
SELF-TRANSFORMATIVE RESEARCH

Effects on Researchers of a Holistic Collaborative Study of Spiritual Exemplars

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Abstract: *What happens to researchers interested in spirituality, as they engage with a large number of spiritual exemplars? This question is explored, based on the experience of 14 research collaborators in a qualitative phenomenological study of spiritual exemplars (individuals perceived by others as exemplifying the spiritual life) of different traditions, paths, and cultures. Over 5.5 months, two groups of research collaborators watched video recordings of interviews with 20 spiritual exemplars, analyzed their transcripts, wrote down their impressions of each exemplar, and discussed them in biweekly meetings. At the end of that period, the effects of the process on the collaborators were explored through individual interviews and group discussions. The data collected suggests that the collaborators both formed and experienced the process as holistic and self-transformative in different ways. Three main effects were described: “self-reflection and insight,” “opening and broadening,” and “fostering spiritual self-reliance.” In choosing their “most exemplary exemplars,” the collaborators relied mainly on their somatic-intuitive impressions—and there was great diversity in their choices. These findings suggest that spiritual exemplarity is determined by “sympathetic resonance” between the exemplar and the person perceiving them as such. The conditions that contributed to the effects of the process and the potential of its application to facilitate interreligious dialogue and personal growth are discussed.*

INTRODUCTION

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

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



Exemplars and Their Effects on Others

In almost every area in which human aspiration for virtue or excellence is expressed, a special place is reserved for exemplars of that area—individuals who are perceived as embodying the highest human potential or the “vertex of maturity” in that area.¹ For aspirants or practitioners who aspire to cultivate and develop any virtue or skill, exemplars of that virtue or skill have been hypothesized to serve several functions. Social learning theory posits that “the power of example to activate and channel behavior has been abundantly documented.”² Exemplars’ example “seems to be a very effective way to remind ourselves of the kind of persons we wish to be.”³ Exemplars attract, inspire, and give confidence that success might be achievable also for others, and admiration of exemplars has been theorized to motivate “imitation of the value-being of the exemplary person”⁴ or emulation.⁵

In the religious-spiritual domain, a special place is reserved in many traditions for those who exemplify “the ideal of the tradition in its concrete manifestations in the lives of humans.”⁶ Learning from spiritual exemplars was named “spiritual modeling” by Oman and Thoresen,⁷ and Oman et al. argued that “regularly exposing students to spiritual models (both religious and nonreligious) can help them absorb and emulate the models’ character strengths.”⁸

Exemplar study was said to be necessary for providing “a complete account that applies to the full variety of human functioning” in the study of any psychological phenomenon.⁹ Examples of early studies of exemplars include Bucke’s study of exemplars of “cosmic consciousness,” James’s study of “mystics” and “saints,” and Maslow’s study of “self-actualizers” and “self-transcenders.”¹⁰ In the last four decades, numerous studies were conducted on exemplars of leadership, morality, altruism, care, bravery, wisdom, spirituality, and other virtues.¹¹ Exemplar methodology, defined as “a sample selection technique that involves the intentional selection of individuals, groups, or entities that exemplify the construct of interest in a highly developed manner,” was developed and refined to identify and study exemplars.¹²

The effects of exemplars on others have so far been studied only on exemplars’ students, followers, apprentices, trainees, employees, coworkers, peers, or community members.¹³ In these studies, the informants referred to their perceptions of and/or relationships with one person or a few at most, whom they had already chosen as their exemplar(s), and to the effects of the exemplar(s) on them. The question of what happens to people as they are exposed to a large number of individuals, nominated by others as exemplars of a specific virtue or construct, has not been studied to date.

Transformation through Research

Transformation through research has been described mainly in relation to so-called transformative research, auto/ethnography,¹⁴ first-person action research,¹⁵ and transpersonal research. In the context of transformative research, defined as research whose aim is to catalyze processes of change on a societal level,¹⁶ personal transformation is transformation of the research participants and is usually referred to as “a necessary component of research that is designed to support change at the societal level.”¹⁷ In auto/ethnography and first-person action research, the researcher may undergo a transformative experience alongside and as a result of the ethnographic immersion and

engagement with the research participants and when “our taken-for-granted assumptions, strategies, and habits are appropriately challenged.”¹⁸

In the context of transpersonal research,¹⁹ “a research project can be accompanied by increased self-awareness, enhance psycho-spiritual growth and development, and other personal changes of great consequence to the individuals involved,”²⁰ participants and researchers included. Sohmer posits that in such a context, “transformative outcomes . . . are considered as important as, if not more important than, the informational or conceptual outcomes.”²¹

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

CURRENT STUDY

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

As mentioned above, however, this question was not intended to be a subject of research when I invited people to join me as research collaborators. My intention was only to receive help with the qualitative analysis of interviews I conducted as part of another study.²² The title of the other study was “Living Transcendence: A Phenomenological Study of Spiritual Exemplars.” “Living Transcendence” is a term I coined, which refers to a relatively stabilized elevated spiritual state; spiritual exemplars are individuals presumably having and evincing that experience. The method used in the study was *exemplar methodology*. In that study, I asked 300 experts in the religious-spiritual field from different traditions to nominate and describe spiritual exemplars they knew “specifically indicating what it is that makes each of them exemplary.”

Descriptions of 180 spiritual exemplars were provided by 77 expert informants. Next, I conducted multiple in-depth phenomenological interviews with 32 of these spiritual exemplars, in which I asked the interviewees to describe their experience of Living Transcendence, and then video-recorded and transcribed their responses. The interviewees were from different traditions and paths and included, for example, an American Roman Catholic nun, pagan priestess, and Tibetan lama; an Uzbekistani teacher of Kashmiri Shaivism; an Iraqi Sufi sheik; an Egyptian Coptic bishop; a Zimbabwean healer; a Greenland shaman; a British New Age teacher; and an Israeli Jewish rabbi.

Prior to this research, I studied for several decades under the tutelage of a Japanese Zen master and then a Western Advaita teacher, exploring the spiritual teacher-student relationship.²³ My approach to the study of Living Transcendence was influenced by my interest in personally making the shift from transient “peak experiences” of transcendence to a more stabilized experience of Living Transcendence. Aware that my biases were toward monotheism and transcendence over polytheism and immanence, I knew that conducting both the interviews and the analysis on my own would greatly weaken the rigor of the research. To counter that effect, after interviewing the first 15 spiritual exemplars I decided to create a small group of research collaborators (hereinafter

referred to as “collaborators”), who would help me in the analysis process. The method I decided to use for the process was *collaborative analysis* with some elements taken from the *focus groups* method.

Collaborative analysis is a process “in which there is joint focus and dialogue among two or more researchers regarding a shared body of data, to produce an agreed interpretation.”²⁴ Usually, researchers from different disciplines, countries, or theoretical traditions—or with different levels of expertise—collaborate in such a process, bringing “a diversity of perspectives to the project, embodied in different people.” Collaborative analysis is thought to yield “researcher triangulation”²⁵ and thus enhance trustworthiness, counteract individual biases,²⁶ and achieve “perspective-transcending knowledge.”²⁷ Considering my biases and the fact that I was studying the experience of spiritual exemplars of different traditions and cultural backgrounds, applying this process seemed suitable.

For the process of collaborative analysis to be truly collaborative and integrative, rather than reflective of multiple analysts working in isolation (a concern expressed by Moran-Ellis and colleagues),²⁸ I decided that the collaborators would meet every second week to discuss their impressions and refine their analysis method. In so doing, I relied on the research technique of focus groups, the purpose of which is “to identify a range of perspectives on a research topic, and to gain an understanding of the issues from the perspective of the participants themselves.”²⁹ From the focus group technique I also adopted the principle that in the group discussions the researcher takes a peripheral role as a facilitator or moderator, with the power balance favoring participants.³⁰ As it turned out, the collaborators’ biweekly meetings were significant also in enabling the collaborators to give words to their subjective impressions, hear other impressions and points of view, and explore together their experiences.

Recruitment and Process Initiation

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

Join me in Living Transcendence

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

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

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

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

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

Through email exchanges with each of the applicants, I confirmed their availability and willingness to commit to six hours a week (some tried to negotiate) and the times they could join group meetings (some could join only at my nighttime). At the end of this screening process, 14 people enrolled to participate as collaborators in the research. These people signed an informed consent, approved by the institutional ethics committee of the University of Haifa. The informed consent specified the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to stop participating in the research at any time, and assured their confidentiality and anonymity (for which they were given pseudonyms in this paper). It also asked for their assurance that they would not share with others the study materials they received access to.

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

The 14 collaborators represented diverse disciplines (e.g., law, psychology, education, business management, and art), academic statuses (five had BAs, six MAs, and three PhDs or an equivalent title), personal attributes (nine women and five men between 46 and 72 years old, with an average age of 58), and geographical location (five were from Asia, five from North America, three from Europe, and one from Africa). The groups embraced no cultural diversity (all were affiliated mainly with Western culture) or diversity in religious-spiritual affiliation—all identified as more spiritual than religious, and their approach to spirituality was more pluralistic than exclusivist.

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

and “Understanding our connection to the Universal and the Divine has become more front and center for me at this point, as I ‘write the last chapter’ of my life” (Burt).

In preparation for the introductory meetings, I asked the collaborators to think of questions that would be of special interest for them during their participation in the research. The introductory group meetings were dedicated to exploring the collaborators’ questions. Examples of the questions are: “What makes someone a spiritual exemplar? Why are exemplars motivated to share their experience?” (Peggie); “How do the exemplars relate to the unexplored or unintegrated aspects of their being? To what extent is the separate sense of self important to them?” (Fred); “What is the process of going from peak experiences to a plateau state? What is the process by which one embodies love?” (Annalie); “What can they tell us about their lived experience that can help me in my journey? What is their relationship to death?” (Kendrick); “I’m interested in the movement between unity consciousness and the day-to-day life. What determines their authenticity?” (Orit); and “Did the spiritual awakening process require a language transformation, to represent a new emerging reality? If so, was it accompanied with a sense of loneliness?” (Yvie).

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

First Period of the Process

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

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

- i. For the discussion of our impressions of each interviewee, consider mainly:
 - a. What did you especially enjoy/appreciate in the interviews with them and what didn’t you like? What deeply resonated with you and what fell flat?
 - b. How would you describe the interviewee’s spiritual experience, state, depth, essence, or insight?
 - c. What impressed you and what you felt was lacking in who they are as a human being and a spiritual exemplar?
- ii. Please think if there are parts of the interview that it’s important for you that we talk about.

- iii. Please prepare follow-up questions that you would have liked to ask the interviewee.

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

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

At the end of the agreed-upon 2.5 months and after the sixth meeting, I sent an email to each of the collaborators, cautiously asking if they were interested in continuing to participate in the process for a second period of 2.5 additional months (with a two-week gap before the second period began). Aware of how intensive and time-consuming their involvement in the research had been, I also indicated that the weekly workload in that period would be reduced to three to four hours a week. I expected some or most of them to end their participation at that point. To my surprise, all 14 collaborators responded that they wanted to continue. Many of them indicated in their responses that, while they welcomed the reduced weekly workload, their involvement in the research was interesting, fulfilling, and important to them.

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

Second Period of the Process

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

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

Table 1: List of Themes and Codes Developed and Used by the Collaborators in Analyzing and Writing Down Their Impressions and Felt Impact of Each Exemplar

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

<i>Guiding:</i>	Recognizing and responding to student's level of understanding, facilitating student's understanding, guiding through stages
<i>Teaching:</i>	Becoming/being a teacher, motivation/reluctance to teach, leading others (groups, close community, wider followership)
<i>Tradition:</i>	Relationship to tradition, reliance on tradition
Impressions (your impressions)	
<i>Authenticity:</i>	Vulnerability, humility, transparency
<i>Ego:</i>	Self-promotion, self-importance, specialness, pride, putting down others, "full of themselves"
<i>Introspection:</i>	Their reflection ability, attention to felt sense, intuition
<i>Interaction:</i>	Dialogicity, openness, care, attentiveness
<i>Humor:</i>	Ease of being, lightness, self-irony
<i>Quirks:</i>	Idiosyncrasies, "nonspiritual" activities, inconsistencies
Spiritual exemplarity (your assessment)	
<i>Essence(s):</i>	Of spiritual exemplarity felt by you, transmitted by them
<i>Roundedness:</i>	Fullness of being—or what is lacking
<i>Why considered:</i>	Or what makes them a spiritual exemplar for some people
Your general impressions of them (free text)	
Their impact on you (free text)	
Self-assessment of your positionality (free text)	

The two collaborator groups continued to watch video recordings and analyze transcripts of interviews with two spiritual exemplars every two weeks. They also continued to meet and discuss their impressions every second week. This second period of the process lasted two more months. By the end of the 5.5-month process, each group watched and analyzed interviews with 20 spiritual exemplars, which included the same 15 exemplars as the other group and five additional exemplars.

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

METHODS

Two methods relevant to the process that the collaborators underwent—heuristic research and organic/intuitive inquiry—are first described in the following section, on methodological

foundations. The procedure used in this research for data collection and the process of its analysis, using the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, are then described.

Methodological Foundations

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

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

Heuristic Research

Heuristic research has been described as “a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others” in which “attention is focused inward on feeling responses of the researcher to the outward situation.”³¹ It is said to be suitable for “any research endeavor where the inquiry is on the cutting edge of new territory being explored.”³² The researcher in heuristic research “must have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated,”³³ and the research “begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer”³⁴ and progresses by processes of “reflective learning.”

In this study, the requirements set for people to join as research collaborators ensured that they all had personal affinity to and deep interest in the study subject. These were foundational for the process that transpired. They were reinforced by the exploration of the questions, which were of special interest for the collaborators, in the introductory meetings of the groups. The process that followed provided the collaborators with an opportunity to follow their personal questions and to incorporate their felt sense³⁵ and “reflective learning” into the collaborative research process.

Organic/Intuitive Inquiry

Organic inquiry³⁶ is an emerging research approach that incorporates feeling, intuitive, and body-based information into data collection and analysis in order to “more fully appreciate . . . the nature of the types of complex, rich, and meaningful experiences that are of great interest to the human sciences and humanities.”³⁷ Closely related to it is a research method called “intuitive inquiry,” which “seeks to engage our full humanity, including our aesthetic, imaginal, and transformational capacities, in the conduct of qualitative research . . . Transformation of the researcher’s

understanding of the topic under study and breakthrough insights are actively sought.”³⁸ As suggested by Churchill and Wertz, “to engage in phenomenological reflection on a given phenomenon, an *intuitive* relationship is needed between the researchers and the research participant—*direct existential contact*. *Intuitive* means that the phenomenon is directly accessible to the researcher’s own consciousness.”³⁹ (Both organic and intuitive inquiry relate to the concept of “empathetic identification,” which means that the researcher “looks around from inside the experience and witnesses the essential qualities of the other coming to life as the researcher’s own experience.”⁴⁰) Participants in organic inquiry should be individuals “who have had meaningful experience with the topic of study, who have an open-minded understanding of it, and who have both willingness and ability to articulate their experience.”⁴¹

Organic/intuitive research is said to be “ideally suited to topics related to psycho-spiritual growth,” where “the psyche of the researcher becomes the instrument of the research, working in partnership with the experiences of participants and guided by liminal and spiritual influences.”⁴² As such, it was especially suitable for this study. This research approach also provides an opportunity for transformational change, defined as the “restructuring of one’s worldview that provides some discrete degree of movement along one’s lifetime path toward further transpersonal development.”⁴³

Procedure

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

After all the collaborators were individually interviewed, the last meeting of each group was conducted by Zoom. Unlike all the previous group meetings, I facilitated those last meetings. Each of the two-hour meetings was divided into two parts. In the first part, which lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, I asked the collaborators to each choose their two or three “most exemplary exemplars” of the exemplars they saw. After they did that, I asked them to “please reflect on and describe *how* you chose your ‘most exemplary exemplars.’” Each of the collaborators was invited to freely describe, in their own words, the internal, subjective process they underwent in choosing their exemplars. Follow-up questions were asked by me and other collaborators if further clarification felt needed. In the second part, which lasted between 80 and 90 minutes, I asked the collaborators to describe and discuss the effect that the process had on them. The meetings were recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

To deeply and intimately understand the collaborators' experiences of the process and its effects on them, I analyzed the transcripts of the individual interviews and the last group meetings using the hermeneutic-phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach aims at understanding how individuals experience, interpret, and give meaning to a given phenomenon. Husserl, who developed this approach, called for a return "to the things themselves" by the researcher holding in abeyance their preconceptions and prior knowledge (a process referred to as *epoche* or bracketing). The hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, proposed by Heidegger,⁴⁴ on the other hand, recognizes that the analysis process is invariably and inevitably influenced by the researcher's preconceptions. The Heideggerian hermeneutic-phenomenological approach includes, therefore, both a description of the phenomenon by the respondent and the researcher's reflection on and interpretation of the respondent's description.

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

FINDINGS

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

Holistic Inquiry Process: "Bringing Forth Your Energy and Experience and All of Your Capacities"

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

First of all, you have an opportunity to engage with deep thinkers. Then you're bringing your cognitive and somatic perceptions and discrimination to the process with the intention

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

Yaris described how the combination of watching the video recording and "allowing for certain processes to take place in me, understanding things about myself," then analyzing the transcript and writing down her impressions, and finally discussing these in the group meeting had a powerful integrative or unifying effect on her. She commented that she experienced this integrative process as gradual, and that "shifting from the pre-verbal experience of the initial meeting with the exemplar and putting it into words was not easy, but important. . . . This was more difficult for me at the beginning and gradually became easier."

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

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

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

The combination of individual and collective inquiry also contributed to the integration of the collaborators' experience by helping them to make conscious and verbalize impressions that had

not been consciously aware of. Angelique, for example, said that the group meetings “helped me to pick out those jewels that actually had hit me while watching the interview but I wasn’t conscious of. Then in the group somebody would give it words and I’d go, ‘Oh, yes, indeed!’”

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

Choosing the Most Exemplary Exemplars: “I Intuitively Moved toward the Ones That Shifted My Consciousness”

In discussing the process, they went through in choosing specific interviewees as their “most exemplary exemplars,” most collaborators indicated that their choice relied more on their somatic-intuitive impressions than on preformulated criteria. Some collaborators did mention preformulated criteria—such as ethical behavior, absence of a sense of superiority, independence, and authenticity—but those criteria were necessary rather than sufficient conditions for their choices. For example, Kendrick provided a list of criteria that led him to choose his three exemplars, but when asked about another exemplar, who also matched all those criteria, he replied, “Yes, but I just didn’t connect with her.” When explaining her choices, Angelique said:

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

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

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

And Annalie said:

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

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

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

The collaborators’ reliance on their somatic-intuitive impressions seems related to the fact that there was little agreement among them on who the most impressive or “the most exemplary exemplars” were among the interviewees. Interviewees that impressed some of the collaborators did not impress at all or were even unappealing to others. Orit, one of the collaborators, commented that “in the group discussion it was interesting for me to see . . . the very different reactions some of us had to the same exemplar, and that how someone would be drawn to or repelled by an exemplar had to do with differences in our personalities.” The combination of these two findings—that the collaborators relied mainly on their somatic-intuitive impressions and that there was diversity among them in choosing “the most exemplary exemplars”—suggests that the collaborators’ impressions were significantly determined by their personal characteristics.

Self-Reflection and Insight: “I Have Found Greater Understanding and Acceptance of Who I Am”

All the collaborators indicated that they found the process insightful and transformative. For example, Kendrick said, “I was challenged, evolved and transformed through this process. I feel I have gained greater awareness, deeper insight, sharper intellect, deeper practice and a more solid footing on my spiritual path.” Angelique said that “during the process, two things stood out for me. One was how to live life more fully and the other was how to be less engaged in drama in my

life. Pondering these really helped me to deepen my understanding.” For Orit, participation in the process helped clarify a question that she had been carrying for many years. She said:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Opening and Broadening: “I Learned to Appreciate the Differences”

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

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

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

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

Some of the collaborators related to how their engagement with the different conceptual and experiential frameworks, embodied and transmitted by the different exemplars, affected them. For example, Annalie said: “I learned to appreciate the differences. We all know that there are many paths to the mountaintop, but to get to walk with these different people and experience through them the truth of that made it an actual experience.” Yvie commented: “With some exemplars I had a feeling of ‘I recognize this,’ with others I felt ‘this is interesting, let me check this.’ This had an effect of expansion on me, it widened the range of possibilities of how spirit can manifest.”

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

Being part of this group has enriched my understandings by listening to you all. I really appreciated how we each have been able to be authentic in our participation. I never felt anybody had to compromise anything about their understanding or impressions of an

exemplar. And I have learned from listening to you all. I think that together we did something that added to the richness and wealth that was brought by each of the exemplars.

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

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

The descriptions of this effect by many of the collaborators indicate that they not only accepted that there are different prisms and perspectives but also, more importantly, found it conducive to their own opening and broadening and appreciated this effect on them. It seems that the effect was self-induced—the collaborators enabled it by engaging in self-reflection while opening themselves up to the exemplars and their peers—as well as transformative.

Fostering Spiritual Self-Reliance: “Stop Looking Without and to Start Going Deep Within”

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

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

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

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

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

It seems that, as with the other two effects of self-reflection and insight and of opening and broadening, the fostering of spiritual self-reliance was also produced by the collaborators’ engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars, amplified by their holistic experience. While engagement with a single spiritual exemplar is often associated with projection of perfection on the exemplar, imitation, and dependency, engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars appears to be associated with the opposite effect.⁴⁵ The reason for this may be that, when someone engages with a single spiritual exemplar, it is difficult for them to distinguish between the spiritual essence that the exemplar embodies and exemplifies and the exemplar’s personal attributes. Engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars, on the other hand, enabled the collaborators to make such a distinction and distill the spiritual essence from the exemplars’ different personalities and cultural and traditional conditionings.

DISCUSSION

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

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

Self-Transformative Effect

Participation in the research process had significant and even transformative effects on many of the collaborators. One effect that many of the collaborators described (under Self-Reflection and Insight) was that of gaining insights about themselves, their life story, issues, and unresolved questions they had been struggling with. This effect brings to mind Moustakas's characterization of heuristic processes as processes in which "while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge."⁴⁶ Another effect (described under Opening and Broadening) was that of seeing through existing limiting or rigid preconceived ideas and judgements and "widen[ing] the range of possibilities of how spirit can manifest" by opening themselves up to the different exemplars. Yet another effect (described under Fostering Spiritual Self-Reliance) was the fostering and cultivation of greater trust of the collaborators in their individuality and of self-reliance on their ability to independently navigate their unique spiritual paths.

The effects can be regarded as self-transformative, in the sense that they were induced by the collaborators' interest in and willingness to open themselves up to the spiritual exemplars they engaged with, and that they involved transformation of the collaborators' "self." The "self" that we refer to here as the subject of transformation is "the set of a person's core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals: the characteristics that are most central to him or her."⁴⁷ Considering the high bar set for participation as a collaborator in the research (a commitment to six hours a week for several months), it can be assumed that spirituality was among the characteristics most central to the collaborators. The term "religious self," defined as "a self which is focused on her own transformation in order to become a perfected version of herself,"⁴⁸ may be replaced, in the context of this study, with "spiritual self." As spiritual selves, the collaborators sought and induced their own self-transformation by joining this study and by forming and participating in the process of the study.

Contributing Conditions

As suggested above, one factor that seemed to contribute to the self-transformative effect of the collaborators' participation in the process is their affinity to and personal interest in the research subject. These match Moustakas's words that "the heuristic researcher is not only intimately and autobiographically related to the question but learns to love the question."⁴⁹ The high bar set for participation as a collaborator in the research ensured that only people with a strong personal interest in spiritual development and therefore in the subject of spiritual exemplars would join the collaborators' group. Their personal interest also made them likely to resonate with and be impacted by the exemplars' descriptions of their experiences, which Anderson and Braud⁵⁰ suggested made them ideal candidates for this kind of research.

Another factor is the research method, which invited the collaborators "to engage in a greater variety of ways of knowing than usually is the case."⁵¹ In this study, the collaborators participated in a relatively extended, multimodal process of inquiry. They used their cognitive-analytical faculties for analyzing the interview transcripts, their embodied felt sense⁵² for sensing their impressions of each exemplar, their contemplative-reflective ability for describing these in writing and speech, and their interpersonal intelligence⁵³ in the group meetings. Although in the individual

interviews and the last group meetings the collaborators mainly described their embodied-intuitive experience and hardly referred to the analytical-cognitive aspect of their engagement with the exemplars, we believe that this aspect was instrumental in the process. The fact that they were taking part in academic research, which required diligence (and time) in coding the transcripts of the exemplars' interviews and analyzing their qualities as spiritual exemplars, contributed to their engagement with the exemplars. The different items in the form that they filled out for each exemplar (table 1) required that they use all their faculties in conjunction with each other, and some of them described that they watched the video recordings of the interviews and coded their transcripts simultaneously. The process may be defined, therefore, as a multimodal-turned-holistic process, where "modality" refers to "the way in which something happens or is experienced,"⁵⁴ and "holistic" means "relating to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems."⁵⁵

The collaborators were also given relative freedom in choosing their preferred ways of engaging with the study materials, which allowed them to gravitate toward holistic engagement, which also produced the greatest impact on them. It seems that such a multimodal and holistic process of inquiry is more likely to have an impact on researchers than processes involving only one or two modes of engagement with the subject.

Yet another factor is the invitation to the collaborators to reflect on their embodied and felt impressions of the exemplars and to express them in writing and speech. As pointed out by Etherington, reflexivity "opens up a space between subjectivity and objectivity where the distinctions between content and process become blurred."⁵⁶

Spiritual Exemplarity

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

These effects were attributed by the collaborators mainly to their engagement with a large number of spiritual exemplars. This observation is supported by the fact (described under Choosing "the Most Exemplary Exemplars") that different collaborators resonated to different degrees with different exemplars. It seems that, in choosing their "most exemplary exemplars," the collaborators relied mainly on what can be called "sympathetic resonance."⁵⁷ "Sympathetic resonance" is a psychological principle akin to the physical resonance principle. Its essential feature is that if two structures are very similar in nature, such as two similar guitars, the activation of one will be mirrored in the other. Likewise, if certain characteristics or experiences of a person also apply to another person, the latter would resonate with or mirror the former's description of their experience. In this study, different collaborators resonated, did not resonate, or anti-resonated with different exemplars, presumably in the same way that differently calibrated guitars respond differently to the same guitar.

This diversity among the collaborators suggests that “spiritual exemplarity” is a relational construct, dependent on a “sympathetic resonance” between an exemplar and the collaborators impacted by him or her. It is also possible that, just like “the effects of moral exemplars on observers may differ according to their stage of moral development,”⁵⁸ each collaborator’s resonance with different exemplars depended on their psychological and spiritual profile or stage of development or maturity.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND APPLICATION

The question of whether or to what extent the above effects are attributable to the relatively extended, multimodal, and holistic process of inquiry or to the unique characteristics of spiritual exemplarity cannot be answered based on this study alone. Additional studies, in which the same or a similar method will be applied to other types of exemplarities, may help to clarify this point. For example, research collaborators could engage with a large number of moral, courage, or wisdom exemplars (who are, as posited by Bronk, King, and Matsuba,⁵⁹ likely to be “typical or even deficient” with regard to other virtues). If it turns out that such engagement yields different effects than in this study, this would suggest that the above effects are, indeed, attributable specifically to spiritual exemplarity and indicative of its characteristics.

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

Exposure of students or graduates of such religious institutions—as well as college and university students of Philosophy, Theology, Religious Studies, Comparative Religion, Psychology, and Anthropology of Religion and Spirituality—to a large number of spiritual exemplars of different traditions may also be a way of facilitating interreligious dialogue. The theoretical foundation for such application had already been laid out by Harrison in her method of “exemplar reasoning.” Exemplar reasoning is a method of thinking with others who possess different religious, moral, or political commitments about our and their exemplars. It is based on the understanding that interpersonal and intercultural understanding can be better cultivated by focusing on exemplary persons and their experience rather than on abstract ideological, philosophical, or religious ideas.⁶⁰ Harrison applied this method as a tool for interreligious dialogue in one or a few interreligious meetings. The method used in this study and variations thereof can be applied for a more extended, multimodal, and holistic process, which may yield more profound and lasting effects on its participants.

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

study suggests that such effects are likely to be achieved by holistic processes of engagement with different types of virtue exemplars.

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