A Longitudinal Case Study: The Development of Exceptional Human Experiences of Senior Ecclesiastical Professionals in the Catholic Church

Abstract. *Exceptional human experiences (EHEs) impact on health and well-being, and can contribute to enhanced intercultural and interreligious awareness and understanding. The aim of this longitudinal study was to explore the development of EHEs in a group of senior professionals in the German Catholic Church during a 12-day training period conducted over nine months. A sample of eight participants voluntarily enrolled for training to develop intercultural and interreligious competences within a spiritual context and framework. Exceptional human experiences were measured through the EEQ in pre- and post-test questionnaires which were qualitatively analysed. The results of this study reflect an increase in the frequency of positive spiritual experiences and visionary dream encounters, as well as a more positive evaluation of these spiritual phenomena. Participants also reported on a decrease in negative spiritual experiences (loss of ego/destructiveness). The findings seem to suggest that it is possible to raise people's awareness of spiritual practices and to enhance intercultural and interreligious competence through training interventions. Training could also result in a shift from a negative to a more positive appraisal of exceptional human experiences. It is asserted that spiritual practice acts as medium to assist with the framing and interpretation of these experiences.*

Introduction and Background

The Catholic Church has undergone many changes and is in the process of opening up to new perspectives of intercultural, interreligious and societal concepts and dialogues in the German context (Schneider-Stengel 2014). While the church is undergoing serious changes, decreasing member numbers (Gummer 2014; Zapp 2012), a decrease in pastoral communities, the consolidation of congregations (German Catholic Bishops' Conference Report 2012), and restructuring processes within the organisation (Gummer 2014; Sorrells 2007) impact on the organisation and its employees.

The Catholic Church is one of the huge providers of adult education in Germany (Starke 1995; Heidenreich 2001; Mörchen and Tolksdorf 2009). Over the years, the Catholic Church has

emphasised the importance of developing intercultural and interreligious encounters and the development towards an open, intercultural learning organisation (Schneider-Stengel 2014; Hellmanns 2014). In the context of these processes of restructuring, redefinitions and the development of new conceptual implications, the Catholic Church is offering training courses and experiences in mediation with regard to intercultural and interreligious topics to train professionals to cope with the demanding challenges of their workplace.

In the training course mentioned and evaluated in this study, senior professionals were trained in intercultural and interreligious competences. During the course, spirituality served as overarching paradigm and new enhanced understanding, manageability and meaningfulness were promoted in the context of a multicultural workplace, the changing culture of the Catholic Church in Germany, and German society in general. Within this spiritual context, so-called "exceptional human experiences" (EHEs) were explored as elements of personal growth and development within intercultural and interreligious contexts.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the development of EHEs of senior German Catholic Church professionals who attended a 12-day training course on becoming mediators in intercultural and interreligious contexts, over a period of nine months. The primary aim of this study is to explore the development of EHEs in senior professionals from the beginning of the course to the end. The article refers to the development, experience and interpretation of EHEs within a homogeneous group of professionals and contributes to a deeper understanding of developing perceptions and attitudes towards EHEs in the context of intercultural and interreligious understanding.

Spirituality as Paradigm and its Context

There is evidence that, within the work context, a search is on for new paradigms to reflect the current existence of the human species. Biberman and Whittey (1997) already mentioned in the previous century that the modernist paradigm is outdated and that we need to find a paradigm of hope and humanity for the future of work and human beings. As spirituality becomes more knowingly embedded in current day effective functioning and growth in the work context (Burrows 2014; Madden 2015; Paul, Dutta and Saha 2015), new paradigms that reflect and capture elements of spirituality and religiosity are searched for. DeHoff (1998) mentioned the need for a paradigm for psychological and spiritual growth, while Lines (2002) promoted a

'new spiritual paradigm' to replace outdated perspectives on the human condition in terms of growth and development.

Spirituality has been described as a universal phenomenon (Teasdale and Dalai Lama 1999). It is hardly possible to provide a single, holistic and inclusive definition thereof (Fukuyama and Servig 1999). Spirituality is viewed as a consciousness-altering process (Cashwell, Paige Bentley and Bigbee 2007); is overarching, encompassing, personal and experimental and does not necessitate an institutional affiliation (Roof 2000). Cashwell, Paige Bentley and Bigbee (2007:67) define spirituality as a "developmental process that is both active and passive wherein beliefs, disciplined practice, and experiences are grounded and integrated to result in increased mindfulness (non-judgemental awareness of present experiences), heartfulness (experience of compassion and love), and soulfulness (connections beyond ourselves)". Campbell and Moyer (2001) emphasise that spirituality is about learning to experience life fully awake, i.e. being mindful. It also has an appreciation for the mystery of life (Miller 2004).

Spirituality is achieved through a person's awareness (Kelly 1995). If the sense of awareness is connected to the meaning and purpose of life, the sacredness of all and the connectedness of all, then this awareness can be called soulfulness. This soulfulness is part of a spiritual path which contributes to aspects of holistic wellness, personal and professional healing and growth (Cashwell, Paige Bentley and Bigbee 2007).

Spirituality has been emphasised as a potential health resource (Larson and Larson 2003) and enhances effective coping during stressful situations by promoting meaning-making and a sense of personal competence, resulting in effective coping and positive mental health outcomes (Day 2010; Puchalski, Blatt and Kogan 2014; Fehring Brennan and Keller 1987; MacDonald 2000; Mascaro, Rosen and Morey 2004; Ying 2009). Besides spirituality contributing positively to health and well-being, it has been proven that spirituality plays a positive role in the development of intercultural and interreligious competences (House and Parker 2015; Mayer and Boness 2013; Sandage, Jankowski, Beilby and Frank 2015). The development of spirituality can particularly contribute to an increase in intercultural and interreligious understanding and competence, if commonalities and differences are explored across religious, cultural and faith groups (Ludeman Smith 2014). Sandage and Harden (2011) emphasise that spirituality is positively associated with intercultural development, particularly when associated with gratitude.

There are different ways of developing spirituality and intercultural, interfaith and interreligious competences, if professional collaborators "tap into the knowledge and training techniques that professional interculturalists use to prepare and support those crossing cultural and religious borders" (Ludeman Smith 2014:2941). One of these ways of promoting intercultural, interreligious and interfaith competences is the experience, analysis and transformation of EHEs (Rankin 2008), such as described in the following section.

Exceptional Experiences within the Spiritual Context

EHEs have been explained as being the experiences of founders and key figures at the origin of the major religious traditions and are seen as core experiences within spiritual and religious contexts (Rankin 2008). The term "exceptional human experiences" (EHEs), a term initially coined by White (1993), is based on the description and definition of Kohls, Friedl and Walach (2001) and Kohls and Walach (2006:126) as "experiences that touch on areas outside the common sense reality of our everyday world". Examples include spiritual and mystical experiences, a sense of enlightenment, presentiment and telepathic encounters. Usually, EHEs correlate with a fundamental change in attitude and/or behaviour (Kohls, Friedl and Walach 2001; Lucadou and Wald 2014; White 1997) and are viewed as spiritual experiences based in the broader context and paradigm of spirituality.

The exploration of EHEs in the context of spirituality is seen as important to develop intercultural and interreligious competences, in order to create an open-minded, self-reflected and self-managed understanding of these experiences within and across different cultures and identities. A deep understanding of EHEs in terms of spirituality is also regarded as contributing to the creation of meaningfulness at work (Mayer, Surtee and Barnard 2015) and can contribute towards positive mental health (Mayer and Viviers 2014a 2014b). Comprehending EHEs within an intercultural and interreligious context can also contribute towards an increase in intercultural competences (Jones-Smith 2016; Greve 2011) and to building the base for a more holistic view of spirituality (Palmer and Braud 2002) and health and well-being benefits (Braud 2012). Taylor, Van Zandt and Menjares (2013) emphasise that the development of cultural competence always needs various approaches to cognitive, affective and spiritual dimensions to engage deeply in the diversity of intercultural and interreligious understanding and contexts of cultural complexity.

In a study of Kohls, Walach and Lewith (2009), patients with regular spiritual practice – tested with the EEQ - reported more positive than negative spiritual experiences and were more mindful than patients without spiritual practice (tested with the FMI, 14 item). This seems to be an important finding, particularly as the relationship between spirituality and health is not always positive or negative; spiritual experiences might be associated with crises (Wardell and Engebretson 2006). At the same time, the authors (Kohls, Walach and Lewith 2009) highlight that mindfulness seems to be a protective factor for buffering generic distress, as well as for distress based on negative spiritual experiences. Spiritual experiences need to be viewed as multivariate constructs when highlighted that mindfulness supports health and well-being through endowing an individual with resilience against negative spiritual experiences. The reflection, analysis and interpretation of EHEs can contribute to the development of spirituality (Jones-Smith 2016), and through particular intercultural and interreligious curricula and education, intercultural and interreligious competences can be built (Greve 2011).

In the past, spirituality has mainly been based on quantitative approaches (Hill and Pargament 2003). At the same time, there is a broad qualitative approach to studying spiritual experiences (e.g. Hardy 1979; Jones-Smith 2016). However, "multilevel interdisciplinary paradigms" (Emmons and Paloutzian 2003) are needed to address the core of spirituality, which has until now been almost unnoticed in the field of spirituality (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003).

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design. It is anchored in a longitudinal case study approach within the modern hermeneutical tradition (Dilthey 1976; Geertz 1987). This study emphasises the development processes of the participants according to O'Reilly (2012) with regard to spirituality within the specific context of a training and development course. Since the research uses a context-specific approach (Patton 2002), it requires an in-depth understanding of the current perspectives and context of the Catholic Church in Germany and the socio-economic challenges of the German society.

Research Setting and Sample

This study presents data that was collected during an "intercultural and interreligious training course" for senior professionals working in the Catholic Church in Essen, Germany. The

training course comprised 12 training days over a period of nine months and was aimed at developing intercultural and interreligious understanding within the spiritual setting of the Catholic Church.

The Training Course

The training programme was advertised in newspapers, on the Internet and via networks of the Catholic Church. The course language was German and any person who was interested in participating, could do so. The participants did not need to belong to a certain religious group.

During this training course, participants learnt about intercultural competences and interreligious approaches to spirituality through theoretical inputs, exercises, literature studies, questionnaires, discussions, videos, excursions into different spiritual contexts, case study work, role-plays, simulations and best practice principles. With regard to the training methods and techniques used during the course, the interaction of participants and interactive learning were promoted. Theoretical inputs introduced the participants to topics, such as culture, interfaith, interreligion, interculture and intercultural competences, spirituality and faith. During the training programme, personal progress was discussed with participants.

The Sample

The training course was open to any person interested in the course, independent of denomination, cultural background or level of education. The course language was German. Eight senior professionals working in the Catholic Church registered for and participated in the entire 12-day training course (Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of the population (n=8)

ITEM	CATEGORY	FREQUENCY
Age	30-40 years	2 (25%)
	41-50 years	3 (37.5%)
	51-60 years	3 (37.5%)
Gender	Female	5 (62.5%)
	Male	3 (37.5%)
Language	German	8 (100%)
Marital status	Married	4 (50%)
	Single	3 (37.5%)
	Divorced	1 (12.5%)

Research Methods

The researcher applied a combination of quantitative (questionnaire survey) and qualitative (participant observation, collateral talks and literature analysis) research methods which were analysed and interpreted within the qualitative research design and the hermeneutical research paradigm.

Data Collection Methods

At the beginning of the training course, the participants were invited to participate in the study. The invitation explained the purpose of the study and highlighted the extent of confidentiality. The questionnaires were distributed by means of the traditional pen-and-paper distribution method at two points in time: at the beginning of the training course and at the end of the training course. The survey questionnaires included a biographical/demographical questionnaire and the Exceptional Experience Questionnaire (EEQ) (Kohls 2004; Kohls and Walach 2006, 2007).

The Exceptional Experience Questionnaire (EEQ) (Kohls 2004; Kohls and Walach 2006, 2007) is a 57-item version. It is developed for measuring spiritual experiences, psychopathological experiences and visionary dream experiences on a four-dimensional scale (Kohls 2004; Kohls and Walach 2006; Kohls, Hack and Walach 2008). The questionnaire measures the frequency of exceptional experiences as well as their current evaluation. The four scales are empirically corroborated by means of factor analyses (Kohls 2004; Kohls and Walach 2006; Kohls, Hack and Walach 2008; Kohls, Walach and Lewith 2009):

- *Positive spiritual experiences*: This factor highlights positive spiritual experiences of transcending the self, sensations of connectedness and unity with a transcendental entity. Example items: "I am illumined by divine light and divine strength" and "A higher being protects or helps me".

- *Negative spiritual experiences*: The second factor describes experiences of deconstruction, ego-loss and fearful sensations of isolation and loneliness that are frequently described in the mystical literature because of following a spiritual path. Example items: "My world-view is falling apart" and "A feeling of ignorance or not knowing overwhelms me".

- *Psychopathological experiences*: This factor emphasises psychopathological experiences that fit into the psychotic and paranoid sphere. Example items: "I clearly hear voices, which scold me and make fun of me, without any physical causation" and "I am controlled by strange and alien forces".

- *Visionary dream experiences*: The fourth factor relates to intensive dream-type experiences. Two example items are "I dream so vividly that my dreams reverberate while I am awake" and "I have meaningful dreams".

The survey data was captured on Excel and processed through SPSS (2012). Notes on observations and colloquial talks were collected during the training course.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data can be analysed in descriptive and qualitative ways by using statistics (Collis and Hussey 2003). Quantitative data is analysed systematically in qualitative theoretical ordering of variables in elaboration tables (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Statistical analysis was used to summarise biographical data as well as EEQ data in two defined points in time. Scores on the two measurements of EEQ for each individual were compared in terms of their development from the first to the second measurement. No inferential statistical analysis was conducted due to the qualitative nature of this research and the small dataset (n=8). The notes on observations and collateral talks feed into the interpretation of the findings to contribute to a deeper understanding of the development of EEQ throughout the course.

Quality Criteria and Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted within a qualitative research paradigm and qualitative research criteria were used to ensure research quality, such as conformability, credibility, transferability and dependability (Van der Riet and Durrheim 2008). The study was based on ethical considerations and ensured the rights of participants, the creation of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and transparency. A cooperative, respectful, constructive and positive research field was created (Wang 2012). Ethical clearance was provided by the Bischöfliches Generalvikaritat, Bistum Essen, Essen, Germany.

Results

From the pre-measurement to the post-measurement, the total EEQ frequency scores increased slightly from 943 to 945. The total EEQ evaluation scores decreased from 1097 to 953 (see Table 2).

Table 2: EEQ total scores per dimension

DIMENSIONS	PRE-TEST		POST-TEST	
	Frequency	*Evaluation*	Frequency	*Evaluation*
Positive spiritual experiences	503	*(431)*	533	*(387)*
Loss of ego/destruction	173	*(264)*	158	*(222)*
Psychopathology	166	*(278)*	150	*(224)*
Visionary dreams	101	*(124)*	104	*(120)*
TOTAL	943	*(1097)*	945	*(953)*

Respondents reported more positive (pre-measurement − 503 and post-measurement − 533) than negative spiritual experiences (pre-measurement − 173 and post-measurement − 158). They communicated more negative experiences (loss of ego/destruction 173 and 158) compared to psychopathological experiences (166 and 150).

Respondents reported a more positive evaluation of all the dimensions (positive spiritual experiences, loss of ego/destruction, psychopathology and visionary dreams) during the post-measurement. According to the mean scores, respondents overall reported more positive experiences, compared to the other three dimensions.

In terms of the individual results (see Table 3 below). The majority of participants (P1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8) reported that they have had an increase in **positive spiritual experiences**. Only two participants (P4 and 7) reported a reduction in these encounters. The majority (P2, 5, 7, and 8) also reported that they have experienced a decrease in experiences related to **loss of ego/destruction**. Three participants (P1, 3 and 6) reported an increase in these episodes. In terms of **psychopathology**, the majority of participants (P1, 4, 5, and 8) indicated a decrease in these encounters across the two measuring points. Interestingly, three participants (P2, 6 and 7) reported a consistent number of experiences from the pre-test to the post-test. Finally, the majority of participants (P1, 4, 5 and 6) reported an increase in **visionary dream** encounters. Three participants (P3, 7 and 8) indicated that these encounters had actually decreased.

Table 3

EEQ Individual <u>frequency</u> scores per dimension

DIMENSIONS	PRE-TEST AND *POST-TEST* SCORES							
	P1	**P2**	**P3**	**P4**	**P5**	**P6**	**P7**	**P8**
Positive spiritual experiences	57*(59)*	48*(53)*	55*(70)*	55*(50)*	48*(57)*	70*(81)*	71*(58)*	99*(105)*
Loss of ego/destruction	21*(22)*	20*(17)*	19*(23)*	20*(20)*	18*(16)*	18*(16)*	23*(16)*	27*(18)*
Psychopathology	19*(16)*	17*(17)*	18*(19)*	21*(15)*	19*(17)*	19*(17)*	18*(18)*	29*(23)*
Visionary dreams	13*(15)*	10*(10)*	18*(11)*	10*(11)*	8*(12)*	8*(12)*	9*(7)*	19*(17)*

In terms of the personal assessment (see Table 4 below) of **positive spiritual experiences**, the majority of participants (P1, 2, 5, 6 and 7) experienced these encounters in a positive light. Insofar as **Loss of ego/destruction** encounters are concerned, the majority of participants (P3, 4, 6 and 8) attached negative connotations to these spiritual experiences. Surprisingly, in terms of **psychopathological** experiences, the majority of participants (P2, 3, 5, 6 and 8) assessed these encounters as positive phenomena. Finally, which is also surprising to some extent, the majority of participants (P1, 2, 4 and 5) evaluated **visionary dream** encounters as being negative or disturbing.

Table 4

EEQ Individual <u>evaluation</u> scores per dimension

DIMENSIONS TEST SCORES	PRE-EVALUATION AND *POST-EVALUATION*							
	P1	**P2**	**P3**	**P4**	**P5**	**P6**	**P7**	**P8**
Positive spiritual experiences	58*(55)*	48*(28)*	32*(38)*	67*(67)*	61*(34)*	55*(54)*	73*(65)*	37*(46)*
Loss of ego/destruction	39*(39)*	19*(6)*	15*(24)*	35*(40)*	41*(9)*	29*(30)*	44*(39)*	42*(35)*
Psychopathology	48*(56)*	21*(8)*	11*(7)*	37*(37)*	44*(4)*	27*(31)*	42*(40)*	48*(41)*
Visionary dreams	17*(19)*	6*(10)*	14*(12)*	17*(19)*	22*(10)*	13*(15)*	19*(19)*	16*(16)*

Discussion

The study found that, collectively, participants reported an increase in the frequency of positive spiritual and visionary dream experiences during post-measurement and a more positive evaluation of these dimensions. There was a significant increase in specifically the collective positive spiritual experiences of participants between the two measuring points. This dimension reflects spiritual experiences which transcend the self, including experiences of connectedness with a transcendental entity. Participants also indicated a more positive evaluation of these spiritual experiences at the end of the training programme. Moreover, the study reports a decrease in negative spiritual experiences (loss of ego/destruction) at the second point of measurement. This factor reflects fearful sensations of isolation and loneliness. Participants' evaluation of this dimension also shifted from a positive assessment to a more negative evaluation of these experiences. The third factor describes psychopathological experiences that are often associated with the psychotic and paranoid spheres or realm. In respect of this dimension, the study found a significant decrease in the frequency of these experiences from the first to the second point of measurement.

The study's findings seem to suggest that it is definitely possible to raise people's awareness of spiritual practices and to develop these practices through intercultural and interreligious training interventions. Phenomenologically, there seems to be similarities between psychotic states and some exceptional spiritual experiences (Lukoff 1990; Lukoff and Lu 1999). Naming and describing these spiritual experiences will help to "normalize" some of these experiences (Lucadou and Wald 2014). Through training interventions, participants are provided with the platform to deliberate, investigate and to make sense of these spiritual encounters. The stigma and perceived "abnormality" of these experiences are thus removed (Black 2007; Wright 2005). We often have these encounters, but our inability to relate to the experience or to identify the experience scientifically, can lead to it not being shared or communicated to other parties. According to Lukoff, Lu and Turner (1998), these experiences have been seen as acts of ego regression, psychotic episodes or temporal lobe dysfunction. This research also seems to suggest that training could result in a shift from a negative appraisal to a more positive assessment of these exceptional spiritual experiences. The sharing and deliberation on these experiences could thus result in the discovery of the positive value of some of these phenomena (Day 2010; Puchalski, Blatt and Kogan 2014). Intercultural and interreligious trainings might support the increase, for example, of openness towards "unusual" experiences, as well as the levels of self-management, conflict management, ambiguity tolerance as well as the ability to change the perspective and thereby reframe the EHEs in a positive rather than negative light.

New culture-specific and religious insights might also support a new understanding of EHEs, new tools of manageability and meaningfulness that then could contribute to the increase in positive developments

In a quantitative study (Kohls and Walach 2006), respondents with spiritual practices also assessed positive spiritual experiences, experiences of ego loss/deconstruction, and visionary dream experiences more positively compared to those without. The nature of the sample for this study, namely spiritually practicing participants seems to be consistent with the results of the Kohls and Walach (2006) finding. Regular spiritual practice enhances the frequency of positive spiritual experiences and the experiences of ego loss/deconstruction and subsequently stimulates a positive assessment of these experiences. Kohls and Walach (2006) maintain that these negative experiences could be approached and reframed from a positive perspective in the context of the participants' spiritual practice. Thus, spiritual practice functions as a medium to assist with the interpretation of human exceptional and spiritual experiences. These mystic experiences have been an integral part of the human condition (Haraldsson and Houtkooper 1991; Cardena, Lynn and Krippner 2000; Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche 2003) and could be beneficial to physical and mental health (Koenig, McCullough and Larson 2001).

Limitations of the study

As any other study, this study comes with limitations. The study is limited to a small sample size, providing longitudinal information at two points in time. This adversely affects the representativeness of the study. Survey data is interpreted in a qualitative way using descriptive statistics. Findings are not generalisable from a quantitative perspective and provide insights into the individual development of participants.

Recommendations for theory and practice

A longitudinal research agenda, which uses a mixed method design, could provide more insight into the development of spirituality and EHE's within an intercultural and interreligious context. Furthermore, not enough is known about intercultural and interreligious trainings and spiritual practice as a mediating variable between well-being and intercultural competence. There seems to be a need for more sophisticated methodologies within the context of different phenomenological cultural traditions. Future research initiatives could thus attend to these considerations.

Mental health practitioners are often confronted with spiritual experiences that cannot always be clearly categorised. Continued research in the field of EHEs would hopefully assist in removing the stigma attached to some of these experiences. This will also help people to cope with these experiences in a contained and structured fashion.

Conclusion

The exploration of EHEs is regarded as important in the development of intercultural and interreligious competences, in order to create an open-minded and self-managed understanding of these experiences within and across different cultures and identities. This study provides some evidence that the Exceptional Experiences Questionnaire can be used for the assessment of the presence and evaluation of spiritual and religious experiences. Intercultural competence training could raise awareness and result in a shift from a negative appraisal to a more positive assessment of these exceptional spiritual experiences in view of cultural interpretations of EHEs. The study further confirms that spirituality plays a significant positive role in the development of intercultural and interreligious competence and vice versa and contributes to the call to engage in more "multilevel interdisciplinary" paradigms to address and reframe the core of spirituality in the context of EHEs. It is hoped that the study has continued to push the boundaries, in terms of embedding a more (w)holistic paradigm for psychological and spiritual growth encounters that are grounded and integrated in a more authentic fashion. The authors thus echo the call for the cultivation of these additional experiences in order to achieve once more the frequent or even constant awareness of the "*All-self* to complement the separate skin-encapsulated *ego-self*."

Acknowledgements

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