

1-1-2007

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### Recommended Citation

Hibbard, W. (2007). Hibbard, W. (2007). Reports of transpersonal experiences by non-native practitioners of the Native American sweat lodge ceremony: A critical appraisal. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 26(1), 18–32.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 26 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2007.26.1.18>



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# Reports of Transpersonal Experiences by Non-Native Practitioners of the Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony: A Critical Appraisal

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Interviews with 30 experienced non-native practitioners of the Native American sweat lodge ceremony revealed 184 reports of transpersonal experiences. Interview questions sought to (a) disclose how practitioners discern or critique their own experiences, (b) consider alternative explanations for practitioners' experiences, and (c) critically reflect on the sweat lodge ceremony per se as a spiritual practice. It was found that practitioners generally (a) interpreted their experiences as trustworthy interactions with a spiritual reality, (b) did not seriously consider alternative explanations for their experiences, and (c) neglected to reflect critically on the sweat lodge ceremony per se as a spiritual practice.

**N**on-native participants in the Native American sweat lodge ceremony sometimes report transpersonal experiences. The purpose of this paper is to (a) disclose how practitioners discern or critique their experiences, (b) consider alternative explanations for practitioners' experiences, and (c) critically reflect on the sweat lodge ceremony per se as a spiritual practice.

## **Background**

Hibbard (2007) conducted a qualitative interview study of 30 experienced non-native practitioners of the Native American sweat lodge ceremony. The essential purpose of the sweat lodge is to provide a place and context for purification, healing, and petitionary prayer, that is, to draw in and incur spiritual favor (Bucko, 1998). Through purposively identifying and interviewing key practitioners (i.e., sweat lodge leaders and senior practitioners), ten subjects were selected from each of three different lodges, representing different traditions and from different parts of the country, including Montana, Texas, and Arizona. Practitioners included 17 females and 13 males, ranging in age from 27 to 65 with an average of 50. The number of sweat lodge ceremonies participated in ranged from 80 to 1000 with an average of 271, and the years of sweat lodge practice ranged from 8 to 33 with an average of 18. The transcribed interview data revealed 184 reports of transpersonal experiences

which occurred during an estimated 8,126 ceremonies. A qualitative data reduction and content analysis identified 31 types of transpersonal experience that were reduced to 17 categories. Major categories include: encounter experiences (e.g., experiencing the presence of or communicating with spirit beings), psychoid experiences (e.g., physical spiritistic phenomena and healings), visual phenomena (e.g., seeing lights and forms in the hot rocks), visions; feelings of connectedness, channeling, intuitive knowings about participants, leaving the physical body, sympathetic resonance with the earth, and feeling beyond/greater than one's normal self. (For a complete description of the research method and resulting taxonomy of transpersonal sweat lodge experiences, see Hibbard, 2007.)

## **Practitioners' Self-Critique of Their Experiences**

The possibilities for self-deception in interpreting one's experience are legion; therefore, critical reflection is necessary. This may be especially true with non-native practitioners of the Native American sweat lodge ceremony. D. Rothberg (personal communication, May 29, 2003) noted that, whereas some Eastern spiritual traditions have "internal processes for discernment, often built into the student-teacher relationship," non-native sweat lodges may lack such an internal evaluation system. Therefore, the task of such discernment for

practitioners in non-native lodges—at least in lodges that lack a genuinely trained and experienced sweat lodge leader—falls on the practitioner.

To disclose how and to what extent practitioners discerned or critiqued their own experiences, each subject in the study was asked a series of interview questions that probed (a) the meaning of their experiences, (b) how they account for or explain their experiences, (c) how they evaluate their experiences, (d) how seriously they take their experiences, and why, (e) whether they trust their experiences, and why, and (f) if they doubt their experiences, and why or why not. Each interview question and a summary of findings follows.

*What does your experience mean to you?*

Practitioners had difficulty addressing the meaning of their experiences. Specifically, 14 of 30 (47%) had something to say in this regard; the remainder had no idea.

Transpersonal sweat lodge experiences mean different things to different practitioners. In general, however, most believe that such experiences, as one said, are “evidence of a spiritual reality that we can communicate with in the sweat lodge.” Similarly, another practitioner stated that her experiences are an “affirmation of my belief in a spirit world, a validation of a spirit world that I can interact with.” And another stated, “In a very tangible way it means that our prayers are answered.” A few practitioners stressed the practical value of their experiences. One practitioner stated:

There’s an old Ojibwa medicine man who I heard say that religion is no good if it doesn’t help you grow corn. In other words, that it helps you live here today. So, for me, my spiritual experiences in the sweat are helpful in seeing the bigger spiritual nature of things, but I often go back into my daily life with a different perspective. . . . For me it makes living easier and more rich. . . . For me this information is immediately practical; it’s not pie in the sky theoretical stuff, it’s really useful right away.

To others, their experiences meant that “there is some kind of help outside myself that I cannot see.” And one practitioner stressed that her experiences meant that

we are more than we think. When we tune into that otherness you heal into a wholeness that’s just beyond

you. It means that every time something like that happens to you you have a deeper understanding of what’s on the other side, those other dimensions.

The general sentiment, however, when asked about meaning was summed up well by a 58-year-old man: “We are connected to the sacred.”

*How do you account for or explain your transpersonal experience in the sweat lodge; that is, what do you think is its cause or source?*

Twenty-eight practitioners (93%) had something to say regarding an accounting or explanation for their experiences, although several admitted that they simply did not know: “I have no explanation,” or “I honestly don’t know.” A few others confessed: “I don’t dwell on it thinking that I need to figure it out.” “I don’t know and I don’t care. I don’t question it. They are all gifts of grace. They are, they just exist.” “I don’t try to explain it. I just accept it for what it was.” And the oldest practitioner, a 65 year old with a terminal degree, stated, “My intent is not to explain it. It’s part of the mystery that we can’t fathom.”

Similarly, several believe that science is of little or no help in explaining their experience. For instance, one person with two masters’ degrees suggested:

My own personal attitude about science is that it’s a myth; it’s a crude scaffolding that attempts to wrap itself around reality to give us a sense of understanding about the unknowable. It’s a great tool but it does not describe reality. Based on that bias, I think that science has become the cosmology of our time and that the general public uses science as a way to explain their reality, so they will keep coming back to science to validate truth. They will look for scientific explanations to explain things. I don’t care to give a scientific explanation. I don’t use my spiritual practice to prove that science is true, and I don’t need science to prove that my spiritual practice is true.

However, the majority of practitioners ventured an explanation for their experiences. In general, most invoked some type of spiritual explanation. For instance, a Jesuit initiate believes that his experiences are “a response from the Creator to our prayers. It’s a way the spirit beings communicate with [us], an affirmation of what we’re doing.” Similarly, a man with a master’s degree in philosophy stated:

I believe that the Creator's helpers are always present to us, are always trying to communicate with us, are always trying to help us and bless us, and the reason we do ceremony is so that we can get ourselves into a place where we're prepared to listen. When I get into the lodge it knocks down my defenses, or softens me up physically and spiritually, so I feel like I'm more receptive. The Creator's blessings are always there for us and we do the sweat to cleanse ourselves of the things that get in the way, but also to make us more receptive. We are a less than perfect receiving instrument, and the sweat is a gift given to us so that we can let go of all the things that get in the way of us receiving those blessings and hearing what the Creator's helpers are trying to tell us.

Another practitioner believes that

the source of the transpersonal experiences is the spirits who have a bond with the spiritual leader conducting the sweat and compassion for the people who are requesting the prayers.

Yet another believes that "the sweat lodge ceremony raises one's spiritual energy which makes one more permeable to spirit, so that means that you can connect with your own inner counsel." And others use the metaphor of alchemy: "The sweat lodge is an alchemical container, a crucible in which people can transform."

#### *What's your evaluation of your experience?*

Twenty practitioners (67%) weighed in on this question. In general, they regard their experiences as real. "I consider my experiences completely true," is a representative response. Furthermore, practitioners do not want to discount their experiences; most take them literally, not symbolically, and they consider themselves quite sane. "I don't feel I'm delusional," is a general sentiment. One well-educated practitioner explained it this way:

Mental illness looks different than this. In mental illness, if somebody is schizophrenic and hallucinating and delusional, there will be no events in the world that will confirm their delusion. It's purely in their heads. When it's a spiritual experience, things happen in the physical world that show you the validity that what you saw in a vision or dream, or what you experienced, was not just in your head, but

that there was a true event of power happening that was not you. That's been my general experience.

Furthermore, most practitioners are struck by the reality of their experience. For instance, one was adamant that "I'm not imagining it. . . . It's as real as the person next to me."

#### *How seriously do you take your experience? Why?*

All but one said that they take their experiences seriously, most extremely so. "As seriously as I take this interview with you," said one, "It's a real experience to me." Similarly, another said, "They're very real from my point of view. It's not a matter of belief; it happened." And another: "As seriously as I take that coffee cup on the table. They're real. They're in a different category, but they are real."

Why do practitioners take their experiences seriously? "Because," as one said, "it's firsthand experience. There's no intermediary between me and spirit." Another said, "Because I receive relevant information that is immediately understandable."

#### *Do you trust your experiences? Why?*

All but two practitioners said that they trust their experiences. When asked why, they gave an assortment of reasons. Some simply have faith in their sweat lodge experiences. An older practitioner and lifelong seeker said, "Because my transpersonal experience is finally leading me to some understanding." Others do not believe them unless they get concrete verification in the outside world. Several trusted their experiences because they were shared experiences (e.g., two practitioners had the same experience of seeing a hawk inside the lodge). Another practitioner said,

I trust my experience because it's not unique; people across generations and cultures have come to the same kind of conclusions. Another reason I trust my experiences is that they work; there's payoff in the real world.

And lastly, a lifelong devotee and personal friend of the East Indian adept, Sai Baba, said:

I trust my experience in the sweat lodge because it lets me rise to my practice. Since being involved in spiritual pursuits since 1967 I've learned to judge on my own integrity what's right and wrong, to not

vary my own integrity, and the sweat lodge allows me to keep that completely. It never asks me to do something that I wouldn't do. It has no demands on my life like so many religious practices, such as you need to be celibate to be a priest. The sweat asks none of those things; it just asks you to be a human being and be fully human.

*Have you ever doubted your experience? Why or why not?*

Even though 93% of practitioners trust their experiences, a full 80% entertain doubts regarding at least some of their experiences. As one practitioner said, "Not the ones that really jolt me, but certainly I doubt others." Commented one practitioner, "As a human being you wonder if they really happened." A few others consider more rational explanations for phenomena, such as the lodge shaking ("It could've been that someone was shaking the lodge"), and seeing things in the glowing rocks, or seeing lights ("I see faces in the rocks, but I don't think it's transpersonal. I think it's my imagination. I see lights but I don't think they're really lights. I think I just get tracers when I close my eyes and move my head"), and seeing spirit animals ("It might be due to my imagination"). Other practitioners doubt their experiences if they do not get confirmation or verification in the physical world.

### **Alternative Explanations for Practitioners' Experiences**

For the purposes of this study, nothing within the totality of the practitioners' experience was excluded from investigation, even though, as Harman and deQuincey (1994) noted, "not all claims may be ultimately verified" (p. 15). For example,

Mystic claims to union with transcendent reality must at some point be evaluated in terms of critical theory concerning that reality. . . . After all, the *noetic* claims of mystics at some point are right or wrong, and critical theory must evolve to evaluate such claims." (Hood, 1985, p. 293)

Whether the self-reports of practitioners generated in this study are right and not wrong, they will have to survive certain critical challenges in the form of alternative explanations.

What follows is my assessment of a number of alternative explanations for practitioners' reports of their experiences. The assessment is based on my subjective impressions gained during the one-on-one, face-to-face

interviews (which ranged from one to three hours) and while participating in a sweat lodge ceremony with each of the subjects.

### *Psychological*

Some classic psychological theorists link transpersonal experiences with psychopathology; that is, as symptoms of pathological, even schizophrenic, regression (Alexander & Selesnich, 1966), "mystical descent" to pre-verbal, undifferentiated states (Prince, 1974), depersonalization (Signer, 1988), or affective disorders (Masson & Masson, 1978).

Another psychological explanation is that transpersonal experiences are more ordinary experiences misinterpreted. For instance, regarding mystical experiences, classic theorists have analyzed them as "experiences of union *misinterpreted* by those who would think they have been united with an ultimate transcendent reality" (Hood, 1985, p. 286, italics his). Similarly, Stace (1960) conjectures that "mystics may be mistaken in their interpretations of their experiences" (p. 15). In other words, there is a probability that some practitioners are self-deluded in believing that they experienced transpersonal phenomena in the sweat lodge; that is, their "transpersonal experience" may not be transpersonal at all, but have a more conventional explanation. For instance, practitioners' reports of seeing something meaningful in the glowing rocks may be a projection, weather changes may be coincidental, channeling may be communications with one's unconscious, or hearing voices may be an internal production of one's psyche, to name a few possibilities.

Yet other psychologists credit transpersonal experiences to illusion and suggestibility. During his work with Lakota medicine men, Lewis (1990) marveled at ceremonial participants' "willingness and even eagerness to suspend critical judgment. Participants in ritual demonstrate . . . suggestibility and participate voluntarily in illusion" (p. 42). For example, Lewis describes night sings in which

the flashing blue sparks are obviously produced by a wheel-and-flint cigarette lighter. The shaman and audience, however, identify the lights as manifestations of spirit helpers. 'The spirits make the lights,' says the medicine man, and we all agree, 'Huh!'" (p. 42)

Similarly, a consultant on this study, R. West (personal communication, May 12, 2003), who lived 24 years with



the Blackfoot Nation in Montana, witnessed a Native American sweat lodge leader surreptitiously sprinkle grated lighter flints on the fire to create sparks, which he said were spirits, and which the participants readily believed. And the “shaking” lodge (which most attribute to spirits) may often be due, as West mused, to “a dog leaning against the lodge scratching fleas.”

Tart (1972/1973) cautioned that illusions and misperceptions are enhanced immensely in some altered states of consciousness (ASC), often to the point that they seem perfectly real, even though they may actually be “purely arbitrary imaginings” (p. 56). This problem may be compounded by “the fact that one person’s illusion in a given ASC can sometimes be communicated to another person in the same ASC so that a kind of false consensual validation results” (p. 57).

I did not detect a link between any reported experiences of the sample practitioners and psychopathology; however, there is a high probability that at least some experiences were misinterpreted. In fact, one astute practitioner commented, “You have to be really careful about misinterpreting your experience. I mean, hearing voices is problematic.” Similarly, the many reports of visual phenomena, such as seeing lights, may be attributed to more mundane causes (e.g., phosgene stimulation), rather than the “presence of spirits” (the usual explanation). The common experience of seeing meaningful things, such as faces, in the glowing hot rocks is, as observed by a psychiatrist practitioner, very “Rorschachy,” in the same way people project meaning into an ink blot. Also, in light of Tart’s (1972/1973) “false consensual validation” (p. 57) via mutual ASCs, what is one to make of the several shared transpersonal experiences in sweat lodges reported by practitioners, such as the presence of a hawk or an extremely malevolent force? On the surface, shared experiences lend credibility to the “reality” of the phenomena, but the reality may be that they are shared “arbitrary imaginings” (p. 56).

There certainly was an obvious tendency “to want to believe” the transpersonal. Also, as observed by R. West (personal communication, May 12, 2003), there certainly is a “willing suspension of disbelief in the mini-theater we call the ‘sweat lodge,’ just as with whiteman’s theater in which disbelief is dropped for a few hours and resumed sometime thereafter.” This willing suspension of disbelief is a double-edged sword; it makes one not only suggestible and gullible, but also open to the possibility of the transpersonal.

### *Psychoanalytic*

The orthodox psychoanalytic tradition regards many transpersonal states as a regression to infantile primary narcissism. (This tradition is distinguished from more progressive and generative psychoanalytic traditions, such as Jung’s, which regard transpersonal experiences positively.) For example, Freud (1930/1961) acknowledged that some people have “a sensation of eternity, something oceanic,” a feeling of “connection with the surrounding world” (p. 2). Although he never had the experience himself, he interpreted this feeling as an essentially regressive, pathological state, the persistence of an infantile consciousness without which some people are not strong enough to endure life.

Of the 184 reports of experiences in this study, only a dozen bore any similarity to Freud’s (1930/1961) description of regression to infantile primary narcissism; that is, “a sensation of eternity, something oceanic,” a feeling of “connection with the surrounding world” (p. 2). For example, some practitioners experienced a feeling of connectedness, or the melting of boundaries, or a sympathetic resonance with the earth, or being part of a divine universe. These experiences, however, are valued highly and reported to have a positive effect on the practitioners’ psyches and lives, and did not appear to be pathological regressions to infantile consciousness. Consequently, in terms of the pre/trans fallacy (discussed below), I believe that the practitioners’ experiences appeared to be transpersonal and not prepersonal, as Freud would suggest.

### *Physiological*

Transpersonal experiences are explained sometimes in terms of altered physiological states. For example, Paper (1990) argued that the altered states of consciousness experienced by sweat lodge practitioners are caused by “partial sensory deprivation, combined with dehydration, hypoxventilation, auditory driving and other trance-inducing neurophysiological factors” (p. 92).

Without question, sweat lodge participants are subjected to extreme physiological conditions, as personally witnessed in sweat lodges with each of the sample groups. These conditions include: sensory deprivation (i.e., total darkness), extreme heat, dehydration (some traditions do not allow drinking water until after the ceremony), oxygen deprivation (some lodges are very small or very crowded, and nearly

airtight), and fasting (some practitioners, at least on occasion, fast before sweats). These conditions likely have many effects on participants' consciousness and may explain certain experiences.

Even if the physiological explanations for transpersonal experience are true, they are only partially so. Several practitioners reported experiences that happened before the sweat lodge ceremony even began. For instance, a woman said she clearly saw her biological grandfathers in the lodge before the rocks were even brought in or the door closed. "It wasn't because it was dark, or because I was fasting, or because I was hot, or because the shadows were playing tricks on me," she noted. "All the things that I could make up to explain why this happened were taken away."

#### *Psychobiological/neuropsychological*

Psychobiologists and neuro-psychologists offer a biological explanation for transpersonal experiences. They argue that the brain is the biological substrate for consciousness; brain processes cause mental experiences. Biological correlates, then, are considered the *real* underlying basis of conscious states, whether mundane or transpersonal. In other words, to produce a specific biological state is to produce a corresponding conscious state. The extreme form of this argument, according to Tart (1979), posits that since consciousness is a product of brain function, transpersonal experiences are illusory and delusional.

As one example, Mandell (1980) explained transpersonal experiences as the result of the failure of regulatory mechanisms maintaining steady-state function, an artifact of "going beyond the normal limits of the mechanisms of adaptation" (p. 387). Transpersonal experiences, then, are regarded by this psychobiological viewpoint as "adaptational failures." Specifically, Mandell identified neurobiochemical mechanisms that result in various transpersonal experiences, including: (a) neurochemical changes induced in the dopaminergic neural systems leading to runaway excitation of certain brain functions; (b) arrested cell firing and uptake of tryptophan, which may account for the intensification of affectual states; (c) the hyperexcitation of hippocampal CA<sub>3</sub> cells leading to hippocampal-septal synchronous discharges and ecstatic emotional flooding; and (d) the sudden loss of hippocampal inhibitory influence on the reticular arousal system along with the loss of comparator function which result in a dissolution of ego boundaries,

a sense of "unity" or "luminescence," and the association of "insight" with "ecstasy."

As other examples, d'Aquili and Newberg (1993) described a detailed mechanism for the neurophysiological basis of meditative experiences. Newberg and d'Aquili (2000) advanced

a neurobiological analysis of mysticism and other spiritual experiences [which] might elucidate the continuum of these experiences by allowing for a typology based on the underlying brain functions." (p. 260)

And Persinger (1987) argued that such experiences—what he calls "God Beliefs"—"should be correlated with normal, transient electrical perturbations of the human temporal lobe" (p. 16) triggered by psychological and physiological factors.

As with the physiological explanations for transpersonal experience, the extreme conditions of the sweat lodge may produce certain alterations in brain processes that cause the "transpersonal" condition. Although this may explain some experiences, it would not explain all. For instance, it would not explain the reports of extraordinary physical healings (e.g., an allegedly documented case of curing cancer), changing the weather (e.g., making it rain during a drought or snow in August), or physical spiritistic phenomena (e.g., a hot rock flying out of the fire pit, a bucket of splash water flying around the lodge, or being hit by large bird wings that flap around inside the lodge).

#### *Self-fulfilling expectations*

Practitioners bring certain beliefs to the sweat lodge which, in some cases, may have the effect of self-fulfilling expectations. For example, if practitioners believe that the sweat lodge is a place to encounter "spirits," such an encounter subsequently may be "experienced."

The interview data revealed that most practitioners believe that the sweat lodge is a place to encounter "spirits." This belief may explain the high incidence of encounter experiences reported; that is, practitioners believe that there is a likelihood of encountering "spirits," therefore they do. This is not surprising given that, as some argue, transpersonal experiences are fully mediated and shaped by the language, culture, doctrinal beliefs, and soteriological expectations of the traditions in which they occur (e.g., Katz, 1978). In other words, practitioners

tend to experience and report what is cultivated by their traditions.

#### *Set and setting*

According to Grof (1994), *set* and *setting* are crucial variables influencing the outcome of LSD psychotherapy:

The term *set* includes the expectations, motivations and intentions of the subject in regard to the session; the therapist's or guide's concept of the nature of the LSD experience; the agreed-upon goal of the psychedelic procedure; the preparation and programming for the session; and the specific technique of guidance used during the drug experience. The term *setting* refers to the actual environment, both physical and interpersonal, and to the concrete circumstances under which the drug is administered. (p. 102)

Similarly, the set and setting surrounding the sweat lodge might be important variables influencing the frequency and type of experiences elicited. Without question, practitioners bring certain expectations, motivations, and intentions (e.g., to have a spiritual experience), the leader has a certain concept of the nature of the experience (based on study and past experience), there may be an agreed upon goal for the ceremony (e.g., the healing of a specific malady), both practitioner and leader undergo certain preparations for the ceremony (e.g., fasting), and use a specific technical protocol during the ceremony (e.g., rituals, songs, prayers), all of which influence the practitioner's experience in manifold ways. For instance, as noted above, the overall set of the sweat lodge ceremony predisposes practitioners to have encounter experiences.

Similarly the setting of the sweat lodge ceremony certainly encourages transpersonal experiences. I well remember my first sweat lodge with a Native American elder and medicine man: the ritualized gathering of willows and rocks, prayerful construction of the lodge and sacred fire, the preparatory prayers and invocations, then entering the lodge for the ceremony itself. The ceremony is enchanting, immersed in the womb-like darkness, the red hot rocks the only light, sitting on Mother Earth, the smell of sweet grass and sage, the rhythmic drumming and chants and soulful prayer in native tongue, the near scorching steam on my skin. It all certainly predisposes and encourages transpersonal experience. However, beyond this generalization, I found no association

between setting—which ranged from rural to urban and traditional to eclectic—and the frequency and type of experience.

#### *Personalities of participants and leaders*

As Grof (1994) noted, the personalities of the subject and therapist in LSD psychotherapy are crucial variables influencing the subject's experience. Similarly, the personalities of sweat lodge participants and the personality of the ceremonial leader may be important variables influencing the type of experiences. For instance, the experience of suggestible practitioners likely would be influenced by the personality of a charismatic leader in the direction of the leader's belief system.

My limited contact with both the sweat lodge leaders and participants precludes any specific observations about their personalities. However, practitioners in all three groups expressed considerable admiration for their respective ceremonial leaders and, as will be discussed later, generally exhibited an uncritical acceptance of their teachings. (The study did not disclose whether practitioners were generally uncritical, or whether some of them initially subjected their leaders to scrutiny and found they passed.) Consequently, the experience of practitioners did appear to be influenced by the personalities of the leaders in the direction of the leaders' belief systems. Interestingly, several practitioners independently commented that they believed that the ceremonial leader was very important in influencing peoples' experience, however, they were not able to articulate specific examples.

#### *Demand characteristics*

The demand characteristics (Orne, 1962) of the ceremony (i.e., an implicit pressure to experience something transpersonal) may encourage practitioners to "experience" transpersonal occasions that they actually did not experience, or inflate experiences beyond what really occurred. For instance, some sweat lodge ceremonies begin with the invocation of various "spirits," which may encourage some practitioners to "experience" their presence. Similarly, the demand characteristics of the interview situation may encourage some subjects to report experiences that they really did not have, or exaggerate or misinterpret them. For example, several practitioners reported having "visions," but after probing their experience further, I determined that they were not visions but visualizations, because they lacked the requisite intensity and vividness characteristic of visions.



### *Self-esteem needs*

Intrinsic, often subconscious, self-esteem needs (Hales, 1985) of practitioners may influence some to report nonexistent experiences or inflate experiences. In other words, some practitioners' self-esteem may depend on having an "experience" to report, or they may want to please the interviewer or make themselves "look good."

To mitigate the potential self-esteem need to exaggerate one's transpersonal sweat lodge experience, I took precautions during each interview "to make it okay" not to have had such an experience (e.g., by admitting that I have never had one during a sweat lodge ceremony). However, this is not to say that a few practitioners may not have inflated their experience. In fact, several appeared to be "fishing" for some experience to report, even if it was not transpersonal, such as enhanced dreamwork and sensory awareness. Overall, however, I was impressed with the apparent honesty of the sample practitioners and believe that they gave truthful reports.

Whether the interpretation of the reports of transpersonal experiences of practitioners of the sweat lodge ceremony ultimately survive these alternative explanations, it is my position that the experiential reports in this study are interesting in and of themselves and, in the tradition of radical empiricism, are data worth investigating and reporting. Therefore, the reported transpersonal experiences of sweat lodge practitioners were assumed to refer to experiential realities; that is, as experientially real to the practitioners. And, it should be acknowledged that even if these alternative explanations are true, the sweat lodge ceremony still has positive value for practitioners.

### **Critical Reflections on the Sweat Lodge Ceremony as a Spiritual Practice**

Just as practitioners' reports of transpersonal experiences should be reflected on critically, the practice of the sweat lodge ceremony per se should be as well. Based on my personal experience with and observations of the three lodges represented in the sample, I attempted a preliminary critical reflection on the sweat lodge ceremony per se relative to several criteria.

#### *Pre/trans fallacy*

The sweat lodge ceremony, as practiced by Euro-Americans, can be examined in light of the *pre/trans fallacy*. The pre/trans fallacy, according to Wilber (1996), refers to a confusion of prerational realms with

transrational realms (which ostensibly lie on a linear, vertical continuum or spectrum):

Because the prerational and transrational realms are, in their own ways, nonrational, they appear similar or even identical to the untutored eye. This confusion generally leads to one of two opposite mistakes: either the transrational is *reduced* to the prerational (e.g., Freud), or the prerational is *elevated* to the transrational (e.g., Jung)." (p. 248)

It is important to note, however, that Grof (1988) found fault with Wilber's seemingly linear conception of the pre/trans fallacy which, in Grof's opinion, forces Wilber to regard pre-egoic states as regressive, and trans-egoic states as progressive. Based on his four decades of clinical research into nonordinary states of consciousness, Grof believes that "spiritual evolution typically does not follow a direct linear trajectory [as Wilber maintains], but involves a combined regressive and progressive movement of consciousness" (p. 113). As a result, Grof advocates *regression in service of transcendence*, a "spiral trajectory" in which consciousness enfolds or bends back into itself on the way to the unfoldment of a higher integration. In fact, contrary to Wilber, Grof believes that "regression to earlier stages of evolution is absolutely essential" (p. 112).

Whatever the case, there is a seductive tendency—especially among New Age enthusiasts, a fact to which I can attest to from personal experience and observation—to elevate prerational practices and experiences to transrational. Regarding the sweat lodge ceremony, my general observation is that practitioners uniformly believe it to be a transpersonal practice (even though few may consciously articulate it as such or use that term). I concur with Wilber's (1995) suggestion, however, that it is not the practice per se, but the level of consciousness of the practitioner that is the crucial variable; that is, practitioners of the same practice (e.g., the sweat lodge ceremony) may have experiences ranging from the prerational and prepersonal to the transrational and transpersonal. Regardless, Zimmerman (1998) cautions that "everyone involved in such practices should be aware of the pre/trans fallacy and the danger of confusing prepersonal with transpersonal states" (p. 199). Vaughan (1987) agreed, cautioning that "it would be useful to determine whether participation in the group promotes pathological regression to prepersonal states or healthy, authentic transcendence of ego" (p. 269).

I was troubled by the fact that virtually no one in the sample was aware of the pre/trans fallacy, let alone Zimmerman's and Vaughan's cautions. Regarding the prerational and prepersonal, I did witness a considerable lack of rational, critical thinking and evaluation regarding practitioners' experiences, as well as tendencies towards magical and mythical thought. For instance, regarding magical thought, many practitioners accept uncritically the animistic Native American belief that all things are alive and conscious (although what natives and non-natives mean by "alive" and "conscious" may differ), and that their mental intentions (e.g., prayers) are able to magically alter the physical world. Regarding mythical thought, many practitioners accepted the mythology of their particular tradition without reflecting rationally on their reasons for doing so. Additionally, many practitioners uncritically referenced the works of Castaneda, McGaa, and Andrews. At best, these works are controversial and, at worst, discredited (e.g., see DeMille's, 1976 and 1980, critiques of Castaneda; Churchill's, 1992, critique of McGaa; according to B. Secunda, personal communication, July 27, 2003, and J. Kremer, personal communication, December 6, 2004, Andrews' material apparently is a fictionalized retelling of stories told to her by indigenous informants).

Similarly, there was a considerable lack of rational, critical thinking and evaluation regarding the sweat lodge per se as a spiritual practice, and a clear tendency of practitioners to regard it as a sacred, protected space in which only good can happen. Typical was a proclamation by one senior practitioner and sweat lodge leader: "Malevolent forces are not possible in the sweat lodge." To which R. West (personal communication, May 12, 2003) replied, "She's out of her mind. Anybody who thinks that the sweat can't be used for malevolent purposes is uninformed; they have no clue." According to West's personal experience, the sweat lodge, particularly in Indian Country, is used often for sorcery and the most venal purposes. Additionally, it is claimed that some people die during sweat lodge ceremonies (V. Deloria, personal communication, March 23, 2003), and they can push psychologically unstable individuals over the edge. For instance, a sweat lodge leader described the following: "At the end of this one lodge I was leading, this guy was vomiting, shitting, and totally not there, nobody home, he was babbling like a child. It was scary." Clearly, the sweat lodge is not solely beneficent. It is a potentially powerful spiritual technology that can be

used for multiple purposes (not all good) with uncertain outcomes.

Regarding the transpersonal experiences reported by practitioners, there was a high incidence of experiences (e.g., encounter experiences of various types) that Grof (1988) places in the higher transpersonal levels (i.e., psychic and subtle) of his taxonomy. However, no experiences were reported that would correspond to the highest transpersonal levels (i.e., the causal and absolute).

#### *Authenticity and legitimacy*

Wilber (1983) would argue that the sweat lodge in general, and each specific lodge in particular, should be adjudicated as a religious practice according to its authenticity and legitimacy. *Authenticity* is a determination of a religious practice's "relative location of the developmental hierarchy of structuralization. Is this 'religious involvement' archaic, magical, mythical, rational, psychic, subtle, causal" (p. 123)? Authenticity, then, is a vertical measure of a religious expression's level of developmental sophistication, hence a measure of its transpersonal transformative power. *Legitimacy*, is a horizontal measure of

how well the particular religious engagement is serving stability and integration *within* the group itself (content legitimacy) and *between* the group and its broader society background (context legitimacy)." (p. 127)

My observation is that the level of developmental sophistication or authenticity of the sweat lodge depends first and foremost on the level of developmental sophistication of the ceremonial leader, and not the sweat lodge per se. For instance, a ceremonial leader steeped in magical thought (e.g., animistic beliefs) tends to encourage and elicit the same in his lodge participants. Secondly, as noted above, a crucial variable is the level of developmental sophistication of the practitioner; some tend to be prerational, others rational, a few transrational, and they experience the sweat lodge accordingly.

Spearman rank order correlation coefficients showed that there was no significant correlation between the incidence of transpersonal experience and the number of sweat lodge ceremonies participated in or the number of years practiced (Hibbard, 2007). In other words, the incidence of experiences does not increase with practice. The data showed that experienced practitioners

were no more likely to have experiences than those less experienced. In fact, the reverse seems to be true, possibly, as one practitioner conjectured, “Much of the sweat’s power may be how different it is from ordinary waking life,” and that difference is most striking early on. Also, practitioners’ experiences came full-blown; that is, they did not develop over time. Additionally, the three people in the sample whom I know the best and respect the most, who had apprenticed seriously under a genuine Native American sweat lodge leader for many years and ostensibly were in an ideal position, time, and place to have transpersonal experiences, had the least number of such experiences. These findings indicated that there is no apparent developmental sequence, which suggests that the sweat lodge practice lacks transpersonal transformative power, and hence authenticity. If this is true, it may be because the sweat lodge ceremony is essentially a sporadic, exoteric religious practice, a primary purpose of which is to pray for spiritual intercession. It is not a regular, contemplative, esoteric practice, a primary purpose of which is transpersonal development.

That being said, it is significant to note that the data suggest that the sweat lodge encourages “mid-level” transpersonal experiences. That is, when compared to Grof’s taxonomy—which is arranged developmentally and hierarchically from “lower” to “higher” transpersonal experiences—the reports of transpersonal sweat lodge experiences fall in the mid-third (i.e., there were no reports of experiences corresponding with Grof’s bottom ten or top nine subcategories). This could simply mean that the practice of the sweat lodge is most relevant to those at this range of development. Or, if the sweat lodge is a relatively stage-specific practice—as many transpersonal practices are—those not yet “ready” for it would not show up or stick around, and those who had gained what they needed would move on.

Regarding legitimacy, the lodges represented in this sample appear to serve stability and integration within the group (content legitimacy) to a high degree. To a lesser degree they appear to serve stability and integration between the group and society (context legitimacy). For example, a few practitioners reported that their sweat lodge experience actually helps them integrate their spiritual lives within society. And, far from retreating from society, all of the study’s subjects were either gainfully employed (many with professional careers) and involved with family, social obligations,

and community work. The subjects struck me as being decent people and good citizens who have chosen the sweat lodge as their spiritual practice.

### *Participatory vision*

Ferrer (2002) advanced a non-evolutionary transpersonal theory—which he calls “a participatory vision of human spirituality”—in which transpersonal phenomena

can be more adequately conceived not as individual inner experiences, but as participatory events that can emerge in the locus of an individual, a relationship, a collective identity, or a place.” (pp. 2-3)

The participatory vision, Ferrer argued, is a more permissive and pluralistic understanding and model of human spirituality than the perennialism advanced by Wilber and others. Perennialism, Ferrer charged, is rather dogmatic and intolerant towards indigenous worldviews, regarding them as either inauthentic, merely exoteric, or less evolved than perennialism’s impersonal, nondual monism. Furthermore, the participatory vision (as well as traditional Native American worldviews) would find fault with Wilber’s pre/trans fallacy and authenticity measures described previously because they are based on a hierarchical model of spiritual givens that the contextualist critique (e.g., Katz, 1978) regards as untenable.

Instead of evaluating religious engagements against perennialist spiritual absolutes, or the degree to which they foster personal transpersonal experience, Ferrer argued that they be evaluated on their ability to help practitioners overcome delusions and ignorance, achieve liberating discernment and practical wisdom, and “stabilize spiritual consciousness, live a spiritual life, and transform the world accordingly” (p. 37). To what degree the sample sweat lodge practitioners have overcome their delusions and ignorance, or achieved liberating discernment and practical wisdom, is unknown. Most practitioners would claim, however, that the Native American beliefs and worldview that they adopted helps make their life experience more meaningful and understandable. Whether that is due to overcoming delusion and ignorance, or achieving liberating discernment and practical wisdom, is open to question. It may be that one set of delusions and state of ignorance have been exchanged for others, and any sense

of liberating discernment and practical wisdom may be more illusory than real. That is, it can be argued that traditional native beliefs and worldviews, in general, are prerational, not transrational, and therefore need to be transcended, not invoked, to further the course of one's conscious development (Wilber, 1995). Regardless, there is no doubt that the majority of practitioners take their sweat lodge practice very seriously and incorporate the worldview of their tradition which, it seems, helps them stabilize spiritual consciousness (whether prerational or transrational), live a spiritual life, and at least influence, if not transform, the world around them accordingly.

*Charismatic/technical, one-level/two-level, monistic/dualistic*

The question is: How does one determine if the sweat lodge one is involved with is an authentic spiritual engagement? One such attempt, the Anthony Typology, "is a conceptual framework designed to assist in assessing the spiritual validity and helpfulness as well as the potential harmfulness of a broad range of groups and leaders who claim to offer higher consciousness, enlightenment, salvation, or transformation" (Anthony & Ecker, 1987, p. 36). The Anthony Typology rates a spiritual group or religious engagement along three descriptive dimensions that allows the group or engagement to be rated according to its likelihood of being problematic. As described by Anthony and Ecker, the *one-level/two-level* dimension refers to one-level religions that focus on manifest reality as the arena of salvation, whereas two-level religions focus on a transtemporal liberation. The *charismatic/technical* dimension refers to charismatic religions that center on the personality of the leader, whereas technical religions center on techniques and practices. The *monistic/dualistic* dimension refers to monistic religions that believe that all are ultimately One with the Godhead, whereas dualistic religions believe that only a select few can reach the Godhead. Problematic groups tend to be one-level, while positive groups tend to be two-level. Charismatic groups tend to be more problematic than technical groups, and dualistic groups tend to be more problematic than monistic groups. The worst possible combination, then, is one-level/charismatic/dualistic. The best possible combination is two-level, technical, and monistic.

Regarding the three lodges in the sample, they all appeared to be two-level, technical, and monistic, therefore relatively unproblematic according to the Anthony Typology. That is, the lodges believed in the

possibility of transtemporal liberation via a pluralistic and egalitarian experience of the Great Mystery through the conduct of a ritualized, ceremonial practice. The lodges did not believe in the salvation of a select few in this manifest reality via the aegis of a charismatic leader.

*Healthy vs. unhealthy spirituality*

Vaughan (1991) acknowledges the importance of healthy spirituality in life, but addresses its negative shadow side which is all too tempting to ignore or overlook. Similarly, Battista (1996) examined the question of when spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences are healthy or unhealthy.

For the sweat lodge to be a positive or healthy spiritual experience, Vaughan and Battista would counsel that practitioners need to proceed with a vigilance for the "shadow side," not only in themselves, but the leaders as well. In essence, practitioners need to be alert to Battista's

relevant distinction . . . between spiritual practices and beliefs that further the development and transformation of personality, and spiritual practices and beliefs that have been incorporated into a psychopathological personality that resists them." (p. 251)

The former is "true" or transformative spirituality and the latter is "false" or defensive spirituality. *False spirituality*, according to Battista, takes two forms. The first, *spiritual defenses*, "refers to spiritual beliefs that keep people from expressing their actual, embodied, emotional self" (p. 251), such as spiritual beliefs that are incongruent with the expression of anger. The second, *offensive spirituality*, is "the narcissistic use of a spiritual persona or spiritual identification" (p. 255), whether by teacher or student. For example, the teacher may abuse the teacher-student relationship or misuse his or her authority for personal gain. And the student may assert that he or she "is spiritually evolved, hence entitled to special rights and privileges that others should recognize and support" (p. 258).

There is certainly ample opportunity for either of these forms of false spirituality in conjunction with the sweat lodge. Overall, I found that the three lodges promoted the sweat lodge ceremony as a personally transformative process by encouraging, giving expression to, and integrating one's shadow. One practitioner



described it as “finding one’s voice.” In regards to spiritual defenses, the lodges at least allowed for, and one actively encouraged, the cathartic contact with and expression of one’s actual, embodied, emotional self. One lodge in particular even encouraged the expression of anger.

Regarding offensive spirituality, one of the three sweat lodge leaders clearly was guilty of the narcissistic use of a spiritual persona to elevate himself above his students and use that privileged position for personal gain in the form of spiritual status and monetary reward. His students seemed to be either blind to, in denial of, or rationalizing this blatant abuse of authority. The other two leaders were the embodiment of humility and compassion.

Vaughan outlined other forms of unhealthy spirituality, that also may be exhibited by sweat lodge leaders and participants. In general, the shadow side of otherwise healthy spirituality “is based on wishful thinking and the abdication of personal responsibility” (p. 106). Specifically, the shadow side may manifest as (a) an escape from reality or an avoidance of the pain and difficulties of ordinary life, (b) avoidance of self-responsibility by surrendering to an outside authority, (c) repressing, denying, and avoiding psychological problems, (d) self-deception and denial of the shadow, (e) inflation of spiritual insights, (f) ego inflation and projection of the negative shadow, and (g) replacing worldly ambition with spiritual ambition and making claims of spiritual specialness.

Regarding Vaughan’s many concerns, any of these signs of unhealthy spirituality may be present in individual sweat lodge practitioners. For example, I witnessed a disturbing tendency among some practitioners to ascribe to the leaders more spiritual power and authority than they actually possess. A commonly shared belief among the three lodges was expressed well by one practitioner: “He is a very powerful shaman.” Exactly what is meant by this, and on what evidence this judgment is based, I do not know; however, I strongly suspect that there is considerable infantile projection of omniscience onto the leaders. Also, due to the fact that a primary purpose of the sweat lodge ceremony is petitionary prayer to the “spirits,” I noticed a tendency on the part of some practitioners to avoid self-responsibility by wishfully praying for magical intervention of some powerful outside spiritual entity—which is to say that infantile desire for the omnipotent parent also is problematic. Additionally, I witnessed some spiritual ambition and inflation of spiritual insights which

led to feelings of spiritual specialness. I did not, however, detect any serious flights from reality or avoidance of psychological problems. To the contrary, the majority of practitioners claimed to be using the sweat lodge to facilitate psychological healing and personal growth. However, just as practitioners need to be on guard against the pre/trans fallacy and the ever-present problem of mistaking the prerational for transrational, they need to be on the lookout for these many signs of unhealthy spirituality.

On the other hand, practitioners should be on the lookout for signs of healthy spirituality as well. In general, healthy spirituality, according to Vaughan (1991), “supports personal freedom, autonomy, and self-esteem, as well as social responsibility. It does not deny our humanity or depend on suppression or denial of emotions” (p. 116). Specifically, Vaughan identified many other characteristics of healthy spirituality, including: (a) becoming one’s own authority, trusting one’s own inward sense and intuition, and the ability to evaluate spiritual teachings and teachers, (b) taking responsibility for one’s own beliefs and practice, (c) examining spiritual assumptions in the light of reason and experience, not dogma, (d) respecting individual rights and different forms of worship, (e) enhancing creativity, compassion, authenticity, insight and forgiveness, (f) letting go of the past and facing our fears, making peace with ourselves, and liberating ourselves from egocentrism, (g) acknowledging and working towards integrating one’s own shadow and a willingness to perceive and confront the ways in which one’s personality is defensively or inauthentically constructed, (h) encouraging moderation, modesty, humility, (i) fostering a healthy ego structure and personal integrity, (j) reducing fear and anxiety, (k) opening one’s heart and mind, (l) increasing kindness, love, and compassion, (m) fostering a commitment to truth, authenticity and personal responsibility, (n) encouraging community involvement, and (o) cultivating an attitude that is inclusive (rather than exclusive), self-reliant, and discerning. All of these signs of healthy spirituality were evidenced by at least some practitioners. In general, I was impressed with their maturity and sincerity, and most claimed to use the sweat lodge as a therapeutic tool to do inner psychological work.

#### *Spiritual practices and psychological problems*

Early transpersonal psychotherapists, such as Assagioli and the Grofs, have “noted the association between spiritual practices and psychological problems”



(Lukoff, 1997, p. 32). These problems may include: (a) spiritual emergencies (Grof & Grof, 1989), (b) spiritual addictions (e.g., attachments to altered states, pseudo-realizations, attractive illusions, and/or attachment to suffering as spiritual merit) (Vaughan, 1991), (c) psychological problems engendered by mystical experience (Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1996), (d) religious or spiritual problems concurrent with mental disorders (e.g., alcohol and drug abuse, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and psychoses) (Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1996), (e) the often problematic experience of kundalini (Scotton, 1996), and (f) certain religious problems, including

loss or questioning of faith, change in denominational membership or conversion to a new religion, intensification of religious beliefs and practices, and involvement with a new religious movement or cult. (Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1996, p. 234)

None of the subjects reported having a spiritual emergency, kundalini experience, or psychological problem engendered by their sweat lodge transpersonal experience. A few subjects commented that it was a loss or questioning of faith that was instrumental in them turning to the sweat lodge, and a few others expressed disillusionment with the sweat lodge. Beyond this, however, the interviews did not elicit enough information to determine if any practitioners suffered from spiritual addictions or religious or spiritual problems concurrent with mental disorders.

### Conclusion

The most noteworthy yet troubling finding for me in this research was the profound lack of critical reflection by practitioners on their experiences, especially given their high level of education and maturity (i.e., 27% BAs, 30% MAs or MSs, 17% Ph.D.s, and an average age of 50). As noted, without critical reflection the possibilities for self-deception in interpreting one's experience are legion. In the absence of such reflection, practitioners of the sweat lodge ceremony (or any spiritual practice, for that matter) cannot honestly adjudicate their experiences to be genuine, that is, not attributable to any number of alternative explanations. Similarly, without serious critical reflection practitioners cannot discern if the sweat lodge ceremony per se—and more specifically their particular lodge—is for them a transrational, authentic, legitimate, and healthy spiritual practice.

This notwithstanding, for most of the study's

subjects, their practice of the sweat lodge appears to fill a spiritual hunger left unsatiated by conventional religiosity or spirituality and serves as an important transformative, spiritual practice. As one practitioner commented, "Overall, just the experience of being in the sweat lodge has changed me. I'm very different now than when I began."

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