

# THE NATIVE AMERICAN SWEAT LODGE CEREMONY: REPORTS OF TRANSPERSONAL EXPERIENCES BY NON-NATIVE PRACTITIONERS

Whit Hibbard, Ph.D.  
*Helena, Montana*

*ABSTRACT:* While both native and non-native participants in Native American sweat lodge ceremonies sometimes report transpersonal experiences, a literature review revealed that this significant human phenomenon had not been studied. Focusing on the experience of non-natives, the purpose of this research was to (a) identify the types of transpersonal experiences, (b) develop a taxonomy of the reported experiences, and (c) compare this taxonomy to Grof's taxonomy of transpersonal experiences. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 non-native sweat lodge practitioners to elicit reports of their experiences. Content analysis of the interview data revealed 31 types of transpersonal experience which were organized into a taxonomy with 17 categories and 18 subcategories. A comparison with Grof's taxonomy revealed that his does not account for all the transpersonal experiences reported by practitioners. New categories emerged that do not appear in Grof's scheme. Conversely, Grof's taxonomy includes many types not reported as experienced by sweat lodge participants.

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, "it is clear from the earliest accounts that the sweat lodge was a place of spiritual encounter" (Bucko, 1998, p. 118). In that "place of spiritual encounter" common ceremonial uses include prayer, physical and spiritual healing, and seeking spiritual guidance and power (Lake, 1991). Also, according to Black Elk (in Brown, 1953), a primary function of the Native American sweat lodge ceremony is to purify ourselves so "that we may live as the Great Spirit wishes, and that we may know something of that real world of the Spirit, which is behind this one" (p. 43). In recent decades, according to Weil (1982), the Plains Indians' sweat-lodge ceremony, especially the Sioux version (*inipi*), "has become increasingly popular among non-Indians all over the West" (pp. 44, 49).

In attempting to "know something of that real world of the Spirit" by engaging "a place of spiritual encounter" for "prayer, physical and spiritual healing, and seeking spiritual guidance and power," practitioners of the sweat lodge ceremony sometimes claim to have had transpersonal experiences, as reported in ethnohistorical and ethnographic accounts (e.g., Bucko, 1998; Bruchac, 1993; Paper, 1990), the popular literature (e.g., Eaton, 1978, 1982), and personal experiences of practitioners told to me over the past twenty years. Until this study, however, the types of reported experiences had not been studied scientifically or addressed seriously in the scholarly literature.

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E-mail: whithibbard@yahoo.com

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## PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to begin to remedy this deficiency. Three primary objectives guided the inquiry:

1. Identification of the types of transpersonal experiences reported by non-native practitioners during the Native American sweat lodge ceremony.
2. Development of a taxonomy of the experiences identified.
3. Comparison of the taxonomy to Grof's (1988) taxonomy of experiences.

Three secondary objectives focused on examining first, the incidence, and second, the types of transpersonal experience by (a) age; (b) gender; (c) religious background; (d) education; (e) number of sweat lodge ceremonies; (f) number of years practiced; (g) pre-sweat lodge spiritual practice; (h) incidence of pre-sweat lodge transpersonal experience; (i) expectations of transpersonal experience; and (j) sweat lodge tradition. Third, an understanding of the practitioners' perspectives of their experiences was elicited. Interview questions probed their explanations for, meaning of, and evaluation of their transpersonal experiences; how seriously they viewed and trusted the experiences; any ongoing transformative aftereffects; and any negative experience during a sweat lodge ceremony.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Historically, attempts have been made to identify various types of transpersonal experiences, such as the classification of peak experiences (Thorne, 1963); investigation of the varieties of psychedelic experience (Masters & Houston, 1966); categorization of mystical experiences (Hood, 1973); survey of near-death experiences (Moody, 1975); mapping of the spectrum of consciousness (Wilber, 1975); identification of categories of spiritual experience (Hardy, 1979); taxonomy of transpersonal experiences (Grof, 1988); typology of neurotechnology-induced peak- and other exceptional experiences (Masluk, 1999); listing of exceptional human experiences (White, 2000); and exploration of transcendent sexual experiences (Wade, 2000).

Until this study, the types of reported experiences of non-native practitioners of the sweat lodge ceremony were unknown. (The types of experiences of native practitioners are, and remain, unknown). Hence, it is an important contribution to the field of transpersonal psychology in particular, and to an increased understanding of human conscious experience in general. As James (1902/1985) noted, "No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded... . They forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality" (p. 388). Further, as Scotton (1996) notes, "our current 'scientific' study of the psyche fails almost entirely to deal with the transpersonal realm" (p. 5). The significance of this study, then, is that it helps to elucidate scientifically a greater range of human conscious experience.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review addresses the three primary research objectives:

The first objective of this study was to identify the types of reported transpersonal experiences of practitioners of the Native American sweat lodge ceremony. A literature search of relevant data bases (e.g., PsycINFO, Digital Dissertations, ERIC, Psychological and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Religion and Philosophy Collection, Social Science Abstracts, and Sociological Collection) revealed that such a study had not been done. In other words, no one had scientifically investigated reports of transpersonal experiences of sweat lodge practitioners, native or non-native.

Ethnohistorical accounts, while available, are circumspect and scarce, apparently for two reasons: (a) native practitioners are reticent about speaking of what transpires inside the sweat lodge, and (b) early investigators were skeptical, even hostile, to such reports (Bucko, 1998). In his review of ethnohistorical accounts, Bucko found a few early stories that “attest to the creative, regenerative, medicinal, and protective powers of the sweat lodge” (p. 147). Similarly, Bruchac (1993) found a few ethnohistorical stories of divination, miraculous healings, and allegedly restoring dead people to life.

Contemporary ethnographic accounts are only slightly more revealing. In his examination of several Lakota accounts, Bucko found reports of “bursts of hot or cold air, flashes of light in the rock pit, sounds of rattles or drums, singing, the shaking of the lodge structure itself, pounding under the earth, sounds of deer hoofs clicking as they dance, eagle cries, and the beating of eagle wings,” all of which are believed to indicate the presence of spirits (p. 117). Bucko reviewed other reports that indicated that participants see and hear “spirits” and “spirit helpers” and other “spiritual things,” hear “spirit noises,” feel the touch of eagle wings, and are able to handle red hot rocks barehanded. Similarly, Paper (1990) reports in his ethnographic study of the Midewiwin sweat lodge that some participants will see, feel, or even hear the “Grandfathers” in the red hot rocks, others will often feel, see, and hear manifestations of “theriomorphic and other spirits” and “powerful spiritual presences,” and others will have waking “visions.”

Accounts in the popular literature reveal only occasional anecdotal reports of transpersonal experiences of sweat lodge practitioners. For example, Lake (1991) writes that “the voices of our ancestors talk to us in the sweat lodge” (p. 39). Peltier (1999) speaks of “higher feelings,” “pure spiritual pleasure,” and believes that he gets “specific instructions” from the Great Mystery during the ceremony (p. 183). Krippner (1975), who was initiated into the sweat lodge ceremony by Rolling Thunder, writes that he “experienced one of the most profound altered conscious states of my life” (p. 165). Ross (1989) talks of shifting into a “different dimension” (p. 3) and receiving messages from the spirits (p. 119). Weil (1982) notes the “great unity of consciousness among the participants” (p. 46) and says that “to my taste nothing compares to the *inipi* for a terrific high in body, mind, and spirit” (p. 45). Eaton (1978) writes of

seeing faces in the hot rocks (p. 28); feeling a “mighty, attentive Being” stand on the hot rocks “slowly scrutinizing each of us as it rotated,” and being aware of “a force flowing over us” (pp. 28–29); “heavy stamping feet passing round the fire in a slow deliberate dance” in a crowded lodge in which there was no room for anyone to stand and walk around (p. 77); flashing lights; and feeling “talons on my shoulder, and several times I heard the beat of wings about the Lodge” (p. 148). Eaton (1982) also experienced a deceased friend’s presence during a ceremony.

The second objective of this study was to develop a taxonomy of experiences of practitioners. A taxonomy of such experiences is a way to organize the data in a distilled and meaningful way. Additionally, it enables a comparison (a focus of the study’s third objective) with other relevant taxonomies which should further the general project of mapping human conscious experience. To this end, I reviewed various taxonomies to determine if any were appropriate for comparison (e.g., Carpenter, 1995; Glock & Stark, 1965; Hardy, 1979; Margolis & Elifson, 1979; Masluk, 1999; Thorne, 1963;). In sum, these (and other) survey studies, although illustrative, are all insufficient because they suffer either methodological problems (e.g., self-administered, mailed questionnaires), sampling weaknesses (e.g., too small or selective a sample), too narrow a focus (e.g., reports of only mystical experiences), lack of definitional consensus (e.g., what constitutes a “peak experience”), or lack of organization (e.g., uncategorized lists of experiences).

One taxonomy stands out as the most comprehensive and relevant in terms of breadth of focus (most types of transpersonal experiences), sample size (thousands), and methodology (clinical, experiential, case-study). That taxonomy is Stanislav Grof’s (1988), discussed below.

Although Grof is of the position that his “spectrum of transpersonal experiences” reflects “the experiential realities to a sufficient degree to provide useful information to future researchers,” he hopes “that they will, in turn, complement, refine, and revise in the future, on the basis of their own experiences and observations, the scheme” (p. 40). Consequently, my purpose was to compare my taxonomy with Grof’s, noting points of agreement and disagreement.

Grof’s “experiential spectrum,” as he calls it, covers a wide range of phenomena that he witnessed in his extensive psychedelic research, holotropic breathwork, and work with people experiencing spontaneous nonordinary states of consciousness (such as so-called “spiritual emergencies”). Grof also notes that the entire spectrum can be induced by powerful non-drug experiential psychotherapies and, furthermore, has been described by historians, anthropologists, and comparative religionists in the context of various sacred technologies and spiritual practices. Furthermore, Grof states that he personally has experienced most of the nonordinary states in his taxonomy.

Briefly, in consonance with his definition of transpersonal experience as “experiential expansion or extension of consciousness beyond the usual boundaries of the body-ego and beyond the limitations of time and space” (p. 38), Grof divides his spectrum into two large categories of transpersonal experiences according to their degree of extension. The first category—Experiential Extension within Consensus Reality and Space-Time—deals with the experience of space-time. This category consists of three subcategories: experiences that involve transcendence of spatial barriers (of which there are 11 specific types); experiences that involve transcendence of the boundaries of linear time (of which there are 8 specific types); and physical introversion and narrowing of consciousness (of which there are no differentiated types).

The second category—Experiential Extension Beyond Consensus Reality and Space-Time—deals with experiences in which “the extension of consciousness seems to go beyond the phenomenal world and the time-space continuum as we perceive it in our everyday life” (p. 105). This category includes 13 specific types of transpersonal experiences.

In the third category, Grof includes experiences and phenomena that represent “strange hybrids” between different levels of consciousness, what he calls transpersonal experiences of the *psychoid* type. This category includes experiences and phenomena reported in the literature, but that Grof has not observed in his own work.

In sum, the literature review revealed that reports of transpersonal experiences of practitioners of the Native American sweat lodge ceremony have not been studied seriously, that there is a paucity of accounts in the literature, and that only one taxonomy of transpersonal experiences was found to be comprehensive and relevant enough for purposes of comparison.

## METHOD

### *Target Population and Sample*

The *target population* was non-native practitioners of the Native American sweat lodge ceremony. To select a representative sample, 10 practitioners from each of three different lodges, representing different traditions and from different parts of the country, were selected, including lodges in Montana, Texas, and Arizona. The Montana lodge is a Cree-based tradition that was under the ceremonial leadership of Pat Kennedy, an Objibwa-Cree elder and medicine man, who conducted his sweat lodge ceremonies in a traditional manner (Kennedy died shortly after my data collection). The Texas lodge, the Earthtribe, is an eclectic, non-traditional lodge that is under the ceremonial leadership of its founder, William Taegel, a psychotherapist. The Arizona lodge, the Deer Tribe, is a Navajo-based tradition under the ceremonial leadership of Harley SwiftDeer Reagan, a teacher of Native American spirituality, who also takes an eclectic approach.

Consultations with several native and non-native consultants all intimately involved for many years in native sweat lodges convinced me to limit the study population to non-native practitioners for the following reasons. First, I did not have enough native subjects to make a representative sample. Second, it was unlikely that I, as a Euro-American person, would be able to enlist a representative number of native subjects. When I asked about enlisting Indian sweat lodge practitioners, one consultant—R. West (personal communication, May 12, 2003), who lived 24 years with the Blackfeet—said, “Because I’m not Blackfeet, that would be hard even for me.” Duran and Duran (1995) explain further:

One important barrier encountered while attempting to conduct research in the Native American community is the residual feelings still fresh in most Native American memories for the colonizing techniques of the anthropologists and other well-meaning albeit arrogant social scientists. A high level of distrust exists among Native American people to anyone asking questions, regardless of the good promised by the results of the research. (p. 25)

Third, defining *native* and who qualifies as native was a challenge: “They can’t even decide amongst themselves,” West commented. Apparently, “no single definition of ‘an Indian’ exists—socially, administratively, legislatively, or judicially” (Utter, 2001, p. 25), or, for that matter, anthropologically. Fourth, was the problem of acculturation. As West noted, “Most Indian Americans are as Westernized and Christianized as any of us,” an observation that was reinforced when I interviewed a pilot subject, a registered Choctaw, who indeed proved to be as Westernized and Christianized as I was. As Bucko (1998) has pointed out, genetic inheritance does not automatically qualify one as culturally native; that is, being born Indian is no guarantee that one will become culturally Indian.

Given these many challenges, it was prudent to delimit the research to non-native practitioners. Furthermore, the sample was limited to experienced sweat lodge practitioners, defined as people who had participated in a minimum of 50 ceremonies, based on the assumption that experienced practitioners would have a greater likelihood of having had transpersonal experiences. Because the primary objective of this study was to identify the types of reported transpersonal experiences of practitioners, it stood to reason that experienced practitioners would have more experiences to report. In other words, the probability of interviewing people who had reports of transpersonal experiences during the sweat lodge would be maximized. As will be seen, however, this proved not to be the case.

### *Sample Size*

Given the resource demands of qualitative, interview-based research (i.e., time-intensive interviewing and data analysis), qualitative researchers generally are advised to keep sample sizes relatively small (i.e., 15 or less). To do otherwise may result in unmanageable levels of data and superficial data analysis. The

converse also is true: Too few subjects may result in manageable levels of data and thorough data analysis, but superficial findings. Consequently, I decided that a reasonable sample size for this research was 30 because I stood to gain a large but manageable level of data.

### *Sampling Design*

The sampling design in this study involved purposively identifying and interviewing key practitioners (i.e., sweat lodge leaders and senior practitioners), then networking from these individuals to others. Permission was obtained from the ceremonial leaders of the lodges identified to interview their lodge members. I also participated in a sweat lodge ceremony with each leader to help gain entry and build trust and rapport.

### *Sample Demographics*

The sample is a heterogeneous population with reference to age, gender, and religious background. It is homogeneous with regard to ethnicity (Euro-American) and common interest and participation in the sweat lodge ceremony. The sample is not representative of U.S. residents demographically. The only criteria for subject selection were ethnicity (i.e., non-Native American), participation in a minimum of 50 sweat lodge ceremonies, and a willingness to be interviewed. Ages ranged from 27 to 65 with an average of 50. There were 17 females and 13 males. The years of sweat lodge practice ranged from 8 to 33 with an average of 18. The number of sweat lodge ceremonies participated in ranged from 80 to 1000 with an average of 271.

### *Instrument*

This research depended on eliciting reports of practitioners' transpersonal experiences. The challenge was to elicit truthful, thoughtful, and thorough self-reports. The interview type most suitable for this study was the in-depth, semi-structured interview that followed an Interview Guide (see Table 1). I asked a predetermined set of questions but prompted and asked additional questions as needed to elicit more detailed information and clarification. Interviews ranged from 1 to 3 hours, were conducted in-person in private settings, audiotape-recorded, then transcribed by me.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

### *Primary Objectives*

To achieve the three primary objectives (identification of the types of transpersonal experiences reported, development of a taxonomy of the experiences, and a comparison with Grof's taxonomy) the transcribed

TABLE 1  
*Interview Guide*

Subject _____	Lodge _____	Date _____
Warm-up Questions		
1. "When did you first get involved with the sweat lodge?"		
2. "How did you first get involved with the sweat lodge?"		
3. "How consistent has your participation been?"		
4. "About how many times have you participated in sweats?"		
Interview Questions (begin audiotaping)		
1. "What expectations did you have before getting involved with the sweat lodge. In other words, what did you expect might happen during the ceremony?"		
2. "Would you please tell me about your general experience in the sweat lodge?"		
3. "What has been your most important experience in the sweat lodge?"		
4. "As you know, the primary purpose of this study is to identify the types of transpersonal experiences that practitioners of the Native American sweat lodge have." (Define "transpersonal experiences," if necessary, and invite the interviewee to use his or her own term[s] to describe their experience.) "Before looking specifically at your sweat lodge experience, I am curious to know if you ever had any transpersonal experiences before getting involved with the sweat lodge. If so, please tell me about them."		
5. "I also am curious to know if you have had any transpersonal experiences during the sweat lodge ceremony. If so, please describe them to me in as much detail as you can. If not, that is fine because some people do, others don't, and I place no value judgment on whether people do or don't." (For those subjects who report transpersonal experience, continue with the rest of the interview. For those who report no such experience, proceed to the Conclusion.)		
6. "How many of these experiences have you had?"		
7. "How often have you had such experiences in the sweat lodge?"		
8. "Did you tend to have more transpersonal experiences with length of practice?"		
9. "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?"		
10. "What does that experience mean to you?"		
11. "How do you interpret that experience?"		
12. "What's your evaluation of that experience?"		
13. "How seriously do you take that experience? Why?"		
14. "Do you trust your experience? If so, why? If not, why not?"		
15. "Have you ever doubted your experience? If so, why? If not, why not?"		
16. "Have any of your experiences had an ongoing transformative aftereffect on you? If so, please explain."		
17. "Have you ever had a negative experience during a sweat lodge ceremony? If so, please tell me about it."		
Conclusion		
1. Ask the subject if he or she has anything else to say or ask.		
2. Thank the subject for his or her participation in the interview.		
3. Obtain the subject's contact information:		
Phone: _____	Email: _____	
Mailing address: _____		
5. Obtain biographical information:		
Age _____	Gender _____	Ethnicity _____ Educational level _____ Religious background _____
Pre-sweat lodge spiritual practices _____		

interview data were subjected to a data reduction process which let the types of experiences inductively "emerge" from the data. Each type had to meet Grof's (1988) definition of transpersonal experience. Masluk (2003) developed a data analysis procedure to create a typology of transpersonal experiences. Basically, following the method of constant comparison of Glaser and Strauss (1967), Masluk developed a series of analytical steps that would let the data "dictate how to depict, describe, and classify the experiences" (p. 107) into categories. I adapted that procedure—a form of content analysis—for use in this study. The content analysis followed seven steps:

Step 1: Initial reading. Each verbal description of an experience documented in the transcriptions was copied onto a separate sheet of paper.

Step 2: Overview of descriptions. The sheets were read to get a tentative “feel” for the types of experiences reported. Attention was paid more to overall patterns and gestalts than to details.

Step 3: Identifying descriptors. Each sheet was read again to identify descriptive characteristics or properties of each experience. These descriptors were noted in pencil on the bottom of each sheet.

Step 4: Initial sorting. The sheets were sorted tentatively into natural groupings or categories containing similar types of experience. A tentative descriptive label was assigned to each grouping or category.

Step 5: Final sorting. The sheets in each pile were read once more, compared within and across piles, and reassigned where necessary. Category names for piles of experience were revised where necessary to make them more descriptively precise.

Step 6: Final categorization. Each pile was examined to determine if it needed to be further subdivided, or if it could be combined with other piles, or subsumed under another pile. In this fashion, categories and subcategories of experiences were developed.

Step 7: Create a taxonomy. The categories and subcategories then were organized into a logical and meaningful taxonomy.

The taxonomy generated from the interview data was then compared to Grof's. Points of agreement and disagreement were noted.

The content analysis of the interview data revealed reports of 184 experiences that were sorted into 31 types of experience according to common descriptive characteristics of practitioners. That is, the types of experiences, as well as the label for each type, inductively emerged from the data according to practitioners' own descriptions. No experience was included in more than one category. Each type is reviewed below with a brief phenomenological description.<sup>1</sup>

*Experiencing the Presence of Animal Spirits.* Twenty-one practitioners reported the presence of animal spirits in different forms—the common descriptive characteristic—including: feeling the presence of animal spirits, seeing animals in the lodge, and hearing various animals.

*Feeling the Presence of Spirit Beings.* Nineteen practitioners reported feeling the presence of spirit beings, other than animal spirits, variously called “guides,” “ancestors” (biological and nonbiological), “discarnate entities,” “spirits,” “souls,” “beings,” and “helpers.”

*Hearing Spirit Beings.* Fourteen practitioners reported hearing spirit beings. Most common was hearing voices or singing.

*Communicating with Spirit Beings.* Direct communication with spirit beings was reported by eight practitioners. Several had the general experience of “listening to my spirit helpers” and “receiving guidance” in the sweat lodge.

*Seeing Spirit Beings.* Five practitioners reported seeing what they call a “spirit,” but there was no direct communication as in the prior category.

*Feeling Spiritual Energies.* Three practitioners reported “feeling the presence of spiritual energies” or “feeling the presence of the powers invoked” during the ceremony.

*Physical Spiritistic Phenomena.* “Physical spiritistic phenomena” refers to a physical manifestation of or interaction with spirit, often of a dramatic nature. For example, nine practitioners reported such experiences as being hit by bird wings (usually interpreted as “eagle spirit”), the lodge shaking, a glowing rock flying out of the fire pit, the bucket of splash water flying around the lodge, or heat going from nothing to blistering upon the invocation of a deceased person.

*Answered Prayers.* Strictly speaking, prayers are answered outside and after the sweat lodge, but presumably “heard” during the ceremony. Consequently, such experiences are included and counted as transpersonal reports. Consistently feeling that their prayers in sweat lodges are answered was an experience reported by seven practitioners. For instance, several said that they prayed for abundance which was soon and serendipitously forthcoming.

*Extraordinary Healings.* Occasional extraordinary healings reportedly happen during the sweat lodge ceremony. When asked about any transpersonal sweat lodge experiences, one practitioner responded immediately with “Healings. It’s amazing. People walking away free of heroin addiction, resolving the loss of a loved one, alleviating my chronic back pain from a herniated disc.” Five other practitioners reported healings that included alleged documented cases of curing cancer and eradication of chronic pain.

*Weather Changes.* Strictly speaking, as with Answered Prayers, weather changes occur outside and after the sweat lodge, but presumably “caused” during the ceremony. There were three reports of changing the weather. For instance, making it rain during a drought and causing a heavy snow fall in August.

*Supraphysical Ability/feat.* One practitioner witnessed a lodge participant “pick up a red hot rock in his bare hands and touch his belly with it, then he put it back down.”

*Seeing Lights.* Seeing various manifestations of lights is sometimes experienced during the sweat lodge ceremony. Fifteen practitioners reported either “seeing

lights” of different colors, “glowing orbs,” “floating lights,” or “little lights that move around, usually white.”

*Seeing Forms in Hot Rocks.* There were six reports from different practitioners of seeing forms in the glowing hot rocks, such as faces of humans and animals.

*Seeing the Sweat Lodge Becoming Transparent.* Two practitioners reported that during a ceremony the sweat lodge cover became transparent; that is, it literally disappeared and they could see the sky above.

*Seeing Geometric Shapes.* One practitioner reported regularly seeing geometric shapes of different colors during sweat lodge ceremonies: “I have them when my eyes are open and when my eyes are shut. I would say that it’s outside of me, that I’m not imagining it. Now no one else has seen it, but it’s as real as the person next to me.”

*Visions.* Ten practitioners reported seeing what they called “visions.” One reported that she had “a very powerful vision.” Another had a vision during her first sweat in 1973 of her life 30 years in the future, which came true.

*Feelings of Connectedness.* Strong feelings of connectedness to the other lodge participants, the lodge itself, the earth, spirit, the All, or the unknown were reported by seven practitioners.

*Intuitive Knowings About Participants.* Eight practitioners reported having “intuitive knowings about participants,” several of which they claim were later confirmed.

*Channeling.* Seven practitioners recounted specific experiences of channeling, including songs, prayer, poetry, wise counsel, and entities.

*Flying/stral Travel.* Four practitioners described experiences of flying and astral travel. For instance, “We do traveling sweat lodges where we travel to different places where I definitely experience myself as being there. It’s like astral projection.”

*Dual Awareness.* Two practitioners reported experiences of dual awareness; that is, they were aware of being two places simultaneously. Neither, however, felt that their experience was an actual out-of-body experience.

*Out-of-body Experience.* Only one practitioner described an out-of-body experience: “I had an experience of leaving my body and going into the earth. I was in a very altered state in this experience because I felt like I’d left my body and gone to other places.”

*Sympathetic Resonance with the Earth.* Six practitioners experienced some type of sympathetic resonance with the earth. For example, three described experiences of hearing the earth’s heartbeat.

*Feeling Beyond/Greater Than Normal Self.* Five practitioners described “feeling more than myself, out of myself, beyond myself,” or “a sense of vastness, “ or “absolutely feeling more than my normal self,” or “opening to a larger sense of consciousness that’s beyond myself,” or “transcending ego.”

*Past-life Experience.* Three practitioners reported what they believed to be past-life experiences. For instance, one practitioner said that “I’ve had images in the sweat lodge of being in other lives.”

*Death-related Experience.* Two practitioners reported death-related experiences. For instance, one described “feeling and seeing death.”

*Trance State.* Two practitioners made specific mention of being in a trance state during some sweat lodge ceremonies. One reported that “I enter some kind of trance because a lot of times I get out of the lodge and don’t remember what happened.”

*Extreme Negative Energy.* Not all experiences in the sweat lodge are positive or beneficent. In addition to many non-transpersonal negative experiences (e.g., excessive heat, oppressively lengthy prayers, offending personalities), there were two profoundly negative transpersonal experiences in the sweat lodge. For instance, one practitioner reported: “I experienced a force so negative and intense that I felt I was nothing compared to it; it knocked down most people in the lodge. We could feel the negative energy; it was malevolent!”

*Altered Experience of Time.* One experience of altered experience of time was recounted:

Many times in a lodge the concept of time goes away. It felt like it was a very short period of time, but when I came out it’d been a two-hour lodge. There’s been both a collapsing of time and an expanding of time. There were times when it seemed interminable, going on and on, when actually it wasn’t that long.

*Precognition.* One practitioner had a precognitive experience:

I’ve known that big issues were going to be coming up in my life that I got a glimpse of in the sweat lodge, like feeling my maternal grandmother in a lodge and within a week I was traveling to Florida to be of assistance to her moving into assisted living and five days later she died.

*Extreme Joy and Peace.* One practitioner said that she experienced “extreme joy, almost deliriousness, an incredible peace” during a sweat lodge ceremony.

Following the 7-step data analysis process through to completion, similar subcategories were then grouped together into a larger category. The end result is a taxonomy that organizes the 31 types of reports of experience into 17 categories (some with subcategories). The categories and subcategories are arranged in Table 2 in descending order according to frequency of occurrence.

TABLE 2

*Taxonomy of Reports of Transpersonal Experiences of Non-Native Practitioners of the Native American Sweat Lodge Ceremony*

- 
- 
1. Encounter experiences (70)
    - a. Experiencing the presence of animal spirits [21]
    - b. Feeling the presence of spirit beings (e.g., guides, ancestors) [19]
    - c. Hearing spirit beings (e.g. voices, singing) [14]
    - d. Communicating with spirit beings [8]
    - e. Seeing spirit beings [5]
    - f. Feeling spiritual energies [3]
  2. Psychoid experiences<sup>1</sup> (26)
    - a. Physical spiritistic phenomena [9]
    - b. Answered prayers [7]
    - c. Extraordinary healings [6]
    - d. Weather changes [3]
    - e. Supraphysical ability/feat [1]
  3. Visual phenomena (23)
    - a. Seeing lights [14]
    - b. Seeing forms in hot rocks [6]
    - c. Seeing the sweat lodge becoming transparent [2]
    - d. Seeing geometric shapes [1]
  4. Visions (10)
  5. Feelings of connectedness (7)
  6. Intuitive knowings about participants (8)
  7. Channeling (7)
  8. Leaving physical body (7)
    - a. Flying/ astral travel [4]
    - b. Dual awareness [2]
    - c. Out-of-body experience [1]
  9. Sympathetic resonance with earth (6)
  10. Feeling beyond/ greater than normal self (5)
  11. Past-life experience (3)
  12. Death-related experience (2)
  13. Trance state (2)
  14. Extreme negative energy (2)
  15. Altered experience of time (1)
  16. Precognition (1)
  17. Extreme joy and peace (1)
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<sup>1</sup>The term is borrowed from Grof (1988), who obtained it from Jung, and refers to experiences “that seem to occur on the interface between the inner world and the external reality, or between matter and consciousness” (p. 42).

*Note.* The numbers indicate frequency of occurrence. Those in parentheses indicate the total number of experiences in the category, and those in brackets, the total number of experiences in each subcategory.

In comparing the taxonomy derived in this study to Grof’s—the prevailing extant taxonomy of transpersonal experience—two noteworthy findings emerge. First, Grof claims that his taxonomy “reflect[s] in an accurate and comprehensive way the introspective data and objective observations from modern consciousness research” (p. 40). Regarding reports of experiences of non-native practitioners of the sweat lodge ceremony, however, his taxonomy appears inadequate. Of the 31 types of transpersonal sweat lodge experience, fourteen (45%) are represented explicitly in Grof’s taxonomy or phenomenological descriptions of those categories. Twelve (39%) are not represented and five (16%) are not explicitly represented but are implicit (see Table 3).

Second, Grof’s taxonomy includes many types of transpersonal experience not experienced by sweat lodge practitioners. That is, of Grof’s 42 types, thirty two

TABLE 3

*Taxonomy of Transpersonal Sweat Lodge Experiences, Organized According to Which Types Are Represented, Are Not Represented, and Not Represented But Implicit In Grof's Taxonomy*

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TYPES REPRESENTED IN GROF'S TAXONOMY
Experiencing the presence of animal spirits
Feeling the presence of spirit beings (e.g., guides, ancestors)
Hearing spirit beings (e.g. voices, singing)
Communicating with spirit beings
Seeing spirit beings
Feeling spiritual energies
Physical spiritistic phenomena
Extraordinary healings
Weather changes
Supraphysical ability/feat
Channeling
Out-of-body experience
Past-life experience
Precognition
TYPES NOT REPRESENTED IN GROF'S TAXONOMY
Answered prayers
Seeing lights
Seeing forms in hot rocks
Seeing the sweat lodge becoming transparent
Seeing geometric shapes
Flying/astral travel
Dual awareness
Sympathetic resonance with the earth
Death-related experience
Extreme negative energy
Altered experience of time
Extreme joy and peace
TYPES NOT REPRESENTED BUT IMPLICIT IN GROF'S TAXONOMY
Visions
Feelings of connectedness
Intuitive knowings about participants
Feeling beyond/greater than normal self
Trance state

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(76%) were not experienced by practitioners; only ten (24%) were experienced. Specifically, Table 4 notes which types of experiences were and were not experienced by practitioners.

### *Secondary Objectives*

To achieve the secondary objectives biographical data were collected, in addition to data generated from question 9–17 of the Interview Guide, and asked of each participant (see Table 1). Spearman rank order correlation coefficients were calculated, general associations made where appropriate, and practitioners' accountings of their experiences were elicited.

Objectives were designed to compare separately the incidence and type of transpersonal sweat lodge experience to the following biographical data: (a) age; (b) gender; (c) religious background; (d) education; (e) number of sweat

lodge ceremonies; (f) number of years practiced; (g) pre-sweat lodge spiritual practice; (h) incidence of pre-sweat lodge transpersonal experience; (i) expectations of transpersonal experience; and (j) sweat lodge tradition. A third objective sought to understand the perspectives of the practitioners regarding their experiences. Findings for each objective will be discussed separately.

With regard to incidence of transpersonal experiences, for three variables—age, number of sweat lodge ceremonies, and number of years practiced—it was possible to calculate the Spearman rank order correlation coefficients because both data sets (i.e., each of the three variables and the incidence of transpersonal sweat lodge experience) consisted of measures on an ordinal scale of measurement (Dyer, 1995). The remaining variables consisted of only one ordinal scale; therefore only general associations could be derived. In sum, the analysis did not yield a statistically significant correlation ( $p < .05$ ) between incidence of experience and age, number of sweat lodge ceremonies, or number of years practiced. With regard to the other variables, no association was found between incidence of experience and gender, religious background, education, pre-sweat lodge spiritual practice, incidence of pre-sweat lodge transpersonal experience, or expectations of transpersonal experience.

There appears to be an association, however, between the incidence of transpersonal experience and the type of sweat lodge tradition. Specifically, in the Cree lodge tradition, the 10 subjects had a total of 4381 sweat lodge experiences and 53 transpersonal experiences which yielded a 1.2% incidence rate. The transpersonal experiences represented 9 subjects, ranging from a minimum of 1 per person to a maximum of 14 per person and an average of 5. In the Deer Tribe lodge, the 10 subjects had a total of 2345 sweat lodge experiences and 67 transpersonal experiences which yielded a 2.9% incidence rate. The transpersonal experiences represented all 10 subjects, ranging from a minimum of 4 per person to a maximum of 10 per person and an average of 7. In the Earthtribe lodge, the 10 subjects had a total of 1400 sweat lodge experiences and 66 transpersonal experiences which yielded a 4.7% incidence rate. The transpersonal experiences represented all 10 subjects, ranging from a minimum of 1 per person to a maximum of 17 per person and an average of 7. In sum, given the incidence rates, practitioners in the Deer Tribe lodge reported over two times more experiences, and Earthtribe practitioners four times more experiences, than the Cree lodge practitioners.

Comparing the type of transpersonal sweat lodge experience to the biographical data, there is no apparent association between the type of experience and age, gender, religious background, education, number of sweat lodge ceremonies, number of years practiced, pre-sweat lodge spiritual practice, incidence of pre-sweat lodge transpersonal experience, expectations of transpersonal experience, or sweat lodge tradition. For example, most of the types of experiences with an  $n > 6$  were experienced by people in all three traditions.

Examining (a) practitioners' explanations for and the meaning of their experiences; (b) their interpretation and evaluation of their experiences; (c) how

TABLE 4

*Grof's Taxonomy of Transpersonal Experiences, Noting Which Types Were and Were Not Experienced by Sweat Lodge Practitioners*

EXPERIENTIAL EXTENSION WITHIN CONSENSUS REALITY AND SPACE-TIME	
1. Transcendence of spatial boundaries	
<u>No</u>	a. Experience of dual unity (i.e., sense of merging with another person while retaining awareness of one's own identity)
<u>No</u>	b. Identification with other persons (i.e., experience of complete identification with another person to the point of losing awareness of one's own identity)
<u>No</u>	c. Identification with an entire group of people
<u>No</u>	d. Identification with currently existing animals
<u>No</u>	e. Identification with plants and botanical processes
<u>No</u>	f. Identification with life and all creation
<u>No</u>	g. Identification with inanimate matter and inorganic processes
<u>No</u>	h. Identification with the entire planet
<u>No</u>	i. Identification with extraterrestrial or celestial bodies and astronomical processes
<u>No</u>	j. Identification with the entire physical universe
<u>Yes</u>	k. Psychic phenomena involving transcendence of space, including out-of-body experiences <u>Yes</u> , traveling clairvoyance of current events <u>No</u> , clairaudience of current events <u>No</u> , "space-travels" <u>No</u> , telepathy <u>Yes</u>
2. Transcendence of the boundaries of linear time	
<u>No</u>	a. Embryonal and fetal experiences (i.e., intrauterine or prenatal)
<u>No</u>	b. Ancestral experiences (i.e., sense of historical regression and identification with one's ancestors)
<u>No</u>	c. Racial and collective experiences (i.e., identification with members of the same ethnicity, or humanity as a whole)
<u>Yes</u>	d. Past incarnation experiences (i.e., a convinced sense of remembering something that happened during another lifetime)
<u>No</u>	e. Phylogenetic experiences (i.e., total identification with members of other species but with a convinced sense of regression to earlier evolutionary times)
<u>No</u>	f. Experiences of planetary evolution (i.e., witnessing panoramic images of the evolution of the planet)
<u>No</u>	g. Cosmogenetic experiences (i.e., witnessing panoramic images of the evolution of the entire universe)
<u>Yes</u>	h. Psychic phenomena involving transcendence of time, including precognition <u>Yes</u> , clairvoyance of past and future events <u>No</u> , clairaudience of past and future events <u>No</u> , psychometry <u>No</u> , time travels <u>No</u>
3. Physical introversion and narrowing of consciousness	
<u>No</u>	a. Organ, tissue, and cellular consciousness (i.e., awareness of physical inner space, even identifying experientially with specific organs, tissues, and cells)
EXPERIENTIAL EXTENSION BEYOND CONSENSUS REALITY AND SPACE-TIME	
<u>Yes</u>	a. Spiritistic and mediumistic experiences (i.e., encounters and telepathic communication with deceased people and discarnate entities)
<u>No</u>	b. Energetic phenomena of the subtle body (i.e., seeing and experiencing energy fields and energy flows, e.g., seeing auras, experiencing Kundalini)
<u>Yes</u>	c. Experiences of animal spirits (i.e., feeling of profound connection with the archetypal essence of animals, often experienced as spiritual teachers)
<u>Yes</u>	d. Encounters with spirit guides and suprahuman beings (i.e., guides, teachers, and protectors from the spiritual world)
<u>No</u>	e. Visits to other universes and meetings with their inhabitants
<u>No</u>	f. Experiences of mythological and fairy-tale sequences (i.e., the world of myths, legends, and fairy tales literally comes to life)
<u>No</u>	g. Experiences of blissful and wrathful deities (i.e., deities clearly identified from the pantheons of different cultures)
<u>No</u>	h. Experiences of universal archetypes (i.e., universal patterns deep within the psyche that represent generalized biological, psychological, social, and professional roles, e.g., Woman, Man, Mother, Father, Child)
<u>No</u>	i. Intuitive understanding of universal symbols (i.e., insights into the esoteric meaning of symbols of complex transcendental realities)
<u>No</u>	j. Creative inspiration (i.e., artistic, scientific, philosophical, and religious inspiration, problem solving, and creativity)

TABLE 4 (continued).

<u>No</u>	k.	Experience of the Demiurg and cosmic creation (i.e., feeling of encountering the creator of the universe, often accompanied by insights into the process of creation)
<u>No</u>	l.	Experience of cosmic consciousness (i.e., the boundless, unfathomable, and ineffable feeling of encompassing the totality of existence and reaching the Reality underlying all realities)
<u>No</u>	m.	The supracosmic and metacosmic void (i.e., experiential identification with the primordial Emptiness, Nothingness, and Silence)
TRANSPERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF PSYCHOID NATURE		
1. Synchronistic links between consciousness and matter (meaningful coincidences linking transpersonal experiences to physical events separated in time and/ or space) <u>No</u>		
2. Spontaneous psychoid events (psychological processes seem to influence physical reality)		
<u>No</u>	a.	Supernormal physical feats (spectacular physiological changes in the body or seemingly impossible physical achievements)
<u>Yes</u>	b.	Spiritistic phenomena (e.g., hauntings) and physical mediumship (e.g., tangible communications, including sounds, voices, telekinesis, and materializations)
<u>No</u>	c.	Recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (poltergeist phenomena)
<u>No</u>	d.	Unidentified flying objects (UFO and alien phenomena)
3. Intentional psychokinesis (deliberate intervention in the physical world by psychological means)		
<u>Yes</u>	a.	Ceremonial magic
<u>Yes</u>	b.	Healing and hexing
<u>Yes</u>	c.	Siddhis (extraordinary powers)
<u>No</u>	d.	Laboratory psychokinesis

seriously they took their experiences and if they trusted them; (d) any experiences that had an ongoing transformative aftereffect; and (e) any negative experiences during a sweat lodge ceremony, the following results emerged. Generally,

1. For practitioners, their experiences meant that there is a spiritual reality and they explained their experiences as interactions with that spiritual reality;
2. They regarded their experiences as literally real;
3. They took their experiences very seriously and trusted most of them; however, 80% of practitioners retained some doubt about some of their experiences;
4. Thirty-three per cent (33%) claimed having an experience that had an ongoing transformative aftereffect; and
5. The majority (60%) had at least one negative experience in the sweat lodge.

## DISCUSSION

Regarding the first primary objective—identification of the types of transpersonal sweat lodge experience—I believe that I obtained a reasonably complete accounting of the types of experience. However, there probably were additional nonreported experiences, hence possibly undiscovered types of experience. For instance, one practitioner said, “I know there are more but I can’t recall them now.” Also, it should be noted that (a) no practitioner reported having more than one experience during a sweat lodge ceremony, and

(b) a few practitioners had more than one experience of the same type (e.g., one practitioner saw geometric shapes during most sweat lodge ceremonies, but that was counted as one type of experience). With these caveats in mind, the 30 participants reported 184 experiences during an estimated 8,126 sweat lodge ceremonies (an astonishingly large number), which equals an incidence of rate of 2.3%.

There were many reports of interesting experiences precipitated in the sweat lodge that were not transpersonal (i.e., they do not meet the criteria of Grof's definition), including: significant insights, enhanced dreamwork, visualizations, intuitive learning, enhanced sensory awareness, feeling physically lighter, intensified physical sensations (e.g., feeling warmth in the solar plexus, surges of energy), perceptual alterations, altered experience of heat, problem solving, cathartic experiences, and confronting and resolving personal fears. These experiences were not included in the tally of transpersonal sweat lodge experiences.

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." That difference is most striking early on. Also, practitioners' experiences came full-blown; that is, they did not develop over time. Such findings raise issues for future research.

The largest category is "encounter experiences," not surprising if we remember that "it is clear from the earliest accounts that the sweat lodge was a place of spiritual encounter" (Bucko, 1998, p. 118), that the supernatural permeates Indian life (Hultkrantz, 1979), that spirits are believed to be susceptible to human pleading and may intervene in the affairs of the world (Driver, 1975), and that ceremonial appeals to the spirits mediated by medicine men are ubiquitous in native religions (Underhill, 1957, 1965). Even though the vast majority of practitioners claim no expectations of transpersonal experience, they nonetheless have an implicit conception of Native Americans and native spirituality. In fact, discussions with practitioners, in general, revealed that they believe that Native Americans are (a) inherently closer to and more connected to the earth; (b) more in balance and in harmony with nature; (c) more sensitive to and aware of the presence of spirit and spirits; and (d) fundamentally more spiritual than Euro-Americans. Additionally, practitioners believe that Native Americans possess and practice powerful sacred ceremonies that access the spirit world.

This conception of Native Americans and their spirituality comes from four sources:

1. *Acculturation*. Whether we know it or not, it is ubiquitous in American culture. Bataille (2001) argues that Native Americans have been mythologized by anthropologists, ethnographers, media, art and literature to the point where they are an integral, but largely unconscious, part of American culture. Similarly, Green (1988) argues

that “playing Indian” has deep roots in American culture. Americans grow up with Pocahontas, Sacajewa, Squanto and Tonto, and romanticized notions of the “noble savage” and their spirituality.

2. *Self-study*. Many practitioners admit reading various popular works about Native American spirituality.
3. *Worldview of the sweat lodge tradition*. Explicitly and implicitly, practitioners are indoctrinated into the worldview of their sweat lodge tradition which is based, often loosely and eclectically, on Native American teachings.
4. *Sweat lodge ceremony*. The actual sweat lodge ceremony is based on certain explicit and implicit beliefs, such as a universe populated with spirits, that practitioners quickly learn during the course of sweat lodge ceremonies (e.g., through the invocations, songs, and prayers). Furthermore, one also quickly learns that a primary purpose of the sweat lodge ceremony is to draw in spirit or spirits, including “ancestors” and “animal spirits.” Not surprisingly, that is what practitioners tend most to experience; they experience the presence of animal and ancestor spirits, not Christ or Mary, as I suspect would be the case in a Roman Catholic Church. This being said, non-native sweat lodge practitioners do tend to have encounter experiences during ceremonies more than any other type of experience which, presumably, is in consonance with the indigenous worldview.

The second largest category, “psychoid experiences,” are some of the more interesting and convincing transpersonal sweat lodge experiences because there are physical correlates (e.g., extraordinary healings). Such correlates lend credibility to the experiences by suggesting that they are not simply private imaginings.

The third largest category, “visual phenomena,” proved problematic. Specifically, there was considerable question as to what some experiences actually were. For instance, is “seeing lights” a transpersonal experience, an encounter with Grof’s sensory barrier, or a perceptual alteration best explained by science (e.g., phosgene stimulation)? Similarly, there is some question whether to include the subcategory “seeing things in rocks.” Given the human brain’s well-known tendency and capacity to perceive patterns, or simulacra, (even where there are apparently none), one has to question the seeing of images (such as faces) in the glowing rocks as transpersonal occasions. As a psychiatrist practitioner admitted, “The glowing rocks are very Rorschachy.”

The category of “visions” is another that proved problematic. There were actually more reports of “visions” than the 10 counted; however, several lacked the telltale characteristics of visions (i.e., intensity, realness, suddenness, meaningfulness), so were excluded.

The remainder of the categories, from “feelings of connectedness” to “extreme joy and peace,” were unproblematic and, for the most part, represented fairly common and well-known transpersonal experiences. Furthermore, some of the types of experiences disclosed by this research were remarkably similar to those

found in the Literature Review. Specifically, accounts in the popular and contemporary ethnographic literature revealed encounter and psychoid experiences, visual phenomena, visions, and experiences of connectedness.

Regarding the second primary objective—developing a taxonomy of experience—I had difficulty categorizing some of the reported experiences. Specifically, it was questionable as to how to categorize some reports, and some could have been categorized in more than one way. For instance, is “seeing glowing orbs” a visual phenomenon or an encounter experience? Is “feeling bird wings” a psychoid event or the presence of an animal spirit? Is “seeing Buddha” an encounter experience or a vision? In all such instances, a determination was made as to how best to categorize the experience according to the dominant descriptive characteristic. Therefore, no experience was included in more than one category.

It is important to acknowledge that, due to the problems described above, the taxonomy developed is only one of several possible versions. In a similar study, Masluk (2003) concluded that his classification scheme developed is “one of possibly several different ways that could have been used to organize the reported experiences” and that “it is provisional, at best” (pp. 140–1). A different researcher or reviewer of the data might develop a different scheme. Therefore, the taxonomy developed here should be considered provisional. Furthermore, as Wade (2000) has noted, “classification of complex human experiences is fraught with difficulties, as any taxonomy is somewhat arbitrary and can never reflect the dynamics or richness of an individual’s experience per se” (pp. 107–108).

Regarding the third primary objective—comparing the taxonomy to Grof’s—the research findings disclosed that Grof’s taxonomy could not readily account for more than half of the reports of experiences of practitioners. Trying to fit many sweat lodge practitioners’ experiences into his categories seemed strained, as if there was simply not a place for the majority of them. This may be due, in part, to a misinterpretation of practitioners’ experiences and/or Grof’s system. It also may be because Grof’s taxonomy privileges certain types of data, namely, transpersonal experiences from psychedelic research, holotropic breathwork, and spontaneous episodes of nonordinary states of consciousness. Grof also states that he included some transpersonal phenomena from the mystical literature and modern researchers, but he does not state that he included any from indigenous traditions of spirituality. Therefore, the finding that many sweat lodge experiences are not accounted for in his taxonomy is not surprising.

On the other hand, the fact that Grof’s taxonomy includes many types of transpersonal experiences not experienced by practitioners suggests that the sweat lodge is limited in its power to induce a wide range of transpersonal experience. Why? Either the sweat lodge ceremony, given its purpose and ritual design, (a) genuinely accesses the transpersonal realms intended (most notably the realm of spirits), or (b) experiences of those realms have more prosaic and secular alternative explanations (e.g., self-fulfilling expectations, set and setting, demand characteristics, self-esteem needs, self-delusion, illusion, suggestibility, chicanery, and other psychological, physiological, psychobio-

logical or neuropsychological reasons, such as sensory deprivation, dehydration, extreme heat, hypoxventilation, auditory driving, or fasting).

Similarly, the sweat lodge is limited in its power to induce a high incidence of transpersonal experiences, perhaps because the sweat lodge ceremony is essentially a sporadic, exoteric, religious practice, a primary purpose of which is intercessionary prayer, not transpersonal experience.

Also, a comparison of the taxonomy generated with Grof's reveals that there are few high-level experiences (e.g., the upper levels on Grof's taxonomy), even amongst the more experienced, long-term practitioners.

Regarding the first two secondary objectives—examining the incidence and types of transpersonal experiences by various biographical variables—no general associations were found, with the possible exception of sweat lodge tradition. This was contrary to expectation. In the least, I expected to find a general association between incidence and/or type of transpersonal experience and number of sweat lodge ceremonies, number of years practiced, pre-sweat lodge spiritual practice, incidence of pre-sweat lodge transpersonal experience, and expectations of transpersonal experience. For unknown reasons, none of this proved to be the case.

Regarding the third secondary objective—gaining an understanding of practitioners' perspectives of their experiences—I was struck by the lack of rational, critical thinking and evaluation of their experiences. Of particular concern is the fact that practitioners lacked awareness of (a) the pre/trans fallacy (Wilber, 1983) and the problem of confusing prerational experiences with transrational, (b) the many forms of unhealthy spirituality (Vaughan, 1991), and (c) the important distinction between “true” or transformative spirituality and “false” or defensive spirituality (Battista, 1996). Additionally, practitioners did not seriously consider the many alternative explanations for their transpersonal experiences.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given that saturation of types of transpersonal experiences reported was not reached and that the sample of sweat lodge traditions was small, this study is worth being replicated. However, I have several recommendations:

1. Use a larger practitioner sample. Optimally, interviews should continue until saturation is reached; that is, until no new reports of transpersonal experience are received.
2. Use a larger sample of traditions.
3. Incorporate any number of standardized psychometric instruments as part of the research design (see MacDonald, LeClair, Holland, Alter, & Friedman, 1995; MacDonald, Friedman, & Kuentzel, 1999; and MacDonald, Kuentzel, & Friedman, 1999).

4. Given that there are different types of sweat lodge ceremonies (e.g., healing, divination, sun dance, peyote, each with its own purpose, songs, prayers, and rituals), it would be revelatory to broaden the sample to test for an association between types of experience and type of sweat lodge ceremony.
5. Replicate this study with a Native American population.

## CONCLUSION

Several practitioners stressed that the primary purpose of the sweat lodge is a place to pray—which is consistent with native views—and not necessarily to have a transpersonal experience. Transpersonal experiences are welcomed, but not actively sought, as with vision quests. Hence, if the generation of transpersonal experiences is not a purpose of the sweat lodge ceremony, it is not surprising that there is not a greater variety and higher incidence of experience, or more overlap with Grof's taxonomy, or more higher-level experiences.

None of this, then, should detract from the sweat lodge's potential value as a spiritual practice for non-natives. Although some practitioners expressed doubt about how much their sweat lodge practice had contributed to their lives, and none had critically evaluated their experiences, for most it is an important spiritual and transformative practice. As one particularly experienced and articulate practitioner concluded: "Ninety-eight percent of the time you don't have a transpersonal experience per se. However, there's a sense of renewal and being cleansed that makes it worthy in and of itself. Even in the absence of an epiphany, over the span of a lifetime it's a transpersonal event, a transformational evolution."

It was my position in this study that the experiential reports were interesting in and of themselves and, in the tradition of radical empiricism, were data worth investigating and reporting. Therefore, the reported transpersonal experiences of sweat lodge practitioners were taken at face value as referring to experiential realities; that is, as experientially real to the practitioners. Even if there are natural explanations for transpersonal sweat lodge experiences, the sweat lodge ceremony still has positive value for practitioners.

The implications of this research are twofold. First, the entire range of human conscious experience has yet to be mapped. Second, different spiritual practices—like the sweat lodge ceremony—will tend to elicit certain types of transpersonal experiences (e.g., encounter) and not others.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> See Table 2 for the number of experiences in each type.

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### The Author

*Whit Hibbard*, Ph.D., received his doctorate in human science from Saybrook Graduate School, and has a third degree black belt in aikido. Whit is senior author of *Forensic Hypnosis* and *Psychic Criminology*. He also published a comprehensive review of ecopsychology in *The Trumpeter* and a case study of an "intuitive archaeologist" in *Exceptional Human Experience*. Whit is an independent scholar with a primary academic interest in transpersonal theory. He can be contacted at [whithibbard@yahoo.com](mailto:whithibbard@yahoo.com)