. An example of the former is the description of SE110.2 (Shaman/Indigenous) as "a living representation of her indigenous tradition and maybe of the indigenous traditions of this world. There is something expressed in her personality that is beyond her personality... she is a manifestation of the wisdom of indigenous people of all times." Descriptions of exemplars as embodying universal spiritual essences include that of SE110.1 (Christian) as "a person that is connected to a sacred reality" and of SE134.1 (Hindu) as "a person who has recognized and has embodied... the nature of reality."

Presence. This quality was mentioned in 29 of the descriptions (16%), as in the description of SE275.1 (Christian), whose informant wrote that "with [him], one has a sense that the world has melted away and we are fully and completely present in this encounter." Several

other qualities appear to be related to presence: power, depth, peace and equanimity. Power was referred to, for example, in "[SE123.1, Hindu] had an immensely powerful presence." Depth was referred to, for example, in "[SE232.2, Hindu]'s depth of presence"), peace in "[SE333.3, Buddhist] is being of great peace" and equanimity in "[SE273.1, Hindu] seemed unflappable, the closest thing I've seen to the unshakable equanimity described in yogic texts."

Knowing. The codes of knowing, wisdom and understanding were indicated in the descriptions of 57 exemplars (32%). This category was generated, for example, from the description of SE114.1 (Shaman/Indigenous) as "[a] diviner who was able to access innate forms of wisdom and cosmic knowledge" and of SE311.1 (Hindu), whose "wisdom and knowledge seem boundless and endless."

Special powers. Codes related to this category were generated from 17 of the descriptions (9%). For example, SE346.2 (Shaman/Indigenous) was described as "a healer... using interdimensional spirit connections." A special type of special powers that was mentioned was that of intuitive knowing of the state of others, as in the description of SE316.1 (Hindu) as "knowing exactly what was going on inside a person, even when he wasn't in the room with them."

Effect on others. The ability to bestow or evoke spiritual experiences and states (called here "spiritual impartation ability") and/or to reveal potentials and facilitate transformation in others (called here "transformation facilitation") was described for 34 exemplars (19%). Spiritual impartation ability was described, for example, by Informant 311, who testified that "I have seen [SE311.1, Hindu] take a group of over a thousand people and share his state of samadhi with them." Transformation facilitation was described, for example, for SE326.1 (Psychology), who "has been facilitating the most incredible life-changing personal transformation processes over the past 30 years." A combination of both was described for SE181.1 (Hindu):

[He was] able to transport his students to an experience of higher states of consciousness. This was particularly apparent in intimate settings, when the air around

him would become charged with a sacred intensity, transporting those in his presence to an otherworldly state of joy and existential contentment... Many of the people [close to him] grew to become people of unusual accomplishment, by virtue of the training they received from him.

Human Nobility. This subtheme includes the categories of goodness, humility, integrity and "overcoming odds and emerging a better human being."

Goodness. Selflessness, kindness, goodness, compassion and love were attributed to 31 of the exemplars (17%). With regards to selflessness, SE345.2 (Buddhist) was described by his informant as "one of the most selfless people I have met." Goodness was expressed in descriptions such as "There is an essential goodness to [SE151.2, Multifaith] that makes him an exemplar of the essential goodness in all things." Love was referred to, for example, in the descriptions of SE131.2 (Sufi) as "a man who had died in the ocean of love" and of SE134.2 (Jewish), "Love was the essence Rabbi realized."

Deficiency in this quality was referred to, on the other hand, as a reservation in the description of SE134.1, whose informant related to his "dark side" in saying that "Despite his living very humbly and modestly, stories have been told that he was at times extremely stern, if not cruel, to his own immediate family and servants."

Humility. Lightness, ease of being, honesty, humility, simplicity, humor, authenticity and transparency were referred to in the descriptions of 57 exemplars (32%), sometimes as different facets of the same condition. For example, SE190.1 (Hindu) was described as "humble, sincere, at times confessional of his own faults, and often very humorous," and SE273.3 (Hindu) as one without "any signs of pretense or artifice in him." Similarly, SE297.1 (Christian) was described as one whose "spiritual force was animated by absolute honesty and vulnerability. I have never met anyone as truthful, honest, and self-effacing." This quality was sometimes described in reference to the exemplar's faults and weaknesses, as in "[SE134.2, Jewish] was also a

vulnerable, flawed human being and this was also apparent to those who knew him well. There was no effort to hide."

Integrity. This category, which included also trustworthiness, consistency, reliability and ethical conduct were referred to in descriptions of 40 exemplars (22%), as in the description of SE137.1 (Christian) as "no separation between what he says and teaches, and what he does, how he acts, and who he is as a person." Deficiency in this quality was referred to in the description of SE273.1 (Hindu): "He was a monk, presumably celibate all his life, but there have always been stories of sexual liaisons in the late 60s... He was human, and by definition imperfect."

Overcoming odds and emerging a better human being. Descriptions of 22 of the exemplars (12%) included statements which referred to challenges and crises that those exemplars had to face, and the fact that they emerged from them as better human beings. For example, SE134.2 (Jewish) "wore the scars of the deepest sort and emerged as a man of love, joy and light."

Relational-Impactive

I regard [SE310.1, Hindu] the most enlightened being actually living on this planet. I could bring up many reasons, listing all her extraordinary achievements in areas of charity and helping the poor, her extraordinary capacity to sit for days, mostly without breaks... But for me personally these astonishing accomplishments are secondary. What I feel, without being able to objectively prove it, is that her presence in my life has changed me for the better, making me more caring, loving towards others, conscious and open to the Divine.

The *Relational-Impactive* theme consists of statements about the exemplar's effect on the informant and the informant's relational feeling toward the exemplar. Such statements were included in 109 of the descriptions (61%). Some of them related to directly experienced spiritual transmission, inspiration and upliftment. Others referred to facilitation of the informant's

transformation and/or development by teaching, encouraging and supporting them in their spiritual process. Yet others referred to feelings that the informant had toward the exemplar, which included awe, admiration, gratitude and love.

Transmission. Spiritual transmission, inspiration and upliftment experienced by the informant were described in 48 of the descriptions (27%). For example, the informant of SE212.1 (Buddhist) wrote that "Being in his presence awakens my being to the knowledge of reality... It is a knowledge that... resonates within the direct encounter with him." The impact of SE225.3 (Hindu) on her informant was described as follows:

When [she] turned her gaze upon me, it was like everything else disappeared, her presence was so strong, focused and compelling. We briefly exchanged a few words and I went on my way. For about a week or ten days afterward, I would fade in and out of a deep and extraordinary heart/mind state of love...

Transformation facilitation. Facilitation of the informant's transformation by teaching, encouragement, confirmation and support were described for 67 of the exemplars (37%). For example, Informant 296 wrote that SE296.1 (Christian) "contributed to my inside path... to my realization of what is important in my life." Informant 131 wrote that SE131.2 (Sufi) "awakened [my] heart and gave me an instrument that can detect love, compassion, justice, purity, and wisdom." And Informant 265 testified that meeting SE265.1 (Hindu) "changed me to be more compassionate to others, non-judgmental and appreciative of everyone that walked in my life from that point onwards."

Relational feelings. Feelings of the informant toward the exemplar, which included awe, admiration, gratitude and love, were described for 38 exemplars (21%). For example, gratitude was referred to explicitly in expressions such as "I am extremely grateful to [SE273.1, Hindu] for changing my life for the better" and implied in expressions such as "I became awake to the infinite through [SE215.1, Hindu]; one can never forget that" and "What I owe [SE225.1, Buddhist] is beyond measure."

A striking expression of love for the exemplar was that of Informant 232, who wrote: "[SE232.1, Hindu] was a beautiful, unselfconscious human being – bright, sharp and incisive in his perception, open and Loving in his being... I loved him deeply, and felt extraordinarily free with him, despite my youth."

General Qualities - Multifacetedness and Elusiveness

[SE 272.2, Multifaith] is, and always has been, connected to his true self, his Origin Consciousness. He gives unconditionally and has never looked for fame or fortune... He respects and loves the Medicine and the sacred Teacher Medicine Plants. I have total respect and love for [him] and count myself as blessed for knowing him.

The above breakdown of the spiritual exemplars' descriptions was done in order to reveal recurring and important categories and themes in those descriptions. But most of the exemplar descriptions were multifaceted or well-rounded, consisting of a combination of different themes and subthemes (*Concrete-Performative*, *Spiritual State*, *Human Nobility* and *Relational-Impactive*). Another salient feature of spiritual exemplarity that was implied or explicitly suggested in some of the descriptions was its elusiveness or indescribability.

Multifacetedness

Of the 180 descriptions, 22 (12%) included all four themes/subthemes, 64 (36%) included three, 69 (38%) included two and only 25 (14%) consisted of a single theme/subtheme. The great majority of the exemplar descriptions (86%) included, therefore, statements of two or more themes/subthemes, suggesting that spiritual exemplarity was a multifaceted construct. The following three excerpts are examples of such multifacetedness:

SE 190.1 (Hindu). I am a little at a loss to describe him. I obviously love him a great deal. I would say he exemplifies the bodhisattva ideal of love, compassion and positive altruistic intention toward others. I feel there is nothing I can't communicate about with him. He emits a kind of ease, even blissful presence, that is tangible and rare. His ability to read what is happening within me and respond to it seems at times uncanny, almost

telepathic or shamanic. He embodies both the ordinary and the sacred, even magical, in a way that is hard to convey.

SE 225.2 (Shaman/Indigenous). [F]or me, her teachings were and are alive with truth, meaning, and value... When she spoke to me or anyone else, she gave her complete attention, that was marked by an openness of heart and a clear eye... This is a woman who, in preparation for and maintenance of her role as shaman in her Basque culture, spent a year alone in silence in nature three different times... She was a living breathing healer, teacher, visionary, and spiritual warrior who walked her talk and talked her walk. I feel a great love, gratitude and indebtedness to her now and always.

SE 134.2 (Jewish). Rabbi lost his wife and daughter in the Holocaust which he managed to escape and eventually landed in New York City. He began as a Chassidic Rabbi, but over time found himself keeping company with ministers of all faiths... Rabbi himself was a humble, delightfully inspired, joyful being of love. One could feel the gratitude he felt for life which he beamed... He wore the scars of the deepest sort and emerged as a man of love, joy and light. He founded several interfaith seminaries to bring people together in the space of shared humane and spiritual values. He walked the life he taught.

Elusiveness

The elusiveness of what makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another was explicitly mentioned by four informants. The excerpt at the top of this manuscript, which is a rich description of SE190.1 (Buddhist) from multiple angles, begins with "I am a little at a loss to describe him" and ends with "He embodies both the ordinary and the sacred, even magical, in a way that is hard to convey." Informant 225 indicated that "How [SE225.3, Hindu] manifests her love and grace to me remains unclear but... undeniable" and Informant 190 wrote that "It is impossible to classify or even accurately describe [SE190.3, Secular]." Informant 251 suggested

that the reason "It is almost impossible to talk or write about the experiences with [SE251.1, Buddhist]" was that "The experiences are beyond time and space."

This elusiveness was also implicitly suggested by the abstract and poetic nature of most of the descriptions under of *Descriptive-Qualitative* and *Relational-Impactive* themes. For example, statements such as "connected to a sacred reality" (SE110.1, Christian), "embodied in the 'natural' state" (SE114.1, Shaman/Indigenous) and "embodied... the nature of reality" (SE134.1, Hindu), included under *Embodiment of Spiritual Essences* above, were highly abstract. Poetic statements included, for example, "[SE151.3, New Age]'s eyes seemed to be infinitely deep and I felt he looked into my soul," "A look into the eyes of [SE251.2, Buddhist] is like looking into eternity, beyond time and space" and "I sometimes felt [SE215.2, Multifaith] as an energetic source like a fountain or volcano."

The multifacetedness and elusiveness of spiritual exemplarity may be related to the fact that, while the informants were asked to describe each exemplar in "a third to two-thirds of a page," most of them exceeded that quota. Only 34 (44%) of the informants complied with the request and wrote between 90 and 250 words per exemplar. Thirty-two of them (42%) wrote between 250 and 500 words, 7 (9%) wrote between 500 and 1000 words and 4 (5%) wrote over 1000 words per exemplar.

Finally, reservations about expressing the essence of an exemplar's exemplarity were indicated by Informant 176, who ended his 430-word description of SE176.2 (Hindu) with "my reasons for choosing him for this list are very directly personal and perhaps mystical. It is best that these remain off the record."

Discussion

Exemplars are widely thought to be a principal vehicle for thriving, learning and developing excellence and virtues in different fields and areas of life. In the religious and spiritual domain, exemplars play an important role in spiritual formation, development, transformation and thriving. They exemplify higher potentials in this domain and show that

spiritual ideals can actually be lived out. For some, they inspire, motivate and guide others toward the realization of those potentials in themselves.

One way of exploring the ways in which spiritual exemplars have such effects on others is by asking: what makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another? How do people recognize or perceive certain individuals as spiritual exemplars? How do they describe or explain their recognition and perception? To answer these questions, the authors elicited descriptions of spiritual exemplars by using a "grand tour"-type open-ended qualitative item, namely a request to describe spiritual exemplars that the person knew. Using bottom-up analysis processes of these descriptions, the following themes of indicators for choosing or recognizing someone as a spiritual exemplar emerged: *Concrete-Performative* (verifiable facts about the exemplar), *Descriptive-Qualitative* (subjective impressions of the exemplar) and *Relational-Impactive* (the exemplar's effect on the informant and the informant's relational feelings toward them). The *Descriptive-Qualitative* theme consists of the subthemes *Spiritual State* (e.g., presence, knowing and special powers) and *Human Nobility* (e.g., goodness, humility, integrity). .

The findings of this research brought to light the key role of subjective impression, relationality and felt impact in the recognition and perception of spiritual exemplars. While many of the exemplars' descriptions included verifiable information about the exemplars' roles (as teachers, leaders, healers and/or authors), practice and specific actions, in most cases it did not constitute the main bulk of their descriptions, and only four descriptions consisted of such information alone. In all other descriptions it was combined with subjective, relational and impactive indicators.

The main bulk of most descriptions consisted of subjective impressions of the exemplars' spiritual state (e.g., embodiment of spiritual essences, presence, knowing), human nobility (e.g., goodness, humility, integrity) and testimonies of the direct, personal impact that the exemplars had on the informant (e.g., inspiration, support, transformation facilitation). The subjective impressions were often charged with positive emotions and the testimonies of impact were often

overflowing with rich and heartfelt expressions of the informants' relational feelings toward their exemplars – particularly awe, admiration, gratitude and love. The importance of relationality in the recognition and perception of spiritual exemplars was also suggested by the fact that in half of the cases the informant indicated a close acquaintance with the exemplar. This centrality of close relationship may be related to Moberg's (2000) suggestions, that "role modeling requires the learner to pay careful attention to the model" (p. 677) and that inspiration is best provided "when role models are *demographically similar* to learners" (p. 679, italicization in the original).

The significant role of relational feelings, subjective impressions and felt impact in the recognition and perception of spiritual exemplars in this research is a departure from the nomination criteria used in other exemplar researches. Those, as asserted by Bronk (2012), had to be "concrete and quantifiable... criteria that include visible behaviors or irrefutable phenomena are preferable to criteria that are vague or open to interpretation" (p. 6). This principle was held in all previous exemplar studies and created a deliberate bias toward demonstrable action-oriented nomination criteria – and exemplars. Thus, an important and significant new perspective regarding the centrality of deep relational feelings and felt impact was discovered in this study. It may be unique to spiritual exemplars but it may also be relevant to other kinds of exemplars (e.g., moral).

The results of present study also underscore distinctiveness in the kinds of emotions related to spiritual exemplars. "Other-praising" emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration, had been indicated not only in spiritual exemplars in this study but also in relation to moral or virtue exemplars (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Haidt, 2013; Zagzebski 2010, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). In relation to spiritual exemplars, however, love and awe were also indicated, while a motivation "to emulate the admired person" (Zagzebski, 2017: 32), which was emphasized by Oman et al. (2008) and Zagzebski (2017), was distinctly absent from the descriptions. The reason for that absence may be that, in the eyes of many of the informants, the spiritual exemplar exemplified that which is uniquely individual and inimitable. Therefore, rather than a motivation to emulate

their exemplar, the informants referred to *spiritual transmission* – a change in their own experience or state of consciousness, and *transformation facilitation*, which was related to their own spiritual path. This distinction was expressed in the concluding words of Informant 225, after he described his exemplars: "These three exemplars utterly supported me in fully realizing the truth of who I am as a unique individual and not some sort of mold or replica of who they were. In my mind, this is priceless."

Many of the exemplar descriptions included statements both about their spiritually elevated, transcendent or God/Self-realized state and about their human nobility or *menschlichkeit* (German/Yiddish: the quality of being a mensch – a human being). In other words, exemplars were often described as endowed with unusual clarity, presence, energy, intuition, and an ability to directly transmit those, while at the same time being humble, warm, humorous, accessible, generous and trustworthy. Through the eyes of many of the informants, spiritual exemplarity seems to be of an integrative-holistic nature, and a spiritual exemplar is one who exemplifies the unity of the transcendent (vertical axis) and the immanent (horizontal axis) (Tillich, 1945), the divine and the human, the sacred and the mundane.

This conclusion, about the integrative-holistic nature of spiritual exemplarity, stands in contrast to other perspectives regarding exemplars in general and moral exemplars in particular. For example, Bronk, King and Matsuba (2013) conclude in their *Introduction to Exemplar Research* that while exemplars' development is exemplary in at least one area, "it is likely to be typical or even deficient in other areas" (p. 3). This view resonates Colby and Damon's words of caution: "In the moral area, as in any other, inflated expectations are bound to be disappointed before long... [D]eification of moral exemplars... sets the stage for the common myths and misconceptions that distort the exemplar's personal qualities, life history, and experience" (1992: 301-302).

It is possible, of course, that many of the informants made the very mistake that Colby and Damon warned against. But considering the close acquaintance of many of them with their

exemplars, sometimes over several decades, this seems unlikely. An alternative and more likely explanation is that spiritual exemplars, unlike other types of exemplar (care, courage, wisdom, morality, creativity, etc.), are developmentally more well-rounded and integrated. It seems that such perceived integrity or wholeness (Niemiec et al., 2020; Pargament et al., 2016) is indeed one way of understanding what makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another person. While interventions involving other types of exemplar can be used to inspire and facilitate the cultivation of specific virtues, interventions involving learning from spiritual exemplars could be used, therefore, to inspire and facilitate integration toward multifaceted wholeness.

The relatively high volume of the descriptions, provided by many of the informants, combined with their multifacetedness, as exemplified by the statements included under the title *Multifacetedness and Elusiveness*, may also suggest that the informants tried to point at a profound and subtle, elusive and possibly indescribable essence. This brings to mind the words of philosopher Max Scheler (1987): "It is essential for the exemplary holy man to be effective only through the being of his person, and not through virtues, and even less through acts, works, deeds or actions. They are only pointers to his being and holiness" (p. 157). Along similar lines is the distinction, made by Vos (2018), between "role exemplars," who "embody the virtues needed to realise the internal goods" of their pre-defined roles (e.g., parent, teacher, professional, neighbor, etc.), and "existential exemplars," who "acquire meaning on a deeper, existential level, that is, with regard to what it means to be a human being and to be a human being with and for others" (p. 23). Vos suggested that, while for the "role exemplar" we have clear standards by which we recognize such an exemplar, this is not the case for the "existential exemplar." In the case of "existential exemplarity," he writes, "exemplariness and that which is exemplified are not immediately recognisable... They resonate on a deeper level of our subjectivity" (p. 24).

Many of the exemplar descriptions in this research suggest that, as with Scheler's holy man and Vos' existential exemplar, the essence of spiritual exemplarity can be testified to or

pointed toward rather than explicitly described. The reason for this indescribability may be that, just as one's own spiritual core or "self" can be felt or intuited but cannot be made "an idol nor any image" (Exodus 20: 4), so can one's spiritual exemplars resonate with one's spiritual core or "self" but the essence of their exemplarity cannot be objectified.

The multifaceted and holistic nature of spiritual exemplarity, the elusiveness or indescribability of its essence and the centrality of subjective impression, relationality and felt impact to the recognition and perception of spiritual exemplars appear to be common to different religious traditions and spiritual paths. This is why, as Victoria Harrison claims in her writings on the "Exemplar Reasoning" approach (2011; 2020), focusing on exemplary figures of different traditions can greatly help promote interreligious understanding and dialogue.

Limitations and Future Research

In this research, a recognition-followed-by-description-and-characterization method, inspired by Zagzebski's "exemplarist moral theory," was used for obtaining descriptions of spiritual exemplars. In contrast to the conventional exemplar nomination method, which creates a bias toward objective, concrete and verifiable nomination criteria – and exemplars that meet such criteria – this method enables and encourages reliance also on subjective impressions, personally-felt impact and relational feelings. The descriptions of spiritual exemplars "nominated" using this method tend, therefore, also to include such elements and to reflect a different kind of bias.

The themes and subthemes (*Concrete-Performative*, *Spiritual State*, *Human Nobility* and *Relational-Impactive*) of the exemplar descriptions, arrived at inductively, may be used in future exemplar research in two main ways. In studies using the conventional exemplar nomination method, that is, studies in which nomination criteria are designed first and then used to nominate exemplars, the themes can be used as a general structure for designing multifaceted nomination criteria. Using them in this way will unavoidably foreclose diversity to an extent, but also yield greater precision, depth and nuance about each of the exemplar characteristics. In

particular, the themes constructed in this research may be used to add subjective and relational aspects to the nomination criteria used in other exemplar studies.

In studies inspired by Zagzebski's (2017) "exemplarist moral theory," that is, studies in which exemplars are first recognized and then described, as in this research, these themes may be used as reference in order to ensure that richer descriptions are obtained. If used in this way, once exemplars are "nominated" based on an open-ended qualitative item, as in this research, these themes can be offered to the informants as a way to elicit thicker, multifaceted descriptions.

In this research, in order to obtain a broad and rich characterization of spiritual exemplarity, the descriptions of all exemplars were analyzed as a whole. In this, it follows the example of most previous studies of spiritual exemplars across traditions (Bucke, 1901; Conway, 1988; Goshen-Gottstein, 2017; James, 1958; King et al., 2014; Sharma & Kennick, 2012). Further research could contribute to our understanding of specific types of spiritual exemplars and commonalities and differences between them. In particular, a more systematic investigation of exemplar characteristics in different traditions, across degrees of doctrinal liberalism to conservatism, between male and female, between descriptions of close and distant exemplars, between exemplars of the same tradition as the informant and exemplars of a different tradition, and between short/thin and long/thick exemplar descriptions, may highlight potentially important distinctions.

Furthermore, the informants in this research were experts in the religious and spiritual domain, mostly from the more modern parts of the West, and they were asked to provide their exemplar descriptions in writing and in English. The use of expert informants, half of whom were scholars, and the cognitive and linguistic load in providing written descriptions, have likely created a bias toward cognitive aspects in choosing and describing the exemplars. The geographical and linguistic factors created a bias toward Western exemplars and traits which are valued more in the Western modern culture. Taking these factors into consideration in future

research, descriptions of spiritual exemplars could be obtained also by means of questionnaires or interviews, from informants in non-Western parts of the world, from more traditional societies, in different languages and from lay people as well as from experts. This would balance the possible biases of this study and broaden the characterization of spiritual exemplarity.

The authors hope that this research will stimulate additional research endeavors aimed at elucidating the essence of spiritual exemplarity, as it is perceived by others and experienced by spiritual exemplars, and research on similarities and differences between spiritual exemplars and other types of exemplars. In addition to the approach used in this research, the exemplars themselves could be studied from different approaches, such as narrative and phenomenological approaches, helping to elucidate both commonalities and particular differences among exemplars.

Conclusion

Exemplars serve as inspiring, motivating and guiding models of virtue and excellence in various fields, and spiritual exemplars play these roles in spiritual formation, development, transformation and thriving. This study, drawing from an in-depth analysis of descriptions of 180 exemplars from various spiritual paths, suggests that spiritual exemplarity is of an integrative-holistic nature and that a spiritual exemplar may be thought of as an archetype of multifaceted wholeness. Such wholeness can manifest in multitude of ways and pointed at from different angles but is itself illusive or hard to describe. Contemplation of the wholeness, exemplified by spiritual exemplars, may inspire and facilitate psychological and spiritual integration and movement toward wholeness in their followers. The results also suggest that personal acquaintance with and relational feelings toward the exemplar may enhance that inspirational and facilitatory effect.

The study of spiritual exemplars also holds great potential for further consideration of universal spiritual qualities and capacities, common to various religious traditions and spiritual paths, alongside key distinctions between them. The authors believe that focusing on spiritual

exemplars, who are relatable human beings, rather than on abstract concepts and dogmas, would be in the service of creating interreligious bridges of shared interest, understanding, appreciation and dialogue among them.

The authors would like to end this paper with remarks made by three of the study informants, which point to the possibility of conducting intervention studies in the future. One of them (Informant 131) wrote: "It is an honor just to be able to share words about human beings whose exaltedness is their demonstration of the living presence of God in this world, where so many suffer from ignorance, deprivation, violence, and fear. Such human beings are a refuge for us all." Another (Informant 225) wrote that "Remembering and writing down my experiences invites me to return to the depths of the love these people feel and offer." The closing words of an email from another (Informant 336) were: "This exercise brought healing to my life and has in the process realigned the direction of my life – thank you!"

Bibliography

- Abo-Zena, M. M., & King, P. E. (2021). Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Case Studies of Spiritual Exemplars. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211020262>
- Anderson, R. (1998a). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69–94). SAGE Publications.
- Anderson, R. (1998b). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69–94). SAGE Publications.
- Anderson, R. (2018). *Toward a Sacred Science — Reflecting Forward*. 46(1), 1–5.
- Anderson, R. (2019a). Intuitive inquiry: Inviting transformation and breakthrough insights in qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 6(3), 312–319.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000144>
- Anderson, R. (2019b). Intuitive inquiry: Inviting transformation and breakthrough insights in qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 6(3), 312–319.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000144>
- Anderson, R. (2020). Transformative research methods: Research to nourish the spirit. *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 10(1), 95–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2020.1726056>
- Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011a). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. State University of New York Press.
- Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011b). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. State University of New York Press.
- Aristotle. (1962). *Nicomachean Ethics (Translated by Martin Ostwald)*. The Library of Liberal Arts.
- Babbie, E. R. (1995). *The practice of social research* (7th ed.). Wadsworth.
- Baltrusaitis, T., Ahuja, C., & Morency, L. P. (2019). Multimodal Machine Learning: A Survey and Taxonomy. In *IEEE Transactions on Pattern Analysis and Machine Intelligence* (Vol. 41, Issue 2, pp. 423–443). IEEE Computer Society.
<https://doi.org/10.1109/TPAMI.2018.2798607>
- Bandura, A. (1986a). *Social Foundation of Thought and Action*. Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1986b). *Social Foundation of Thought and Action*. Prentice Hall.
- Barber, C. (2019). Working within a spiritual framework. *British Journal of Nursing*, 28(4), 229–229. <https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2019.28.4.229>
- Becker, S. W., & Eagly, A. H. (2004). The heroism of women and men. *American Psychologist*, 59(3), 163–178.

- Benson, P. L., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Rude, S. P. (2003). Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence: Toward a Field of Inquiry. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 205–213. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_12
- Bojerud, E., Younadam, R., & Čehajić-Clancy, S. (2023). Testing a moral exemplar intervention in a non-conflict context: The effects of moral exemplars on key dimensions of outgroup evaluations. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 41(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21403>
- Böwering, G. (1988). Baqā' wa fanā'. In E. Yarshater (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bravo, A. J., Pearson, M. R., Wilson, A. D., & Witkiewitz, K. (2018). When Traits Match States: Examining the Associations Between Self-Report Trait and State Mindfulness Following a State Mindfulness Induction. *Mindfulness*, 9(1), 199–211. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0763-5>
- Bronk, K. C. (2012a). The exemplar methodology: An approach to studying the leading edge of development. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2211-1522-2-5>
- Bronk, K. C. (2012b). The exemplar methodology: An approach to studying the leading edge of development. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2211-1522-2-5>
- Bronk, K. C., King, P. E., & Matsuba, M. K. (2013a). An Introduction to Exemplar Research: A Definition, Rationale, and Conceptual Issues. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2013(142), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20045>
- Bronk, K. C., King, P. E., & Matsuba, M. K. (2013b). An introduction to exemplar research: A definition, rationale, and conceptual issues. In M. K. Matsuba, P. E. King, & K. C. Bronk (Eds.), *Exemplar Methods and Research: Strategies for Investigation* (Vol. 142, pp. 1–12). New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development.
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4), 822–848. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822>
- Bucke, R. M. (1901). *Cosmic consciousness: A study in the evolution of the human mind*. Innes & Sons.
- Burridge, R. A. (2007). *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Chidananda, S. S. (1984). *The philosophy, psychology, and practice of yoga*. Divine Life Society.
- Chiu, L., Emblen, J. D., Van Hofwegen, L., Sawatzky, R., & Meyerhoff, H. (2004). An Integrative Review of the Concept of Spirituality in the Health Sciences. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 26(4), 405–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193945904263411>
- Churchill, S. D., & Wertz, F. J. (2015). An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations. In K. J. Schneider, J. F. Pierson, & J. F. T. Bugental (Eds.), *An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations* (2nd ed., pp. 275–295). Sage Publications, Inc.

- Clements, J. (2004a). Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 26–49.
- Clements, J. (2004b). Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 26–49.
- Clements, J. (2011). Organic inquiry: Research in partnership with spirit. In R. Anderson & W. Braud (Eds.), *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities* (pp. 131–166). State University of New York Press.
- Cohn, R. L. (1987). Sainthood on the Periphery: The Case of Judaism. In J. S. Hawley (Ed.), *Saints and Virtues*. University of California.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992a). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. The Free Press.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992b). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. The Free Press.
- Cornish, F., Gillespie, A., & Tania, Z. (2014). Collaborative Analysis of Qualitative Data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>
- Costeines, M. (2009a). *What Enlightenment Means: A Qualitative Study of Nondual Consciousness As Experienced by Teachers of Nondual Mysticism*.
- Costeines, M. (2009b). *What Enlightenment Means: A Qualitative Study of Nondual Consciousness As Experienced by Teachers of Nondual Mysticism*.
- Croce, M., & Silvia Vaccarezza, M. (2017). Educating through exemplars: Alternative paths to virtue. *Theory and Research in Education*, 15(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878517695903>
- Custer, D. (2014). Auto/ethnography as a transformative research method. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(How To 21), 1–13.
- Damon, W., & Colby, A. (2013). Why a true account of human development requires exemplar research. In M. K. Matsuba, P. E. King, & K. C. Bronk (Eds.), *Exemplar Methods and Research: Strategies for Investigation* (pp. 13–26). Jossey-Bass.
- Davidson, L. (2000). Philosophical foundations of humanistic psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 28(1–3), 7–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2000.9976979>
- Dawson, A. (2006). East is East, Except When It's West: The Easternization Thesis and the Western Habitus. *Journal of Religion & Society*, 8, 1–13.
- de Brito Sena, M. A., Damiano, R. F., Lucchetti, G., & Peres, M. F. P. (2021). Defining Spirituality in Healthcare: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Framework. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.756080>
- Djuraskovic, I., & Arthur, N. (2010). Heuristic inquiry: A personal journey of acculturation and identity reconstruction. *Qualitative Report*, 15(6), 1569–1593. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2010.1361>
- Dōgen, Leighton, T. D., & Okumura, S. (1996a). *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the Eihei Shingi*. State University of New York Press.

- Dōgen, Leighton, T. D., & Okumura, S. (1996b). *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the Eihei Shingi*. State University of New York Press.
- Dorjee, D. (2016). Defining Contemplative Science: The Metacognitive Self-Regulatory Capacity of the Mind, Context of Meditation Practice and Modes of Existential Awareness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01788>
- Dunlop, W. L., Walker, L. J., & Matsuba, M. K. (2012). The distinctive moral personality of care exemplars. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7(2), 131–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2012.662994>
- Etherington, K. (2020). Becoming a Narrative Inquirer. In S. Bager-Charleson & A. McBeath (Eds.), *Enjoying Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (pp. 71–93). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55127-8_5
- Ferrer, J. N., & Tarnas, R. (2002). *Revisioning transpersonal theory : a participatory vision of human spirituality*. State University of New York Press.
- Fire, M. (2010a). *Exploring the felt experience of nondual consciousness*. California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Fire, M. (2010b). *Exploring the felt experience of nondual consciousness*. California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Flores, R. (2009). *Buddhist scriptures as literature: Sacred rhetoric and the uses of theory*. SUNY Press.
- Forman, R. K. C. (1999). *Mysticism, mind, consciousness*. State University of New York Press.
- Freimann, A. (2018). *Spiritual Transmission: Paradoxes and Dilemmas on the Spiritual Path*. Monkfish Book Publishing Company.
- Freimann, A., & Mayseless, O. (n.d.). *Surrender to Another Person: The Case of a Spiritual Master*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820975636>
- Friedman, H., Krippner, S., Riebel, L., & Johnson, C. (2010). Transpersonal and Other Models of Spiritual Development. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 29(1), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190905538.001.0001>
- Gall, T. L., Malette, J., & Guirguis-Younger, M. (2011). Spirituality and Religiousness: A Diversity of Definitions. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 13(3), 158–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2011.593404>
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Basic Books.
- Gendlin, E. (1962). *Experiencing and the creation of meaning*. University Press. https://scholar.google.co.il/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Experiencing+and+the+creation+of+meaning.+Evanston%3A+Northwestern+University+Press&btnG=
- Gendlin, E. T. (1981). *Focusing*. Bantam Books.
- Gillespie, A., & Richardson, B. (2011). Exchanging social positions: enhancing perspective taking within a cooperative problem solving task. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41(5), 608–616.

- Giorgi, A. (1997). The Theory, Practice, and Evaluation of the Phenomenological Method as a Qualitative Research Procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 28(2), 235–260. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916297X00103>
- Gleig, A. L. (2010). *Enlightenment after the enlightenment: American transformations of Asian contemplative traditions*. Rice University.
- Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. C. (1984). *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. Academic Press Inc.
- Goleman, D., Smith, H., & Ram Dass. (1985). Truth and Transformation in Psychological and Spiritual Paths. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 17(2), 183–214.
- Göpel, M. (2016). *The Great Mindshift* (Vol. 2). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43766-8>
- Goshen-Gottstein, A. (2017). Religious genius: Appreciating inspiring individuals across traditions. *Religious Genius: Appreciating Inspiring Individuals Across Traditions*, 1–196. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55514-0>
- Greeley, A. (1974). *Ecstasy: A way of knowing*. Prentice Hall.
- Gruel, N. (2015). The plateau experience: An exploration of its origins, characteristics, and potential. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 47(1), 44–63.
- Haidt, J. (2013). Moral psychology for the twenty-first century. *Journal of Moral Education*, 42(3), 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2013.817327>
- Hamel, S., Leclerc, G., & Lefrançois, R. (2003). A psychological outlook on the concept of transcendent actualization. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(1), 3–15.
- Han, H., & Dawson, K. J. (2023). Relatable and attainable moral exemplars as sources for moral elevation and pleasantness. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2173158>
- Harrison, V. S. (2011). Embodied values and muslim-christian dialogue: 'Exemplar reasoning' as a model for interreligious conversations. *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 21(1), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.2143/SID.21.1.2129547>
- Harrison, V. S. (2020). "Exemplar Reasoning" as a Tool for Constructive Conversation between Confucians and Catholics. In *Confucianism and Catholicism* (pp. 172–189). University of Notre Dame Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19m643m.12>
- Harrison, V. S., & Gayle, R. (2020a). Self-transformation and Spiritual Exemplars. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 12(4), 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v12i4.3520>
- Harrison, V. S., & Gayle, R. (2020b). Self-Transformation and Spiritual Exemplars. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 12(4), 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.24204/EJPR.V12I4.3520>
- Harvey, P. (1990). *An introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, history and practices*. Cambridge University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Eds.). Blackwell.
- Hennink, M. M., & Leavy, P. (2014). *Understanding Focus Group Discussions*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199856169.001.0001>

- Hick, J. (1988). Religious pluralism and salvation. *Faith and Philosophy*, 5(4), 365–377.
- Hill, P. C., & Pargament, K. I. (2003). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health research. *American Psychologist*, 58(1), 64–74. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.64>
- Hood, R. W. (1975). The construction and preliminary validation of a measure of reported mystical experience. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14(1), 29–41.
- Hu, D., Gu, Q., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Role modeling effects: how leader's job involvement affects follower creativity. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 61(1), 101–123. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1744-7941.12332>
- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology* (Vol. 2). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Huxley, A. (1945). *The perennial philosophy*. Harper & Row.
- James, W. (1958). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Mentor.
- Jiyu-Kennett, H. (2005). *Roar of the tigress, An introduction to Zen: Religious practice for everyday life* (D. Rev. MacPhillamy, Ed.; Vol. 1). Shasta Abbey Press.
- Johnstone, B., Hanks, R., Bhushan, B., Cohen, D., Roseberry, J., & Yoon, D. P. (2017). Selflessness as a universal neuropsychological foundation of spiritual transcendence: validation with Christian, Hindu, and Muslim traditions. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 20(2), 175–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2017.1333090>
- Kilrea, K. A. (2013a). *The everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment*. Sofia University.
- Kilrea, K. A. (2013b). *The everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment* [Doctoral Dissertation]. Sofia University.
- King, P. E., Abo-Zena, M. M., & Weber, J. D. (2017). Varieties of social experience: The religious cultural context of diverse spiritual exemplars. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 35(1), 127–141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12181>
- King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014a). Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(2), 186–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413502534>
- King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014b). Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(2), 186–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413502534>
- King, P. E., Mueller, R. A. O., & Furrow, J. (2013). Cultural and Contextual Issues in Exemplar Research. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2013(142), 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20048>
- Koch, T., & Harrington, A. (1998). Reconceptualizing rigour: the case for reflexivity. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(4), 882–890.
- Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M. E., & Larson, D. B. (2001). *Handbook of Religion and Health* (H. G. Koenig, M. E. McCullough, & D. B. Larson, Eds.; 1st ed.). Oxford University Press.

- Kourie, C. (2016). The Way of the Mystic: The Sanjuanist stages of the spiritual path. *HTS Theological Studies*, 72(4), 1–11.
- Krippner, S. (1972). The plateau experience: A. H. Maslow and others. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 4(2), 107–120.
- Kristjánsson, K. (2010). *The self and its emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kuntz, A. F. (2016). Exemplary Exemplar Research : Three Approaches to Studying Moral Excellence. *PsyArXiv Preprints*, May, 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4537.4329>
- Kuzel, A. J. (1992). Sampling in qualitative inquiry. In B. F. Crabtree & W. L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research. Research Methods for Primary Care* (p. Vol. 3, 31-44). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Levin, J., & Steele, L. (2005). The transcendent experience: Conceptual, theoretical, and epidemiologic perspectives. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 1(2), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2004.12.002>
- Leys, S. (translator). (1997). *The Analects of Confucius*. W.W. Norton and Co.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Long, J. (2000). Spirituality and the Idea of Transcendence. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 5(2), 147–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713670913>
- Maslow, A. H. (1962a). Lessons from the Peak-Experiences. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 2(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216786200200102>
- Maslow, A. H. (1962b). Lessons from the Peak-Experiences. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 2(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216786200200102>
- Maslow, A. H. (1964). *Religions, values, and peak experiences*. Ohio State University Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1969a). The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. In *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–9).
- Maslow, A. H. (1969b). The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. In *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–9).
- Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The farther reaches of the human nature*. The Viking Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1973). *The farther reaches of the human nature*. Penguin Books.
- Matsuba, M. K., & Walker, L. J. (2004). Extraordinary Moral Commitment: Young Adults Involved in Social Organizations. *Journal of Personality*, 72(2), 413–436. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00267.x>
- Matsuba, M. K., & Walker, L. J. (2005). Young adult moral exemplars: The making of self through stories. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 15(3), 275–297. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2005.00097.x>
- Mertens, D. M. (2017). Transformative research: personal and societal. *International Journal for Transformative Research*, 4(1), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijtr-2017-0001>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

- Moberg, D. J. (2000). Role Models and Moral Exemplars: How do Employees Acquire Virtues by Observing Others? *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 10(3), 675–696. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3857898>
- Moloney, S. (2011). Focus Groups as Transformative Spiritual Encounters. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10(1), 58–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000105>
- Moran-Ellis, J., Alexander, V. D., Cronin, A., Dickinson, M., Fielding, J., Sleney, J., & Thomas, H. (2006). Triangulation and integration: processes, claims and implications. *Qualitative Research*, 6(1), 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106058870>
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: design, methodology, and applications*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995641>
- Murata, K. (2018). Fana and Baqa. In *Oxford Bibliographies*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195390155-0256>
- Nagle, C. (2004a). *Experience of self in advanced yogis: A preliminary verification of Upanishadic theory*. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.
- Nagle, C. (2004b). *Experience of self in advanced yogis: A preliminary verification of Upanishadic theory*. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.
- Niemiec, R. M., Russo-Netzer, P., & Pargament, K. I. (2020). The Decoding of the Human Spirit: A Synergy of Spirituality and Character Strengths Toward Wholeness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02040>
- Nyumba, T. O., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). *The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12860>
- Olberding, A. (2012). *Moral exemplars in the Analects: The good person is that*. Routledge.
- Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. (1988a). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. Free Press.
- Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. (1988b). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. Free Press.
- Oman, D. (2013). Spiritual modeling and the social learning of spirituality and religion. In K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, & J. W. Jones (Eds.), *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality: Context, theory, and research* (1st ed., pp. 187–204). American Psychological Association.
- Oman, D., Flinders, T., & Thoresen, C. E. (2008). Integrating spiritual modeling into education: A college course for stress management and spiritual growth. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 18(2), 79–107.
- Oman, D., Shapiro, S. L., Thoresen, C. E., Flinders, T., Driskill, J. D., & Plante, T. G. (2007). Learning from Spiritual Models and Meditation: A Randomized Evaluation of a College Course. *Pastoral Psychology*, 55(4), 473–493. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-006-0062-x>
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003a). Authors' response: "The many frontiers of spiritual modeling." *International Journal of Phytoremediation*, 21(1), 197–213. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_04

- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003b). INVITED ESSAY: "Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?" *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(3), 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_01
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003c). Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth? *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(3), 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_01
- Oman, D., Thoresen, C. E., Park, C. L., Shaver, P. R., Hood, R. W., & Plante, T. G. (2009). How does one become spiritual? The Spiritual Modeling Inventory of Life Environments (SMILE). *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 12(5), 427–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670902758257>
- Orchard, T. (2017). To Change and Be Changed: Transformative Research Experiences. In *Remembering the body: Ethical issues in body mapping research* (pp. 65–83). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49861-4_4
- Osborne, A. (1966a). Excerpt of a letter to the editor from Arthur Osborne. *The R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience Newsletter-Review*, 13–17.
- Osborne, A. (1966b). Excerpt of a letter to the editor from Arthur Osborne. *The R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience Newsletter-Review*, 13–17.
- Pahnke, W. N. (1963). *Drugs and mysticism: An analysis of the relationship between psychedelic drugs and the mystical consciousness*. Harvard University.
- Pargament, K. I. (2012). Searching for the sacred: Toward a nonreductionistic theory of spirituality. *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol 1): Context, Theory, and Research.*, 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14045-014>
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative Research and Education Methods (2nd ed.)*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Perrin, D. B. (2007). *Studying Christian spirituality*. Routledge.
- Piaget, J. (1970a). *Structuralism*. Harper & Row.
- Piaget, J. (1970b). *Structuralism*. Harper & Row.
- Piedmont, R. L. (1999). Does spirituality represent the sixth factor of personality?: Spiritual transcendence and the five-factor model. *Journal of Personality*, 67(6), 985–1013.
- Piotrowski, J. P., Żemojtel-Piotrowska, M., Piedmont, R. L., & Baran, T. (2021). The Assessment of Spirituality and Religious Sentiments (ASPIRES) scale: Examining a spiritual transcendence nomological net in Polish context. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 13(1), 36–45. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000273>
- Ratcliffe, M. (2008). *Feelings of being: Phenomenology, psychiatry and the sense of reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2020). Existential Feelings. In T. Szanto & H. Landweer (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotion* (pp. 250–261). Routledge.
- Reason, P., & Torbert, W. (2001). The action turn: Toward a transformational social science. *Concepts and Transformation*, 6(1), 1–37.

- Richards, K. A. R., & Hemphill, M. A. (2018). A Practical Guide to Collaborative Qualitative Data Analysis. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 37(2), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2017-0084>
- Russo-Netzer, P. (2018). Spirituality. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development* (pp. 2127–2130). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Sass, L., & Ratcliffe, M. (2017). Atmosphere: On the Phenomenology of “Atmospheric” Alterations in Schizophrenia - Overall Sense of Reality, Familiarity, Vitality, Meaning, or Relevance (Ancillary Article to EAWE Domain 5). *Psychopathology*, 50(1), 90–97. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000454884>
- Sayeed, A. (n.d.). Hadith. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- Scarlett, W. G. (2012). Spiritual exemplars: An introduction. *Religions*, 3(2), 183–190. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3020183>
- Scheler, M. (1987). Exemplars of Person and Leaders. In M. S. Frings (Ed.), *Person and Self-Value* (pp. 125–198). Nijhoff.
- Schneider, K. J. (2008). *Existential-integrative psychotherapy: Guideposts to the core of practice*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Schneiders, S. M. (2005). Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality. In A. Holder (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Christian Spirituality* (pp. 15–33). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sebastián, M. Á. (2012). Experiential Awareness: Do You Prefer “It” to “Me”? *Philosophical Topics*, 40(2), 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201240218>
- Seidlitz, L., Abernethy, A. D., Duberstein, P. R., Evinger, J. S., Chang, T. H., & Lewis, B. L. (2002). Development of the Spiritual Transcendence Index. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41(3), 439–453. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00129>
- Sela-Smith, S. (2002). Heuristic research: A review and critique of Moustakas’s method. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 42(3), 53–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167802423004>
- Sessanna, L., Finnell, D., & Jezewski, M. A. (2007). Spirituality in Nursing and Health-Related Literature. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 25(4), 252–262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0898010107303890>
- Sharma, A., & Kennick, V. (Eds.). (2012). *Spiritual masters of the world’s religions*. State University of New York Press.
- Sohmer, O. R. (2020). The Experience of the Authentic Self: A Cooperative Inquiry. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820952339>
- Sperry, L. (2001). *Spirituality in clinical practice: Incorporating the spiritual dimension in psychotherapy and counseling*. Psychology Press.
- Stace, W. (1960). *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Macmillan).
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Tavel, P., Chrz, V., Poláčková Šolcová, I., Dubovská, E., & Kalman, M. (2022). Peak experience and its varieties: Response to challenge as a valuable perspective of peak experience and

- its varieties. *Ceskoslovenska Psychologie*, 66(2), 95–110.
<https://doi.org/10.51561/cspsych.66.2.95>
- Taylor, S. (2012). Spontaneous awakening experiences: Beyond religion and spiritual practice. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 44(1), 73–91.
- Taylor, S. (2013a). *A phenomenological investigation into the psychological transformation interpreted as "Spiritual Awakening": possible causes, characteristics, and after-effects*. Liverpool John Moores University.
- Taylor, S. (2013b). *A phenomenological investigation into the psychological transformation interpreted as "Spiritual Awakening": possible causes, characteristics, and after-effects*. Liverpool John Moores University.
- Taylor, S. (2013c). Temporary and Permanent Awakening: The Primary and Secondary Shift. *Journal of Transpersonal Research*, 5(2), 41–48.
- Taylor, S., & Egeto-Szabo, K. (2017). Exploring Awakening Experiences: a Study of Awakening Experiences in Terms of Their Triggers, Characteristics, Duration and After-Effects. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 49(1), 45–65.
- Teilhard de Chardin, P. (1969). *Building the Earth and The Psychological Conditions of Human Unification* (Discus Edition). Avon.
- Underhill, E. (1911). *Mysticism: A study in nature and development of spiritual consciousness*. Methuen.
- van de Ven, N., Archer, A. T. M., & Engelen, B. (2019). More important and surprising actions of a moral exemplar trigger stronger admiration and inspiration. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 159(4), 383–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2018.1498317>
- Van Deurzen, E. (2010). *Everyday mysteries: A handbook of existential psychotherapy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. SUNY Press.
- Vos, P. H. (2018). Learning from exemplars: emulation, character formation and the complexities of ordinary life. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 39(1), 17–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2017.1393295>
- Walker, L. J., & Frimer, J. A. (2010). Moral Personality Exemplified. *Personality, Identity, and Character*, 232–255. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511627125.011>
- White, J. (2005). Exemplary persons and ethics. The place of St. Francis in the philosophy of Max Scheler. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 79(1), 57–90.
- Yaden, D. B., Haidt, J., Hood, R. W., Vago, D. R., & Newberg, A. B. (2017). The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience. *Review of General Psychology*, 21(2), 143–160.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000102>
- Yaden, D. B., & Newberg, A. (2022). *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*. Oxford University Press New York. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190665678.001.0001>
- Zagzebski, L. (2010a). Exemplarist virtue theory. *Metaphilosophy*, 41, 41–57.
- Zagzebski, L. (2010b). Exemplarist virtue theory. *Metaphilosophy*, 41, 41–57.

- Zagzebski, L. (2015a). Admiration and the admirable. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 89, 205–221.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015b). Admiration and the admirable. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 89, 205–221.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015c). Exemplarism and admiration. In C. B. Miller, R. M. Furr, A. Knobel, & W. Fleeson (Eds.), *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015d). Exemplarism and admiration. In C. B. Miller, R. M. Furr, A. Knobel, & W. Fleeson (Eds.), *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2017a). *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2017b). *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Manuscript 2

Title: ***Living Transcendence: A phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars***

Authors: Amir Freimann, Ofra Mayseless, Tobin Hart and Aostre Johnson

Journal: Humanistic Psychologist (H-Index 32), Advance online publication.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000359>

Statement of Authorship

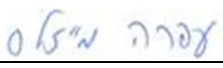
Principal Author

Title of Paper	<i>Living Transcendence: A phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars</i>		
Publication Status	☒ Published ☐ Accepted for Publication ☐ Submitted for Publication		
Publication Details	Humanistic Psychologist (H-Index 32), Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000359		
Name of Principal Author (Candidate)	Amir Friemann		
Contribution to the Paper	Ofra Mayseless, Tobin Hart and Aostre Johnson		
Certification:	This paper reports on original research I conducted during the period of my Higher Degree by Research candidature and is not subject to any obligations or contractual agreements with a third party that would constrain its inclusion in this thesis. I am the primary author of this paper.		
Name and Signature	 Amir Freimann	Date	20/11/2024

Co-Author Contributions

By signing the Statement of Authorship, each author certifies that:

- the candidate's stated contribution to the publication is accurate (as detailed above);
- permission is granted for the candidate to include the publication in the dissertation

Name of Co-Author	Ofra Mayseless		
Contribution to the Paper	Supervision, conceptualization, development of methodology, analysis, validation, review		
Name and Signature	 Ofra Mayseless	Date	20/11/2024

Name of Co-Author	Tobin Hart		
Contribution to the Paper	Supervision, analysis, validation, review		
Name and Signature	 Tobin Hart	Date	20/11/2024

Name of Co-Author	Aostre Johnson		
Contribution to the Paper	Supervision, analysis, validation, review		
Name and Signature	 Aostre Johnson	Date	20/11/2024

Title: ***Living Transcendence: A phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars***

Citation: Freimann, A., Mayseless, O., Hart, T., & Johnson, A. (2024). Living transcendence: A phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars. *The Humanistic Psychologist*. Advance online publication. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/hum0000359>

The text below is the final version sent to the journal following revision. It is not the copy of record and may not exactly replicate the final, authoritative version of the article. Please do not copy or cite without authors' permission.

Abstract

The aim of this study is to shed light on the experience of *Living Transcendence*, a relatively stabilized spiritual state considered in many religious traditions the pinnacle and holy grail of the search for the sacred. It explores how *Living Transcendence* is experienced by individuals, identified by others as spiritual exemplars having and evincing that experience. Multiple in-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with thirty-two such individuals of different traditions and spiritual paths. Based on their analysis, four qualities of this experience are described: *Noetic* (pre-conceptual, non-discursive, non-symbolic knowing / awareness / consciousness of ultimate reality or truth), *Affective* (supremely positive affective qualities of joy, happiness or bliss and love), *Embodied* (somatic and/or energetic presence or sense of a spiritual essence) and *Relational* (a sense of connectivity or "inter-being" with everything, God or the Whole). A characteristic of the experience of *Living Transcendence* is its constancy over time, amid and through the fluctuations of normal life and various crises. An additional characteristic is its association with an unusual type of volitionality, that is, the will to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling." While the presence and prominence of each of these qualities and characteristics vary between individuals, they appear to be facets of one essence.

The experience of *Living Transcendence* appears to be constantly and consistently unitive, connective and supremely positive, and to inextricably permeate all other experiences and contextualize them.

Keywords

Living Transcendence, exemplar methodology, phenomenology, constancy, volitionality

"Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating." (Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, New York, 1971, p. 269.)

A stabilized spiritual state is considered in many religious traditions the desideratum and consummation of the "search for the sacred" (Pargament, 2012). This state is central and important for religious and spiritual practitioners and seekers, and much has been written about it in traditional scriptures and popular spiritual literature (Ferrer & Tarnas, 2002; Osborne, 1966; Underhill, 1911). It is called *baqā* in Sufism, *samādhi* or *moksha* in Hinduism, *devekut* in Judaism, *nirvāṇa* or *bodhi* in Buddhism, *daigo* or *satori* in Zen, *theosis* or "union with God" in Christianity, enlightenment, awakening or self-realization in the modern East-meets-West spirituality. Maslow (1969) called such a state "high plateau" and described it as constantly living at a high level "of illumination or awakening" (Maslow, 1971).

Unlike transient peak experiences of transcendence (Maslow, 1964), whose academic study has been extensive (James, 1958; Maslow, 1962; Pahnke, 1963; Stace, 1960; Tavel et al., 2022; Yaden et al., 2017), the study of the constant spiritual "high plateau" state has been exceedingly scarce (Gruel, 2015; Hamel et al., 2003). Some of the reasons for it are the relative rarity of individuals who evince that state (referred to in this study as "spiritual exemplars") and

the difficulty in operationalizing it or even agreeing on its definition or on what constitutes its boundaries.

The present study refers to this state as *Living Transcendence* and pioneers in its portrayal of its phenomenological characteristics, as described in interviews with 32 spiritual exemplars of different traditions and paths.

The traditional distinction between peak experiences of transcendence and *Living Transcendence* (Maslow, 1971) will first be described. The phenomenological research to date of peak experiences of transcendence will then be briefly reviewed. It will be followed by a review of the research of *Living Transcendence* and its lacunas, leading to the research questions.

Peak Experiences of Transcendence Versus *Living Transcendence*

Many religious traditions make a distinction between transient, fleeting experiences, referred to as religious (James, 1958), spiritual (Underhill, 1911), mystical (Stace, 1960), peak (Maslow, 1964, (Maslow, 1971) or self-transcendent (Yaden et al., 2017) experiences, and an ideal stabilized and ongoing spiritual state. Such a state is often considered the pinnacle and holy grail of the "search for the sacred" (Pargament, 2012). According to Ferrer (Ferrer & Tarnas, 2002), "as it has often been stressed in the religious literature, the goal of the spiritual quest is not to have spiritual experiences, but to stabilize spiritual consciousness, live a spiritual life, and transform the world accordingly."

To illustrate the above distinction, in Hinduism, for example, "The supreme experience is held... to be neither spasmodic nor ecstatic but natural and continuous and should therefore not be characterized as a 'peak' but as a lofty plateau" (Osborne, 1966). In the Zen tradition, Zen patriarch Dogen explained that "traditionally, *daigo* is final, absolute enlightenment, contrasted to experiences of glimpsing enlightenment, *shōgo*" or *kenshō* (Dōgen et al., 1996: 209). In Sufism, the terms *fanā* (extinction or annihilation in God, referring to an ecstatic state) and *baqā*

(subsistence or permanence in God, referring to a grounded, ongoing experience) represent "progressive stages of the spiritual journey... with the latter constituting a more advanced stage" (Murata, 2018). And in Christianity, a person who has *mystical experiences* is, according to Underhill (Underhill, 1911), "no mystic," because "a true mystic is the person... in whom the transcendental consciousness can dominate the normal consciousness" (p. 75), a state that is referred to as *theosis* or "union with God" (Kourie, 2016).

Maslow made a similar distinction between peak experiences of transcendence and the "high plateau," which he described as living "at a constantly high level in the sense of illumination or awakening." Speaking about his own "high plateau" experience at the end of his life, he said that "This type of consciousness has certain elements in common with peak experiences... These elements are present, but are constant rather than climactic" (cited in Krippner, 1972: 113-114)

In this paper, the term *Living Transcendence* is used to denote that ideal stabilized and ongoing spiritual state. The first author formulated this term with the intention to avoid equivalent emic terms of specific spiritual-religious traditions. The "living" part was chosen to emphasize the non-transitory and dynamic nature of the construct, as well as the phenomenological approach. "Transcendence" connotes "the capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and space to view life from a larger, more objective perspective" (Piedmont, 1999) and is synonymous to "spirituality" in suggesting that which is "lofty, idealistic, elevated or pious" (Long, 2000).

Peak experiences of transcendence have been studied extensively over the last century (James, 1958; Maslow, 1962; Maslow, 1964; Pahnke, 1963; Stace, 1960; Tavel et al., 2022; Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Yaden et al., 2017). Currently there is agreement amongst scholars on many of the phenomenological characteristics of such experiences. According to Stace (Stace, 1960), the primary feature of such experiences is "the apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses

nor the reason can penetrate... it entirely transcends our sensory-intellectual consciousness" (p. 14). Additional characteristics described by James (1958) are ineffability ("defies expression"), a noetic quality ("insight into depths of truth"), transiency ("cannot be sustained for long"), and passivity ("as if his own will were in abeyance"). Stace (1960) added to these characteristics a sense of "objectivity or reality", positive feelings ("blessedness, joy, peace, happiness, satisfaction, etc."), a sense of sacredness ("feeling that what is apprehended is holy, sacred, or divine"), paradoxicality, and persisting positive changes (notwithstanding transiency of the experiences themselves). Pahnke's (1963) nine categories (unity, transcendence of time and space, deeply felt positive mood, sense of sacredness, objectivity and reality, paradoxicality, alleged ineffability, transiency and persisting positive changes in attitude and behavior), which were based on the results of his Good Friday Study, included the same characteristics described by James and Stace, as did Greeley's (1974) descriptors of mystical experience and Hood's (1975) Mysticism Scale items. Yaden et al. (2017) described two subcomponents of transient self-transcendent experiences: reduced self-salience ("fading bodily and social boundaries" (p. 8)) and "connection to other people and things in the environment beyond the self" that "may extend beyond interpersonal domains to include one's spatial environment" (pp. 8, 10).

Of the different characteristics of peak experiences of transcendence, *transiency*, initially identified by James (1958) and re-introduced by the researchers and scholars who succeeded him (Pahnke, 1963; Stace, 1960), is particularly relevant to the distinction between them and *Living Transcendence*. Indeed, phenomenological research to date of peak experiences of transcendence has suggested that they are usually of short duration (Greeley, 1974; Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017).

Research of *Living Transcendence*

In contrast to the abundant study of the phenomenology of peak experiences of transcendence,

the study of ongoing, stable *Living Transcendence* is scarce (Gruel, 2015; Hamel et al., 2003). The first studies of the experiential characteristics of *Living Transcendence* across different cultural and historical contexts were conducted at the beginning of the 20th century by Bucke (1901) and James (1958). Bucke described the characteristics of the experience of more than a dozen men, who included the founders of some of the great traditions (Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed) as well as figures such as Dante, Francis Bacon and Walt Whitman, who displayed what he called *cosmic consciousness*. Based on the writings of some of them and their depictions by others, Bucke characterized *cosmic consciousness* as consciousness "of the life and order of the universe," accompanied by "an intellectual enlightenment or illumination... a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense... a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life... (p. 3) James (1958) dedicated a few of his seminal Gifford Lectures to the characterization of "the ripe fruits of religion in a character", which he called "Saintliness". Quoting examples from the writings of (mostly Christian) theologians and mystics such as Henry Thoreau, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Voysey and from records collected by his colleague E.D. Starbuck, James suggested that the following characteristics of saintliness were the same in all religions:

1. A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests...
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.
3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.
4. A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections... (pp. 212-213)

Following studies of spiritual masters (Sharma & Kennick, 2012) defined by those authors as individuals who "authoritatively teach traditions" and "support religious vitality" (p. 28), spiritual exemplars (Scarlett, 2012) who, according to Scarlett, included Lincoln, Mother Teresa, John Muir, Nelson Mandela and Atticus Haygood, and religious geniuses (Goshen-Gottstein, 2017), defined by that author as individuals who bring about "deep transformation within a religious

tradition" (p. 12), were mainly based on second-hand textual descriptions of historical and well-known religious and public figures. These studies focused on their figures' character traits, actions and teachings, such as founding, reforming or revolutionizing a tradition or institution, and/or their being "apt to have accomplished a great deal and been successful in their missions" (Scarlett, 2012), rather than on their figures' experience. The traits of the "religious genius," described by Goshen-Gottstein (2017), include love, purity, humility, self-surrender and "expanded awareness of reality" (pp. 44-50).

A few phenomenological interview-based studies, which focused on the first-hand experiences of well-known spiritual teachers/masters (Costeines, 2009; Kilrea, 2013; Nagle, 2004) and of individuals with "nondual consciousness" (Fire, 2010a) or self-reported regular experience of "spiritual awakening" (Taylor, 2013a) were doctoral dissertations which, with the exception of the last one, remained unpublished.

Nagle's (2004b) doctoral study focused on the lived experience of three advanced yogis. Nagle concluded that the yogis' experience included the experience of "oneness or unity with the universe... a state of consciousness beyond mind, thought and sense awareness... freedom from suffering, negative emotions, desire and attachment... unending, supreme bliss and peace... universal love and compassion" (pp. 397-398).

Costeines' (2009) doctoral dissertation was based on a qualitative study of "nondual consciousness" as experienced by sixteen "purportedly enlightened spiritual teachers" (p. 73). Costeines concluded that the participants' "stable traits" included "nondual ontology, disidentification from mental constructs, timeless awareness, mental lucidity, nondual action, beatific peace, spontaneous joy, absence of neurotic suffering, unitive relationships, unitive love awareness of spiritual immortality, and awareness of positive cosmology" (p. iii).

Kilrea's (2013) doctoral dissertation was based on her dialogue-style interviews with four well-known spiritual teachers with "a body positive approach to the experience of spiritual enlightenment" (p. 75). Kilrea concluded that each of the participants reported that they were

"feeling the body and its sensations more fully, and experience greater pleasure and well-being as a result of this transformation... [with] acute awareness of their emotional and cognitive experience and a transformed relationship to their thoughts, emotions, and sensations" (p. iii).

In Taylor's (2013) doctoral dissertation, the researcher interviewed 25 individuals who felt they had "undergone the transformational experience of 'spiritual awakening' or 'enlightenment'" (p. 80), all of whom "reported a shift into a new psychological state, with a new sense of identity, new modes of cognition and perception, a new relationship to their surroundings and to other human beings... and new values" (p. 5). A significant number of the participants also reported "initial and ongoing difficulties and fluctuations in their state, including psychological disturbances, cognitive problems, difficulty dealing with practical and organisational tasks, confusion, and physical problems" (p. 5).

Fire's (2010) doctoral dissertation on "the felt experience of nondual consciousness" was based on her interviews with eight participants "with regular experience of nondual consciousness" (p. 80). Its results suggested that "the experience of nondual consciousness is a profoundly meaningful one... unmistakably and deeply felt... in the moment, and in the body" and that the participants experienced "more letting go and allowing, more ease, more trust, and more clarity" (pp. 234-235).

Some themes are common to all or most of the above phenomenological studies. These are the awareness of oneness (also referred to as nondual consciousness, nondual ontology or unity with the universe); transformed or new modes of cognition and perception (also referred to as consciousness beyond mind); absence of or freedom from neurotic suffering, negative emotions, desire and attachment; supreme bliss and peace (also referred to as beatific peace); and universal or unitive love. Other themes, such as a new or transformed relationship to the body, identity or values, were indicated in only one or two of the studies.

Current Study

Each of the above phenomenological studies of spiritual teachers/masters or self-selecting individuals focused on a specific, pre-defined group: one (Nagle, 2004a) on a specific tradition and the other four (Costeines, 2009; Fire, 2010; Kilrea, 2013; Taylor, 2013) on pre-determined spiritual schemes. Bucke's (1901) and James' (1958) studies, which were not as focused on a pre-defined group, were based on their subjects' books, diaries and letters and on their descriptions by others rather than on phenomenological interviews. In sum, no comprehensive research, unrestricted to a pre-defined scheme, has been done yet on the phenomenological characteristics of *Living Transcendence*. The present study is geared to addressing this lacuna by focusing on a variety of traditions and spiritual paths without restriction to pre-defined spiritual schemes, and by using first-person live descriptions of experience rather than written texts.

The aim of this study is to shed light on the experience of *Living Transcendence* as depicted by individuals, who were identified by others as spiritual exemplars having and evincing that experience, from diverse traditions and spiritual paths. The main question the present study explores is: How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars? The study explores this question by analyzing phenomenological interviews with thirty-two such individuals.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted the exemplar methodology (Bronk et al., 2013) modified in accordance with Zagzebski's (Zagzebski, 2010, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) "exemplarist moral theory," and the qualitative phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 1997).

Exemplar methodology was defined as "a sample selection technique that involves the intentional selection of individuals, groups, or entities that exemplify the construct of interest in a

highly developed manner" (Bronk, 2012a). This methodology was first applied in a study of altruistic exemplars (Oliner & Oliner, 1988a) and moral exemplars (Colby & Damon, 1992a). Since then, it has been applied mainly in studies of moral and ethical development (Kuntz, 2016; Matsuba & Walker, 2004; Matsuba & Walker, 2005). In the spiritual domain, it was applied so far in research on the experience of adolescent spiritual exemplars of different traditions and cultures (King et al., 2014a). Considering that *Living Transcendence* is considered a high achievement, attained by few, this methodology matched well its study.

The basic strategy of exemplar nomination, used in all the above studies, was that researchers first design exemplar nomination criteria, which are then shared with nominators who use them to identify potential exemplars (Bronk et al., 2013a). The approach to exemplar nomination, adopted in this study, was inspired by Zagzebski's (Zagzebski, 2010a, 2015a, 2015c, 2017a) suggestion, that exemplars are identified "readily and spontaneously" (Harrison & Gayle, 2020) by the emotional response they evoke in others. In this study, therefore, the nominators were asked to nominate spiritual exemplars with the term loosely defined and without providing them with specific nomination criteria.

The qualitative phenomenological approach focuses on exploring the meaning of human experiences (Giorgi, 1997) from the subjective, first-person perspectives of the individuals experiencing them. Phenomenology was introduced by Husserl (1983) as a philosophical approach and a method for the systematic study of subjective experience, and was further developed by thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Many of these thinkers were instrumental in shaping the movement of humanistic psychology, along with "Eastern philosophical and religious traditions" (Davidson, 2000). Phenomenology asks, "what is it like for [one] to undergo the experience, the concrete way it feels to undergo it" (Sebastián, 2012) and attempts "to grasp the fullness of a given human experience in as rich a language or mode of expression as possible" (Schneider, 2008). In this study, people who were chosen as spiritual

exemplars by experts in the spiritual and religious field were asked about their experience of *Living Transcendence*.

The study involved several steps to respect the autonomy, privacy, and anonymity of the participants, as indicated in the Data Analysis section.

Participants

The study participants were selected from among 110 spiritual exemplars, nominated by 77 experts in the religious and spiritual field from around the world. Some basic characteristics of the nominating experts will first be briefly mentioned: 35 (45%) of them were female and 42 (55%) were male; 19 (25%) of them were multifaith, non-denominational or transpersonal, 15 (19%) were Buddhist, 14 (18%) were Hindu and 9 (12%) were Christian; 34 (44%) of them identified primarily as "scholar" or "thinker", 24 (31%) as "authority figure" and 17 (22%) as "practitioner" or "seeker." These experts were asked to nominate and describe two-three spiritual exemplars they knew, defined as individuals who are "perceived as enlightened / self-transcendent / Self-realized / God-realized / spirit-medium / awakened / surrendered / fully integrated or otherwise an inspiring exemplar of their religious / spiritual path."

Of the 110 spiritual exemplars nominated, 62 were selected and approached with two intentions in mind: first, to have similar representation of male and female exemplars; and second, to include equal numbers of exemplars from the Abrahamic, Eastern and Shamanic/Indigenous traditions and from New Age, Pagan and unaffiliated spirituality, in order to achieve variability. Each of the selected exemplars was contacted by email, inviting them to participate in a study "on the topic of *Living Transcendence: A Phenomenological Study of Spiritual Exemplars*." The exemplar was told that, if they agreed to participate, they would be interviewed by Zoom about their experience of *Living Transcendence*. Those who agreed signed an informed consent assuring their confidentiality and anonymity, approved by the institutional ethics committee of the first two authors' university.

Thirty-two exemplars ended up participating in the study. These will be referred to hereinafter as "interviewees". The sample size was determined by the saturation principle: Data were collected and analyzed until the addition of new interviewees yielded no new insights.

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, carried out by the first author by Zoom. Each interview lasted between 1.25 and 1.75 hours. Two or three interviews were conducted with 25 of the interviewees (13 and 12, respectively) and one interview was conducted with seven of them, who were not available for more. In total, 69 interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed verbatim.

At the beginning of the first interview with each interviewee, the first author described the purpose of the study and its emphasis on the interviewee's experience of *Living Transcendence* (the word "transcendence" was often replaced by the interviewee's preferred term, e.g., "the spiritual life," "in connection with the sacred" and "in service of the spirits"). As a "warmup question", the interviewee was then asked about the main spiritually formative experiences they had in their life. Once those were sufficiently described, the interviewee was asked to describe their current spiritual life and experience. The interviewee's lead was followed in the interviews, but if they did not spontaneously describe their experience of *Living Transcendence*, the interviewer introduced more guiding questions. This process allowed for descriptions of the experience of *Living Transcendence* to be obtained in a friendly, open and relaxed atmosphere. This atmosphere was supported by the first author's keen interest in and receptivity to the interviewees' descriptions.

Positionality of Authors. The first author is a doctoral student who had studied for several decades under the tutelage of a Japanese Zen master and then a Western Advaita teacher and explored the spiritual teacher-student relationship. His interest in and approach to the subject of this research was influenced by his interest in personally making the shift from

peak experiences of transcendence to *Living Transcendence* and by his assumption, that some spiritual exemplars were in *Living Transcendence* to a significant degree. The second author is a professor of psychology and studies spiritual development and spiritual experiences both inside and outside religious traditions, using qualitative methods. In her own spiritual path she does not belong to a certain tradition. The third author serves as a professor of psychology who has been tracking the nature of consciousness and psychospiritual development. The fourth author is an Emeritus Professor of Education who taught courses and researches and writes about spiritual dimensions of human development and education. She has studied and practiced in Sufi, Christian and Buddhist contemplative traditions.

Data analysis

In the data analysis, the reliability and validity were bolstered in two ways. First, multiple analysis collaborators independently coded and categorized the data to establish intercoder agreement, thus enhancing the study's reliability. Second, the analysis collaborators practiced bracketing, a process involving acknowledgement and suspension of preconceived assumptions and biases, to allow for a more open and neutral engagement with the data. This reflexive practice enhanced the trustworthiness and validity of the analysis results.

Analysis collaborators were recruited by the first author after the first twelve interviewees were interviewed. The recruiting was done through a post he published on his Facebook page, which invited interested people to join "a small team of 'research collaborators' that would accompany [him] in the study of '*Living Transcendence*'." The inclusion criteria were "experience in the psychological/spiritual field and preferably in qualitative research" and willingness to commit to six hours a week.

Eleven analysis collaborators were initially recruited in this way. They were divided into two groups of six and five people, which met every other week for two hours. A person from each group facilitated the meetings, which were also attended by the first author. In each

meeting, the group members discussed their analysis of two exemplars, whose interviews they had watched and analyzed on their own before the meeting. After 2.5 months, three additional people joined the groups, which now consisted of six and eight people. The groups' analysis and biweekly meeting process went on for five months in total.

Of the 14 analysis collaborators, nine were women and five were men. Their ages were between 46 and 72 years old (average 58) and they were from four continents – five from Asia, five from N. America, four from Europe and one from Africa. Five had BA, six MA and three PhD academic degrees.

The two groups analyzed interviews with 26 interviewees in total. Each of the collaborators independently coded the interview transcripts and answered two questions for each interviewee, writing in free style: (1) What characterizes this interviewee's experience of *Living Transcendence* according to them? (2) What characterizes this interviewee's experience of *Living Transcendence* based on your impression of them? Before each group meeting, the collaborators sent their coded transcripts and impressions to the first author. Based on these, the first author proposed in the meetings changes to the coding system, which was discussed and gradually refined.

The analysis process conducted by the analysis collaborator groups was accompanied by continuous and documented reflection and critical discussion between the four authors (van Manen, 1990). Since the first author continued interviewing during the analysis process, the interviews were ongoingly informed and refined by that process.

Once the above analysis process was completed, the first author used Dedoose qualitative data analysis application to extract from all the interviews the excerpts directly related to the research questions. The four authors then re-analyzed those excerpts and arrived at the qualities and characteristics presented in the Findings section.

To maintain the interviewees' anonymity, they were given pseudonyms in this paper. Each pseudonym is followed by a few of the interviewee's characteristics: Religious affiliation /

Male or Female / Age group / Geographical location (for example, "Salome (Hindu/F/70's/N. America)").

Interviewee Demographics

Of the 32 interviewees, 13 were women and 19 were men. Four of them were in their 50's, 12 in their 60's, 13 in their 70's and three in their 80's. Eighteen of them lived in North America, five in Europe, four in Asia, four in Africa and one in Australia. Ten of them were affiliated with the Abrahamic traditions (Christianity: 4, Sufism: 3, Judaism: 3), eight with Eastern traditions (Hinduism: 4, Buddhism: 4), seven were not affiliated with a tradition, six were affiliated with New Age or Pagan spirituality and four with Indigenous traditions or Shamanism (Indigenous: 3, Shamanism: 1).

The media presence of each interviewee was determined by conducting (in March 2022) a Google search of their full name in quotation marks with the word "spiritual". Of the exemplars, five had under one thousand results, 12 had thousands, 13 had tens of thousands and two had hundreds of thousands (for comparison with some well-known examples, Ram Dass and Jean Vanier had hundreds of thousand results).

Findings

This section is divided to four main parts. The first part presents four experiential qualities of *Living Transcendence*, described by the interviewees: *Noetic*, *Affective*, *Embodied* and *Relational*. The second part presents a fifth quality, of constancy over time, which was attributed to any of the above four qualities. The third part presents motivational or volitional aspects of *Living Transcendence*, described by the interviewees. The fourth part presents an overarching characteristic of *Living Transcendence*, namely its multifacetedness.

Experiential Qualities of *Living Transcendence* (Noetic, Affective, Embodied and Relational)

In the analysis of the interviewees' descriptions of their experience of *Living Transcendence* (or their preferred term), four main qualities of that experience were identified. These qualities are *Noetic* (pre-conceptual, non-discursive, non-symbolic knowing / awareness / consciousness), *Affective* (supremely positive affective qualities), *Embodied* (somatic and/or energetic sense) and *Relational* (a sense of connectivity or "inter-being").

Noetic (pre-conceptual, non-discursive, non-symbolic knowing / awareness / consciousness of ultimate reality or truth): "It's like you know the multiplication table."

One of the most commonly described qualities of the experience of *Living Transcendence* was a noetic quality – a sense of pre-conceptual, non-discursive and non-symbolic knowing, recognizing, understanding or being conscious or aware of an ultimate or absolute truth or reality.

Some of the exemplars tended to refer to the ultimate truth or reality more in terms of the *object* of their knowing, referring to it in emic terms such as "oneness," "unity," "non-duality," "the divine" and "the self absolute." For example, Salome (Hindu/F/70's/N. America) said, "I live in an overall awareness of non-duality." Diane (Christian/F/80's/N. America), in describing the presence in her of divine "light," said: "I always have an awareness of it... You're not touching it, you're not explaining it, you're not understanding it. It is an *awareness*, probably like young love; the minute I saw her, I knew I loved her."

Barry (Hindu/M/70's/N. America) described his state of "unity consciousness" as "a see-through, know-through phenomenon. It's like you know the multiplication table, right? It's just like that... I know it all the time. And then when I open my mouth, whatever I know comes out." And Ness (Buddhist/M/70's/Europe) said that, when he is not fully immersed in the experience

of *rigpa* (Tibetan: nondual awareness), "Then there is a knowledge that you can establish the *rigpa*. It's like... when you are silent you still know that you can speak. It's comparable to that."

Other exemplars tended to refer to the ultimate reality or truth more in terms of the knowing *subject*. For example, Goren (Hindu/M/50's/Asia) indicated that "The down-to-earth understanding of myself as awareness, as [the] One without a second, is not conceptual. It is my experience." Rene (Unaffiliated/M/70's/N. America) described his experience as "an ongoing ever-present awareness, infinite and eternal." And Milla (Buddhist/F/60's/N. America) referred to an awareness that seemed to precede *her* awareness and said: "This knowing or awareness is always there, always operative. It's a constant companion. But am I always aware of the companion? No. Not when I'm carried away into grasping, into fear... Then I lose touch with the enlightenment."

Affective (supremely positive affective qualities of joy, happiness or bliss and love): "There's always this uprising of joy or excitement, the excitement of being."

Another commonly described quality of the experience of *Living Transcendence* was a supremely positive affective quality, which previous scholars referred to as "an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation, and joyousness" (Bucke, 1901) and "immense elation and freedom... A shifting of the emotional centre towards loving and harmonious affections" (James, 1958). The emotions often described by the interviewees were joy, happiness or bliss and love. These emotions were usually referred to as distinct but sometimes as intertwined, as by Rene (Unaffiliated/M/70's/N. America), who said, "A loving bliss or a blissful love, that's the sort of constant background feeling that I have."

Joy / Happiness / Bliss. Annis (Sufi/F/70's/Europe) described her experience of *Living Transcendence* as "It is part of life and there is silent joy in it. It's dynamic, but very subtle dynamic. It's the same all the time and it's always new in each moment. That is the beauty of being present." Goren (Hindu/M/50's/Asia) said: "I can never be depressed. It's a dangerous

thing to assume, and yet with full awareness of what this represents, I'm telling you that one thing I know is that I'm truly happy." When Susan (Unaffiliated/F/60's/Australia) was asked to describe her daily experience, she described it as filled with delight, excitement and joy:

All I really am interested in doing is playing... My partner has said, it's like living with a big dog that always wants to play with him, that is always excited about something... At the same time, my inner state is absolutely uniform... If it wasn't so delightful, it would be absolutely boring. But there's always this uprising of joy or excitement, the excitement of being.

While discomfort and joy are usually perceived as contradictory, Rica (Hindu/F/60's/N. America) indicated that her experience of *Living Transcendence* was joyful and at the same time challenging and uncomfortable. She said:

If you think spiritual growth and attunement is some blissful, beautiful sun-filled room, then you're going to the wrong party. It's the dark night of the soul constantly, because we're always stripping off and evolving out of a place of comfort to a place of discomfort... I'm just living in the unknown and I'm embracing it. I feel joyful but that's not to say it's not challenging or difficult.

Love. Descriptions of the quality of love could be divided into two types, based on the source and directionality of love: "outgoing love" from the individual out and "incoming love", from God or the world toward the individual. An example of the former is the description provided by Annis (Sufi/F/70's/Europe), who spoke about the "pouring out love" as the affective quality of her experience of *Living Transcendence*. She said: "Being present has a very subtle feeling quality to it, a being quality, that is just pouring out love that is not personal." Similarly, Eldad (Unaffiliated/M/60's/Asia) said: "It's love guiding the way... and it affects everything. There's nothing that is not that and it affects everything, every little thing. The way I cook dinner for us here, love is cooking dinner. Love is doing those little things." Faadil (Sufi/M/80's/Africa) described the affective quality of his experience of *Living Transcendence* as "utter reverence

and love for the divine" that is so intense, that "occasionally it would be good to get out of the immensity of that reverence, to do something silly, whatever, because it's too much."

An example of the latter type of love, an "incoming love", is Eddison's (Christian/M/60's/Europe) description of his experience: "It's like floating in life. You are carried along by something, like a little sailboat on the river going downstream, and have a sense of being blessed. It's this general sense of floating along in god's loving energy." Similarly, when asked to describe her experience at the present moment, Amanda (Unaffiliated/F/50's/N. America) said:

I'm aware of just being in this ordinary state, talking to you. And at the same time... I feel like I'm in a shower of light that is so loving. I know I sound like I'm on acid, but I'm really not, this is how it actually feels.

In some descriptions, however, both "outgoing " and "incoming" love were mixed together. For example, when Wilhelm (New Age/M/60's/Europe) related to what guided him in his life, he said:

What guides me as a mystic is this overwhelming feeling, experience, intuition that the cosmos is essentially benevolent and is seeking to incarnate, ground, integrate love and benevolence into all aspects of the world. My job as a soul and as a human being is to embody being benevolent and wise and conscious. And that's an embodied experience, not a head trip.

Embodied (somatic and/or energetic presence or sense of a spiritual essence):

"All the way down to the soles of my feet." The experience of *Living Transcendence* was described by some of the interviewees as a somatic and/or energetic (having energy-like qualities) presence or sense of a spiritual essence. An example of its embodied quality was provided by Diane (Christian/F/80's/N. America), who told that as a child she had an experience of God as light, and continued: "That brightness inside my darkness has never gone away to this second. The feeling of it has never ever gone away... It's in every part of me all the way

down to the soles of my feet. And it weighs a lot." Another example was provided by Rica (Hindu/F/60's/N. America), who said that her experience of being "part of the whole of creation" was an experience of "settledness, a calm, an alignment, a coming together of something" that was "happening on a cellular level... [although] externally people would say it is joy or bliss."

Some of the interviewees related to a shift in their experience of *Living Transcendence*, from noetic to embodied. Wilhelm (New Age/M/60's/Europe) and Damon (New Age/M/70's/N. America) described that process as follows:

...At the first decade of meditation, starting when I was 22, I was transpersonal and transcendent, storming heaven and seeking to go up the Tree of Life and into God. And then, having opened up, the next forty years have been about landing it and integrating, embodying it, anchoring it into my cellular structure. (Wilhelm)

...Nowadays spirit is... more solid for me, more in my body than when I was twenty. Then it was more in my mind, but now it's much more deeply integrated. And in some cases, my illnesses have helped to do that. Nothing like pain for really helping you integrate with your body. (Damon)

The experience of *Living Transcendence* was also described as have an energy-like quality. Salome (Hindu/F/70's/N. America) said, "When I first started meditating, the *prana* (Sanskrit: universal energy, life force) in my body would expand and that would feel like a good meditation... At this point, the *prana* in my body is very expanded." Duston (Unaffiliated/M/70's/N. America) and Goren (Hindu/M/50's/Asia) referred to fluctuation in the intensity of their energetic experience of *Living Transcendence*. Duston said that "if there was a buzz to the energy that keeps everything going, so that buzz is always available to me, but in degrees, depending on my attention." Goren described the following:

As soon as there's a moment of repose where I lay down or sit down, immediately this somatic experience of vibration or resonance takes over. It's energetic in quality. It may

be very subtle, gentle, just fizzing with tamed sweetness. At other times, it may be more acute.

Relational (a sense of connectivity or "inter-being" with everything, God or the Whole): "My coffee cup to me is a living and sentient presence." Some descriptions of the experience of *Living Transcendence* referred to it as relational, in a sense of being connected or non-separate from the surroundings, world, God or the Whole. For example, Susan (Unaffiliated/F/60's/Australia) described her experience as "There's a sense that there are no boundaries, no edges, so there's a sense of being in touch with all of it, with everything. And that is part of the joy, because... the whole thing is alive to you." Damon (New Age/M/70's/N. America) expressed his experience of loving connection with his surroundings as follows:

All my life I've experienced the physical world as being alive... So my coffee cup to me is a living and sentient presence... My heart sense of the sacred is that it is the essence of connectivity. It is the impulse to express wholeness... as an ongoing, generative and emerging connectiveness.

Paris (Christian/M/80's/N. America) described his sense of sacredness of the world surrounding him, and added that "a spiritual discipline for me is cultivating gratitude in the simple sense of opening my heart and mind and whole body to the beautiful in our world." Jonas (Christian/M/60's/Africa) referred to his sense of the presence of God and his living relationship with God as follows:

What makes me happy is feeling the presence of God... that He is actually here with me now. I wake up in the early morning and walk out and look at the sky, at the stars, and praise him for his presence... It's the holy of holies, the kneeling inside me and the whole cosmos. And this is a daily experience, although it's not exactly the same every day. It's a living relationship and that's the beauty of it.

When asked about the difference between her experience in earlier stages in her spiritual life and her present experience, Salome (Hindu/F/70's/N. America) replied:

The thing that's really changed is not so much my inner experience... but the external experience of "inter-being", which is fairly steady... Now there's not such a sense of the body being different than the world around me, the trees, the air, the furniture, all as very connected... I mean, there's not such a sense of the body barriers.

Constancy (ongoing, ever-present): "It's just there no matter what else is happening"

Most of the interviewees indicated that their experience of *Living Transcendence* or any of the above four qualities of it were constant. These descriptions were produced either spontaneously or in response to the interviewer's questions. For example, when referring to his experience of "an ongoing ever-present awareness, infinite and eternal" Rene (Unaffiliated/M/70's/N. America) said: "It's never gone... sometimes it's stronger and sometimes weaker... but it's always present. Up until ten-twenty years ago it wouldn't be present for me in my deep sleep, and then that came on board and joined the rest." Susan (Unaffiliated/F/60's/Australia), when referring to the affective quality of her experience, said: "The things that I talked about – peace, love, joy... are just there in their stability and constancy." Amanda (Unaffiliated/F/50's/N. America) said about her "realization of boundless love": "That realization has become integrated to the point where it's just there no matter what else is happening." Ness (Buddhist/M/70's/Europe) said: "I have thoughts and feelings, and in that I'm no different from an ordinary person. But there's stability on the deep existential level, and although it doesn't feel like you're different from other people, that level is definitely different."

Several interviewees suggested that, while they experienced the normal ups-and-downs of life "just like everybody else," their experience of *Living Transcendence* or of specific qualities of it remained constant and untouched by such fluctuations. For example, Rene (Unaffiliated/M/70's/N. America) described the relationship between the constancy of the

affective quality of his experience of *Living Transcendence*, "the bliss component... [which is] always there in a type of background," and his experiences of depression or anxiety as follows: "[Bliss] is constant, no matter whether my small relative self might be feeling a little bit depressed or anxious. Then it's a depression or anxiety that occurs on top of this extraordinary background bliss." Similarly, Goren (Hindu/M/50's/Asia) described constancy of the noetic quality of his experience of *Living Transcendence*, which he referred to as the "inner core," even in the midst of emotional turmoil. When asked if he experienced emotional ups and downs, Goren replied:

It's certainly not a flat line [laughing wholeheartedly]. It's far from a flat line... At a surface level of life or embodied experience, I'm fully engaged. If I'm angry or upset about something, I'm fully engaged in that emotion. And yet with that full engagement, that inner core is not at all affected by anything and knows itself not being affected. Ever.

Several interviewees indicated that the constancy of their experience of *Living Transcendence* mitigated to some degree their experience of the ups-and-downs of life. For example, when asked if anything happened in the last years that jarred the constancy of his experience of "self-awareness," Barry (Hindu/M/70's/N. America) replied:

No. Never. And I've gone through things just like everybody else... I've gone through health issues from time to time, I had pneumonia two years ago and I was in miserable shape, but pure consciousness was always there. Nothing affects the kind of at-home feeling, the self-awareness. It's forever and ever... It didn't take the illness away, but it mitigated it to some degree.

Susan (Unaffiliated/F/60's/Australia) and Jonas (Christian/M/60's/Africa) testified to the same, and suggested the way by which the experience of *Living Transcendence*, which Susan referred to as "Being" and Jonas as "faith", produced such a mitigating effect:

My health is not great. I have challenges with my relationships and with money... So normally, as I remember it, if something bad happened, that would be the totality of my

experience until something shifted. Now, I find if something bad happens, it doesn't take up the whole space. The whole space is already full of Being, so the impact is cushioned. There's fundamental stability in which all experience falls, so you are never lost in experience. You still have to cope with and be responsible for everything that happens, but basically, there's something in you that is not moving... (Susan)

Life is full of challenges. To deal with it, one needs a lot of faith. This is a line that goes through all my life. It's like an anchor. There are many moments that I feel down. There are times of pain and sorrow, lots of worries and fear. But it only goes to a certain level up and down, because the anchor is there. (Jonas)

Somewhat differently from them, Damon (New Age/M/70's/N. America) indicated that, while his experience of "unconditional inclusive lovingness" was constant, his ability "to draw it into his life" was impacted by periods of depression:

The sense of unconditional inclusive lovingness has not changed in my seventy-some years... I've experienced periods of depression and feeling down, but I've never experienced a sense of being abandoned or that the sacred is not present. It's always there. I'm just not always able to draw it into my life as fully as I might like in those down periods.

Some of the interviewees indicated that their experience of *Living Transcendence* was not constant or that it depended upon them practicing or turning their attention to it. For example, Salome (Hindu/F/70's/N. America) said: "I live in an overall awareness of nonduality, which I experience directly sometimes, and sometimes it's a practice, an awareness. Being able to turn inside and have my state change, that is always available." Paris (Christian/M/80's/N. America) said: "The power of creation is always at work and there's really only one question: Am I cultivating the faculties that allow me to receive it? Because it's always there... I think that's what spiritual discipline is all about."

Volitionality (surrendering of one's will or willing to surrender): "I give myself totally, unconditionally to the powers that work through me"

Many of the interviewees referred, when relating to their experience of *Living Transcendence*, to agency, choice, volitionality, will or intention of an unusual kind: to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling" or a higher power, intelligence or Self.

Some interviewees described "a calling" that they were aware of since an early age or felt that they were born with. For example, Sahaja (Sufi/F/70's/N. America) said, "I feel that I was born with... a flame of desire for the One, for the Beloved." Sabrina (New Age/F/60's/N. America) said, "Ever since I was very young I've felt a sense of mission, that I'm here in this life to do something." In reflecting on her life, Annis (Sufi/F/70's/Europe) said: "You are born a mystic... and then it's always a miracle how you are guided in your life..."

Some interviewees commented that, while they had a sense of "being called" at an early age, they were unable to understand it at that age. For example, Albert (Jewish/M/70's/Asia) said that "I grew up in a strictly atheist household, but when I was seven I was taking my mother to synagogue on Friday night... Exactly what I believed I'm not sure, but there was a deep attraction to the inner life." For others, the "calling" was clear even at an early age. Haldis (Unaffiliated/F/70's/Europe) told about an experience she had at the age of five, when she realized that "I had to be true to myself in order to become what I'm supposed to be" and that realization "created in me a sense of duty: I have to be true to truth... I need to be true in all actions and all thoughts. So I've been living like that." For Ness (Buddhist/M/70's/Europe), the "calling" first appeared when he started meditating "out of the blue" at the age of three years, trying "to come into a deep state." He continued that practice of meditation until he was fourteen years old, which was when he "began to search intellectually." He said it was because "I had a feeling from way back that the real thing was not told... That [the real thing] was on another level, and I wanted to reach that level."

Some interviewees referred to their sense of a vocation or a mission that they had to fulfill. For example, Amanda (Unaffiliated/F/N. America) said: "I'm very aware that it is my *dharma* [spiritual duty] to bring forth as much love and presence as I can while I can. That's why I'm here. That's what I'm called to do." Diane (Christian/F/80's/N. America), who had a revelation of "light" when kneeling in front of the altar in a church when she was twelve years old, described her vocation as follows:

My goal in life is to keep the light lit. That's my only spiritual goal. Keep the light lit. And you know inside when you're losing contact with it. When you're not on the side of the poor, the invisible, the haters and the hated, the light is dimmed in you.

Rica (Hindu/F/60's/N. America) described her sense of her vocation as follows: "I know that there's a journey I'm here to go on, that I'm here to... merge with the divine. And so always I check against that... I trust... that if you are in alignment with the Way things work out." Betty (Buddhist/F/70's/N. America) said: "I know the sensation when I am in alignment with [a greater wisdom] versus when I'm not. When I am... I absolutely feel a sense of awe and gratitude."

Some interviewees spoke about their volitional, intentional pursuit of their "calling". Mendosa (Indigenous/M/60's/Africa) said that his prayer had always been, "Great spirits, my ancestors, my creator, my natural world – use me the way you want. I give myself totally, unconditionally to the powers that work through me." Annis (Sufi/F/70's/Europe) told that "Every day I get up when it's still dark and meditate in nature. This is a way to tune me in and to ask the question, 'how can I serve best the universe today?' And I listen to what is told or what comes up." On the other hand, Kell (Indigenous/F/50's/Africa) described her initial resistance to obey her "calling" and said: "It was like a competition between me and my ancestors who were calling me... until I succumbed. The time came for me to accept the calling and do what they were asking me to do. And that's what I did."

Some of the interviewees indicated that surrender to their calling was "work in progress." For example, Wilhelm (New Age/M/60's/Europe) said, "The whole purpose of my life is to be in a

state of curiosity and compassion all the time. But I have not achieved that. I'm working towards it." Mendoza (Indigenous/M/60's/Africa), when speaking about his surrender to "great spirits, my ancestors, my creator, my natural world," said:

The moment of surrender to spirit is still with me up till now. I need to surrender more.

I'm not done yet. Yes. Because we are humans, we are visited by ego, by envy, by hate, by judging, by wanting to have a position, to have power... It is a lifelong process for me.

Multifacetedness: "By feeling I mean a whole-body knowing"

In addition to the above five qualities of the experience of *Living Transcendence*, an overarching characteristic of that experience was identified in the analysis process, namely its multifacetedness.

As shown in Table 1, the interviewees' descriptions of their experiences of *Living Transcendence* included more than one of the above characteristics in all but five cases, and four or more characteristics in more than half the cases. This suggested that, for the great majority of the interviewees, the experience of *Living Transcendence* was multifaceted or multidimensional.

For example, Diane (Christian/F/80's/N. America) referred to her experience of the presence of God as noetic ("I always have an awareness of it"), affective ("brightness inside my darkness"), embodied ("It's in every part of me all the way down to the soles of my feet"), constant ("has never ever gone away") and volitional ("My goal in life is to keep the light lit."). Amanda (Unaffiliated/F/50's/N. America) spoke about the noetic ("knowing") and affective ("love") qualities of her experience of *Living Transcendence* as inseparable: "[My] realization of boundless love is like an inner platform of knowing that feeds other things," and mentioned its constancy ("it's just there no matter what else is happening") and volitionality ("it is my *dharma* [spiritual duty] to bring forth as much love and presence as I can while I can") aspects. Barry (Hindu/M/70's/N. America) described his experience of *Living Transcendence* as having

embodied qualities ("I see pure consciousness with my eyes and hear it with my ears"), constancy ("it's forever and ever") and volitionality ("my experience of wholeness wants to keep expanding"), and in the following excerpt he referred to its noetic ("awareness"), affective ("love") and relational ("unification") qualities:

The experience of self-awareness could just as well be called... You know, whenever I say this, I cringe a little bit. But it's just the experience. Self-awareness could just as well be called love-awareness, because that's what you feel. Because the main quality of self-awareness is a sense of unification. What does it unify? Everything... The whole world. I used to love my family only and it was actually a shock to me to start loving other people, and then the whole world. That's what self-awareness does for you.

In addition to the relational ("inter-being") and constant ("always available") qualities of her experience, mentioned above, inseparability of the noetic ("knowing"), affective ("joy" and "love") and embodied ("whole-body") qualities was suggested by Salome's (Hindu/F/70's/N. America):

That's very much my experience, that God is joy, that God is love. And to experience love in that radical form, in that unconditional form as an all-body experience, it's a feeling state. My experience of divine love is that it is very much a feeling... And by feeling I mean a whole-body knowing, a non-rational mode of perception. It's a knowing that's in your body.

The distribution of the four experiential qualities of *Living Transcendence*, its constancy and its volitional nature is shown in Table 1. In the columns of the *Experiential Qualities*, gray filling indicates that the quality was present, black filling indicates that the quality was emphasized and no filling indicates that the quality was not present in the interviewee's description of their experience. In the columns of *Constancy* and *Volitionality*, black filling means present and no filling means absent. With regard to the qualities, as can be seen in the table, the *Noetic* quality was mentioned by 21 interviewees (66%) and emphasized by nine of them, the *Affective* quality was mentioned by 19 (60%) and emphasized by seven, the *Embodied* quality was mentioned by

18 (56%) and emphasized by eight and the *Relational* quality was mentioned by 15 (47%) and emphasized by eight. *Constancy* was described by 22 interviewees (69%) and the *Volitionality* by 19 (59%). Of the 32 interviewees, 18 (56%) described four or more qualities of their experience of *Living Transcendence*, including seven (22%) for which four qualities were present, seven (22%) for which five qualities were present and four (12%) for which all six qualities were present. No clear pattern emerged with regards to an association between affiliation to a tradition, sex or geographical location and the dominant qualities or the number of qualities described by each interviewee.

Table 1. Distribution of the characteristics of *Living Transcendence*

Name	Affiliation / Sex / Location	Experiential Qualities				Constancy	Volitionality
		Noetic	Affect.	Embo.	Relat.		
Agathius	Shaman/M/N.Am.						
Susan	Unaffiliated/F/Australia						
Annis	Sufi/F/Europe						
Albert	Jewish/M/Asia						
Avrell	Jewish/M/Asia						
Betty	Buddhist/F/N.Am.						
Kell	Indigenous/F/Africa						
Damon	New Age/M/N.Am.						
Abe	Jewish/M/N.Am.						
Eddison	Christian/M/Europe						
Faadil	Sufi/M/Africa						
Foursan	Indigenous/M/N.Am.						
Den	Buddhist/M/N.Am.						
Barry	Hindu/M/N.Am.						
Goren	Hindu/M/Asia						
Ness	Buddhist/M/Europe						
Diane	Christian/F/N.Am.						

consciousness of ultimate reality or truth), *Affective* (supremely positive affective qualities of joy, happiness or bliss and love), *Embodied* (somatic and/or energetic presence or sense of a spiritual essence) and *Relational* (a sense of connectivity or "inter-being" with everything, God or the Whole). The two characteristics identified were *Constancy* of the experience over time and a special kind of *Volitionality*: the will to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling."

Constancy over time of the experience of *Living Transcendence*, amid and through the fluctuations of normal life, was described by about two-thirds of the interviewees. Several of the interviewees indicated that that experience was barely – if at all – impacted by other experiences, including dramatic emotional or health crises. The interviewees differed from each other, however, in terms of the qualities of *Living Transcendence* that they experienced as constant.

In addition to these qualities and their characteristic constancy, the experience of *Living Transcendence* is characterized by volitionality of an unusual kind: to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling". Many of the interviewees in this study described either surrender of their will or having a will to surrender to or be in service of a "calling" or a higher power, intelligence or Self. Their descriptions bring to mind two more of James' (1958) characteristics of saintliness: "a conviction... of the existence of an Ideal Power" and "a sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control" (p. 212).

In further consideration of the qualities of *Living Transcendence* and its characteristics of volitionality and constancy, an overarching characteristic of multifacetedness was identified. Multifacetedness of the experience of *Living Transcendence* is suggested by the fact that more than half of the interviewees in the study described four or more of the above qualities and characteristics of the experience of *Living Transcendence*. Some phrases that interviewees used (e.g., "self-awareness could just as well be called love-awareness" and "a whole-body knowing") suggested that, in their experience, the different qualities and characteristics were facets of one essence. While characterized by being multifaceted, the experience of *Living*

Transcendence appeared to also be idiosyncratic and variable between individuals. Most interviewees described or emphasized only some of its qualities, and among those who described all of them, one quality was usually more prominent than the others.

Of the four qualities of the experience of *Living Transcendence*, some are clearly shared with peak experiences of transcendence. The *Noetic* quality of peak experiences was highlighted by James (1958), who described them as "states of knowledge... of insight into depths of truth" (p. 381), and by Maslow (1962), who wrote that those who reported about them had the feeling "that they had really seen the ultimate truth, the essence of things, the secret of life" (p. 8). Their *Affective* quality of joy, happiness or bliss was described by Stace (1960) as "blessedness, joy, peace, happiness, satisfaction, etc." (p. 79) and by Maslow (1962) as "moments of the most intense happiness or even rapture, ecstasy or bliss" (p. 9). The *Relational* quality of peak experiences was referred to by James (1958) and Stace (1960) and described as "reduced self-boundaries" and a sense of "connection to other people and things in the environment beyond the self" (Yaden et al., 2017). On the other hand, the *Affective* quality of love and the *Embodied* quality, described by interviewees in this study, were significantly missing from James' (1958), Stace's (1960), Pahnke's (1963) and following descriptions of peak experiences.

A significant difference can be seen between the will to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling," described by many of the interviewees in this study, and the "passivity" characteristic of peak experiences. This "passivity" of peak experiences was described by James (1958) as a sense that one's will "were in abeyance... as if he were grasped and held by a superior power" (p. 381). The experience of *Living Transcendence*, on the other hand, is characterized not by having one's will "in abeyance" but rather in service of, and not by being "grasped and held" but rather by being compelled, guided and directed by such a "superior power."

The fact that peak experiences and the experience of *Living Transcendence* share their

Noetic quality, the *Affective* quality of joy, happiness or bliss and the *Relational* quality makes them related to each other and belonging to the same field or family. The transiency/constancy and the passivity/volitionality differences between them make them, however, separate and easily distinguishable constructs.

The transiency/constancy difference is not merely a difference in duration. The experience of *Living Transcendence* is not akin to a prolonged peak experience, in the same way that chronic anxiety is not akin to a prolonged bout of fear or that a long-term love relationship is not akin to a prolonged romantic infatuation. The dramatic, intense or "climatic" (in Maslow's words (Krippner, 1972)) nature of peak experiences is contrasted by the subtlety and "background"-like constancy of *Living Transcendence*. Likewise, the volitionality of *Living Transcendence* not only distinguish it from the passivity of peak experiences, but also make it a way of being in the world of time, space, choices and actions rather than an experience of being flung out of that world.

The importance of this difference cannot be emphasized enough. *Living Transcendence* is an experience since it has a subjective, phenomenal character. But it is also a way of being, of what it is like for one to be, experience and perceive oneself and the world in the way one is and does. It is the atmosphere, ground, backdrop and horizon of one's being and all of one's experience, inextricably permeating all other experiences and contextualizing them. Other categories of experience, as well as meaning-making, agency and identity, are embedded in and imbued by it. *Living Transcendence* is, therefore, a variety of "existential awareness" (Dorjee, 2016) or of "existential feelings" (Ratcliffe, 2008, 2020). The term "existential awareness" points at "overarching, phenomenologically distinct... [states of] awareness of self and reality" (Dorjee, 2016). "Existential feelings" are experiences that "concern an all-enveloping sense of reality and of being rooted in a world" (Ratcliffe, 2020). From the perspectives of the interviewees in this study, *Living Transcendence* appears to be an "existential feeling-awareness" that is consistently unitive, connective and supremely positive.

Limitations and Future Research

The authors hope that this research will stimulate additional research endeavors aimed at elucidating the construct of *Living Transcendence* from additional angles.

This study focused on the phenomenological characteristics of *Living Transcendence*. Future research could focus on additional aspects of *Living Transcendence*, and look for connections between the different aspects. For example, a study could focus on spiritual exemplars' self-identity and different virtues and character strengths, and look for connections between those aspects and the phenomenological characteristics. Of particular interest, in such a study, would be a possible connection between moral identity and conduct and specific characteristics of the experience. As another example, a brain-research perspective could contribute to our understanding of the neurophenomenology of *Living Transcendence*.

Some of the qualities and characteristics of *Living Transcendence* elucidated in this study merit more research. Specifically, research focusing on the body and the senses connection to *Living Transcendence*, on object-less or non-relational love and on the special type of volitionality, which characterizes *Living Transcendence*, is called for.

Due to language considerations, most interviewees in this study were from the more modern parts of the West. This might have created a bias in the data collected in this study with regards to the experience of *Living Transcendence*. In future research, interviews could be conducted with spiritual exemplars from non-Western parts of the world and from more traditional backgrounds in non-English languages.

This study sought to shed light on the essence of the experience of *Living Transcendence*, and the descriptions of all interviewees were therefore analyzed as a whole. Further research could contribute to our understanding of specific tendencies or emphases in the experience of *Living Transcendence* by spiritual exemplars' background (e.g., by gender, by religious tradition or spiritual path, by adherence to a tradition). Commonalities and differences

between varieties of the experience of *Living Transcendence* may be identified, and different profiles of that experience may be sketched.

The findings of this study seem to support Huxley's (1945) theory of "perennial philosophy," regarding the common essence of mysticism across cultures and mystical traditions. They also seem to support the basis for Hick's (1988) theory of "religious pluralism," by which the seemingly competing truth claims among the world's great religions are different conceptual lenses, through which the same ultimate reality is experienced. The authors believe that the study of *Living Transcendence* holds great potential for addressing religious diversity and further illuminating the universal spiritual essence of various religious traditions and spiritual paths, while revealing differences in "flavors" of the essence. The authors believe that focusing on the lived experience of this essence, rather than on abstract concepts and dogmas, would be in the service of creating interreligious bridges of shared interest, understanding, appreciation and dialogue among the world religions.

Bibliography

- Abo-Zena, M. M., & King, P. E. (2021). Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Case Studies of Spiritual Exemplars. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211020262>
- Anderson, R. (1998a). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69–94). SAGE Publications.
- Anderson, R. (1998b). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69–94). SAGE Publications.
- Anderson, R. (2018). *Toward a Sacred Science — Reflecting Forward*. 46(1), 1–5.
- Anderson, R. (2019a). Intuitive inquiry: Inviting transformation and breakthrough insights in qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 6(3), 312–319.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000144>
- Anderson, R. (2019b). Intuitive inquiry: Inviting transformation and breakthrough insights in qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 6(3), 312–319.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000144>

- Anderson, R. (2020). Transformative research methods: Research to nourish the spirit. *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 10(1), 95–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2020.1726056>
- Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011a). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. State University of New York Press.
- Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011b). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. State University of New York Press.
- Aristotle. (1962). *Nicomachean Ethics (Translated by Martin Ostwald)*. The Library of Liberal Arts.
- Babbie, E. R. (1995). *The practice of social research* (7th ed.). Wadsworth.
- Baltrusaitis, T., Ahuja, C., & Morency, L. P. (2019). Multimodal Machine Learning: A Survey and Taxonomy. In *IEEE Transactions on Pattern Analysis and Machine Intelligence* (Vol. 41, Issue 2, pp. 423–443). IEEE Computer Society. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TPAMI.2018.2798607>
- Bandura, A. (1986a). *Social Foundation of Thought and Action*. Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1986b). *Social Foundation of Thought and Action*. Prentice Hall.
- Barber, C. (2019). Working within a spiritual framework. *British Journal of Nursing*, 28(4), 229–229. <https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2019.28.4.229>
- Becker, S. W., & Eagly, A. H. (2004). The heroism of women and men. *American Psychologist*, 59(3), 163–178.
- Benson, P. L., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Rude, S. P. (2003). Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence: Toward a Field of Inquiry. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 205–213. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_12
- Bojerud, E., Younadam, R., & Čehajić-Clancy, S. (2023). Testing a moral exemplar intervention in a non-conflict context: The effects of moral exemplars on key dimensions of outgroup evaluations. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 41(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21403>
- Böwering, G. (1988). Baqā' wa fanā'. In E. Yarshater (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bravo, A. J., Pearson, M. R., Wilson, A. D., & Witkiewitz, K. (2018). When Traits Match States: Examining the Associations Between Self-Report Trait and State Mindfulness Following a State Mindfulness Induction. *Mindfulness*, 9(1), 199–211. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0763-5>
- Bronk, K. C. (2012a). The exemplar methodology: An approach to studying the leading edge of development. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2211-1522-2-5>
- Bronk, K. C. (2012b). The exemplar methodology: An approach to studying the leading edge of development. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2211-1522-2-5>

- Bronk, K. C., King, P. E., & Matsuba, M. K. (2013a). An Introduction to Exemplar Research: A Definition, Rationale, and Conceptual Issues. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2013(142), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20045>
- Bronk, K. C., King, P. E., & Matsuba, M. K. (2013b). An introduction to exemplar research: A definition, rationale, and conceptual issues. In M. K. Matsuba, P. E. King, & K. C. Bronk (Eds.), *Exemplar Methods and Research: Strategies for Investigation* (Vol. 142, pp. 1–12). New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development.
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4), 822–848. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822>
- Bucke, R. M. (1901). *Cosmic consciousness: A study in the evolution of the human mind*. Innes & Sons.
- Burridge, R. A. (2007). *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Chidananda, S. S. (1984). *The philosophy, psychology, and practice of yoga*. Divine Life Society.
- Chiu, L., Emblen, J. D., Van Hofwegen, L., Sawatzky, R., & Meyerhoff, H. (2004). An Integrative Review of the Concept of Spirituality in the Health Sciences. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 26(4), 405–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193945904263411>
- Churchill, S. D., & Wertz, F. J. (2015). An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations. In K. J. Schneider, J. F. Pierson, & J. F. T. Bugental (Eds.), *An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations* (2nd ed., pp. 275–295). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Clements, J. (2004a). Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 26–49.
- Clements, J. (2004b). Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 26–49.
- Clements, J. (2011). Organic inquiry: Research in partnership with spirit. In R. Anderson & W. Braud (Eds.), *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities* (pp. 131–166). State University of New York Press.
- Cohn, R. L. (1987). Sainthood on the Periphery: The Case of Judaism. In J. S. Hawley (Ed.), *Saints and Virtues*. University of California.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992a). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. The Free Press.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992b). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. The Free Press.
- Cornish, F., Gillespie, A., & Tania, Z. (2014). Collaborative Analysis of Qualitative Data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>

- Costeines, M. (2009a). *What Enlightenment Means: A Qualitative Study of Nondual Consciousness As Experienced by Teachers of Nondual Mysticism*.
- Costeines, M. (2009b). *What Enlightenment Means: A Qualitative Study of Nondual Consciousness As Experienced by Teachers of Nondual Mysticism*.
- Croce, M., & Silvia Vaccarezza, M. (2017). Educating through exemplars: Alternative paths to virtue. *Theory and Research in Education*, 15(1), 5–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878517695903>
- Custer, D. (2014). Auto/ethnography as a transformative research method. *The Qualitative Report*, 19((How To 21)), 1–13.
- Damon, W., & Colby, A. (2013). Why a true account of human development requires exemplar research. In M. K. Matsuba, P. E. King, & K. C. Bronk (Eds.), *Exemplar Methods and Research: Strategies for Investigation* (pp. 13–26). Jossey-Bass.
- Davidson, L. (2000). Philosophical foundations of humanistic psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 28(1–3), 7–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2000.9976979>
- Dawson, A. (2006). East is East, Except When It's West: The Easternization Thesis and the Western Habitus. *Journal of Religion & Society*, 8, 1–13.
- de Brito Sena, M. A., Damiano, R. F., Lucchetti, G., & Peres, M. F. P. (2021). Defining Spirituality in Healthcare: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Framework. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.756080>
- Djuraskovic, I., & Arthur, N. (2010). Heuristic inquiry: A personal journey of acculturation and identity reconstruction. *Qualitative Report*, 15(6), 1569–1593.
<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2010.1361>
- Dōgen, Leighton, T. D., & Okumura, S. (1996a). *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the Eihei Shingi*. State University of New York Press.
- Dōgen, Leighton, T. D., & Okumura, S. (1996b). *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the Eihei Shingi*. State University of New York Press.
- Dorjee, D. (2016). Defining Contemplative Science: The Metacognitive Self-Regulatory Capacity of the Mind, Context of Meditation Practice and Modes of Existential Awareness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01788>
- Dunlop, W. L., Walker, L. J., & Matsuba, M. K. (2012). The distinctive moral personality of care exemplars. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7(2), 131–143.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2012.662994>
- Etherington, K. (2020). Becoming a Narrative Inquirer. In S. Bager-Charleson & A. McBeath (Eds.), *Enjoying Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (pp. 71–93). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55127-8_5
- Ferrer, J. N., & Tarnas, R. (2002). *Revisioning transpersonal theory : a participatory vision of human spirituality*. State University of New York Press.
- Fire, M. (2010a). *Exploring the felt experience of nondual consciousness*. California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Fire, M. (2010b). *Exploring the felt experience of nondual consciousness*. California Institute of Integral Studies.

- Flores, R. (2009). *Buddhist scriptures as literature: Sacred rhetoric and the uses of theory*. SUNY Press.
- Forman, R. K. C. (1999). *Mysticism, mind, consciousness*. State University of New York Press.
- Freimann, A. (2018). *Spiritual Transmission: Paradoxes and Dilemmas on the Spiritual Path*. Monkfish Book Publishing Company.
- Freimann, A., & Mayseless, O. (n.d.). *Surrender to Another Person: The Case of a Spiritual Master*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820975636>
- Friedman, H., Krippner, S., Riebel, L., & Johnson, C. (2010). Transpersonal and Other Models of Spiritual Development. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 29(1), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190905538.001.0001>
- Gall, T. L., Malette, J., & Guirguis-Younger, M. (2011). Spirituality and Religiousness: A Diversity of Definitions. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 13(3), 158–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2011.593404>
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Basic Books.
- Gendlin, E. (1962). *Experiencing and the creation of meaning*. University Press. https://scholar.google.co.il/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Experiencing+and+the+creation+of+meaning.+Evanston%3A+Northwestern+University+Press&btnG=
- Gendlin, E. T. (1981). *Focusing*. Bantam Books.
- Gillespie, A., & Richardson, B. (2011). Exchanging social positions: enhancing perspective taking within a cooperative problem solving task. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41(5), 608–616.
- Giorgi, A. (1997). The Theory, Practice, and Evaluation of the Phenomenological Method as a Qualitative Research Procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 28(2), 235–260. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916297X00103>
- Gleig, A. L. (2010). *Enlightenment after the enlightenment: American transformations of Asian contemplative traditions*. Rice University.
- Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. C. (1984). *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. Academic Press Inc.
- Goleman, D., Smith, H., & Ram Dass. (1985). Truth and Transformation in Psychological and Spiritual Paths. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 17(2), 183–214.
- Göpel, M. (2016). *The Great Mindshift* (Vol. 2). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43766-8>
- Goshen-Gottstein, A. (2017). Religious genius: Appreciating inspiring individuals across traditions. *Religious Genius: Appreciating Inspiring Individuals Across Traditions*, 1–196. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55514-0>
- Greeley, A. (1974). *Ecstasy: A way of knowing*. Prentice Hall.
- Gruel, N. (2015). The plateau experience: An exploration of its origins, characteristics, and potential. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 47(1), 44–63.

- Haidt, J. (2013). Moral psychology for the twenty-first century. *Journal of Moral Education*, 42(3), 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2013.817327>
- Hamel, S., Leclerc, G., & Lefrançois, R. (2003). A psychological outlook on the concept of transcendent actualization. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(1), 3–15.
- Han, H., & Dawson, K. J. (2023). Relatable and attainable moral exemplars as sources for moral elevation and pleasantness. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2173158>
- Harrison, V. S. (2011). Embodied values and muslim-christian dialogue: 'Exemplar reasoning' as a model for interreligious conversations. *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 21(1), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.2143/SID.21.1.2129547>
- Harrison, V. S. (2020). "Exemplar Reasoning" as a Tool for Constructive Conversation between Confucians and Catholics. In *Confucianism and Catholicism* (pp. 172–189). University of Notre Dame Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19m643m.12>
- Harrison, V. S., & Gayle, R. (2020a). Self-transformation and Spiritual Exemplars. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 12(4), 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v12i4.3520>
- Harrison, V. S., & Gayle, R. (2020b). Self-Transformation and Spiritual Exemplars. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 12(4), 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.24204/EJPR.V12I4.3520>
- Harvey, P. (1990). *An introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, history and practices*. Cambridge University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Eds.). Blackwell.
- Hennink, M. M., & Leavy, P. (2014). *Understanding Focus Group Discussions*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199856169.001.0001>
- Hick, J. (1988). Religious pluralism and salvation. *Faith and Philosophy*, 5(4), 365–377.
- Hill, P. C., & Pargament, K. I. (2003). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health research. *American Psychologist*, 58(1), 64–74. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.64>
- Hood, R. W. (1975). The construction and preliminary validation of a measure of reported mystical experience. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14(1), 29–41.
- Hu, D., Gu, Q., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Role modeling effects: how leader's job involvement affects follower creativity. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 61(1), 101–123. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1744-7941.12332>
- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology* (Vol. 2). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Huxley, A. (1945). *The perennial philosophy*. Harper & Row.
- James, W. (1958). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Mentor.
- Jiyu-Kennett, H. (2005). *Roar of the tigress, An introduction to Zen: Religious practice for everyday life* (D. Rev. MacPhillamy, Ed.; Vol. 1). Shasta Abbey Press.

- Johnstone, B., Hanks, R., Bhushan, B., Cohen, D., Roseberry, J., & Yoon, D. P. (2017). Selflessness as a universal neuropsychological foundation of spiritual transcendence: validation with Christian, Hindu, and Muslim traditions. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 20(2), 175–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2017.1333090>
- Kilrea, K. A. (2013a). *The everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment*. Sofia University.
- Kilrea, K. A. (2013b). *The everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment* [Doctoral Dissertation]. Sofia University.
- King, P. E., Abo-Zena, M. M., & Weber, J. D. (2017). Varieties of social experience: The religious cultural context of diverse spiritual exemplars. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 35(1), 127–141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12181>
- King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014a). Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(2), 186–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413502534>
- King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014b). Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(2), 186–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413502534>
- King, P. E., Mueller, R. A. O., & Furrow, J. (2013). Cultural and Contextual Issues in Exemplar Research. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2013(142), 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20048>
- Koch, T., & Harrington, A. (1998). Reconceptualizing rigour: the case for reflexivity. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(4), 882–890.
- Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M. E., & Larson, D. B. (2001). *Handbook of Religion and Health* (H. G. Koenig, M. E. McCullough, & D. B. Larson, Eds.; 1st ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Kourie, C. (2016). The Way of the Mystic: The Sanjuanist stages of the spiritual path. *HTS Theological Studies*, 72(4), 1–11.
- Krippner, S. (1972). The plateau experience: A. H. Maslow and others. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 4(2), 107–120.
- Kristjánsson, K. (2010). *The self and its emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kuntz, A. F. (2016). Exemplary Exemplar Research : Three Approaches to Studying Moral Excellence. *PsyArXiv Preprints*, May, 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4537.4329>
- Kuzel, A. J. (1992). Sampling in qualitative inquiry. In B. F. Crabtree & W. L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research. Research Methods for Primary Care* (p. Vol. 3, 31–44). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Levin, J., & Steele, L. (2005). The transcendent experience: Conceptual, theoretical, and epidemiologic perspectives. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 1(2), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2004.12.002>
- Leys, S. (translator). (1997). *The Analects of Confucius*. W.W. Norton and Co.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.

- Long, J. (2000). Spirituality and the Idea of Transcendence. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 5(2), 147–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713670913>
- Maslow, A. H. (1962a). Lessons from the Peak-Experiences. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 2(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216786200200102>
- Maslow, A. H. (1962b). Lessons from the Peak-Experiences. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 2(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216786200200102>
- Maslow, A. H. (1964). *Religions, values, and peak experiences*. Ohio State University Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1969a). The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. In *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–9).
- Maslow, A. H. (1969b). The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. In *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–9).
- Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The farther reaches of the human nature*. The Viking Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1973). *The farther reaches of the human nature*. Penguin Books.
- Matsuba, M. K., & Walker, L. J. (2004). Extraordinary Moral Commitment: Young Adults Involved in Social Organizations. *Journal of Personality*, 72(2), 413–436. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00267.x>
- Matsuba, M. K., & Walker, L. J. (2005). Young adult moral exemplars: The making of self through stories. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 15(3), 275–297. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2005.00097.x>
- Mertens, D. M. (2017). Transformative research: personal and societal. *International Journal for Transformative Research*, 4(1), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijtr-2017-0001>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Moberg, D. J. (2000). Role Models and Moral Exemplars: How do Employees Acquire Virtues by Observing Others? *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 10(3), 675–696. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3857898>
- Moloney, S. (2011). Focus Groups as Transformative Spiritual Encounters. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10(1), 58–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000105>
- Moran-Ellis, J., Alexander, V. D., Cronin, A., Dickinson, M., Fielding, J., Sleney, J., & Thomas, H. (2006). Triangulation and integration: processes, claims and implications. *Qualitative Research*, 6(1), 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106058870>
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: design, methodology, and applications*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995641>
- Murata, K. (2018). Fana and Baqa. In *Oxford Bibliographies*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195390155-0256>
- Nagle, C. (2004a). *Experience of self in advanced yogis: A preliminary verification of Upanishadic theory*. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.
- Nagle, C. (2004b). *Experience of self in advanced yogis: A preliminary verification of Upanishadic theory*. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.

- Niemiec, R. M., Russo-Netzer, P., & Pargament, K. I. (2020). The Decoding of the Human Spirit: A Synergy of Spirituality and Character Strengths Toward Wholeness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02040>
- Nyumba, T. O., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). *The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12860>
- Olberding, A. (2012). *Moral exemplars in the Analects: The good person is that*. Routledge.
- Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. (1988a). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. Free Press.
- Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. (1988b). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. Free Press.
- Oman, D. (2013). Spiritual modeling and the social learning of spirituality and religion. In K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, & J. W. Jones (Eds.), *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality: Context, theory, and research* (1st ed., pp. 187–204). American Psychological Association.
- Oman, D., Flinders, T., & Thoresen, C. E. (2008). Integrating spiritual modeling into education: A college course for stress management and spiritual growth. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 18(2), 79–107.
- Oman, D., Shapiro, S. L., Thoresen, C. E., Flinders, T., Driskill, J. D., & Plante, T. G. (2007). Learning from Spiritual Models and Meditation: A Randomized Evaluation of a College Course. *Pastoral Psychology*, 55(4), 473–493. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-006-0062-x>
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003a). Authors' response: "The many frontiers of spiritual modeling." *International Journal of Phytoremediation*, 21(1), 197–213. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_04
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003b). INVITED ESSAY: "Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?" *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(3), 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_01
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003c). Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth? *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(3), 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_01
- Oman, D., Thoresen, C. E., Park, C. L., Shaver, P. R., Hood, R. W., & Plante, T. G. (2009). How does one become spiritual? The Spiritual Modeling Inventory of Life Environments (SMILE). *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 12(5), 427–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670902758257>
- Orchard, T. (2017). To Change and Be Changed: Transformative Research Experiences. In *Remembering the body: Ethical issues in body mapping research* (pp. 65–83). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49861-4_4
- Osborne, A. (1966a). Excerpt of a letter to the editor from Arthur Osborne. *The R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience Newsletter-Review*, 13–17.
- Osborne, A. (1966b). Excerpt of a letter to the editor from Arthur Osborne. *The R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience Newsletter-Review*, 13–17.

- Pahnke, W. N. (1963). *Drugs and mysticism: An analysis of the relationship between psychedelic drugs and the mystical consciousness*. Harvard University.
- Pargament, K. I. (2012). Searching for the sacred: Toward a nonreductionistic theory of spirituality. *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol 1): Context, Theory, and Research.*, 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14045-014>
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative Research and Education Methods (2nd ed.)*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Perrin, D. B. (2007). *Studying Christian spirituality*. Routledge.
- Piaget, J. (1970a). *Structuralism*. Harper & Row.
- Piaget, J. (1970b). *Structuralism*. Harper & Row.
- Piedmont, R. L. (1999). Does spirituality represent the sixth factor of personality?: Spiritual transcendence and the five-factor model. *Journal of Personality*, 67(6), 985–1013.
- Piotrowski, J. P., Żemojtel-Piotrowska, M., Piedmont, R. L., & Baran, T. (2021). The Assessment of Spirituality and Religious Sentiments (ASPIRES) scale: Examining a spiritual transcendence nomological net in Polish context. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 13(1), 36–45. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000273>
- Ratcliffe, M. (2008). *Feelings of being: Phenomenology, psychiatry and the sense of reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2020). Existential Feelings. In T. Szanto & H. Landweer (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotion* (pp. 250–261). Routledge.
- Reason, P., & Torbert, W. (2001). The action turn: Toward a transformational social science. *Concepts and Transformation*, 6(1), 1–37.
- Richards, K. A. R., & Hemphill, M. A. (2018). A Practical Guide to Collaborative Qualitative Data Analysis. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 37(2), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2017-0084>
- Russo-Netzer, P. (2018). Spirituality. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development* (pp. 2127–2130). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Sass, L., & Ratcliffe, M. (2017). Atmosphere: On the Phenomenology of “Atmospheric” Alterations in Schizophrenia - Overall Sense of Reality, Familiarity, Vitality, Meaning, or Relevance (Ancillary Article to EAWD Domain 5). *Psychopathology*, 50(1), 90–97. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000454884>
- Sayeed, A. (n.d.). Hadith. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- Scarlett, W. G. (2012). Spiritual exemplars: An introduction. *Religions*, 3(2), 183–190. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3020183>
- Scheler, M. (1987). Exemplars of Person and Leaders. In M. S. Frings (Ed.), *Person and Self-Value* (pp. 125–198). Nijhoff.
- Schneider, K. J. (2008). *Existential-integrative psychotherapy: Guideposts to the core of practice*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

- Schneiders, S. M. (2005). Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality. In A. Holder (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Christian Spirituality* (pp. 15–33). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sebastián, M. Á. (2012). Experiential Awareness: Do You Prefer “It” to “Me”? *Philosophical Topics*, 40(2), 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201240218>
- Seidlitz, L., Abernethy, A. D., Duberstein, P. R., Evinger, J. S., Chang, T. H., & Lewis, B. L. (2002). Development of the Spiritual Transcendence Index. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41(3), 439–453. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00129>
- Sela-Smith, S. (2002). Heuristic research: A review and critique of Moustakas’s method. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 42(3), 53–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167802423004>
- Sessanna, L., Finnell, D., & Jezewski, M. A. (2007). Spirituality in Nursing and Health-Related Literature. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 25(4), 252–262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0898010107303890>
- Sharma, A., & Kennick, V. (Eds.). (2012). *Spiritual masters of the world’s religions*. State University of New York Press.
- Sohmer, O. R. (2020). The Experience of the Authentic Self: A Cooperative Inquiry. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820952339>
- Sperry, L. (2001). *Spirituality in clinical practice: Incorporating the spiritual dimension in psychotherapy and counseling*. Psychology Press.
- Stace, W. (1960). *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Macmillan).
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Tavel, P., Chrz, V., Poláčková Šolcová, I., Dubovská, E., & Kalman, M. (2022). Peak experience and its varieties: Response to challenge as a valuable perspective of peak experience and its varieties. *Ceskoslovenska Psychologie*, 66(2), 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.51561/cspsych.66.2.95>
- Taylor, S. (2012). Spontaneous awakening experiences: Beyond religion and spiritual practice. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 44(1), 73–91.
- Taylor, S. (2013a). *A phenomenological investigation into the psychological transformation interpreted as “Spiritual Awakening”: possible causes, characteristics, and after-effects*. Liverpool John Moores University.
- Taylor, S. (2013b). *A phenomenological investigation into the psychological transformation interpreted as “Spiritual Awakening”: possible causes, characteristics, and after-effects*. Liverpool John Moores University.
- Taylor, S. (2013c). Temporary and Permanent Awakening: The Primary and Secondary Shift. *Journal of Transpersonal Research*, 5(2), 41–48.
- Taylor, S., & Egeto-Szabo, K. (2017). Exploring Awakening Experiences: a Study of Awakening Experiences in Terms of Their Triggers, Characteristics, Duration and After-Effects. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 49(1), 45–65.
- Teilhard de Chardin, P. (1969). *Building the Earth and The Psychological Conditions of Human Unification* (Discus Edition). Avon.

- Underhill, E. (1911). *Mysticism: A study in nature and development of spiritual consciousness*. Methuen.
- van de Ven, N., Archer, A. T. M., & Engelen, B. (2019). More important and surprising actions of a moral exemplar trigger stronger admiration and inspiration. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 159(4), 383–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2018.1498317>
- Van Deurzen, E. (2010). *Everyday mysteries: A handbook of existential psychotherapy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. SUNY Press.
- Vos, P. H. (2018). Learning from exemplars: emulation, character formation and the complexities of ordinary life. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 39(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2017.1393295>
- Walker, L. J., & Frimer, J. A. (2010). Moral Personality Exemplified. *Personality, Identity, and Character*, 232–255. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511627125.011>
- White, J. (2005). Exemplary persons and ethics. The place of St. Francis in the philosophy of Max Scheler. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 79(1), 57–90.
- Yaden, D. B., Haidt, J., Hood, R. W., Vago, D. R., & Newberg, A. B. (2017). The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience. *Review of General Psychology*, 21(2), 143–160. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000102>
- Yaden, D. B., & Newberg, A. (2022). *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*. Oxford University Press New York. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190665678.001.0001>
- Zagzebski, L. (2010a). Exemplarist virtue theory. *Metaphilosophy*, 41, 41–57.
- Zagzebski, L. (2010b). Exemplarist virtue theory. *Metaphilosophy*, 41, 41–57.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015a). Admiration and the admirable. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 89, 205–221.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015b). Admiration and the admirable. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 89, 205–221.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015c). Exemplarism and admiration. In C. B. Miller, R. M. Furr, A. Knobel, & W. Fleeson (Eds.), *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015d). Exemplarism and admiration. In C. B. Miller, R. M. Furr, A. Knobel, & W. Fleeson (Eds.), *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2017a). *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2017b). *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Manuscript 3

Title: Self-transformative research: Effects of a holistic collaborative study of spiritual exemplars on the researchers

Authors: Amir Freimann, Ofra Mayseless, Tobin Hart, and Aostre Johnson

Journal: Journal of Contemplative Studies, published. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.57010/TIWG2652>

Statement of Authorship

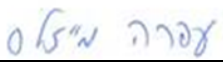
Principal Author

Title of Paper	Self-transformative research: Effects of a holistic collaborative study of spiritual exemplars		
Publication Status	☐ Published ☒ Accepted for Publication ☐ Submitted for Publication		
Publication Details	Journal of Contemplative Studies		
Name of Principal Author (Candidate)	Amir Friemann		
Contribution to the Paper	Ofra Mayseless, Tobin Hart and Aostre Johnson		
Certification:	This paper reports on original research I conducted during the period of my Higher Degree by Research candidature and is not subject to any obligations or contractual agreements with a third party that would constrain its inclusion in this thesis. I am the primary author of this paper.		
Name and Signature	Amir Freimann 	Date	20/11/2024

Co-Author Contributions

By signing the Statement of Authorship, each author certifies that:

- the candidate's stated contribution to the publication is accurate (as detailed above);
- permission is granted for the candidate to include the publication in the dissertation

Name of Co-Author	Ofra Mayseless		
Contribution to the Paper	Supervision, conceptualization, development of methodology, analysis, validation, review		
Name and Signature	Ofra Mayseless 	Date	20/11/2024

Name of Co-Author	Tobin Hart		
Contribution to the Paper	Supervision, analysis, validation, review		
Name and Signature	Tobin Hart 	Date	20/11/2024

Name of Co-Author	Aostre Johnson		
Contribution to the Paper	Supervision, analysis, validation, review		
Name and Signature	Aostre Johnson 	Date	20/11/2024

Title: Self-transformative research: Effects of a holistic collaborative study of spiritual exemplars on the researchers

Authors: Amir Freimann, Ofra Mayseless, Tobin Hart, and Aostre Johnson

Journal: Journal of Contemplative Studies, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57010/TIWG2652>

The text below is the final version sent to the journal following revision. It is not the copy of record and may not exactly replicate the final, authoritative version of the article. Please do not copy or cite without authors' permission.

Abstract

What happens to researchers interested in spirituality, as they engage with a large number of spiritual exemplars? This question is explored, based on the experience of fourteen research collaborators in a qualitative phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars (individuals perceived by others as exemplifying the spiritual life) of different traditions, paths and cultures. Over 5.5 months, two groups of research collaborators watched video recordings of interviews with twenty spiritual exemplars, analyzed their transcripts, wrote down their impressions of each exemplar and discussed them in biweekly meetings. At the end of that period, the effects of the process on the collaborators were explored through individual interviews and group discussions. The data collected suggests that the collaborators both formed and experienced the process as holistic and self-transformative in different ways. Three main effects were described: “self-reflection and insight,” “opening and broadening” and “fostering spiritual self-reliance.” In choosing their “most exemplary exemplars,” the collaborators relied mainly on their somatic-intuitive impressions and there was great diversity in their choices. These findings suggest that spiritual exemplarity is determined by “sympathetic resonance” between the exemplar and the

person perceiving them as such. The conditions which contributed to the effects of the process and the potential of its application to facilitate inter-religious dialogue and personal growth are discussed.

Key words: organic inquiry, intuitive inquiry, collaborative analysis, heuristic research, self-transformative research, spiritual exemplars

What happens to researchers interested in spirituality, as they engage as researchers with a large number of spiritual exemplars – individuals perceived by others as exemplifying the spiritual life? This question and the answers it yielded were not intended to be a subject of research when I (the first author) invited people to join me as research collaborators. It became one in the course of the research process. The answers it yielded seem pertinent to both the nature of spiritual exemplarity and possibly exemplarity in general and to the self-transformative impact of the research process, which the collaborators co-created and in which they participated.

To contextualize this research process and its outcomes, I begin by reviewing the extant scientific literature on the two main topics of this research and its lacunas: the first is exemplars and their effects on others, and the second is transformation through research.

Exemplars and Their Effects on Others

In almost every area in which human aspiration for virtue or excellence is expressed, a special place is reserved for exemplars of that area – individuals who are perceived as embodying the highest human potential or the "vertex of maturity" (1970) in that area. For aspirants or practitioners who aspire to cultivate and develop any virtue or skill, exemplars of that virtue or skill have been hypothesized to serve several functions. Social learning theory (Bandura 1986) posits that "The power of example to activate and channel behavior has been

abundantly documented" (p. 206). Exemplars' example "seems to be a very effective way to remind ourselves of the kind of persons we wish to be" (Croce and Silvia Vaccarezza 2017: 6). Exemplars attract, inspire and give confidence that success might be achievable also for others (Moberg 2000), and admiration of exemplars has been theorized to motivate "imitation of the value-being of the exemplary person" (White 2005: 66) or emulation (Zagzebski 2017).

In the religious-spiritual domain, a special place is reserved in many traditions for those who exemplify "the ideal of the tradition in its concrete manifestations in the lives of humans" (Goshen-Gottstein, 2017). Learning from spiritual exemplars was named "spiritual modeling" by Oman and Thoresen (2003), and Oman et al. (2008) argued that "regularly exposing students to spiritual models (both religious and non-religious) can help them absorb and emulate the models' character strengths" (p. 82).

Exemplar study was said to be necessary for providing "a complete account that applies to the full variety of human functioning" in the study of any psychological phenomenon (Damon and Colby 2013: 14). Examples of early studies of exemplars include Bucke's (1901/1905) study of exemplars of "cosmic consciousness," James' (1902/1958) study of "mystics" and "saints" and Maslow's (1962, 1971) study of "self-actualizers" and "self-transcenders." In the last four decades, numerous studies were conducted on exemplars of leadership, morality, altruism, care, bravery, wisdom, spirituality and other virtues (e.g., Becker and Eagly 2004; Dunlop, Walker, and Matsuba 2012; Matsuba and Walker 2004; Walker and Frimer 2010; Oliner and Oliner 1988; Colby and Damon 1992; King, Clardy, and Ramos 2014). Exemplar methodology, defined as "a sample selection technique that involves the intentional selection of individuals, groups, or entities that exemplify the construct of interest in a highly developed manner" (Bronk, 2012a), was developed and refined to identify and study exemplars.

The effects of exemplars on others have so far been studied only on exemplars' students, followers, apprentices, trainees, employees, coworkers, peers or community members (for example, (Bojerud, Younadam, and Čehajić-Clancy 2023; Hu, Gu, and Zhang 2023; van de

Ven, Archer, and Engelen 2019; Han and Dawson 2023). In these studies, the informants referred to their perceptions of and/or relationships with one person or a few at most, who they had already chosen as their exemplar(s), and to the effects of the exemplar(s) on them. The question of what happens to people as they are exposed to a large number of individuals, nominated by others as exemplars of a specific virtue or construct, has not been studied to date.

Transformation Through Research

Transformation through research has been described mainly in relation to so-called “transformative research,” auto/ethnography, first-person action research and transpersonal research. In the context of transformative research, defined as research whose aim is to catalyze processes of change on a societal level (Göpel 2016), personal transformation is transformation of the research participants and is usually referred to as “a necessary component of research that is designed to support change at the societal level” (Mertens 2017: 18). In auto/ethnography (Custer 2014; Orchard 2017) and first-person action research (Reason and Torbert 2001), the researcher may undergo a transformative experience alongside and as a result of the ethnographic immersion and engagement with the research participants and when “our taken-for-granted assumptions, strategies, and habits are appropriately challenged” (Reason and Torbert 2001: 1).

In the context of transpersonal research (Anderson 2020; 1998a; 2019a; 2018; Anderson and Braud 2011a), “a research project can be accompanied by increased self-awareness, enhance psycho-spiritual growth and development, and other personal changes of great consequence to the individuals involved” (Anderson and Braud 2011a: xvi), participants and researchers included. Sohmer (2020) posits that in such a context, “transformative outcomes... are considered as important as, if not more important than, the informational or conceptual outcomes” (p. 18).

As far as I am aware of, the scientific literature includes no explicit reference to self-transformation (in the sense of both “transformation of the self” and “self-induced transformation”) of the researcher as the main outcome of a research.

Current Study

By aiming to answer the question, “what happens to researchers interested in spirituality as they engage with a large number of spiritual exemplars?”, the current study sheds light on the lacunas of the above two topics. In this context of this study, the “researchers” referred to in the question were people who participated as collaborators in the research, “engaged” means “engaged as researchers with video-recorded interviews” and “spiritual exemplars” means “individuals nominated as spiritual exemplars by others.”

As mentioned above, however, this question was not intended to be a subject of research when I invited people to join me as research collaborators. My intention was only to receive help with the qualitative analysis of interviews I conducted as part of another study. The title of the other study was *Living Transcendence: A Phenomenological Study of Spiritual Exemplars*. *Living Transcendence* is a term I coined, which refers to a relatively stabilized elevated spiritual state; spiritual exemplars are individuals presumably having and evincing that experience. The method used in the study was *exemplar methodology*. In that study, I asked 300 experts in the religious-spiritual field from different traditions to nominate and describe spiritual exemplars they knew “specifically indicating what it is that makes each of them exemplary.” Descriptions of 180 spiritual exemplars were provided by 77 expert informants. Next, I conducted multiple in-depth phenomenological interviews with thirty-two of these spiritual exemplars, in which I asked the interviewees to describe their experience of *Living Transcendence*, video-recorded and transcribed their responses. The interviewees were from different traditions and paths and included, for example, an American Catholic nun, pagan priestess and Tibetan lama, an Uzbekistani teacher of Kashmiri Shaivism, an Iraqi Sufi sheik, an

Egyptian Coptic bishop, a Zimbabwean healer, a Greenlander shaman, a British New Age teacher and an Israeli Jewish rabbi.

Prior to this research, I studied for several decades under the tutelage of a Japanese Zen master and then a Western Advaita teacher and explored the spiritual teacher-student relationship (Freimann 2018). My approach to the study of *Living Transcendence* was influenced by my interest in personally making the shift from transient “peak experiences” of transcendence to a more stabilized experience of *Living Transcendence*. Aware that my biases were toward monotheism and transcendence over polytheism and immanence, I knew that conducting both the interviews and the analysis on my own would greatly weaken the rigor of the research. To counter that effect, after interviewing the first 15 spiritual exemplars I decided to create a small group of research collaborators (hereinafter referred to as “collaborators”), who would help me in the analysis process. The method I decided to use for the process was *collaborative analysis* with some elements taken from the *focus groups* method.

Collaborative analysis is a process "in which there is joint focus and dialogue among two or more researchers regarding a shared body of data, to produce an agreed interpretation" (Cornish, Gillespie, and Tania 2014). Usually, researchers from different disciplines, countries or theoretical traditions or with different levels of expertise collaborate in such a process, bringing "a diversity of perspectives to the project, embodied in different people" (ibid: 3). Collaborative analysis is thought to yield "researcher triangulation" (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and thus enhance trustworthiness, counteract individual biases (Richards and Hemphill 2018) and achieve "perspective-transcending knowledge" (Gillespie and Richardson 2011). Considering my biases and the fact that I was studying the experience of spiritual exemplars of different traditions and cultural backgrounds, applying this process seemed suitable.

For the process of collaborative analysis to be truly collaborative and integrative, rather than reflective of multiple analysts working in isolation (a concern expressed by Moran-Ellis and colleagues (2006), I decided that the collaborators would meet every second week to discuss

their impressions and refine their analysis method. In so doing, I relied on the research technique of focus groups, the purpose of which is "to identify a range of perspectives on a research topic, and to gain an understanding of the issues from the perspective of the participants themselves" (Hennink and Leavy 2014: 2). From the focus group technique I also adopted the principle, that in the group discussions the researcher takes a peripheral role as a facilitator or moderator (Nyumba et al. 2018) with the power balance favoring participants (Moloney 2011). As it turned out, the collaborators' biweekly meetings were significant also in enabling the collaborators to give words to their subjective impressions, hear other impressions and points of view and explore together their experiences.

Recruitment and process initiation

In December 2020 I posted the following post on my Facebook page, inviting people to join me as research collaborators. I also forwarded the post to several people, who I thought may be interested in the invitation. The post said:

Join me in Living Transcendence

I'm looking for a few people who would like to join a small team of "research collaborators," that would accompany me in my PhD study of *Living Transcendence: A phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars*.

The idea is that the team members will watch the interviews I conducted with spiritual exemplars (on their own), write down their impressions, what stood out for them, what they found especially interesting and maybe surprising regarding each interviewee, and what follow-up questions they'd like to ask the interviewee. The team will convene by Zoom every other week to discuss our different impressions and questions .

Suitable candidates should have experience in the psychological/spiritual field and preferably in qualitative research, who can commit (after a trial period) to six hours a week for the next two months.

The benefits to the team members would be their very participation in an interesting and enjoyable learning process; getting to know spiritual exemplars of different traditions; clarification of questions about spirituality and spiritual exemplars; and my gratitude for their help in my PhD research. No financial compensation will be offered.

Setting the relatively high bar of six hours a week was meant to make sure that only people who are deeply interested in the subject would apply, and I expected only a few people to respond. To my surprise, about two dozen people from around the world responded to the invitation, about half of them unsolicited and half solicited.

Through email exchanges with each of the applicants, I confirmed their availability and willingness to commit to six hours a week (some tried to negotiate) and the times they could join group meetings (some could join only at my nighttime). At the end of this screening process, fourteen people enrolled to participate as collaborators in the research. These people signed an informed consent, approved by the institutional ethics committee of the University of Haifa. The informed consent specified the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to stop participating in the research at any time, and assured their confidentiality and anonymity (for which they were given pseudonyms in this paper). It also asked for their assurance that they would not share with others the study materials they receive access to.

Based on a survey of the most convenient meeting times for each collaborator, the collaborators were divided into two groups: A six-person group met on Saturday and an eight-person group met on Sunday every second week. At my request, a member in each group with qualifications and experience as a group facilitator agreed to facilitate their group meetings. The two (Harriet and Sigrid) facilitated all the group meetings throughout the process.

The fourteen collaborators represented diverse disciplines (e.g., law, psychology, education, business management and art), academic statuses (five had BA, six MA and three PhD or an equivalent title), personal attributes (nine women and five men between 46 and 72 years old, average 58) and geographical location (five were from Asia, five from N. America,

three from Europe and one from Africa). The groups embraced no cultural diversity (all were affiliated mainly with Western culture) or diversity in religious-spiritual affiliation – all identified as more spiritual than religious, and their approach to spirituality was more pluralistic than exclusivist.

Prior to the introductory meetings of the groups, I created an online shared document and asked the collaborators to introduce themselves, especially their spiritual or religious background. Excerpts from the collaborators' self-descriptions included "Although raised in the Muslim tradition I am more aligned to the Advaita and Stoic approaches to meaning making" (Nazim); "As a child I found myself drawn to the mystery, inwardly practicing what I called 'walking in greenfields' when I was supposed to be saying my prayers and declaring myself 'not a Christian' when I was fifteen" (Annalie); "I have Masters in Jewish Studies and Rabbinic Ordination, certified in Pastoral Care, Chaplain (APC), Spiritual Care Practitioner (CASC), Iyengar Yoga, Reiki, Johrei... I work as a Chaplain at a major trauma and teaching hospital" (Kendrick); "I was born into a Catholic family that went to church weekly... My spiritual roots are both in anthroposophy (36 years) and Sufism (22 years)" (Harriet); "I come from an orthodox Jewish background and have been exposed to yoga, meditation, Sufism and Buddhism" (Peggie); and "Understanding our connection to the Universal and the Divine has become more front and center for me at this point, as I 'write the last chapter' of my life" (Burt).

In preparation for the introductory meetings, I asked the collaborators to think of questions, which would be of special interest for them during their participation in the research. The introductory group meetings were dedicated to exploring the collaborators' questions. Examples of the questions are: "What makes someone a spiritual exemplar? Why are exemplars motivated to share their experience?" (Peggie); "How do the exemplars relate to the unexplored or unintegrated aspects of their being? To what extent is the separate sense of self important to them?" (Fred); "What is the process of going from peak experiences to a plateau state? What is the process by which one embodies love?" (Annalie); "What can they tell us

about their lived experience that can help me in my journey? What is their relationship to death?" (Kendrick); "I'm interested in the movement between unity consciousness and the day day-to-day life. What determines their authenticity?" (Orit); and "Did the spiritual awakening process require a language transformation, to represent a new emerging reality? If so, was it accompanied with a sense of loneliness?" (Yvie).

Following the introductory meetings, the collaborators participated in the first part of the process, which consisted of five meetings over 2.5 months.

First period of the process

At the beginning of the process, I sent the members of each group links to video recordings and transcripts of three interviews with two different exemplars each (two interviews with one exemplar and one interview with the other). The interviews were between 75 and 100 minutes each and the transcripts of those interviews were broken down into sentences. I asked the collaborators to apply codes to the sentences that seemed meaningful to them, and then to do the following:

Please write down your impressions of the interviewee; how he or she thinks, feels, reflects, responds, interacts; whatever you find particularly significant, interesting, authentic and revealing; themes that emerge in the interview that are of particular interest to you; what impact (if any) they had on you; and follow-up questions you would have liked to ask them.

- For the discussion of our impressions of each interviewee, consider mainly:
 - What did you especially enjoy/appreciate in the interviews with them and what didn't you like? What deeply resonated with you and what fell flat?
 - How would you describe the interviewee's spiritual experience, state, depth, essence or insight?

- What impressed you and what you felt was lacking in who they are as a human being and a spiritual exemplar?
- Please think if there are parts of the interview that it's important for you that we talk about.
- Please prepare follow-up questions that you would have liked to ask the interviewee.

Over the following two weeks, the collaborators sent me the transcripts highlighted with codes, such as those listed in Table 1, and their impressions of each exemplar. Based on the codes they used and thematic analysis of their impressions, I created an initial coding system. The second meeting of each group lasted two hours and consisted of two main parts: in the first, the collaborators went over the coding system I proposed, discussed and refined it; and in the second, each collaborator spoke about their impression of each of the exemplars. Some of the impressions were discussed by all and questions for future interviews were proposed.

The following four meetings of each group followed a similar pattern. In the two weeks between the meetings, the collaborators watched two or three video recordings and coded transcripts of interviews with two different exemplars each and wrote down their subjective impressions and felt impact of the exemplars. The biweekly two-hour meetings consisted of three parts: (1) discussion of the coding system, which was ongoingly refined from one meeting to another; (2) sharing of each collaborator's impression of each exemplar and discussion of specific impressions; and (3) group exploration of specific topics, brought up by one of the collaborators. These included, for example, authenticity, humility, morality and psycho-spiritual integration in exemplars. A topic that was of special interest to me was the diversity in the collaborators' impressions of different exemplars. I had assumed that there would be significant agreement among the collaborators on who the most impressive or "exemplary" exemplars were, and that it would match my impressions. This turned out not to be the case. Different collaborators were impressed by or felt resonance with different exemplars, and there was considerable diversity among them (and between them and me) on this issue.

At the end of the agreed-upon 2.5 months and after the sixth meeting, I sent an email to each of the collaborators, cautiously asking if they were interested in continuing to participate in the process for a second period of 2.5 additional months. Aware of how intensive and time-consuming their involvement in the research had been, I also indicated that the weekly workload in that period would be reduced to three-four hours a week. I expected some or most of them to end their participation at that point. To my surprise, all fourteen collaborators responded that they wanted to continue. Many of them indicated in their responses that, while they welcomed the reduced weekly workload, their involvement in the research was interesting, fulfilling and important to them.

It was then that I became more aware of how significant the process was for the collaborators and considered that it might be worth studying and writing about. I decided that the research question would be, what happens to researchers interested in spirituality, as they engage with a large number of spiritual exemplars? From that point on, I started paying closer attention to the collaborators' comments about the effects of the process on them and planning on interviewing them about it at the end of the process.

Second period of the process

At the beginning of the second period of the process I also finalized and sent the collaborators a "Themes Document" (Table 1), which listed the themes (bolded, on the left) and codes that were developed up to that point. I asked the collaborators to use, from that point on, the list of themes in two ways:

- While reading the transcript of an interview, if there is a section of an interview that strikes you as relevant to one of the themes, code it with that theme.
- When writing your impressions, write something under each theme, if applicable.

Table 1. List of themes and codes developed and used by the collaborators in analyzing and writing down their impressions and felt impact of each exemplar

<i>Living Transcendence (according to the interviewee)</i>	
Embodiment:	Senses, sexuality, physicality, "down-to-earth"-ness
Emotions:	Love, compassion, bliss, depression, anxiety, anger, etc.
Inner compass:	Higher guidance, sense of their path, alignment with spirit
Supernatural perception:	Energies / immaterial entities / subtle realms, communication with nature, channeling, intuition, esoteric knowledge
Relationships:	With significant others, own teachers, role models, peers, students
Volition:	Surrender, free will, wanting to serve, responding to a calling
Unity:	Expansion / dissolution of self, infinity, absolute, timelessness, unity consciousness
Spiritual life (according to the interviewee)	
Challenges:	Crises, struggles, difficulties, suffering, self-doubt, "dark nights of the soul"
Development:	Stages, milestones, current development, growing edge
Early life:	Childhood / adolescence experiences, formative events
Inner life:	Inquiry, internal processes not shared with others
Integration:	Shadow / psychological work, wholeness, unification of personality/life
Motivation:	Drive, intentionality in own journey / development / teaching
Peak experiences:	Transient spiritual / transformative experiences
Practice:	Type of practice, relationship to practice, practice past and present

Being a teacher / leader (according to the interviewee)	
Activism:	Social-political awareness / involvement, intention to have an effect
Conceptualization:	Of knowledge, articulation, understanding, metaphors, stories
Ethics:	Position in the community, ethical conduct, peer supervision, response to criticism, sense of responsibility
Guiding:	Recognizing & responding to student's level of understanding, facilitating students' understanding, guiding through stages
Teaching:	Becoming / being a teacher, motivation/reluctance to teach, leading others (groups, close community, wider followership)
Tradition:	Relationship to tradition, reliance on tradition
Impressions (your impressions)	
Authenticity:	Vulnerability, humility, transparency
Ego:	Self-promotion, self-importance, specialness, pride, putting down others, "full of themselves"
Introspection:	Their reflection ability, attention to felt sense, intuition
Interaction:	Dialogicity, openness, care, attentiveness
Humor:	Ease of being, lightness, self-irony
Quirks:	Idiosyncrasies, "non-spiritual" activities, inconsistencies
Spiritual exemplarity (your assessment)	
Essence(s):	Of spiritual exemplarity felt by you, transmitted by them
Roundedness:	Fullness of being – or what is lacking
Why considered:	Or what makes them a spiritual exemplar for some people

Your general impressions of them (free text)
Their impact on you (free text)
Self-assessment of your positionality (free text)

The two collaborator groups continued to watch video recordings and analyze transcripts of interviews with two spiritual exemplars every two weeks. They also continued to meet and discuss their impressions every second week. This second period of the process lasted two more months. By the end of the 5.5-month process, each group watched and analyzed interviews with twenty spiritual exemplars, which included the same 15 exemplars as the other group and five additional exemplars.

At the end of the second period and the entire process, I conducted by Zoom short interviews with each of the collaborators about how the process was for them. The last meeting of each group was also dedicated to exploring the same. The procedures of the individual interviews and the last meetings are described in the *Methods* section and data from the interviews and meetings are used in the *Findings* section.

Methods

Two methods relevant to the process that the collaborators underwent – heuristic research and organic / intuitive inquiry – are first described under *Methodological Foundations*. The procedure used in this research for data collection and the process of its analysis, using the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, are then described.

Methodological Foundations

The research process, which the collaborators participated in, was originally designed based on the methods of *collaborative analysis* and *focus groups*. In discussing the process that the collaborators actually underwent, however, we (the four authors) realized that these two methods were insufficient to delineate the theoretical foundations of the research method. The reason for this insufficiency was that the collaborators, whom I initially recruited as “assistant coders” to co-analyze data about spiritual exemplars, became in the process of the research also “self-inquirers” and “self-transformers.” By entering an internal dialogue with the videotaped exemplars and an external dialogue with their peers, and by allowing themselves to be impacted and transformed by both, the collaborators became involved in the research in different ways than originally intended and thereby reconfigured the research method.

In light of this reconfiguration, we found that the methods of *heuristic research* and *organic/intuitive inquiry* provided better methodological foundations for the method actually used in this research. This method organically and collaboratively developed during the research, however, rather than being intentionally designed based on these methods. Nevertheless, they helped us better understand it and situate it in relation to well-established methods.

Heuristic Research

Heuristic research has been described as “a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others” (Moustakas 1990: 15) in which “attention is focused inward on feeling responses of the researcher to the outward situation” (ibid: 59). It is said to be suitable for “any research endeavor where the inquiry is on the cutting edge of new territory being explored” (Sela-Smith 2002: 6). The researcher in heuristic research “must have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas 1990: 14) and the research “begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer” (ibid: 15) and progresses by processes of “reflective learning” (Djuraskovic and Arthur 2010).

In this study, the requirements set for people to join as research collaborators ensured that they all had personal affinity to and deep interest in the study subject. These were

foundational for the process that transpired. They were reinforced by the exploration of the questions, which were of special interest for the collaborators, in the introductory meetings of the groups. The process that followed provided the collaborators with an opportunity to follow their personal questions and to incorporate their felt-sense (Gendlin 1962, 1981) and “reflective learning” into the collaborative research process.

Organic / Intuitive Inquiry

Organic inquiry (Clements 2004b, 2011) is an emerging research approach that incorporates feeling, intuitive and body-based information into data collection and analysis in order to “more fully appreciate... the nature of the types of complex, rich, and meaningful experiences that are of great interest to the human sciences and humanities” (Anderson and Braud 2011b: 282). Closely related to it is a research method called “intuitive inquiry,” which “seeks to engage our full humanity, including our aesthetic, imaginal, and transformational capacities, in the conduct of qualitative research... Transformation of the researcher’s understanding of the topic under study and breakthrough insights are actively sought” (Anderson 2019b: 312). As suggested by Churchill and Wertz (2015), “To engage in phenomenological reflection on a given phenomenon, an *intuitive* relationship is needed between the researchers and the research participant – *direct existential contact*. *Intuitive* means that the phenomenon is directly accessible to the researcher’s own consciousness” (p. 281). Both organic and intuitive inquiry relate to the concept of “empathetic identification,” which means that the researcher “looks around from inside the experience and witnesses the essential qualities of the other coming to life as the researcher’s own experience” (Anderson and Braud 2011b). xxx Participants in organic inquiry should be individuals “who have had meaningful experience with the topic of study, who have an open-minded understanding of it, and who have both willingness and ability to articulate their experience” (Clements 2004b: 28).

Organic / intuitive research is said to be “ideally suited to topics related to psycho-spiritual growth” where “the psyche of the researcher becomes the instrument of the research,

working in partnership with the experiences of participants and guided by liminal and spiritual influences" (Clements 2004a: 26). As such, it was especially suitable for this study. This research approach also provides an opportunity for transformational change, defined (ibid) as "the restructuring of one's worldview that provides some discrete degree of movement along one's lifetime path toward further transpersonal development."

Procedure

At the end of the collaborative analysis process and before the last meeting of each group, I conducted by Zoom interviews with each of the collaborators. Each interview lasted between 25 and 35 minutes and was recorded and later transcribed. Each interview began with an open-ended, non-directive question: How was the research process for you? I invited the collaborator to respond to this question as freely as possible and asked follow-up questions only based on things they had already said. After the collaborator's response to this question was exhausted, I asked two additional questions: How did you work with the study materials? Did the process affect you in some way? Also with these questions, I used follow-up questions, if needed, only to encourage the collaborator to elaborate on and clarify things they had already said.

After all the collaborators were individually interviewed, the last meeting of each group was conducted by Zoom. Unlike all the previous group meetings, I facilitated those last meetings. Each of the two-hour meetings was divided into two parts. In the first part, which lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, I asked the collaborators to each choose their two or three "most exemplary exemplars" of the exemplars they saw. After they did that, I asked them: Please reflect on and describe *how* you chose your "most exemplary exemplars." Each of the collaborators was invited to freely describe, in their own words, the internal, subjective process they underwent in choosing their exemplars. Follow-up questions were asked by me and other collaborators if further clarification felt needed. In the second part, which lasted between 80 and

90 minutes, I asked the collaborators to describe and discuss the effect that the process had on them. The meetings were recorded and later transcribed.

Data analysis

In order to deeply and intimately understand the collaborators' experiences of the process and its effects on them, I analyzed the transcripts of the individual interviews and the last group meetings using the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach aims at understanding how individuals experience, interpret and give meaning to a given phenomenon. Husserl, who developed this approach, called for a return "to the things themselves" (Van Deurzen 2010: 36) by the researcher holding in abeyance their preconceptions and prior knowledge (a process referred to as epoché or bracketing). The hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, proposed by Heidegger (1962), on the other hand, recognizes that the analysis process is invariably and inevitably influenced by the researcher's preconceptions. The Heideggerian hermeneutic-phenomenological approach includes, therefore, both a description of the phenomenon by the respondent and the researcher's reflection on and interpretation of the respondent's description.

I used Dedoose qualitative data analysis application to analyze the data from the collaborators' interviews and group meetings. I started the analysis process by watching several times the recordings of the interviews and group meetings while reading and annotating their transcripts with initial ideas related to the research question. At the next stage, I documented topics, that emerged out of my notes. These topics were at a higher level of abstraction than the original notes, yet they remained grounded in my notes. Finally, the other three authors reviewed the topics and their connections to the raw data, and together we clustered the topics into the themes, presented in the *Findings* section.

Findings

In our analysis of the collaborators' interviews and group meetings we identified five themes.

The first theme, *Holistic Inquiry Process*, presents the collaborators' experience working with the video recordings and transcripts of the interviews and with the combination between individual and group inquiry. The second theme, *Choosing "The Most Exemplary Exemplars,"* presents the collaborators' reflections on how they chose the exemplars that touched or impressed them the most. The next three themes, *Self-Reflection and Insight*, *Opening and Broadening* and *Fostering Spiritual Self-Reliance*, concern the effects that participation in the research process had on the collaborators.

Holistic Inquiry Process: "Bringing forth your energy and experience and all of your capacities."

The process that the collaborators participated in consisted of several elements: watching video recordings of the interviews, coding their transcripts, writing down impressions and discussing them in group meetings. The collaborators used this multi-modal design to engage with the exemplars and with their peers not only on a cognitive-analytic level but also emotionally, relationally, in an embodied-intuitive and transpersonal-spiritual ways. For example, Fred referred to it as "spiritual practice" and explained:

First of all, you have an opportunity to engage with deep thinkers. Then you're bringing your cognitive and somatic perceptions and discrimination to the process with the intention of engaging with others on the issue. So you're actually bringing forth your energy and experience and all of your capacities and try to come up with an accurate description of your impressions. I mean, you really have to do all of those things in order to do a good job and you can't be sloppy doing it, right? So that's a spiritual practice.

Yaris described how the combination of watching the video recording and "allowing for certain processes to take place in me, understanding things about myself," then analyzing the transcript and writing down her impressions, and finally discussing these in the group meeting, had a

powerful integrative or unifying effect on her. She commented that she experienced this integrative process as gradual, and that “shifting from the pre-verbal experience of the initial meeting with the exemplar and putting it into words was not easy, but important... This was more difficult for me at the beginning and gradually became easier.”

Some of the collaborators indicated that their engagement with the interviews sometimes left a “vibrational” or “resonant” impression on them, which extended beyond the time of their engagement with the task. Jama told that “I have dreams and insights and I can feel the words of certain exemplars reverberating in the background when I have those insights.” Annalie mentioned that “Often the interviewees walked with me while I was with them. And I would refer back to things that they said, maybe go back and find again that, yeah, that’s why that resonated with me. They became part of my life.”

The collaborators were not given specific recommendations on how to work with and incorporate the different modes of engagement and they experimented with different ways on their own. Whatever method each of the collaborators developed, it was one that enabled them to bring together their intuitive/embodied impressions and their analytic-cognitive faculties. Yvie, for example, said that “I used to watch the interview and then give it a few days for the impressions to sink in, without writing. Then I would write my impressions free style, whatever stayed with me.” Only after “digesting” her initial impressions in this way she started the analytic coding process. Other collaborators chose to watch the video recording of an interview while reading its transcript and coding it at the same time. Sigrid, for example, described that “I was watching, reading and self-noticing how my body is responding, what images are arising, what’s happening in my heart, when am I getting goosebumps, what’s happening to me in this encounter with this person, when is there a qualitative change in what’s going on, what I call ‘grace moments’ or ‘transmission’.” Kendrick said that he used to watch the video recording in order to “get the energy and the feeling of the person” while coding the transcript, and commented:

Part of the process for me was learning to open more of my senses, in perceiving what I call the subtle realms of my awareness. I was then able to articulate my preferences more precisely as the process continued, and I became more acutely aware of what turns me on, what turns me off and why... And eventually I was able to [discern]: Does this person speak from their heart? What type of energy are they expounding? Do I get the transmission? For some there was a point you just put the paper down and you're so engrossed and all of a sudden you start to get it on a different level.

The combination of individual and collective inquiry also contributed to the integration of the collaborators' experience by helping them to make conscious and verbalize impressions that had not been consciously aware of. Angelique, for example, said that the group meetings "helped me to pick out those jewels that actually had hit me while watching the interview but I wasn't conscious of. Then in the group somebody would give it words and I'd go, 'Oh, yes, indeed!'"

The descriptions of the process by many of the collaborators suggest that they used their engagement and experienced it as integrative-holistic, that is, as bringing together and unifying their cognitive-analytic, emotional, relational, embodied-intuitive and transpersonal-spiritual ways of knowing, feeling and communicating. The multi-modality of the study design and the freedom they had, to combine the different modalities in ways that deepened their engagement, supported their integrative-holistic experience. However, it was the collaborators' deep interest in and "empathetic identification" (Anderson and Braud 2011b) with the phenomenon they were studying which seemed to be the motivating force behind their holistic engagement and experience.

Choosing "The Most Exemplary Exemplars:" "I intuitively moved toward the ones that shifted my consciousness."

In discussing the process they went through in choosing specific interviewees as their "most exemplary exemplars," most collaborators indicated that their choice relied more on their

somatic-intuitive impressions than on preformulated criteria. Some collaborators did mention preformulated criteria, such as ethical behavior, absence of sense of superiority, independence, and authenticity, but those criteria were necessary rather than sufficient conditions for their choices. For example, Kendrick provided a list of criteria that led him to choose his three exemplars, but when asked about another exemplar, who also matched all those criteria, he replied, "Yes, but I just didn't connect with her." When explaining her choices, Angelique said:

Many interviewees I watched over the last months "fit the bill" of what makes one a spiritual exemplar, but there is also such a thing as a more personal preference to specific exemplars, which has to do with particular qualities of their personality that appeal to me personally and literally make me feel happy and more attracted to their message. So they seem to be a more direct conduit of spirit and seem to have more impact, or maybe because they are personally more attractive they are easier for me to listen to and therefore seem to have more impact on me.

Some collaborators indicated that the determining factor for them was a "felt sense," a certain "vibration" or an "internal shift" that they experienced with some of the exemplars and not with others. For example, Orit said:

I felt different sensations and had different experiences throughout the interviews, but at times I sensed something altering in my perception – the vividness with which I experience the interviewee, their words touching me intensely. I experience a deepening of focused awareness around what the interviewee is expressing, I feel I am drawn into a different realm, with a different vibration to it. I feel touched and greatly drawn to the person when he or she allows me into the core of their experience. I feel they are not talking "about it" but "being it" as they speak. I guess that will be the experience of spiritual transmission. In those cases I experienced the interviewee as a spiritual exemplar.

And Annalie said:

I found exemplary aspects of each interviewee. But this did not necessarily correlate with how deeply each moved me. For example, I think that the living sense of divine love and forgiveness of the Christian mystic you interviewed is how he lives in the material world – he embodies that place which I respect and appreciate – but he didn't move or inspire me. So where would I seek? I intuitively moved toward the ones with whom I had a felt sense that shifted my consciousness. That made me leave my role as outside observer and become one who was invited inside, an experience that resulted in an upliftment or expansion in my conscious awareness.

Harriet referred to her experience with some of the exemplars as "transcendence," and said that such an experience was for her an indication of the exemplar's spiritual state:

Feeling transcendence is like being transferred into a wider space that is at the same time spaceless. The polarity between inner and outer starts disappearing, as my inner space and subtle body open and widen. With some exemplars it starts more in the head, with others in the heart region... What I mean is that I'm able to not just hear the words but sense and resonate with the inner state or space from which they are spoken. This leads to a direct knowing or understanding of what is being said... Sometimes it feels like a sudden inner energetic shift, like a switch being turned on, sometimes it is a gradual growing awareness that I have been invited and find myself in another space than where I usually reside. Sometimes it is overwhelming, which my body tends to downregulate by allowing tears to well up.

The collaborators' reliance on their somatic-intuitive impressions seems related to the fact that there was little agreement among them on who the most impressive or "the most exemplary exemplars" were among the interviewees. Interviewees that impressed some of the collaborators did not impress at all or were even unappealing to others. Orit, one of the collaborators, commented that "In the group discussion it was interesting for me to see... the very different reactions some of us had to the same exemplar, and that how someone would be

drawn to or repelled by an exemplar had to do with differences in our personalities.” The combination of these two findings – that the collaborators relied mainly on their somatic-intuitive impressions and that there was diversity among them in choosing “the most exemplary exemplars” – suggests that the collaborators’ impressions were significantly determined by their personal characteristics.

Self-Reflection and Insight: "I have found greater understanding and acceptance of who I am."

All the collaborators indicated that they found the process insightful and transformative. For example, Kendrick said: "I was challenged, evolved and transformed through this process. I feel I have gained greater awareness, deeper insight, sharper intellect, deeper practice and a more solid footing on my spiritual path." Angelique said that "During the process, two things stood out for me. One was how to live life more fully and the other was how to be less engaged in drama in my life. Pondering these really helped me to deepen my understanding." For Orit, participation in the process helped clarify a question, that she had been carrying for many years. She said:

I've had unity consciousness experiences before, but they scared me. Something in me would say, "How am I going to live with my family and keep doing my art if I'm without boundaries?" And that would take me away from there. Hearing some of the exemplars assured me that it was possible. That I'm not going to lose who I am on this physical plane. I will remain who I am but with an expanded consciousness. That was a gift for me. It opened the path to go forward without fear.

Fred told how the process helped him better understand his own life story and unify disparate aspects of his life:

It was significant hearing that many of these exemplars experienced the mystery from very young ages... It enabled me to contextualize my own experience as a young child, having these out-of-the-blue experiences where I would just be overcome with the sense

of eternity and tears would come to my eyes. I didn't know how to deal with it at six or seven years old, when all my peers were rough and tumbling on the playground and I was feeling this love for the universe. To just hear so many others who've had similar experiences gave me a sense of "this is really important for us to be out there with these narratives, that don't make a lot of sense in the context of secular culture. This is important for us culturally to have a place for the 'freaks,' in a positive sense. To have this be a recognized human phenomenon." And that gave me a little more courage to get out there myself and not be so secretive about my life. I mean, I'm an attorney and a mediator and I've been living a life of spiritual pursuit and practice, and I've always been keeping them separate. So by watching these exemplars and reflecting on how important it is that they're out there, I felt like I also needed to come out a little more. So after years I finally consented to do an interview about my life with an organization of mediators that I'm part of, and felt so liberated. It just came out and in it I speak about synthesizing disparate interests. Maybe this will have significance also for others.

In an unsolicited email from Burt, which he sent me four months after the last group meetings, he wrote:

What I want to express is how much of a profound effect participating in the research has had and how it changed in many ways the very core of who I am, how I see the world and my experience in it. I have found greater understanding and acceptance of who I am, and after this research experience I more readily see the good in others and feel more compassion for others than I ever have. I've never felt more prepared to go back to being a therapist. It's hard to put into words the profundity of this whole thing.

Most of the collaborators' descriptions of this effect suggested that they attributed it to the overall, cumulative effect of engaging with a large number of spiritual exemplars over several months, rather than to the effect of any specific exemplar. While none of them attributed it to the

multi-modal study design alone, some indicated that this design deepened and amplified the effect of their engagement with the exemplars.

Opening and Broadening: "I learned to appreciate the differences."

The collaborators engaged in self-reflection, reinforced by their engagement with the exemplars and their peers, throughout the process. To some of them, this self-reflection revealed that their preconceptions were getting in their way of opening themselves up to the exemplars and "meeting" them directly. For example, Nazim said:

What I kept finding was my own frame of reference when I'm listening to someone. So I got a little worried that I wasn't able to really do justice to whoever these people were, because I was always seeing them through my own reference and my past experience. It was quite challenging, to be honest. I could see that was a very strong drive, and that it was limiting me.

For Fred, the combined effect of self-reflection and the engagement with the different exemplars produced a process of opening and deepening, described by him as follows:

When I was first viewing the exemplars I was coming from – as it seems to me now – a more fragmented place in myself. And as I learned more about the individual expressions of different exemplars, my judgments in certain ways softened or my preconceptions dissolved. And that had an effect on me of like seeing through a different lens and having a more spacious appreciation for the infinite expressions of spirit that can come through the human being... The diversity of experiences and expressions of that which is beyond the mind has broadened and deepened my experience and has given rise to a sense of wonder... It's not intellectual, because intellectually I'd known that, but it was really an extraordinary experience. It gives a sense of humility and wonder about what it means to be an awakened human being.

Some of the collaborators related to how their engagement with the different conceptual and experiential frameworks, embodied and transmitted by the different exemplars, affected them.

For example, Annalie said: "I learned to appreciate the differences. We all know that there are many paths to the mountaintop, but to get to walk with these different people and experience through them the truth of that made it an actual experience." Yvie said: "With some exemplars I had a feeling of 'I recognize this,' with others I felt 'this is interesting, let me check this.' This had an effect of expansion on me, it widened the range of possibilities of how spirit can manifest."

In addition to engaging with the different frameworks, embodied and transmitted by the different interviewees, the collaborators were also exposed to the different perspectives, embodied by their peers. Angelique, for example, said the following about the way that the group exploration enriched her learning experience:

Being part of this group has enriched my understandings by listening to you all. I really appreciated how we each have been able to be authentic in our participation. I never felt anybody had to compromise anything about their understanding or impressions of an exemplar. And I have learned from listening to you all. I think that together we did something that added to the richness and wealth that was brought by each of the exemplars.

Referring to her experience of the group meetings, Peggie said:

I think that what we're doing as a group has a great value. Because as a group, we are all transcending our self and trying to enable a form of collaboration, of sharing, of openness... Obviously, it derives from a deep sense of interest, commitment, and different understandings and realizations that we all have, different life experiences we all have... None of us is able to comprehend the whole thing from A to Z, but the more we open to other experiences and minds, the better the understanding.

The descriptions of this effect by many of the collaborators indicate that they not only accepted that there are different prisms and perspectives but more importantly, found it conducive to their own opening and broadening and appreciated this effect on them. It seems that the effect was

self-induced – the collaborators enabled it by engaging in self-reflection while opening themselves up to the exemplars and their peers – as well as transformative.

Fostering Spiritual Self-Reliance: "Stop looking without and to start going deep within."

Another effect of the process on collaborators was the fostering and cultivation of greater self-reliance, independence and trust in their own ability to guide themselves on their spiritual paths. For example, Orit said: "This process brought me to a deep understanding and acceptance that my way is *my* way and that's it. It's a path that is specific, individualistic and important for me. And accepting it is a big deal." Annalie indicated that her engagement with the spiritual exemplars helped her acknowledge, appreciate and honor experiences she had had in her life, and said: "I took something of value from each exemplar, but I think that the change in me is more about trusting myself and respecting my experiences, not comparing them with anyone else's. That was the most important thing that I learned and that I value a lot."

Some of the collaborators indicated that this effect on them was produced by their engagement with a large number of exemplars. Nazim, for example, said: "we experienced so many exemplars that are all completely different, but the one thing that unites them is their authenticity to themselves. This gives you more courage to live from your own experience." Kendrick referred to why he thought that the effect of engaging with a large number of exemplars was significantly different from the effect of engaging with just one exemplar:

These are the things you normally get from your teacher, and it really helped me that it came from twenty different directions or through twenty different prisms. This makes it a very different experience because with one teacher you only get one prism, only their experience. And going through this process and seeing people from all these different traditions showed me that we each have to find our own portal and we have to find our own path that's unique to us.

Peggie, who had studied and practiced different religious-spiritual traditions, indicated that her engagement with a large number of exemplars had a dramatic effect on her:

As a result of this intensive journey, meeting so many people, I realized that there were countless pointers. And a sense of discomfort started brewing in me, that is related to this enormous variety. It comes out of an understanding, that I can spend my entire life examining fingers pointing at the moon. Each of these fingers deserves attention, but my discomfort says, "but how many more fingers am I going to look at until I make it to the moon? When will the shift occur – the shift of stopping to look at fingers? When will I realize that, as impressive a finger may be, it is not the moon?" And as a result, I decided to leave it all – to stop reading spiritual books, to stop doing all the practices I've been doing, simply to stop! And turn inwards. To stop looking without and to start going deep within – without structures, without guidance, without props. Just me as I am – and find out what happens when I let go of all that. So I bought a piece of land far away from everything and I'm going to spend time there on retreat, without any plans, and just see what happens.

It seems that, as with the other two effects of self-reflection and insight and of opening and broadening, also the fostering of spiritual self-reliance was produced by the collaborators' engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars, amplified by their holistic experience. While engagement with a single spiritual exemplar is often associated with projection of perfection on the exemplar, imitation and dependency (Freimann 2018), engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars appears to be associated with the opposite effect. The reason for this may be that, when someone engages with a single spiritual exemplar, it is difficult for them to distinguish between the spiritual essence that the exemplar embodies and exemplifies and the exemplar's personal attributes (ibid). Engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars, on the other hand, enabled the collaborators to make such a distinction and distill the spiritual essence from the exemplars' different personalities and cultural and traditional conditionings.

Discussion

The effects of exemplars in general and of spiritual exemplars in particular on others, and the ways in which such effects are produced, have so far been studied only on people who engaged with their self-chosen exemplar or a few exemplars at most. The question of what happens to people as they are exposed to a large number of individuals, nominated by others as exemplars of a specific virtue or construct, has not been studied to date. In this paper we attempt to fill this lacuna by exploring what happens to researchers interested in spirituality as they engage with a large number of spiritual exemplars.

Our analysis of the transcripts of the collaborators' individual interviews and of the last collaborator group meetings, in light of this question, revealed the themes of the *Findings* section: *Holistic Inquiry Process, Choosing "The Most Exemplary Exemplars," Self-Reflection and Insight, Opening and Broadening and Fostering Spiritual Self-Reliance*. In further reflection on these themes, we found that the self-transformation, that many of the collaborators attested to, the conditions which contributed to it, and the nature of spiritual exemplarity, merited further elaboration and elucidation. Here we will discuss these and their possible implications for further research and application.

Self-Transformative Effect

Participation in the research process had significant and even transformative effects on many of the collaborators. One effect that many of the collaborators described (under *Self-Reflection and Insight*) was that of gaining insights about themselves, their life story, issues and unresolved questions they had been struggling with. This effect brings to mind Moustakas' (Moustakas, 1990) characterization of heuristic processes as processes in which "while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge" (p. 9). Another effect (described under *Opening and Broadening*) was that of seeing through existing limiting or rigid preconceived ideas and

judgements and “widen[ing] the range of possibilities of how spirit can manifest” by opening themselves up to the different exemplars. Yet another effect (described under *Fostering Spiritual Self-Reliance*) was the fostering and cultivation of greater trust of the collaborators in their individuality and of self-reliance on their ability to independently navigate their unique spiritual paths.

The effects can be regarded as self-transformative, in the sense that they were induced by the collaborators’ interest in and willingness to open themselves up to the spiritual exemplars they engaged with, and that they involved transformation of the collaborators’ “self.” The “self” that we refer to here as the subject of transformation is “the set of a person’s core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals: the characteristics that are most central to him or her” (Kristjánsson 2010: 5). Considering the high bar set for participation as a collaborator in the research (a commitment to six hours a week for several months), it can be assumed that spirituality was among the characteristics most central to the collaborators. The term “religious self”, defined as “a self which is focused on her own transformation in order to become a perfected version of herself” (Harrison and Gayle 2020: 2), may be replaced, in the context of this study, with “spiritual self.” As spiritual selves, the collaborators sought and induced their own self-transformation by joining this study and by forming and participating in the process of the study.

Contributing Conditions

As suggested above, one factor that seemed to contribute to the self-transformative effect of the collaborators’ participation in the process is their affinity to and personal interest in the research subject. These match Moustakas’ (Moustakas, 1990) words, that “The heuristic researcher is not only intimately and autobiographically related to the question but learns to love the question” (p. 43). The high bar, set for participation as a collaborator in the research, ensured that only people with a strong personal interest in spiritual development and therefore in the subject of spiritual exemplars would join the collaborators’ group. Their personal interest

also made them likely to resonate with and be impacted by the exemplars' descriptions of their experiences, which Anderson and Braud (2011b) suggested made them ideal candidates for this kind of research.

Another factor is the research method, which invited the collaborators "to engage in a greater variety of ways of knowing than usually is the case" (Anderson and Braud 2011b: xvii). In this study, the collaborators participated in a relatively extended, multi-modal process of inquiry. They used their cognitive-analytical faculties for analyzing the interview transcripts, their embodied felt-sense (E. T. Gendlin, 1981) for sensing their impressions of each exemplar, their contemplative-reflective ability for describing these in writing and speech and their interpersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1983) in the group meetings. Although in the individual interviews and the last group meetings, the collaborators mainly described their embodied-intuitive experience and hardly referred to the analytical-cognitive aspect of their engagement with the exemplars, we believe that this aspect was instrumental in the process. The fact that they were taking part in academic research, which required diligence (and time) in coding the transcripts of the exemplars' interviews and analyzing their qualities as spiritual exemplars, contributed to their engagement with the exemplars. The different items in the form, that they filled out for each exemplar (Table 1), required that they use all their faculties in conjunction with each other, and some of them described that they watched the video recordings of the interviews and coded their transcripts simultaneously. The process may be defined, therefore, as a multi-modal-turned-holistic process, where modality refers to "the way in which something happens or is experienced" (Baltrusaitis, Ahuja, and Morency 2019: 423), and holistic means "relating to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems" (Merriam-Webster Online, n.d.).

The collaborators were also given relative freedom in choosing their preferred ways of engaging with the study materials, which allowed them to gravitate toward holistic engagement, which also produced the greatest impact on them. It seems that such a multi-modal and holistic

process of inquiry is more likely to have an impact on researchers than processes involving only one or two modes of engagement with the subject.

Yet another factor is the invitation to the collaborators to reflect on their embodied and felt impressions of the exemplars and to express them in writing and speech. As pointed out by Etherington (2020), reflexivity "opens up a space between subjectivity and objectivity where the distinctions between content and process become blurred" (p. 78).

Spiritual Exemplarity

The effects of the process on the collaborators may also be attributed to, and therefore indicative of, unique characteristics of spiritual exemplarity. The effect described under *Self-Reflection and Insight* may suggest that spiritual exemplars are reflective and insightful, and that engagement with them inspired the same. The effect of *Opening and Broadening* was suggested by some collaborators to be a result of their engagement with different "expressions of spirit," embodied and transmitted by different exemplars. And the effect of *Fostering Spiritual Self-Reliance* may suggest that spiritual exemplarity is characterized by independence, self-reliance and "authenticity to oneself."

These effects were attributed by the collaborators mainly to their engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars. This observation is supported by the fact (described under *Choosing the Most Exemplary Exemplars*), that different collaborators resonated to different degrees with different exemplars. It seems that, in choosing their "most exemplary exemplars," the collaborators relied mainly on what can be called "sympathetic resonance" (Anderson 1998b, 2019b). "Sympathetic resonance" is a psychological principle akin to the physical resonance principle. Its essential feature is that if two structures are very similar in nature, such as two similar guitars, the activation of one will be mirrored in the other. Likewise, if certain characteristics or experiences of a person also apply to another person, the latter would resonate with or mirror the former's description of their experience. In this study, different collaborators resonated, did not resonate or anti-resonated with different exemplars,

presumably in the same way that differently calibrated guitars respond differently to the same guitar.

This diversity among the collaborators suggests that “spiritual exemplarity” is a relational construct, dependent on a “sympathetic resonance” between an exemplar and the collaborators impacted by him or her. It is also possible that, just like “[t]he effects of moral exemplars on observers may differ according to their stage of moral development” (Moberg 2000: 684), each collaborator’s resonance with different exemplars depended on their psychological and spiritual profile or stage of development or maturity.

Future Research and Application

The question of whether or to what extent the above effects are attributable to the relatively extended, multi-modal and holistic process of inquiry or to the unique characteristics of spiritual exemplarity cannot be answered based on this study alone. Additional studies, in which the same or a similar method will be applied to other types of exemplarities, may help to clarify this point. For example, research collaborators could engage with a large number of moral, courage or wisdom exemplars (who are, as posited by Bronk, King and Matsuba (2013), likely to be “typical or even deficient” with regards to other virtues). If it turns out that such engagement yields different effects than in this study, this would suggest that the above effects are, indeed, attributable specifically to spiritual exemplarity and indicative of its characteristics.

The effects are likely to vary also with different backgrounds of the collaborators. In this study, the collaborators were affiliated mainly with Western culture, and all identified as more spiritual than religious. The effects may be different with groups of collaborators that are more diversified in terms of cultural backgrounds and degrees of affiliation with religious traditions, or with homogenous groups consisting of practitioners of a specific religion, such as students in Christian, Muslim seminaries, Rabbinical colleges or schools for Buddhist, Hindu or Daoist priests.

Exposure of students or graduates of such religious institutions, as well as college and university students of philosophy, theology, religious studies, comparative religion, psychology and anthropology of religion and spirituality, to a large number of spiritual exemplars of different traditions, may also be a way of facilitating inter-religious dialogue. The theoretical foundation for such application had already been laid out by Harrison (2020; 2011) in her method of “exemplar reasoning.” Exemplar reasoning is a method of thinking with others, who possess different religious, moral or political commitments, about our and their exemplars. It is based on the understanding that interpersonal and intercultural understanding can be better cultivated by focusing on exemplary persons and their experience rather than on abstract ideological, philosophical or religious ideas (ibid). Harrison applied this method as a tool for inter-religious dialogue in one or a few inter-religious meetings. The method used in this study and variations thereof can be applied for a more extended, multi-modal and holistic process, which may yield more profound and lasting effects on its participants.

The principles of this method can be applied, however, also in various other contexts and for other purposes than the facilitation of inter-religious dialogue. As suggested by Harrison and Gayle (2020: 13), reflection upon exemplars can help a person “to bridge the gap between the actual self as it is in the present and the ideal self... [and] provide cognitive access to a conception of an ideal future self that is adequate to act upon.” Self-transformative effects such as those described by the research collaborators, of self-reflection and insight, opening and broadening, and fostering of spiritual self-reliance, are desirable psychological, moral and existential effects in general. The study suggests that such effects are likely to be achieved by holistic processes of engagement with different types of virtue exemplars.

Bibliography

Abo-Zena, M. M., & King, P. E. (2021). Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Case Studies of Spiritual Exemplars. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211020262>

- Anderson, R. (1998a). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69–94). SAGE Publications.
- Anderson, R. (1998b). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69–94). SAGE Publications.
- Anderson, R. (2018). *Toward a Sacred Science — Reflecting Forward*. 46(1), 1–5.
- Anderson, R. (2019a). Intuitive inquiry: Inviting transformation and breakthrough insights in qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 6(3), 312–319. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000144>
- Anderson, R. (2019b). Intuitive inquiry: Inviting transformation and breakthrough insights in qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 6(3), 312–319. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000144>
- Anderson, R. (2020). Transformative research methods: Research to nourish the spirit. *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 10(1), 95–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2020.1726056>
- Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011a). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. State University of New York Press.
- Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011b). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. State University of New York Press.
- Aristotle. (1962). *Nicomachean Ethics (Translated by Martin Ostwald)*. The Library of Liberal Arts.
- Babbie, E. R. (1995). *The practice of social research* (7th ed.). Wadsworth.
- Baltrusaitis, T., Ahuja, C., & Morency, L. P. (2019). Multimodal Machine Learning: A Survey and Taxonomy. In *IEEE Transactions on Pattern Analysis and Machine Intelligence* (Vol. 41, Issue 2, pp. 423–443). IEEE Computer Society. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TPAMI.2018.2798607>
- Bandura, A. (1986a). *Social Foundation of Thought and Action*. Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1986b). *Social Foundation of Thought and Action*. Prentice Hall.
- Barber, C. (2019). Working within a spiritual framework. *British Journal of Nursing*, 28(4), 229–229. <https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2019.28.4.229>
- Becker, S. W., & Eagly, A. H. (2004). The heroism of women and men. *American Psychologist*, 59(3), 163–178.
- Benson, P. L., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Rude, S. P. (2003). Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence: Toward a Field of Inquiry. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(3), 205–213. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_12
- Bojerud, E., Younadam, R., & Čehajić-Clancy, S. (2023). Testing a moral exemplar intervention in a non-conflict context: The effects of moral exemplars on key dimensions of outgroup evaluations. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 41(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21403>

- Böwering, G. (1988). Baqā' wa fanā'. In E. Yarshater (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bravo, A. J., Pearson, M. R., Wilson, A. D., & Witkiewitz, K. (2018). When Traits Match States: Examining the Associations Between Self-Report Trait and State Mindfulness Following a State Mindfulness Induction. *Mindfulness*, 9(1), 199–211. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0763-5>
- Bronk, K. C. (2012a). The exemplar methodology: An approach to studying the leading edge of development. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2211-1522-2-5>
- Bronk, K. C. (2012b). The exemplar methodology: An approach to studying the leading edge of development. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2211-1522-2-5>
- Bronk, K. C., King, P. E., & Matsuba, M. K. (2013a). An Introduction to Exemplar Research: A Definition, Rationale, and Conceptual Issues. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2013(142), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20045>
- Bronk, K. C., King, P. E., & Matsuba, M. K. (2013b). An introduction to exemplar research: A definition, rationale, and conceptual issues. In M. K. Matsuba, P. E. King, & K. C. Bronk (Eds.), *Exemplar Methods and Research: Strategies for Investigation* (Vol. 142, pp. 1–12). New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development.
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4), 822–848. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822>
- Bucke, R. M. (1901). *Cosmic consciousness: A study in the evolution of the human mind*. Innes & Sons.
- Burridge, R. A. (2007). *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Chidananda, S. S. (1984). *The philosophy, psychology, and practice of yoga*. Divine Life Society.
- Chiu, L., Emblen, J. D., Van Hofwegen, L., Sawatzky, R., & Meyerhoff, H. (2004). An Integrative Review of the Concept of Spirituality in the Health Sciences. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 26(4), 405–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193945904263411>
- Churchill, S. D., & Wertz, F. J. (2015). An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations. In K. J. Schneider, J. F. Pierson, & J. F. T. Bugental (Eds.), *An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations* (2nd ed., pp. 275–295). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Clements, J. (2004a). Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 26–49.
- Clements, J. (2004b). Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 26–49.
- Clements, J. (2011). Organic inquiry: Research in partnership with spirit. In R. Anderson & W. Braud (Eds.), *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research*

- methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities* (pp. 131–166). State University of New York Press.
- Cohn, R. L. (1987). Sainthood on the Periphery: The Case of Judaism. In J. S. Hawley (Ed.), *Saints and Virtues*. University of California.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992a). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. The Free Press.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992b). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. The Free Press.
- Cornish, F., Gillespie, A., & Tania, Z. (2014). Collaborative Analysis of Qualitative Data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>
- Costeines, M. (2009a). *What Enlightenment Means: A Qualitative Study of Nondual Consciousness As Experienced by Teachers of Nondual Mysticism*.
- Costeines, M. (2009b). *What Enlightenment Means: A Qualitative Study of Nondual Consciousness As Experienced by Teachers of Nondual Mysticism*.
- Croce, M., & Silvia Vaccarezza, M. (2017). Educating through exemplars: Alternative paths to virtue. *Theory and Research in Education*, 15(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878517695903>
- Custer, D. (2014). Auto/ethnography as a transformative research method. *The Qualitative Report*, 19((How To 21)), 1–13.
- Damon, W., & Colby, A. (2013). Why a true account of human development requires exemplar research. In M. K. Matsuba, P. E. King, & K. C. Bronk (Eds.), *Exemplar Methods and Research: Strategies for Investigation* (pp. 13–26). Jossey-Bass.
- Davidson, L. (2000). Philosophical foundations of humanistic psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 28(1–3), 7–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2000.9976979>
- Dawson, A. (2006). East is East, Except When It's West: The Easternization Thesis and the Western Habitus. *Journal of Religion & Society*, 8, 1–13.
- de Brito Sena, M. A., Damiano, R. F., Lucchetti, G., & Peres, M. F. P. (2021). Defining Spirituality in Healthcare: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Framework. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.756080>
- Djuraskovic, I., & Arthur, N. (2010). Heuristic inquiry: A personal journey of acculturation and identity reconstruction. *Qualitative Report*, 15(6), 1569–1593. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2010.1361>
- Dōgen, Leighton, T. D., & Okumura, S. (1996a). *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the Eihei Shingi*. State University of New York Press.
- Dōgen, Leighton, T. D., & Okumura, S. (1996b). *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the Eihei Shingi*. State University of New York Press.
- Dorjee, D. (2016). Defining Contemplative Science: The Metacognitive Self-Regulatory Capacity of the Mind, Context of Meditation Practice and Modes of Existential Awareness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01788>

- Dunlop, W. L., Walker, L. J., & Matsuba, M. K. (2012). The distinctive moral personality of care exemplars. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7(2), 131–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2012.662994>
- Etherington, K. (2020). Becoming a Narrative Inquirer. In S. Bager-Charleson & A. McBeath (Eds.), *Enjoying Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (pp. 71–93). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55127-8_5
- Ferrer, J. N., & Tarnas, R. (2002). *Revisioning transpersonal theory : a participatory vision of human spirituality*. State University of New York Press.
- Fire, M. (2010a). *Exploring the felt experience of nondual consciousness*. California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Fire, M. (2010b). *Exploring the felt experience of nondual consciousness*. California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Flores, R. (2009). *Buddhist scriptures as literature: Sacred rhetoric and the uses of theory*. SUNY Press.
- Forman, R. K. C. (1999). *Mysticism, mind, consciousness*. State University of New York Press.
- Freimann, A. (2018). *Spiritual Transmission: Paradoxes and Dilemmas on the Spiritual Path*. Monkfish Book Publishing Company.
- Freimann, A., & Mayseless, O. (n.d.). *Surrender to Another Person: The Case of a Spiritual Master*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820975636>
- Friedman, H., Krippner, S., Riebel, L., & Johnson, C. (2010). Transpersonal and Other Models of Spiritual Development. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 29(1), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190905538.001.0001>
- Gall, T. L., Malette, J., & Guirguis-Younger, M. (2011). Spirituality and Religiousness: A Diversity of Definitions. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 13(3), 158–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2011.593404>
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Basic Books.
- Gendlin, E. (1962). *Experiencing and the creation of meaning*. University Press. https://scholar.google.co.il/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Experiencing+and+the+creation+of+meaning.+Evanston%3A+Northwestern+University+Press&btnG=
- Gendlin, E. T. (1981). *Focusing*. Bantam Books.
- Gillespie, A., & Richardson, B. (2011). Exchanging social positions: enhancing perspective taking within a cooperative problem solving task. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41(5), 608–616.
- Giorgi, A. (1997). The Theory, Practice, and Evaluation of the Phenomenological Method as a Qualitative Research Procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 28(2), 235–260. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916297X00103>
- Gleig, A. L. (2010). *Enlightenment after the enlightenment: American transformations of Asian contemplative traditions*. Rice University.
- Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. C. (1984). *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. Academic Press Inc.

- Goleman, D., Smith, H., & Ram Dass. (1985). Truth and Transformation in Psychological and Spiritual Paths. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 17(2), 183–214.
- Göpel, M. (2016). *The Great Mindshift* (Vol. 2). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43766-8>
- Goshen-Gottstein, A. (2017). Religious genius: Appreciating inspiring individuals across traditions. *Religious Genius: Appreciating Inspiring Individuals Across Traditions*, 1–196. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55514-0>
- Greeley, A. (1974). *Ecstasy: A way of knowing*. Prentice Hall.
- Gruel, N. (2015). The plateau experience: An exploration of its origins, characteristics, and potential. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 47(1), 44–63.
- Haidt, J. (2013). Moral psychology for the twenty-first century. *Journal of Moral Education*, 42(3), 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2013.817327>
- Hamel, S., Leclerc, G., & Lefrançois, R. (2003). A psychological outlook on the concept of transcendent actualization. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(1), 3–15.
- Han, H., & Dawson, K. J. (2023). Relatable and attainable moral exemplars as sources for moral elevation and pleasantness. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2173158>
- Harrison, V. S. (2011). Embodied values and muslim-christian dialogue: 'Exemplar reasoning' as a model for interreligious conversations. *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 21(1), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.2143/SID.21.1.2129547>
- Harrison, V. S. (2020). "Exemplar Reasoning" as a Tool for Constructive Conversation between Confucians and Catholics. In *Confucianism and Catholicism* (pp. 172–189). University of Notre Dame Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19m643m.12>
- Harrison, V. S., & Gayle, R. (2020a). Self-transformation and Spiritual Exemplars. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 12(4), 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v12i4.3520>
- Harrison, V. S., & Gayle, R. (2020b). Self-Transformation and Spiritual Exemplars. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 12(4), 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.24204/EJPR.V12I4.3520>
- Harvey, P. (1990). *An introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, history and practices*. Cambridge University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Eds.). Blackwell.
- Hennink, M. M., & Leavy, P. (2014). *Understanding Focus Group Discussions*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199856169.001.0001>
- Hick, J. (1988). Religious pluralism and salvation. *Faith and Philosophy*, 5(4), 365–377.
- Hill, P. C., & Pargament, K. I. (2003). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health research. *American Psychologist*, 58(1), 64–74. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.64>
- Hood, R. W. (1975). The construction and preliminary validation of a measure of reported mystical experience. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14(1), 29–41.

- Hu, D., Gu, Q., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Role modeling effects: how leader's job involvement affects follower creativity. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 61(1), 101–123. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1744-7941.12332>
- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology* (Vol. 2). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Huxley, A. (1945). *The perennial philosophy*. Harper & Row.
- James, W. (1958). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Mentor.
- Jiyu-Kennett, H. (2005). *Roar of the tigress, An introduction to Zen: Religious practice for everyday life* (D. Rev. MacPhillamy, Ed.; Vol. 1). Shasta Abbey Press.
- Johnstone, B., Hanks, R., Bhushan, B., Cohen, D., Roseberry, J., & Yoon, D. P. (2017). Selflessness as a universal neuropsychological foundation of spiritual transcendence: validation with Christian, Hindu, and Muslim traditions. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 20(2), 175–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2017.1333090>
- Kilrea, K. A. (2013a). *The everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment*. Sofia University.
- Kilrea, K. A. (2013b). *The everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment* [Doctoral Dissertation]. Sofia University.
- King, P. E., Abo-Zena, M. M., & Weber, J. D. (2017). Varieties of social experience: The religious cultural context of diverse spiritual exemplars. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 35(1), 127–141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12181>
- King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014a). Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(2), 186–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413502534>
- King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014b). Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(2), 186–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413502534>
- King, P. E., Mueller, R. A. O., & Furrow, J. (2013). Cultural and Contextual Issues in Exemplar Research. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2013(142), 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20048>
- Koch, T., & Harrington, A. (1998). Reconceptualizing rigour: the case for reflexivity. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(4), 882–890.
- Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M. E., & Larson, D. B. (2001). *Handbook of Religion and Health* (H. G. Koenig, M. E. McCullough, & D. B. Larson, Eds.; 1st ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Kourie, C. (2016). The Way of the Mystic: The Sanjuanist stages of the spiritual path. *HTS Theological Studies*, 72(4), 1–11.
- Krippner, S. (1972). The plateau experience: A. H. Maslow and others. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 4(2), 107–120.
- Kristjánsson, K. (2010). *The self and its emotions*. Cambridge University Press.

- Kuntz, A. F. (2016). Exemplary Exemplar Research : Three Approaches to Studying Moral Excellence. *PsyArXiv Preprints*, May, 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4537.4329>
- Kuzel, A. J. (1992). Sampling in qualitative inquiry. In B. F. Crabtree & W. L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research. Research Methods for Primary Care* (p. Vol. 3, 31-44). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Levin, J., & Steele, L. (2005). The transcendent experience: Conceptual, theoretical, and epidemiologic perspectives. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 1(2), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2004.12.002>
- Leys, S. (translator). (1997). *The Analects of Confucius*. W.W. Norton and Co.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Long, J. (2000). Spirituality and the Idea of Transcendence. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 5(2), 147–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713670913>
- Maslow, A. H. (1962a). Lessons from the Peak-Experiences. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 2(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216786200200102>
- Maslow, A. H. (1962b). Lessons from the Peak-Experiences. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 2(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216786200200102>
- Maslow, A. H. (1964). *Religions, values, and peak experiences*. Ohio State University Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1969a). The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. In *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–9).
- Maslow, A. H. (1969b). The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. In *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–9).
- Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The farther reaches of the human nature*. The Viking Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1973). *The farther reaches of the human nature*. Penguin Books.
- Matsuba, M. K., & Walker, L. J. (2004). Extraordinary Moral Commitment: Young Adults Involved in Social Organizations. *Journal of Personality*, 72(2), 413–436. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00267.x>
- Matsuba, M. K., & Walker, L. J. (2005). Young adult moral exemplars: The making of self through stories. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 15(3), 275–297. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2005.00097.x>
- Mertens, D. M. (2017). Transformative research: personal and societal. *International Journal for Transformative Research*, 4(1), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijtr-2017-0001>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Moberg, D. J. (2000). Role Models and Moral Exemplars: How do Employees Acquire Virtues by Observing Others? *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 10(3), 675–696. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3857898>
- Moloney, S. (2011). Focus Groups as Transformative Spiritual Encounters. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10(1), 58–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000105>

- Moran-Ellis, J., Alexander, V. D., Cronin, A., Dickinson, M., Fielding, J., Sleney, J., & Thomas, H. (2006). Triangulation and integration: processes, claims and implications. *Qualitative Research*, 6(1), 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106058870>
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: design, methodology, and applications*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995641>
- Murata, K. (2018). Fana and Baqa. In *Oxford Bibliographies*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195390155-0256>
- Nagle, C. (2004a). *Experience of self in advanced yogis: A preliminary verification of Upanishadic theory*. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.
- Nagle, C. (2004b). *Experience of self in advanced yogis: A preliminary verification of Upanishadic theory*. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.
- Niemiec, R. M., Russo-Netzer, P., & Pargament, K. I. (2020). The Decoding of the Human Spirit: A Synergy of Spirituality and Character Strengths Toward Wholeness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02040>
- Nyumba, T. O., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). *The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12860>
- Olberding, A. (2012). *Moral exemplars in the Analects: The good person is that*. Routledge.
- Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. (1988a). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. Free Press.
- Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. (1988b). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. Free Press.
- Oman, D. (2013). Spiritual modeling and the social learning of spirituality and religion. In K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, & J. W. Jones (Eds.), *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality: Context, theory, and research* (1st ed., pp. 187–204). American Psychological Association.
- Oman, D., Flinders, T., & Thoresen, C. E. (2008). Integrating spiritual modeling into education: A college course for stress management and spiritual growth. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 18(2), 79–107.
- Oman, D., Shapiro, S. L., Thoresen, C. E., Flinders, T., Driskill, J. D., & Plante, T. G. (2007). Learning from Spiritual Models and Meditation: A Randomized Evaluation of a College Course. *Pastoral Psychology*, 55(4), 473–493. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-006-0062-x>
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003a). Authors' response: "The many frontiers of spiritual modeling." *International Journal of Phytoremediation*, 21(1), 197–213. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_04
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003b). INVITED ESSAY: "Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?" *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(3), 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_01
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003c). Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth? *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(3), 149–165. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_01

- Oman, D., Thoresen, C. E., Park, C. L., Shaver, P. R., Hood, R. W., & Plante, T. G. (2009). How does one become spiritual? The Spiritual Modeling Inventory of Life Environments (SMILE). *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 12(5), 427–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670902758257>
- Orchard, T. (2017). To Change and Be Changed: Transformative Research Experiences. In *Remembering the body: Ethical issues in body mapping research* (pp. 65–83). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49861-4_4
- Osborne, A. (1966a). Excerpt of a letter to the editor from Arthur Osborne. *The R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience Newsletter-Review*, 13–17.
- Osborne, A. (1966b). Excerpt of a letter to the editor from Arthur Osborne. *The R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience Newsletter-Review*, 13–17.
- Pahnke, W. N. (1963). *Drugs and mysticism: An analysis of the relationship between psychedelic drugs and the mystical consciousness*. Harvard University.
- Pargament, K. I. (2012). Searching for the sacred: Toward a nonreductionistic theory of spirituality. *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol 1): Context, Theory, and Research.*, 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14045-014>
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative Research and Education Methods (2nd ed.)*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Perrin, D. B. (2007). *Studying Christian spirituality*. Routledge.
- Piaget, J. (1970a). *Structuralism*. Harper & Row.
- Piaget, J. (1970b). *Structuralism*. Harper & Row.
- Piedmont, R. L. (1999). Does spirituality represent the sixth factor of personality?: Spiritual transcendence and the five-factor model. *Journal of Personality*, 67(6), 985–1013.
- Piotrowski, J. P., Żemojtel-Piotrowska, M., Piedmont, R. L., & Baran, T. (2021). The Assessment of Spirituality and Religious Sentiments (ASPIRES) scale: Examining a spiritual transcendence nomological net in Polish context. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 13(1), 36–45. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000273>
- Ratcliffe, M. (2008). *Feelings of being: Phenomenology, psychiatry and the sense of reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2020). Existential Feelings. In T. Szanto & H. Landweer (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotion* (pp. 250–261). Routledge.
- Reason, P., & Torbert, W. (2001). The action turn: Toward a transformational social science. *Concepts and Transformation*, 6(1), 1–37.
- Richards, K. A. R., & Hemphill, M. A. (2018). A Practical Guide to Collaborative Qualitative Data Analysis. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 37(2), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2017-0084>
- Russo-Netzer, P. (2018). Spirituality. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development* (pp. 2127–2130). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Sass, L., & Ratcliffe, M. (2017). Atmosphere: On the Phenomenology of “Atmospheric” Alterations in Schizophrenia - Overall Sense of Reality, Familiarity, Vitality, Meaning, or

- Relevance (Ancillary Article to EAWE Domain 5). *Psychopathology*, 50(1), 90–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1159/000454884>
- Sayeed, A. (n.d.). Hadith. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- Scarlett, W. G. (2012). Spiritual exemplars: An introduction. *Religions*, 3(2), 183–190.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3020183>
- Scheler, M. (1987). Exemplars of Person and Leaders. In M. S. Frings (Ed.), *Person and Self-Value* (pp. 125–198). Nijhoff.
- Schneider, K. J. (2008). *Existential-integrative psychotherapy: Guideposts to the core of practice*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Schneiders, S. M. (2005). Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality. In A. Holder (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Christian Spirituality* (pp. 15–33). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sebastián, M. Á. (2012). Experiential Awareness: Do You Prefer “It” to “Me”? *Philosophical Topics*, 40(2), 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201240218>
- Seidlitz, L., Abernethy, A. D., Duberstein, P. R., Evinger, J. S., Chang, T. H., & Lewis, B. L. (2002). Development of the Spiritual Transcendence Index. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41(3), 439–453. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00129>
- Sela-Smith, S. (2002). Heuristic research: A review and critique of Moustakas’s method. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 42(3), 53–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167802423004>
- Sessanna, L., Finnell, D., & Jezewski, M. A. (2007). Spirituality in Nursing and Health-Related Literature. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 25(4), 252–262.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0898010107303890>
- Sharma, A., & Kennick, V. (Eds.). (2012). *Spiritual masters of the world’s religions*. State University of New York Press.
- Sohmer, O. R. (2020). The Experience of the Authentic Self: A Cooperative Inquiry. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820952339>
- Sperry, L. (2001). *Spirituality in clinical practice: Incorporating the spiritual dimension in psychotherapy and counseling*. Psychology Press.
- Stace, W. (1960). *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Macmillan).
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Tavel, P., Chrz, V., Poláčková Šolcová, I., Dubovská, E., & Kalman, M. (2022). Peak experience and its varieties: Response to challenge as a valuable perspective of peak experience and its varieties. *Ceskoslovenska Psychologie*, 66(2), 95–110.
<https://doi.org/10.51561/cspsych.66.2.95>
- Taylor, S. (2012). Spontaneous awakening experiences: Beyond religion and spiritual practice. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 44(1), 73–91.
- Taylor, S. (2013a). *A phenomenological investigation into the psychological transformation interpreted as “Spiritual Awakening”: possible causes, characteristics, and after-effects*. Liverpool John Moores University.

- Taylor, S. (2013b). *A phenomenological investigation into the psychological transformation interpreted as "Spiritual Awakening": possible causes, characteristics, and after-effects*. Liverpool John Moores University.
- Taylor, S. (2013c). Temporary and Permanent Awakening: The Primary and Secondary Shift. *Journal of Transpersonal Research*, 5(2), 41–48.
- Taylor, S., & Egeto-Szabo, K. (2017). Exploring Awakening Experiences: a Study of Awakening Experiences in Terms of Their Triggers, Characteristics, Duration and After-Effects. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 49(1), 45–65.
- Teilhard de Chardin, P. (1969). *Building the Earth and The Psychological Conditions of Human Unification* (Discus Edition). Avon.
- Underhill, E. (1911). *Mysticism: A study in nature and development of spiritual consciousness*. Methuen.
- van de Ven, N., Archer, A. T. M., & Engelen, B. (2019). More important and surprising actions of a moral exemplar trigger stronger admiration and inspiration. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 159(4), 383–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2018.1498317>
- Van Deurzen, E. (2010). *Everyday mysteries: A handbook of existential psychotherapy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. SUNY Press.
- Vos, P. H. (2018). Learning from exemplars: emulation, character formation and the complexities of ordinary life. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 39(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2017.1393295>
- Walker, L. J., & Frimer, J. A. (2010). Moral Personality Exemplified. *Personality, Identity, and Character*, 232–255. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511627125.011>
- White, J. (2005). Exemplary persons and ethics. The place of St. Francis in the philosophy of Max Scheler. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 79(1), 57–90.
- Yaden, D. B., Haidt, J., Hood, R. W., Vago, D. R., & Newberg, A. B. (2017). The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience. *Review of General Psychology*, 21(2), 143–160. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000102>
- Yaden, D. B., & Newberg, A. (2022). *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*. Oxford University Press New York. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190665678.001.0001>
- Zagzebski, L. (2010a). Exemplarist virtue theory. *Metaphilosophy*, 41, 41–57.
- Zagzebski, L. (2010b). Exemplarist virtue theory. *Metaphilosophy*, 41, 41–57.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015a). Admiration and the admirable. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 89, 205–221.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015b). Admiration and the admirable. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 89, 205–221.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015c). Exemplarism and admiration. In C. B. Miller, R. M. Furr, A. Knobel, & W. Fleeson (Eds.), *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.

- Zagzebski, L. (2015d). Exemplarism and admiration. In C. B. Miller, R. M. Furr, A. Knobel, & W. Fleeson (Eds.), *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2017a). *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2017b). *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Discussion

The present research seeks to shed light on a constant, stabilized spiritual “state of being,” considered in many religious traditions to be the vertex of spiritual development and the desideratum and holy grail of the “search for the sacred.” It does so by exploring it from two different angles: (1) the subjective experience of that state of being; and (2) the perception by and effect on others of individuals, who are perceived as exemplifying it. The former, termed here *Living Transcendence*, is an experiential or psychological phenomenon. It was explored by in-depth phenomenological interviews with spiritual exemplars. The latter, a relational or social phenomenon, was explored by studying the perception by others of spiritual exemplars – those perceived as exemplifying this state of being – and their effects on others.

The main questions that the research set out to explore were: How is *Living Transcendence* experienced by spiritual exemplars? How are spiritual exemplars perceived by and what are their effects on other people? These questions will first be explored, based on the findings of the three studies of this research. Based on that exploration, an additional question will be discussed: What is the relationship between the experience of *Living Transcendence* by spiritual exemplars and their perception by and effect on other people?

The experience of *Living Transcendence*

In Study 2 of this research, descriptions of experiences of *Living Transcendence*, provided by thirty-two spiritual exemplars were analyzed. Four qualities and two characteristics were identified in the interviewees' descriptions of their experience of *Living Transcendence*. The four qualities of that experience were *Noetic* (pre-conceptual, non-discursive, non-symbolic knowing / awareness / consciousness of ultimate reality or truth), *Affective* (supremely positive affective qualities of joy, happiness or bliss and love), *Embodied* (somatic and/or energetic presence or sense of a spiritual essence) and *Relational* (a sense of connectivity or “inter-being”

with everything, God or the Whole). The two characteristics identified were *Constancy* of the experience over time and a special kind of *Volitionality*: the will to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling."

Constancy over time of at least one of the experiential qualities of *Living Transcendence*, amid and through the fluctuations of normal life, was described by about two-thirds of the interviewees. Several of them indicated that some qualities of that experience remained constant and stable even through dramatic emotional, relational or health crises. The interviewees differed from each other, however, in terms of the qualities of *Living Transcendence* that they experienced as constant and those they experienced as fluctuating and unstable.

In addition to these qualities and their characteristic constancy, the experience of *Living Transcendence* is characterized by volitionality of an unusual kind: to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling". Many of the interviewees in this study described either surrender of their will or having a will to surrender to or be in service of a "calling" or a higher power, intelligence or Self. Their descriptions bring to mind two more of James' (1958) characteristics of saintliness: "a conviction... of the existence of an Ideal Power" and "a sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control" (p. 212).

In further consideration of the qualities of *Living Transcendence* and its characteristics of volitionality and constancy, an overarching characteristic of multifacetedness was identified. Multifacetedness of the experience of *Living Transcendence* is suggested by the fact that more than half of the interviewees in the study described four or more of the above qualities and characteristics of the experience of *Living Transcendence*. Some phrases that interviewees used (e.g., "self-awareness could just as well be called love-awareness" and "a whole-body knowing") suggested that, in their experience, the different qualities and characteristics were facets of one essence. While characterized by being multifaceted, the experience of *Living Transcendence* appeared to also be idiosyncratic and variable between individuals. Most

interviewees described or emphasized only some of its qualities, and among those who described all of them, one quality was usually more prominent than the others.

Of the four qualities of the experience of *Living Transcendence*, the *Noetic* quality, the *Affective* quality of joy, happiness or bliss and the *Relational* quality are shared with peak experiences of transcendence. This makes them related to each other and belonging to the same field or family. Nevertheless, the dramatic, intense or "climatic" (in Maslow's words [Krippner, 1972]) nature of peak experiences is contrasted by the subtlety and "atmospheric" (Sass & Ratcliffe, 2017) or "background"-like constancy of *Living Transcendence*. Another significant difference between *Living Transcendence* and peak experiences of transcendence can be seen between the will to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling," which appears to be a characteristic of *Living Transcendence*, and the "passivity" characteristic of peak experiences. This "passivity" of peak experiences was described by James (1958) as a sense that one's will "were in abeyance... as if he were grasped and held by a superior power" (p. 381). The experience of *Living Transcendence*, on the other hand, is characterized not by having one's will "in abeyance" but rather in service of, and not by being "grasped and held" but rather by being called, guided and directed by such a "superior power." The volitionality of *Living Transcendence* not only distinguishes it from the passivity of peak experiences, but also makes it a way of being in the world of time, space, choices and actions rather than an experience of being flung out of that world.

Spiritual exemplars' perception by and effect on other people

The findings of Study 1 brought to light the key role of subjective impression, relationality and felt impact in the recognition and perception of spiritual exemplars by those who regard them as such. The main bulk of the exemplars' descriptions consisted of subjective impressions of the exemplars' spiritual state (e.g., embodiment of spiritual essences, presence, knowing) and human nobility (e.g., goodness, humility, integrity) and testimonies of the direct, personal

impact that the exemplars had on the informant (e.g., inspiration, support, transformation facilitation). The subjective impressions were often charged with positive emotions and the testimonies of impact were often overflowing with rich and heartfelt expressions of the informants' positive relational feelings toward their exemplars. The importance of relationality in the recognition and perception of spiritual exemplars was also suggested by the fact that in half of the cases the informant indicated a close acquaintance with the exemplar.

The findings of Study 1 also underscore the exemplars' effects on the informants. Some of the exemplars' descriptions related to directly experienced *spiritual transmission* – a change in their own experience or state of consciousness, inspiration and upliftment. Others referred to facilitation of the informant's transformation and/or development by teaching, encouraging and supporting them in their spiritual process. Yet others referred to feelings that the informant had toward the exemplar, which included awe, admiration, gratitude and love.

Many of the exemplar descriptions included statements both about their spiritually elevated, transcendent or God/Self-realized state and about their human nobility or *menschlichkeit* (German/Yiddish: the quality of being a *mensch* – a person exemplifying the best of humanity). In other words, exemplars were often described as endowed with unusual clarity, presence, energy, intuition, and an ability to directly transmit those, while at the same time being humble, warm, humorous, accessible, generous and trustworthy. Through the eyes of many of the informants, spiritual exemplarity seems to be of an integrative-holistic nature, and a spiritual exemplar is one who exemplifies the unity of the transcendent (vertical axis) and the immanent (horizontal axis), the divine and the human, the sacred and the mundane.

This conclusion, about the integrative-holistic nature of spiritual exemplarity, stands in contrast to other perspectives regarding exemplars in general and moral exemplars in particular. For example, Bronk, King and Matsuba (2013) conclude in their *Introduction to Exemplar Research* that while exemplars' development is exemplary in at least one area, "it is likely to be typical or even deficient in other areas" (p. 3). This view resonates Colby and Damon's words of

caution: "In the moral area, as in any other, inflated expectations are bound to be disappointed before long... [D]eification of moral exemplars... sets the stage for the common myths and misconceptions that distort the exemplar's personal qualities, life history, and experience" (1992: 301-302).

The relatively high volume of the descriptions, provided by many of the informants, may be related to the multifacetedness and elusiveness, which were found to be salient features of spiritual exemplarity. Taken together, they may suggest that the informants tried to point at a profound and subtle, elusive and possibly indescribable essence. This brings to mind Scheler's (1987) "exemplary holy man", who is "effective only through the being of his person, and not through virtues, and even less through acts, works, deeds or actions. They are only pointers to his being and holiness" (p. 157). It also brings to mind Vos' (2018) "existential exemplars," who exemplify "what it means to be a human being and to be a human being with and for others" (p. 23) and whose "exemplariness and that which is exemplified are not immediately recognisable... They resonate on a deeper level of our subjectivity" (p. 24).

Many of the exemplar descriptions in this research suggest that the essence of spiritual exemplarity can be testified to or pointed toward rather than explicitly described. The reason for this inability to directly describe that essence may be similar to the reason that one's own spiritual core or "self" can be intuited but cannot be objectified and made "an idol nor any image" (Exodus 20: 4). One's spiritual exemplars seem to resonate with one's spiritual core or "self," yet the essence of their exemplarity cannot be objectified. At the same time, the expression or manifestation of that essence seems to be multifaceted and integrative, affecting different aspects of the spiritual exemplar's being and integrating them toward wholeness.

The effects of spiritual exemplars on others, and the ways in which such effects are produced, were explored also in Study 3. In that study, the effects on research collaborators of analyzing interviews with a large number of spiritual exemplars were studied. It appeared that such engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars had the following effects on many

of the collaborators, and these effects may be attributed to and indicative of unique characteristics of spiritual exemplarity:

(1) One effect that many of the collaborators described was that of gaining insights about themselves, their life story, issues and unresolved questions they had been struggling with. This effect may suggest that spiritual exemplars are reflective and insightful, and that engagement with them inspired the same.

(2) A second effect was that of seeing through existing limiting or rigid preconceived ideas and judgements and “widen[ing] the range of possibilities of how spirit can manifest” by opening themselves up to the different exemplars. This effect was suggested by some collaborators to be a result of their engagement with different “expressions of spirit,” embodied and transmitted by different exemplars.

(3) A third effect was the fostering and cultivation of greater trust of the collaborators in their individuality and of self-reliance on their ability to independently navigate their unique spiritual paths. This effect may suggest that spiritual exemplarity is characterized by independence, self-reliance and “authenticity to oneself.”

These effects were attributed by the collaborators mainly to their engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars. At the same time, different collaborators resonated, did not resonate or anti-resonated to varying degrees with different exemplars. The absence of consensus among the collaborators about the “most exemplary exemplars” was unexpected and seemed significant. One possible explanation to it is that in choosing their “most exemplary exemplars” the collaborators relied on what can be called “sympathetic resonance” (Anderson 1998b, 2019b). “Sympathetic resonance” is a psychological principle akin to the physical resonance principle. Its essential feature is that if two structures are very similar in nature, such as two similar guitars, the activation of one will be mirrored in the other. Likewise, if certain characteristics or experiences of a person also apply to another person, the latter would resonate with or mirror the former's description of their experience. Another possible explanation

may be that different spiritual exemplars met different (psychological or spiritual) lacks or needs of different collaborators. It is also possible that, just like "[t]he effects of moral exemplars on observers may differ according to their stage of moral development" (Moberg 2000: 684), each collaborator's resonance with different exemplars depended on their stage of psychological or spiritual development or maturity. Be the reason for the diversity among the collaborators as it may, it suggests that "spiritual exemplarity" is a relational construct and that a "spiritual exemplar" is that in "the eye of the beholder."

Relationship between *Living Transcendence* and spiritual exemplars' perception by and effect on other people

A spiritual exemplar was defined here as an individual "who is perceived as an inspiring exemplar of their religious / spiritual path." The research started from the assumption, that in-depth phenomenological interviews with such individuals would yield descriptions of *Living Transcendence*, the experience of living "at a constantly high level in the sense of illumination or awakening" (Maslow, 1969b). Considering that many religious traditions refer to a more stabilized, enduring and long-lasting state of transcendence as their desideratum, it seemed reasonable to assume that such a state would be experienced by those who exemplify the desideratum of the tradition, referred to here as "spiritual exemplars."

No reference to experience was made in the way the term "spiritual exemplar" was described, however, in the email sent to the expert nominators in Study 1. No reference to it was made also in most of the spiritual exemplar descriptions, provided by the expert nominators in that study. The descriptions did suggest that the nominators perceived their spiritual exemplars as exemplifying integration, consistency and multifaceted wholeness and that "spiritual exemplarity" was of an integrative-holistic nature. The results also suggest that spiritual exemplars impart spiritual transmission, facilitate spiritual transformation and inspire love, awe and admiration in those who regards them as such. Personal acquaintance with and relational

feelings toward the exemplar seemed to be key in their recognition as a spiritual exemplar by another.

The findings of Study 3 also did not directly suggest a relationship between spiritual exemplarity and an experience of *Living Transcendence*. The main effects of the study of spiritual exemplars on the research collaborators were of self-reflection and insight, opening and broadening, and fostering of spiritual self-reliance. To the degree that these effects *were* related to the characteristics the spiritual exemplars, however, they suggested that spiritual exemplars are self-reflective and spiritually self-reliant, and that they transmit a spiritual essence or essences that are cross-traditional and cross-cultural.

In Study 2, on the other hand, the descriptions provided by nearly all of the 32 spiritual exemplars suggested constancy over time of at least one quality of their experience of *Living Transcendence*. Some of their descriptions indicated that such constantly remained amid and through the fluctuations of normal life and various crises. They also described association of that experience with an unusual type of volitionality, that is, the will to obey, surrender to or be in service of a "calling." Many of their descriptions revealed multifacetedness of that experience, that is, that its qualities and characteristics appeared to be facets of an elusive essence. *Living Transcendence* was suggested to be an "existential feeling-awareness" that is consistently unitive, connective and supremely positive, in which other categories of experience, as well as meaning-making, agency and identity, are embedded.

Combining the findings of Studies 1 and 3 with those of Study 2 leads to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the relationship between *Living Transcendence* – a constant, stabilized spiritual "state of being" – and the role of spiritual exemplars in spiritual development. It appears that individuals, whose "experience of being" has the characteristics of *Living Transcendence*, tend to be regarded by others as exemplars of integration and wholeness and to support and facilitate the spiritual development of those who regard them as such. More specifically, individuals who describe their "existential feeling-awareness" or "experience of

being” as *Living Transcendence* tend to (1) be perceived by others as exemplifying integration, consistency and multifaceted wholeness, (2) inspire in them love, awe and admiration, (3) facilitate their spiritual development by having on them effects of spiritual transmission, transformation facilitation, and (4) inspire and facilitate in others self-reflection and insight, opening and broadening, and fostering of spiritual self-reliance. As the experience of *Living Transcendence* by spiritual exemplars appears to be constantly and consistently unitive, connective and supremely positive, so is also spiritual exemplars’ perception by and effects on others.

Questioning of assumptions of the PhD student

Two sets of assumptions that the PhD student had at the start of the research were refuted or found to be partial in its course. One set of assumptions was based on the premise that the state of being, termed in this research *Living Transcendence*, had a perennial, universal core or essence. This premise of the perennial or universal nature of *Living Transcendence* was in line with Huxley’s (1945) “perennial philosophy” and Hick’s (1988) theory of “religious pluralism.” Based on this premise, he also assumed that this universal core is the “vertex of maturity” (Piaget, 1970a) or the “ultimate value” (Schneiders, 2005) toward which spiritual development leads, and that integration and wholeness (Niemic et al., 2020) were the hallmarks of that state of being. Such integration and wholeness he expected to manifest as alignment of different aspects of one’s experience, personality, values and behavior with that universal core. At the highest levels of such integration all these different aspects were assumed to be fully in service of that core.

The findings of this research suggest that this set of assumptions, concerning the universal nature of *Living Transcendence* and of spiritual development, is partial at best. It was not found to be completely wrong, because the experiential qualities (noetic, affective, embodied and relational) and characteristics (constancy and motivation), identified in the

interviewees' descriptions of their experience of *Living Transcendence*, did appear to be facets of a universal core. It is partial, however, because great variation was found between individuals, in whom different qualities and characteristics of the experience of *Living Transcendence* are dominant and take center stage, while others may be weak or absent. Each of these individuals seemed to have an innate preference for some of these qualities and characteristics and a unique combination thereof, different from that of all the others. It is unclear, based on the data of this research, if such uniqueness tends to diminish in the process of spiritual development and be replaced by a kind of integration and wholeness, in which all qualities and characteristics are balanced and equally prominent. A longitudinal study would have to be conducted in order to gain more clarity on this question.

The second set of assumptions concerned the nature of “spiritual exemplarity.” It was based on the premise that “spiritual exemplar” was a monadic phenomenon. “Monadic” meant that spiritual exemplarity was a singular, unified and self-contained phenomenon, that was not dependent on traditional, cultural or relational conditions. The PhD student also assumed, in agreement with Haidt (2013) and Zagzebski (2010a, 2015c, 2015a, 2017a), that such a phenomenon would be readily, spontaneously and unanimously recognized by others.

The findings of this research suggest that this second set of assumptions, that “spiritual exemplar” is a monadic phenomenon, independent of traditional, cultural or relational conditions, is not untrue but is partial. Based on the findings of this research, “spiritual exemplar” appears to be perceived as an archetype of integration and multifaceted wholeness, in whom different positive human qualities come together to form a well-rounded “saint and *mensch*”-type human being. On the other hand, subjective impressions, relationality and felt impact seem to play a major role in the recognition and perception of a spiritual exemplar by another person. This finding suggests that “spiritual exemplar” is an interrelational phenomenon, and that different and maybe complex interpersonal dynamics play an important role in the

perception of a spiritual exemplar by another person and in the effects of the spiritual exemplar on that person.

The dynamics of both *Living Transcendence* and spiritual exemplarity seem, therefore, to be dialectic: the former is universal and uniquely individual; the latter is monadic and interrelational. It can be speculated that the two are related: the universal core of *Living Transcendence* seems related to the multifaceted wholeness, described in spiritual exemplars, while the unique individual expression of *Living Transcendence* seems related to the interrelational nature of spiritual exemplarity. The dialectic dynamics of a universal core and individual/interrelational expressions are manifested, therefore, in the closely related phenomena of *Living Transcendence* and spiritual exemplarity.

Limitations and Future Research

This research sought to shed light on the essences of the experience of *Living Transcendence* and of spiritual exemplarity. For this purpose, descriptions were obtained from (1) spiritual exemplars of their experience of *Living Transcendence*, (2) expert informants of people they regard as spiritual exemplars, and (3) research collaborators of the effects on them of analyzing interviews of a large number of spiritual exemplars. In order to obtain broad and rich characterizations of the experience of *Living Transcendence* and of spiritual exemplarity, each of the groups of descriptions, obtained from these three sources, was analyzed as a whole. Further research, in which each individual description is analyzed, could contribute to our understanding of different “flavors” of the experience of *Living Transcendence* and maybe of different “profiles” of spiritual exemplars. Comparison between the description, provided by each spiritual exemplar, of the “flavors” of their experience of *Living Transcendence*, and the perception of that exemplar by others could bring greater detail and nuance to our understanding of the relationship between them.

This research focused on the phenomenological characteristics of the experience of *Living Transcendence*. As a state of being, however, *Living Transcendence* includes additional aspects of being such as selfhood and identity, meaning and purpose, morality and responsibility. Future research could focus on the relationships between characteristics of the experience of *Living Transcendence* and each of those aspects (for example, spiritual exemplars whose experience of *Living Transcendence* is centered on relationality may put great emphasis on morality and responsibility).

Due to language considerations, most expert informants and most spiritual exemplars who participated in this study were from the more modern parts of the West. This probably created a bias in the data collected in this study with regards to both the experience of *Living Transcendence* and the characteristics of spiritual exemplarity. In future research, descriptions of exemplars could be obtained from informants from non-Western parts of the world and from more traditional backgrounds in non-English languages, and interviews could be conducted with the spiritual exemplars they describe (who would presumably be from similar backgrounds to those of the informants). In particular, a more systematic investigation of exemplar characteristics in different traditions may highlight potentially important distinctions. In addition, such research can be focused on different degrees of doctrinal liberalism to conservatism in different traditions, on possible differences between male and female, between descriptions of close and distant exemplars, between exemplars of the same tradition as the informant and exemplars of a different tradition than the informant, and between short/thin and long/thick exemplar descriptions.

Afterword

At the start of this research, at the top of my research proposal, I placed the following excerpt I love, by French theologian Teilhard de Chardin (1969: 11): "Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge."

The image that this excerpt alludes to is that of a singular summit or perspective toward which all paths lead and from which an all-encompassing view is seen. I placed it at the top of my research proposal because I believed that stripping the experience of spiritual exemplars – people who are close to if not at the proverbial summit – from its different tradition-specific interpretations would reveal that they are all heading to or residing at the same experiential summit and seeing the same experiential "view."

Now, as I come to summarize this phase of the research, a somewhat different image comes to my mind that seems to me more suitable. Building on de Chardin's evocative call, I would say: "Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! You will find that as you ascend your mountain and get closer to its summit, you see the land around you like you've never seen it before. You notice, on the neighboring mountains, others making the same ascent. They, too, you realize, are seeing the land around them like never before. You feel that they are your brothers and sisters. You are also aware that each summit holds a unique perspective, and that each of your brothers and sisters sees a somewhat different view from their summit. Both the sharing of the same experience and the multiplicity of perspectives fill your heart with joy and gratitude."



Bibliography

- Abo-Zena, M. M., & King, P. E. (2021). Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Case Studies of Spiritual Exemplars. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211020262>
- Anderson, R. (1998a). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69–94). SAGE Publications.
- Anderson, R. (1998b). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience* (pp. 69–94). SAGE Publications.
- Anderson, R. (2018). *Toward a Sacred Science — Reflecting Forward*. 46(1), 1–5.
- Anderson, R. (2019a). Intuitive inquiry: Inviting transformation and breakthrough insights in qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 6(3), 312–319.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000144>
- Anderson, R. (2019b). Intuitive inquiry: Inviting transformation and breakthrough insights in qualitative research. *Qualitative Psychology*, 6(3), 312–319.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000144>
- Anderson, R. (2020). Transformative research methods: Research to nourish the spirit. *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 10(1), 95–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2020.1726056>
- Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011a). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. State University of New York Press.
- Anderson, R., & Braud, W. (2011b). *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities*. State University of New York Press.
- Aristotle. (1962). *Nicomachean Ethics (Translated by Martin Ostwald)*. The Library of Liberal Arts.
- Babbie, E. R. (1995). *The practice of social research* (7th ed.). Wadsworth.
- Baltrusaitis, T., Ahuja, C., & Morency, L. P. (2019). Multimodal Machine Learning: A Survey and Taxonomy. In *IEEE Transactions on Pattern Analysis and Machine Intelligence* (Vol. 41, Issue 2, pp. 423–443). IEEE Computer Society. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TPAMI.2018.2798607>
- Bandura, A. (1986a). *Social Foundation of Thought and Action*. Prentice Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1986b). *Social Foundation of Thought and Action*. Prentice Hall.
- Barber, C. (2019). Working within a spiritual framework. *British Journal of Nursing*, 28(4), 229–229.
<https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2019.28.4.229>

- Becker, S. W., & Eagly, A. H. (2004). The heroism of women and men. *American Psychologist*, 59(3), 163–178.
- Benson, P. L., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Rude, S. P. (2003). Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence: Toward a Field of Inquiry. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 205–213. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_12
- Bojerud, E., Younadam, R., & Čehajić-Clancy, S. (2023). Testing a moral exemplar intervention in a non-conflict context: The effects of moral exemplars on key dimensions of outgroup evaluations. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 41(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21403>
- Böwering, G. (1988). Baqā' wa fanā'. In E. Yarshater (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bravo, A. J., Pearson, M. R., Wilson, A. D., & Witkiewitz, K. (2018). When Traits Match States: Examining the Associations Between Self-Report Trait and State Mindfulness Following a State Mindfulness Induction. *Mindfulness*, 9(1), 199–211. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-017-0763-5>
- Bronk, K. C. (2012a). The exemplar methodology: An approach to studying the leading edge of development. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2211-1522-2-5>
- Bronk, K. C. (2012b). The exemplar methodology: An approach to studying the leading edge of development. *Psychology of Well-Being: Theory, Research and Practice*, 2(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2211-1522-2-5>
- Bronk, K. C., King, P. E., & Matsuba, M. K. (2013a). An Introduction to Exemplar Research: A Definition, Rationale, and Conceptual Issues. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2013(142), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20045>
- Bronk, K. C., King, P. E., & Matsuba, M. K. (2013b). An introduction to exemplar research: A definition, rationale, and conceptual issues. In M. K. Matsuba, P. E. King, & K. C. Bronk (Eds.), *Exemplar Methods and Research: Strategies for Investigation* (Vol. 142, pp. 1–12). New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development.
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4), 822–848. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.822>
- Bucke, R. M. (1901). *Cosmic consciousness: A study in the evolution of the human mind*. Innes & Sons.
- Burridge, R. A. (2007). *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Chidananda, S. S. (1984). *The philosophy, psychology, and practice of yoga*. Divine Life Society.

- Chiu, L., Emblen, J. D., Van Hofwegen, L., Sawatzky, R., & Meyerhoff, H. (2004). An Integrative Review of the Concept of Spirituality in the Health Sciences. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 26(4), 405–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193945904263411>
- Churchill, S. D., & Wertz, F. J. (2015). An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations. In K. J. Schneider, J. F. Pierson, & J. F. T. Bugental (Eds.), *An introduction to phenomenological research in psychology: Historical, conceptual, and methodological foundations* (2nd ed., pp. 275–295). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Clements, J. (2004a). Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 26–49.
- Clements, J. (2004b). Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 36(1), 26–49.
- Clements, J. (2011). Organic inquiry: Research in partnership with spirit. In R. Anderson & W. Braud (Eds.), *Transforming self and others through research: Transpersonal research methods and skills for the human sciences and humanities* (pp. 131–166). State University of New York Press.
- Cohn, R. L. (1987). Sainthood on the Periphery: The Case of Judaism. In J. S. Hawley (Ed.), *Saints and Virtues*. University of California.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992a). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. The Free Press.
- Colby, A., & Damon, W. (1992b). *Some do care: Contemporary lives of moral commitment*. The Free Press.
- Cornish, F., Gillespie, A., & Tania, Z. (2014). Collaborative Analysis of Qualitative Data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>
- Costeines, M. (2009a). *What Enlightenment Means: A Qualitative Study of Nondual Consciousness As Experienced by Teachers of Nondual Mysticism*.
- Costeines, M. (2009b). *What Enlightenment Means: A Qualitative Study of Nondual Consciousness As Experienced by Teachers of Nondual Mysticism*.
- Croce, M., & Silvia Vaccarezza, M. (2017). Educating through exemplars: Alternative paths to virtue. *Theory and Research in Education*, 15(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878517695903>
- Custer, D. (2014). Auto/ethnography as a transformative research method. *The Qualitative Report*, 19((How To 21)), 1–13.
- Damon, W., & Colby, A. (2013). Why a true account of human development requires exemplar research. In M. K. Matsuba, P. E. King, & K. C. Bronk (Eds.), *Exemplar Methods and Research: Strategies for Investigation* (pp. 13–26). Jossey-Bass.
- Davidson, L. (2000). Philosophical foundations of humanistic psychology. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 28(1–3), 7–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2000.9976979>

- Dawson, A. (2006). East is East, Except When It's West: The Easternization Thesis and the Western Habitus. *Journal of Religion & Society*, 8, 1–13.
- de Brito Sena, M. A., Damiano, R. F., Lucchetti, G., & Peres, M. F. P. (2021). Defining Spirituality in Healthcare: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Framework. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.756080>
- Djuraskovic, I., & Arthur, N. (2010). Heuristic inquiry: A personal journey of acculturation and identity reconstruction. *Qualitative Report*, 15(6), 1569–1593. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2010.1361>
- Dōgen, Leighton, T. D., & Okumura, S. (1996a). *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the Eihei Shingi*. State University of New York Press.
- Dōgen, Leighton, T. D., & Okumura, S. (1996b). *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the Eihei Shingi*. State University of New York Press.
- Dorjee, D. (2016). Defining Contemplative Science: The Metacognitive Self-Regulatory Capacity of the Mind, Context of Meditation Practice and Modes of Existential Awareness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01788>
- Dunlop, W. L., Walker, L. J., & Matsuba, M. K. (2012). The distinctive moral personality of care exemplars. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7(2), 131–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2012.662994>
- Etherington, K. (2020). Becoming a Narrative Inquirer. In S. Bager-Charleson & A. McBeath (Eds.), *Enjoying Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (pp. 71–93). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55127-8_5
- Ferrer, J. N., & Tarnas, R. (2002). *Revisioning transpersonal theory : a participatory vision of human spirituality*. State University of New York Press.
- Fire, M. (2010a). *Exploring the felt experience of nondual consciousness*. California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Fire, M. (2010b). *Exploring the felt experience of nondual consciousness*. California Institute of Integral Studies.
- Flores, R. (2009). *Buddhist scriptures as literature: Sacred rhetoric and the uses of theory*. SUNY Press.
- Forman, R. K. C. (1999). *Mysticism, mind, consciousness*. State University of New York Press.
- Freimann, A. (2018). *Spiritual Transmission: Paradoxes and Dilemmas on the Spiritual Path*. Monkfish Book Publishing Company.
- Freimann, A., & Mayseless, O. (n.d.). *Surrender to Another Person: The Case of a Spiritual Master*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820975636>

- Friedman, H., Krippner, S., Riebel, L., & Johnson, C. (2010). Transpersonal and Other Models of Spiritual Development. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 29(1), 79–94.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190905538.001.0001>
- Gall, T. L., Malette, J., & Guirguis-Younger, M. (2011). Spirituality and Religiousness: A Diversity of Definitions. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 13(3), 158–181.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2011.593404>
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Basic Books.
- Gendlin, E. (1962). *Experiencing and the creation of meaning*. University Press.
https://scholar.google.co.il/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Experiencing+and+the+creation+of+meaning.+Evanston%3A+Northwestern+University+Press&btnG=
- Gendlin, E. T. (1981). *Focusing*. Bantam Books.
- Gillespie, A., & Richardson, B. (2011). Exchanging social positions: enhancing perspective taking within a cooperative problem solving task. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 41(5), 608–616.
- Giorgi, A. (1997). The Theory, Practice, and Evaluation of the Phenomenological Method as a Qualitative Research Procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 28(2), 235–260.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/156916297X00103>
- Gleig, A. L. (2010). *Enlightenment after the enlightenment: American transformations of Asian contemplative traditions*. Rice University.
- Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. C. (1984). *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. Academic Press Inc.
- Goleman, D., Smith, H., & Ram Dass. (1985). Truth and Transformation in Psychological and Spiritual Paths. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 17(2), 183–214.
- Göpel, M. (2016). *The Great Mindshift* (Vol. 2). Springer International Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43766-8>
- Goshen-Gottstein, A. (2017). Religious genius: Appreciating inspiring individuals across traditions. *Religious Genius: Appreciating Inspiring Individuals Across Traditions*, 1–196.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55514-0>
- Greeley, A. (1974). *Ecstasy: A way of knowing*. Prentice Hall.
- Gruel, N. (2015). The plateau experience: An exploration of its origins, characteristics, and potential. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 47(1), 44–63.
- Haidt, J. (2013). Moral psychology for the twenty-first century. *Journal of Moral Education*, 42(3), 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2013.817327>
- Hamel, S., Leclerc, G., & Lefrançois, R. (2003). A psychological outlook on the concept of transcendent actualization. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(1), 3–15.

- Han, H., & Dawson, K. J. (2023). Relatable and attainable moral exemplars as sources for moral elevation and pleasantness. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1–17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2023.2173158>
- Harrison, V. S. (2011). Embodied values and muslim-christian dialogue: 'Exemplar reasoning' as a model for interreligious conversations. *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 21(1), 20–35.
<https://doi.org/10.2143/SID.21.1.2129547>
- Harrison, V. S. (2020). "Exemplar Reasoning" as a Tool for Constructive Conversation between Confucians and Catholics. In *Confucianism and Catholicism* (pp. 172–189). University of Notre Dame Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19m643m.12>
- Harrison, V. S., & Gayle, R. (2020a). Self-transformation and Spiritual Exemplars. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 12(4), 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v12i4.3520>
- Harrison, V. S., & Gayle, R. (2020b). Self-Transformation and Spiritual Exemplars. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 12(4), 9–26. <https://doi.org/10.24204/EJPR.V12I4.3520>
- Harvey, P. (1990). *An introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, history and practices*. Cambridge University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Eds.). Blackwell.
- Hennink, M. M., & Leavy, P. (2014). *Understanding Focus Group Discussions*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199856169.001.0001>
- Hick, J. (1988). Religious pluralism and salvation. *Faith and Philosophy*, 5(4), 365–377.
- Hill, P. C., & Pargament, K. I. (2003). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health research. *American Psychologist*, 58(1), 64–74. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.64>
- Hood, R. W. (1975). The construction and preliminary validation of a measure of reported mystical experience. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 14(1), 29–41.
- Hu, D., Gu, Q., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Role modeling effects: how leader's job involvement affects follower creativity. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 61(1), 101–123.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1744-7941.12332>
- Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology* (Vol. 2). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Huxley, A. (1945). *The perennial philosophy*. Harper & Row.
- James, W. (1958). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Mentor.
- Jiyu-Kennett, H. (2005). *Roar of the tigress, An introduction to Zen: Religious practice for everyday life* (D. Rev. MacPhillamy, Ed.; Vol. 1). Shasta Abbey Press.

- Johnstone, B., Hanks, R., Bhushan, B., Cohen, D., Roseberry, J., & Yoon, D. P. (2017). Selflessness as a universal neuropsychological foundation of spiritual transcendence: validation with Christian, Hindu, and Muslim traditions. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 20(2), 175–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2017.1333090>
- Kilrea, K. A. (2013a). *The everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment*. Sofia University.
- Kilrea, K. A. (2013b). *The everyday, lived, physical, and sensory experience of spiritual enlightenment* [Doctoral Dissertation]. Sofia University.
- King, P. E., Abo-Zena, M. M., & Weber, J. D. (2017). Varieties of social experience: The religious cultural context of diverse spiritual exemplars. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 35(1), 127–141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12181>
- King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014a). Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(2), 186–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413502534>
- King, P. E., Clardy, C. E., & Ramos, J. S. (2014b). Adolescent Spiritual Exemplars: Exploring Spirituality in the Lives of Diverse Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(2), 186–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413502534>
- King, P. E., Mueller, R. A. O., & Furrow, J. (2013). Cultural and Contextual Issues in Exemplar Research. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2013(142), 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20048>
- Koch, T., & Harrington, A. (1998). Reconceptualizing rigour: the case for reflexivity. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(4), 882–890.
- Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M. E., & Larson, D. B. (2001). *Handbook of Religion and Health* (H. G. Koenig, M. E. McCullough, & D. B. Larson, Eds.; 1st ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Kourie, C. (2016). The Way of the Mystic: The Sanjuanist stages of the spiritual path. *HTS Theological Studies*, 72(4), 1–11.
- Krippner, S. (1972). The plateau experience: A. H. Maslow and others. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 4(2), 107–120.
- Kristjánsson, K. (2010). *The self and its emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kuntz, A. F. (2016). Exemplary Exemplar Research : Three Approaches to Studying Moral Excellence. *PsyArXiv Preprints*, May, 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4537.4329>
- Kuzel, A. J. (1992). Sampling in qualitative inquiry. In B. F. Crabtree & W. L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research. Research Methods for Primary Care* (p. Vol. 3, 31-44). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Levin, J., & Steele, L. (2005). The transcendent experience: Conceptual, theoretical, and epidemiologic perspectives. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 1(2), 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2004.12.002>

- Leys, S. (translator). (1997). *The Analects of Confucius*. W.W. Norton and Co.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Long, J. (2000). Spirituality and the Idea of Transcendence. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 5(2), 147–161. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713670913>
- Maslow, A. H. (1962a). Lessons from the Peak-Experiences. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 2(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216786200200102>
- Maslow, A. H. (1962b). Lessons from the Peak-Experiences. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 2(1), 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002216786200200102>
- Maslow, A. H. (1964). *Religions, values, and peak experiences*. Ohio State University Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1969a). The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. In *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–9).
- Maslow, A. H. (1969b). The Farther Reaches of Human Nature. In *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–9).
- Maslow, A. H. (1971). *The farther reaches of the human nature*. The Viking Press.
- Maslow, A. H. (1973). *The farther reaches of the human nature*. Penguin Books.
- Matsuba, M. K., & Walker, L. J. (2004). Extraordinary Moral Commitment: Young Adults Involved in Social Organizations. *Journal of Personality*, 72(2), 413–436. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3506.2004.00267.x>
- Matsuba, M. K., & Walker, L. J. (2005). Young adult moral exemplars: The making of self through stories. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 15(3), 275–297. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2005.00097.x>
- Mertens, D. M. (2017). Transformative research: personal and societal. *International Journal for Transformative Research*, 4(1), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijtr-2017-0001>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Moberg, D. J. (2000). Role Models and Moral Exemplars: How do Employees Acquire Virtues by Observing Others? *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 10(3), 675–696. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3857898>
- Moloney, S. (2011). Focus Groups as Transformative Spiritual Encounters. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10(1), 58–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000105>
- Moran-Ellis, J., Alexander, V. D., Cronin, A., Dickinson, M., Fielding, J., Sleney, J., & Thomas, H. (2006). Triangulation and integration: processes, claims and implications. *Qualitative Research*, 6(1), 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106058870>
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research : design, methodology, and applications*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995641>

- Murata, K. (2018). Fana and Baqa. In *Oxford Bibliographies*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195390155-0256>
- Nagle, C. (2004a). *Experience of self in advanced yogis: A preliminary verification of Upanishadic theory*. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.
- Nagle, C. (2004b). *Experience of self in advanced yogis: A preliminary verification of Upanishadic theory*. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco.
- Niemiec, R. M., Russo-Netzer, P., & Pargament, K. I. (2020). The Decoding of the Human Spirit: A Synergy of Spirituality and Character Strengths Toward Wholeness. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02040>
- Nyumba, T. O., Wilson, K., Derrick, C. J., & Mukherjee, N. (2018). *The use of focus group discussion methodology: Insights from two decades of application in conservation*.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210X.12860>
- Olberding, A. (2012). *Moral exemplars in the Analects: The good person is that*. Routledge.
- Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. (1988a). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. Free Press.
- Oliner, S. P., & Oliner, P. M. (1988b). *The altruistic personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*. Free Press.
- Oman, D. (2013). Spiritual modeling and the social learning of spirituality and religion. In K. I. Pargament, J. J. Exline, & J. W. Jones (Eds.), *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality: Context, theory, and research* (1st ed., pp. 187–204). American Psychological Association.
- Oman, D., Flinders, T., & Thoresen, C. E. (2008). Integrating spiritual modeling into education: A college course for stress management and spiritual growth. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 18(2), 79–107.
- Oman, D., Shapiro, S. L., Thoresen, C. E., Flinders, T., Driskill, J. D., & Plante, T. G. (2007). Learning from Spiritual Models and Meditation: A Randomized Evaluation of a College Course. *Pastoral Psychology*, 55(4), 473–493. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-006-0062-x>
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003a). Authors' response: "The many frontiers of spiritual modeling." *International Journal of Phytoremediation*, 21(1), 197–213.
https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_04
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003b). INVITED ESSAY: "Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?" *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(3), 149–165.
https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_01
- Oman, D., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003c). Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth? *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 13(3), 149–165.
https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1303_01

- Oman, D., Thoresen, C. E., Park, C. L., Shaver, P. R., Hood, R. W., & Plante, T. G. (2009). How does one become spiritual? The Spiritual Modeling Inventory of Life Environments (SMILE). *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 12(5), 427–456. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670902758257>
- Orchard, T. (2017). To Change and Be Changed: Transformative Research Experiences. In *Remembering the body: Ethical issues in body mapping research* (pp. 65–83). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49861-4_4
- Osborne, A. (1966a). Excerpt of a letter to the editor from Arthur Osborne. *The R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience Newsletter-Review*, 13–17.
- Osborne, A. (1966b). Excerpt of a letter to the editor from Arthur Osborne. *The R. M. Bucke Memorial Society for the Study of Religious Experience Newsletter-Review*, 13–17.
- Pahnke, W. N. (1963). *Drugs and mysticism: An analysis of the relationship between psychedelic drugs and the mystical consciousness*. Harvard University.
- Pargament, K. I. (2012). Searching for the sacred: Toward a nonreductionistic theory of spirituality. *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality (Vol 1): Context, Theory, and Research.*, 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14045-014>
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative Research and Education Methods (2nd ed.)*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Perrin, D. B. (2007). *Studying Christian spirituality*. Routledge.
- Piaget, J. (1970a). *Structuralism*. Harper & Row.
- Piaget, J. (1970b). *Structuralism*. Harper & Row.
- Piedmont, R. L. (1999). Does spirituality represent the sixth factor of personality?: Spiritual transcendence and the five-factor model. *Journal of Personality*, 67(6), 985–1013.
- Piotrowski, J. P., Żemojtel-Piotrowska, M., Piedmont, R. L., & Baran, T. (2021). The Assessment of Spirituality and Religious Sentiments (ASPIRES) scale: Examining a spiritual transcendence nomological net in Polish context. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 13(1), 36–45. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000273>
- Ratcliffe, M. (2008). *Feelings of being: Phenomenology, psychiatry and the sense of reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. (2020). Existential Feelings. In T. Szanto & H. Landweer (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotion* (pp. 250–261). Routledge.
- Reason, P., & Torbert, W. (2001). The action turn: Toward a transformational social science. *Concepts and Transformation*, 6(1), 1–37.
- Richards, K. A. R., & Hemphill, M. A. (2018). A Practical Guide to Collaborative Qualitative Data Analysis. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 37(2), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2017-0084>

- Russo-Netzer, P. (2018). Spirituality. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Lifespan Human Development* (pp. 2127–2130). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Sass, L., & Ratcliffe, M. (2017). Atmosphere: On the Phenomenology of “Atmospheric” Alterations in Schizophrenia - Overall Sense of Reality, Familiarity, Vitality, Meaning, or Relevance (Ancillary Article to EAWD Domain 5). *Psychopathology*, 50(1), 90–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1159/000454884>
- Sayeed, A. (n.d.). Hadith. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- Scarlett, W. G. (2012). Spiritual exemplars: An introduction. *Religions*, 3(2), 183–190.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3020183>
- Scheler, M. (1987). Exemplars of Person and Leaders. In M. S. Frings (Ed.), *Person and Self-Value* (pp. 125–198). Nijhoff.
- Schneider, K. J. (2008). *Existential-integrative psychotherapy: Guideposts to the core of practice*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Schneiders, S. M. (2005). Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality. In A. Holder (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Christian Spirituality* (pp. 15–33). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sebastián, M. Á. (2012). Experiential Awareness: Do You Prefer “It” to “Me”? *Philosophical Topics*, 40(2), 155–177. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201240218>
- Seidlitz, L., Abernethy, A. D., Duberstein, P. R., Evinger, J. S., Chang, T. H., & Lewis, B. L. (2002). Development of the Spiritual Transcendence Index. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41(3), 439–453. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00129>
- Sela-Smith, S. (2002). Heuristic research: A review and critique of Moustakas’s method. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 42(3), 53–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167802423004>
- Sessanna, L., Finnell, D., & Jezewski, M. A. (2007). Spirituality in Nursing and Health-Related Literature. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 25(4), 252–262.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0898010107303890>
- Sharma, A., & Kennick, V. (Eds.). (2012). *Spiritual masters of the world’s religions*. State University of New York Press.
- Sohmer, O. R. (2020). The Experience of the Authentic Self: A Cooperative Inquiry. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167820952339>
- Sperry, L. (2001). *Spirituality in clinical practice: Incorporating the spiritual dimension in psychotherapy and counseling*. Psychology Press.
- Stace, W. (1960). *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Macmillan).
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

- Tavel, P., Chrz, V., Poláčková Šolcová, I., Dubovská, E., & Kalman, M. (2022). Peak experience and its varieties: Response to challenge as a valuable perspective of peak experience and its varieties. *Ceskoslovenska Psychologie*, 66(2), 95–110. <https://doi.org/10.51561/cspsych.66.2.95>
- Taylor, S. (2012). Spontaneous awakening experiences: Beyond religion and spiritual practice. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 44(1), 73–91.
- Taylor, S. (2013a). *A phenomenological investigation into the psychological transformation interpreted as “Spiritual Awakening”: possible causes, characteristics, and after-effects*. Liverpool John Moores University.
- Taylor, S. (2013b). *A phenomenological investigation into the psychological transformation interpreted as “Spiritual Awakening”: possible causes, characteristics, and after-effects*. Liverpool John Moores University.
- Taylor, S. (2013c). Temporary and Permanent Awakening: The Primary and Secondary Shift. *Journal of Transpersonal Research*, 5(2), 41–48.
- Taylor, S., & Egeto-Szabo, K. (2017). Exploring Awakening Experiences: a Study of Awakening Experiences in Terms of Their Triggers, Characteristics, Duration and After-Effects. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 49(1), 45–65.
- Teilhard de Chardin, P. (1969). *Building the Earth and The Psychological Conditions of Human Unification* (Discus Edition). Avon.
- Underhill, E. (1911). *Mysticism: A study in nature and development of spiritual consciousness*. Methuen.
- van de Ven, N., Archer, A. T. M., & Engelen, B. (2019). More important and surprising actions of a moral exemplar trigger stronger admiration and inspiration. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 159(4), 383–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2018.1498317>
- Van Deurzen, E. (2010). *Everyday mysteries: A handbook of existential psychotherapy* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. SUNY Press.
- Vos, P. H. (2018). Learning from exemplars: emulation, character formation and the complexities of ordinary life. *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 39(1), 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2017.1393295>
- Walker, L. J., & Frimer, J. A. (2010). Moral Personality Exemplified. *Personality, Identity, and Character*, 232–255. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511627125.011>
- White, J. (2005). Exemplary persons and ethics. The place of St. Francis in the philosophy of Max Scheler. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 79(1), 57–90.

- Yaden, D. B., Haidt, J., Hood, R. W., Vago, D. R., & Newberg, A. B. (2017). The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience. *Review of General Psychology*, 21(2), 143–160.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000102>
- Yaden, D. B., & Newberg, A. (2022). *The Varieties of Spiritual Experience*. Oxford University Press New York. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190665678.001.0001>
- Zagzebski, L. (2010a). Exemplarist virtue theory. *Metaphilosophy*, 41, 41–57.
- Zagzebski, L. (2010b). Exemplarist virtue theory. *Metaphilosophy*, 41, 41–57.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015a). Admiration and the admirable. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 89, 205–221.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015b). Admiration and the admirable. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 89, 205–221.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015c). Exemplarism and admiration. In C. B. Miller, R. M. Furr, A. Knobel, & W. Fleeson (Eds.), *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2015d). Exemplarism and admiration. In C. B. Miller, R. M. Furr, A. Knobel, & W. Fleeson (Eds.), *Character: New Directions from Philosophy, Psychology, and Theology* (pp. 251–268). Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2017a). *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (2017b). *Exemplarist Moral Theory*. Oxford University Press.

עמיר פריימן

תקציר

התפתחות רוחנית נחשבת לאחד ההיבטים המרכזיים בהתפתחות האדם. ישנן הגדרות רבות למונח "התפתחות רוחנית", אך הגדרה המקובלת בספרות היא ש"התפתחות רוחנית היא תהליך של פיתוח היכולת האנושית להתעלות עצמית, שבה האני נטמע בתוך משהו גדול ממנו, כולל הנשגב. היא 'המנוע ההתפתחותי' שמניע את החיפוש אחר חיבור, משמעות, תכלית ותרומה" (Benson et al., 2003: 205-206). על אף מרכזיותו של נושא זה, "התעלות עצמית ותכונות אופי הקשורות לרוחניות נטות להיות מוזנחות במחקר שיטתי" (Sperry, 2001: 42). הזנחה זו ניכרת במיוחד ביחס ל"פסגת ההתפתחות" (Piaget, 1970a) אליה מכוונת ההתפתחות הרוחנית, וכן ביחס לאלו המגלמים ומדגימים אותה.

מחקר זה מתמקד במילוי הפער הזה על ידי הבהרת המאפיינים של "חיים מוארים" ("Living Transcendence") ושל דמויות-מופת רוחניות ("spiritual exemplars") במסורות דתיות ובנתיבים רוחניים שונים. המונח "חיים מוארים" מתייחס למצב רוחני יציב וקבוע יחסית, אשר נחשב במסורות דתיות רבות ליעד הנכסף ול"גביע הקדוש" של החיפוש אחר הנשגב. "דמויות-מופת רוחניות" הן אנשים, הנתפסים על ידי אחרים כמי שמדגימים את היעד הנכסף של המסורת הדתית או הנתיב הרוחני שלהם. במילים אחרות, חיים מוארים ודמות-מופת רוחנית מייצגים, בהתאמה, את פסגת ההתפתחות הרוחנית ואת ביטוייה בבני אדם. מטרת החקר של שתי התופעות הללו והיחסים ביניהן הינה להעמיק את ההבנה של רוחניות והתפתחות רוחנית.

המחקר עוסק בשאלות: כיצד מתוארים חיים מוארים על ידי דמויות-מופת רוחניות? כיצד נתפסות דמויות-מופת רוחניות על ידי אחרים, ומהן ההשפעות שיש להן על אחרים? שאלות אלו נבדקו משלוש פרספקטיבות שונות: (1) דמויות-מופת רוחניות המתארות את חוויית החיים המוארים; (2) מומחים בתחום הדתי-רוחני המתארים אנשים שהם רואים בהם דמויות-מופת רוחניות; ו-(3) חוקרים-שותפים המתארים את ההשפעה עליהם של ניתוח ראיונות עם דמויות-מופת רוחניות רבות.

המחקר כלל שלושה מחקרי-משנה, שכל אחד מהם ייצג אחת משלוש פרספקטיבות אלו. מחקרי-משנה

אלו מכונים כאן מחקר 1, המתמקד בתיאורים של דמויות-מופת רוחניות על-ידי מומחים; מחקר 2, המתמקד

בתיאורי החוויה של דמויות-המופת הרוחניות עצמן; ומחקר 3, המתמקד בתפיסתם של החוקרים-שותפים את דמויות-המופת הרוחניות שהם חקרו.

מחקר 1, שכותרתו "מה עושה אדם לדמות-מופת רוחנית בעיני אדם אחר?" (*What makes someone a spiritual exemplar to another?*), כלל ניתוח תמטי של תיאורים של 180 דמויות-מופת רוחניות. תיאורים אלו סופקו על ידי 77 מומחים בתחום הדתי והרוחני, שהתבקשו לתאר אנשים שהם מחשיבים כדמויות-מופת רוחניות ולהתייחס ספציפית לשאלה, מה הופך אותם לכאלה בעיניהם. שאלת המחקר המרכזית הייתה: מה עושה אדם לדמות-מופת רוחנית בעיני אדם אחר? שאלות נוספות היו: כיצד אנשים מזהים פרטים מסוימים ותופסים אותם כדמויות-מופת רוחניות? כיצד הם מתארים או מסבירים את הזיהוי והתפיסה שלהם? בניתוח התמטי של התיאורים, זוהו 15 קטגוריות של מאפיינים של דמויות-מופת רוחניות, אשר אורגנו לשלושה נושאים: מוחשי-ביצועי (לדוגמה, תרגולים רוחניים, פעולות), איכותי-תיאורי (לדוגמה, נוכחות, ענווה) וקשרי-השפעה (לדוגמה, אהבה, הכרת תודה). מאפיינים בולטים של מופתיות רוחנית היו רב-הממדיות שלה וחמקמקותה לתיאור. ממצאי המחקר הדגישו את תפקידם החשוב של תחושות קשר, רשמים סובייקטיביים והשפעה מורגשת בתפיסה של דמויות-המופת הרוחניות. כמו כן, הם הציעו כי דמות-מופת רוחנית נתפסת בדרך כלל כארכיטיפ של לכידות וכוליות. כוליות זו יכולה להתבטא בדרכים רבות ולהיות מוצגת מנקודות מבט שונות, אך היא עצמה נותרת חמקמקה וקשה לתיאור. המאמר המתאר מחקר זה וממצאיו התקבל לפרסום בכתב העת *Archive for the Psychology of Religion*.

מחקר 2, שכותרתו "חיים מוארים: מחקר פנומנולוגי של דמויות-מופת רוחניות" (*Living Transcendence: A phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars*), כלל 32 מתוך 180 דמויות-המופת הרוחניות שתוארו במחקר 1. דמויות-מופת אלו רואיינו על חוויית החיים המוארים שלהם, והראיונות נותחו. שאלת המחקר המרכזית הייתה: כיצד מתוארים חיים מוארים על ידי דמויות-מופת רוחניות? ארבעה מאפיינים עיקריים של החוויה זוהו: תודעתי (ידע/תודעה/מודעות טרום-מושגית, לא-דיסקורסיבית ולא-סמלית של מציאות או אמת מוחלטת), רגשי (איכויות רגשיות חיוביות לעילא, כמו שמחה, אושר או חדווה ואהבה), גופני (נוכחות סומטית ו/או תחושה אנרגטית של מהות רוחנית) וקשרי (תחושת חיבור או "אחדות" עם הכול או עם אלוהים). מאפיינים נוספים של החוויה כללו את יציבותה לאורך זמן, בעיצומן של תנודות החיים הרגילות ומשברים שונים, וקשר שלה לסוג יוצא דופן של התכוונות, כלומר, הרצון להתמסר, להיכנע או להיות בשירות "קריאה מגבוה". אף כי הנוכחות והמרכזיות של כל אחד מהמאפיינים האלה השתנו בין אנשים, הם נראו כפנים שונות של מהות אחת. חוויית

החיים המוארים נראתה כאחדותית, מחברת וחיובית לעילא, והיא ספוגה בכל החוויות האחרות ומקנה להן הקשר.

המאמר המתאר מחקר זה וממצאיו פורסם בכתב העת The Humanistic Psychologist

(<https://doi.org/10.1037/hum0000359>).

מחקר 3, שכותרתו "מחקר טרנספורמטיבי: השפעות על חוקרים של מחקר הוליסטי ושיתופי של דמויות-

מופת רוחניות" (*Self-transformative research: Effects on researchers of a holistic collaborative*

study of spiritual exemplars), נערך עם 14 חוקרים-שותפים, שניתחו ראיונות עם 20 מתוך דמויות-המופת

הרוחניות שתוארו במחקר 2. שאלת המחקר המרכזית הייתה: מה קורה לחוקרים-שותפים המתעניינים ברוחניות

כאשר הם נחשפים למספר רב של דמויות-מופת רוחניות? המידע שנאסף הצביע על כך שהחוקרים-שותפים ראו

בתהליך חוויה הוליסטית וטרנספורמטיבית, שהתבטאה בדרכים שונות. ההשפעות העיקריות שתוארו כללו

"התבוננות עצמית ותובנות", "פתיחות והרחבה" ו"טיפול ביטחון עצמי רוחני". מהממצאים עולה כי מופתיות

רוחנית נקבעת על ידי "תהודה סימפתית" בין דמות-המופת לבין האדם שתופס אותו כדמות-מופת. התנאים

שתרמו להשפעות של התהליך כללו את זיקתם האישית של החוקרים לנושא המחקר, שיטת המחקר הרב-

ממדית, ואולי גם מאפייניה הייחודיים של מופתיות רוחנית. המאמר המתאר מחקר זה וממצאיו התפרסם בכתב

העת Journal of Contemplative Studies, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57010/TIWG2652>

מחקר זה עוזר למלא חלל בספרות המדעית בתחומי הפסיכולוגיה של הדת והרוחניות, כמו גם

בפסיכולוגיה הומניסטית וטרנס-פרסונלית. חשיבותם של חיים מוארים ושל דמויות-מופת רוחניות עבור מתרגלים

ומחפשים רוחניים, וכן עבור מסורות דתיות ונתיבים רוחניים עצמם, נדונה בהרחבה בטקסטים מסורתיים. עם

זאת, שפע זה אינו מתבטא במחקר מדעי שיטתי בנושא. מחקר זה מכון לתרום לחקר שיטתי של חיים מוארים

ושל דמויות-מופת רוחניות ולהניח תשתית למחקרים עתידיים בתחום.

חקר החיים המוארים ודמויות-המופת הרוחניות מציע אפשרות להתמודד עם השוני בין דתות ועם

הדיכוטומיה בין דת לחילוניות, על ידי הבהרה נוספת של המהות המיסטית המשותפת לתרבויות ולמסורות דתיות

שונות ועידוד פלורליזם דתי ותרבותי. התמקדות בחוויה החייה של מהות זו, במקום במושגים מופשטים ובדוגמות,

יכולה לשרת את קידום הדיאלוג הבין-דתי והבין-תרבותי וליצור גשרים של עניין משותף, הבנה, הערכה ודיאלוג בין

הדתות והתרבויות בעולם.

חיים מוארים ומופתיות רוחנית:
מחקר פנומנולוגי מנקודות-מבט שונות

עמיר פריימן

מנחה: פרופ' עפרה מייזלס
ועדה מלווה: Prof. Aostre Johnson (SMC) ו-Prof. Tobin Hart (UWG)

חיבור לשם קבלת התואר
"דוקטור לפילוסופיה"
דוקטורט פרסומים

אוניברסיטת חיפה
הפקולטה לחינוך
החוג לייעוץ והתפתחות האדם

נובמבר 2024

חיים מוארים ומופתיות רוחנית:
מחקר פנומנולוגי מנקודות-מבט שונות

עמיר פריימן

חיבור לשם קבלת התואר

“דוקטור לפילוסופיה”

דוקטורט פרסומים

אוניברסיטת חיפה

הפקולטה לחינוך

החוג לייעוץ והתפתחות האדם

נובמבר 2024