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The Perceived Impact of Holotropic Breathwork: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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Holotropic Breathwork (HB) is a method of self-exploration developed by Stanislav and Christina Grof. Research has only just begun to investigate the effects of HB, while the possible influence of the context and other features of HB within the experience and its impact have not been studied in depth. This qualitative study investigated the perceived impact of HB on 6 women and 6 men (ages 25-67) in Chile, using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an emergent method developed specifically to work with these types of subjective issues. Results revealed 10 major themes involving both intrapsychic and relational features prior, during and after HB. Results provide support for some elements of the existing theory and practice of HB, but, given the influence of preparation, the reasons for seeking HB, and the integration of experiences on the perceived impact of HB, revision of some HB procedures may provide better support for workshop attendees.

Keywords: *transpersonal psychology, holotropic breathwork, Stanislav Grof, non-ordinary states of consciousness, interpretive phenomenological analysis*

In the mid-1970s, Stanislav Grof, a pioneer of LSD research, and his wife Christina began developing a natural method, called Holotropic Breathwork (HB), which evokes similar states of consciousness as those induced by LSD (Grof & Grof, 2011). HB is a self-exploration method that uses deep and fast breathing, evocative music, and bodywork to induce nonordinary states of consciousness; afterward, the HB process integrates these states using individual expressive arts and group sharing circles (Grof & Grof, 2011). Over 1,000 people in several countries have been certified as HB facilitators (Grof Transpersonal Training, 2018).

Grof (1985, 1993) coined the term *holotropic* from the Greek *holos* (whole) and *trepein* (moving toward, or in the direction of something). According to Grof (1985, 1993, 2002), holotropic states encompass the states of consciousness related to personal and psycho-spiritual growth, spiritual awakening and spirituality in general, and powerful and potentially healing experiences that happen spontaneously or are induced during ritual and spiritual practices.

Research has only just begun to investigate HB's effects. Grof's published works (e.g., 1973,

1975, 1985, 1988, 1993, 2002, 2012a, 2012b) are rich in phenomenological descriptions, but most of these experiences—and Grof's theoretical stance—derive mostly from his previous LSD work, which he applied to developing HB. Grof and C. Grof (2011) unpacked a description of HB based on the work itself, but to date, published studies have not embraced the perceived impact of HB in participants of a one-day workshop (the most common HB modality) with participants who are not training to become HB facilitators. Furthermore, published articles neither discuss nor critically reflect upon the influence of some core elements of HB, such as the role of preparation, participants' expectations for and motives behind engaging in HB, the workshop setting, or the follow-up integration process.

Previous studies suggest that HB facilitates access to forgotten life events (Byford, 1991; Contreras & Zenteno, 2014; Metcalf, 1995); transpersonal or transcendental realms (Brouillette, 1997; Pressman, 1993; Smirnova, 2013); nonordinary states of consciousness (La Flamme, 1994; Rock, Denning, Harris, Clark, & Misso, 2015; Terekhin, 1996); and peak experiences (Puente, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Some studies reported positive effects on mental

health, such as a reduction in rigidity and dogmatism, and an improvement in life satisfaction and life purpose (Binarová, 2003); a reduction in negative affect (Hanratty, 2002); experiences of atonement, healing, and restoration through confrontation with dreadful experiences of the sacred (Smirnova, 2013); facilitation in closure of past psychological material in adolescents while giving them a boost toward adulthood (Contreras & Zenteno, 2014); release of emotional and psychological material behind addictive behavior (Metcalf, 1995); and symptom reduction for anxiety (Pressman, 1993; Puente, 2014a) and depression (Puente, 2014a).

Although HB has been publicly used for more than 40 years, there are relatively few HB studies. Significant methodological problems were found in most extant studies, including the omission of research procedures (e.g., Binarová, 2003; Brewerton, Eyerman, Capetta, & Mithoefer, 2011; Terekhin, 1996); the conflation of variables, such as the inclusion of participants in training to become HB facilitators (e.g., Afanasenko, Emelianenko, & Emelianenko, 2014; Brouillete, 1997; Hanratty, 2002; Puente, 2014a, 2014b); the presence of Grof himself and the residential nature of workshops (e.g., Brouillete, 1997; Hanratty, 2002; Puente, 2014a); and the combination of HB with meditation practices (Mazorco, 2014; Puente, 2014a, 2014b; Robedee, 2008). Additionally, some previous studies do not describe the HB method in enough detail to ensure that interventions involve similar conditions (e.g., Brewerton et al., 2011; Mazorco, 2014; Terekhin, 1996).

Most studies have been conducted by facilitators and members of the HB community, who charged workshop fees and may have introduced positive bias. Previous studies are also marked by a lack of critical discussion of HB's theory or practice, and findings often reveal only neutral or positive effects. In the few cases in which participants reported difficulties after HB, they were acknowledged as part of the process, which could be assumed as an influence of the holotropic framework (e.g., Byford, 1991; Metcalf, 1995).

Studies in HB using a pre- and post-test design have not shown consistent or significant results (e.g., Afanasenko et al., 2014; Binarová, 2003;

Byford, 1991; Rock et al., 2015). The disadvantage of this study design is that it does not shed light on how reported changes are integrated or on new issues that emerged after HB. Longer-term studies using follow-ups at 4, 6, or 12 months after HB (e.g., Brouillete, 1997; Hanratty, 2002; Puente, 2014a, 2014b) allowed researchers to witness features of the HB experience with staying power over time post-experience, but problems arise in discerning whether the long-lasting effects are a direct result of HB or of participation in other workshops and therapies, or of life and developmental changes. Furthermore, the participants' motivations and intentions in engaging HB might be important: a few studies (Puente, 2014a; Rock et al., 2015), suggest that participants may have personality traits driving them to search for the type of experiences HB facilitates or allowing them easier access to nonordinary states.

Three aspects of HB warrant investigation: the role of clients' expectations and motivations for participating in HB; the connections made by clients between the HB experience and their lives; and the perceived effects during and after the experience. To investigate those aspects, this study posed the following question: What is the perceived impact of HB?

The HB Method

Attendees of HB workshops are screened via a medical form to eliminate those with contraindicated medical conditions and to highlight issues that the participant may want to share with facilitators prior to the breathing session, per screening guidelines set forth by the Grofs (Grof & Grof, 2011; Taylor, 2007). First-time participants must attend a 90-minute lecture before the experience for background preparation (e.g., Grofian terminology and theory; see Grof, 1973, 1975, 1985, 1993; Grof & Grof, 2011) and practical guidance.

According to Grof and C. Grof (2011), a prototypical group HB session takes place during a daylong workshop and lasts two to three hours. HB uses fast and deep breathing, intentionally evocative music and bodywork when needed, and afterward, expressive drawing and group sharing for integration. In these group sessions, participants

work in pairs, alternating between the roles of breathers and sitters. Breathers are encouraged to breathe rapidly and deeply in a circular manner, connecting inhalation and exhalation, and to surrender to any experiences that may emerge (Grof & Grof, 2011). Breathers are invited to trust in the inner healer (Grof & Grof, 2011; Taylor, 2007), focus on their inner experience, and ask for help or bodywork from facilitators as needed. Sitters remain silent, safeguarding the breather and supporting their process through practical actions (e.g., providing water or tissues when asked). Breathers may vocalize words and sounds if it is part of their experience.

HB facilitators prepare a clean, simple physical space with mattresses, arranging them to account for breathers' movement and expression (Grof & Grof, 2011; Taylor, 2007). The room is darkened. Facilitators must create an emotionally supportive environment during breathwork sessions, one characterized by unconditional acceptance of every experience (Grof & Grof, 2011); they encourage respect for participants' inner wisdom and avoid interpretations during and after breathwork. Facilitators only intervene when necessary to ensure participants' safety.

Breathing sessions start with a 10-minute guided relaxation (Taylor, 2007), where they are encouraged to set aside any expectations for the session or program and surrender their HB journey-process to their *Inner Healer*—their innate healing intelligence or wisdom (Grof & Grof, 2011). Breathers lie down on a mattress and use eyeshades (some may simply close their eyes), and the sitters sit right by them. A few minutes later, pre-recorded sets of carefully selected music are played for approximately three hours. According to Grof (2012a), HB sessions begin with dynamic, flowing, and uplifting music, followed by a gradual increase in intensity toward the second hour. To support a breakthrough experience, facilitators use powerful and intense orchestral pieces about an hour and a half into the HB session, usually drawn from movie soundtracks or sacred music. From there, the music gradually decreases in intensity and the session ends with soothing, meditative tracks.

Breathwork sessions are followed by an integration stage that includes creative expression, usually through mandala drawing and group sharing (Grof, 2002; Grof & Grof, 2011). At the end of the workshop, facilitators guide a meditation and offer a sharing circle for each attendee to talk about the significance of their breathwork experiences, while the group listens and witnesses compassionately. Facilitators check to see whether participants are experiencing some sense of incompleteness; if so, they are asked to work with a facilitator before leaving (Taylor, 2007). At the end of the sharing circle, facilitators offer recommendations for participants' return to daily life and encourage them to continue their integration process through physical self-care, writing, meditating, drawing, and therapeutic support if needed. Participants are also encouraged to contact facilitators if any difficulty emerges, in case they need a follow-up session or professional referrals (Grof & Grof, 2011). This workshop structure was designed to apply to all workshops worldwide (Grof & Taylor, 2009; Lahood, 2007).

Some facilitators offer individual sessions for participants that include screening, an introductory meeting, a breathwork session, and an integration period spent drawing and sharing with one another; in these sessions, the facilitator may adopt the role of sitter. Grof and C. Grof (2011) suggested the need for a third person to support any necessary bodywork and ensure the highest ethical behavior. According to Grof and C. Grof (2011), the advantage of group sessions is that there are multiple witnesses for the experience, and the group context often provides an intense atmosphere that makes it easier for some people to let go. Group sessions, therefore, may be more effective than individual ones. Additionally, sharing circles offer participants the possibility of being compassionately heard and socially validated by others who have encountered similar issues (Grof & Grof, 2011).

Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceived impact of HB on participants from Chile. Qualitative research is appropriate when an issue warrants more comprehension or

is complex enough that it cannot be easily measured (Creswell, 2013). The complexity of experiences that are sometimes disclosed after HB makes the use of this approach reasonable in order to develop a nuanced comprehension of them and to explore HB's perceived impact.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) combines descriptions of participants' experiences with the researcher's interpretation of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). While respecting each participant's data, IPA stresses the importance of giving space to the researcher's data interpretation and their hermeneutical cycles of reflection, which may decant new and emergent ways to understand the phenomenon under study. IPA is appropriate for the study of HB's perceived impact in that the method may allow the researcher to develop new insights and interpretations of HB, while allowing participants to better understand their own experiences through dialogue with the researcher.

Participants

This study used purposive sampling to select people who had experienced HB and reported a perceived impact afterward. Criteria for inclusion were as follows: (a) being at least 18 years old at the time of the HB session; (b) having been guided by a certified facilitator in a regular public full-day HB workshop in a group context; (c) having perceived that the experience had an impact in their life; (d) having experienced HB at least three months and no more than five years before the interview; (e) residing in Chile for in-person interviews and being able to describe the HB experience in Spanish, the researcher's language; (f) being articulate about subtle experiences; and (g) reporting a general state of subjective wellbeing to avoid potential issues provoked by remembering strong emotional experiences during HB.

Exclusion criteria were the diagnosis of or treatment for a severe psychiatric disorder or other mental illness. People reporting unfinished or traumatic experiences were not eligible for this study due to the risk of adversely affecting their mental health. Additionally, facilitators of HB and those in facilitator training were excluded due to the assumption of bias.

Recruitment

Participant recruitment took place in September 2017 through an announcement flyer posted on social networks and the researcher's website; it was also sent to the Grof Transpersonal Training database. Interested candidates received the prescreening interview by email; the flyer and the recruiting form listed inclusion/exclusion criteria. Candidates were asked to reply with their HB experience and its impact on their lives in simple terms. After receipt of their response and recruiting form, the researcher contacted each participant by email to schedule the interview meeting, and recruiting continued until 12 qualified candidates agreed to participate.

Procedure

Face-to-face meetings were scheduled by email; these audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with the researcher took place in an office rented for the purpose of the study. They received the Informed Consent Form (in Spanish) via email, which was also provided at the interview to allow them to review it, ask questions if needed, and sign it.

The interview protocol (Appendix A) began with a description of their HB experience, followed by their perceptions of its impact, and an exploration of the periods before and after the experience. Experience descriptions were mainly verbal, although participants were invited to share artistic expressions and any other means used to integrate their HB experience. During the interview, participants were asked about the meaning these creative works held for them.

The protocol was pilot-tested with one person, who was asked to go through the whole process and then provide feedback. According to her feedback, she felt comfortable and the process flowed well throughout, so the researcher made no changes to the recruitment or data gathering protocols. Her data was not considered in the study's analysis.

Treatment of Data.

Transcripts were analyzed in Spanish to create meaning units, and only later translated into English in order to keep participants' meanings as close to their own as possible. After completing the analysis and documenting the results, the material

was given to an external editor who was a native English speaker to correct language features in order to make the meaning units comprehensible to English readers. Only minor changes were made to a few meaning units.

Data were analyzed following IPA guidelines. Each interview transcript was printed with numbered lines and read several times while taking notes “to begin the process of entering the participant’s world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82). Initial notes and descriptive comments were mostly linked to the participant’s own words about their HB experiences. In order to increase validity, the researcher and dissertation chair examined the first interview transcript and its initial codes, categories, and themes. The researcher increased reliability by using member checks with each participant for the first annotations and first analysis of their record to see whether they reflected what they wanted to say; the interview transcripts and initial notes were emailed as Word files to each participant for verification (five suggested a few changes). Additionally, four participants shared artwork.

Next, the researcher developed new layers of analysis by making descriptive and conceptual annotations and highlighting meaningful transcript extracts per IPA (Smith et al., 2009). By looking at the individual records, the researcher could search for patterns, which resulted in the first codes, themselves named to closely link to the participants’ interpretations. Subsequently, these themes were categorized and then organized into superordinate themes and subthemes. This process was repeated for each individual record.

The selected meaning units with the developed themes were then moved to Excel spreadsheets for each participant. The next step was to check each file and its codes for the first similarities, convergences, and divergences across participants, taking notes and writing commentaries in the same Excel file. This stage was accompanied by grouping codes within each participant’s data in a search for new patterns, highlighting meaning units that appeared to be clear examples of those emergent patterns. Next, a table of the emergent patterns was produced while looking for recurrence across participants,

comparing and collapsing ones that converged in their meaning. At this stage, the researcher applied the strategies Smith et al. (2009) called *abstraction* (the identification of patterns between themes in order to develop superordinate themes), and *subsumption* (the recognition of superordinate themes and related subthemes). After developing superordinate themes, the thematic table went to the dissertation chair for feedback, which resulted in collapsing more patterns to create more discrete ones; this step simultaneously increased the recurrence of themes and simplified them.

Researcher’s Bracketing

As in any qualitative research, the researcher has a primary role in approaching the data and must be aware of his own biases. As a certified facilitator in HB with seven years’ experience in conducting HB workshops at the time of the study, this researcher needed to bracket several ideas regarding HB: (a) HB has an inherently positive value for experiencers; (b) engagement in a round of sessions is a worthwhile endeavor and may provoke positive change; (c) HB induces an alteration in consciousness; (d) HB may induce specific types of experiences described in Grofian theory; (e) under some conditions HB can be unpleasant and have negative effects; (f) physical sensations and reactions might bring a meaningful insight for breathers; (g) meetings prior to sessions might influence people’s expectations before their breathing sessions; (h) an HB experience might have pre-existing elements that may be manifest in people’s awareness prior to their breathing experience; and (i) HB experiences have a relevance, per se, for those who have experienced it.

To increase awareness of personal biases during data analysis, the researcher included a 15-minute mindfulness practice and, for greater objectivity, refrained from searching for Grof’s (e.g., 1973, 1980, 1985, 2002) theoretical assertions. However, the researcher became aware of looking for relationships between participants’ motivations for participating in HB and their experience outcomes, expecting something disruptive to arise in participants’ contributions and for those participants to have a more critical view of the practice. The researcher kept a journal to bracket

the ideas and assumptions as they occurred in order to further reduce bias.

Results

Interviews took place from mid-September to mid-October 2017. The procedure was conducted as outlined, with the exception that actual interview times ranged from 45 to 75 minutes instead of the initially planned 60 minutes.

The sample consisted of six women and six men from Chile, aged 25 to 67 years. The average age of the women was 41.2 ($SD = 10.55$), while the men's average age was 35.5 ($SD = 15.93$). Participants had a wide range of HB sessions, ranging from 1 to 20 per participant: the women's sessions ranging from 2 to 20 ($M = 8.83$; $SD = 6.76$) and the men's number of sessions ranging from 1 to 10 ($M = 3.83$; $SD = 5.47$).

Ten superordinate themes appeared in more than 85% of the interviews. These themes were grouped into four categories in experiential chronological order: reasons for seeking HB, qualities of the HB experience, lasting impact of HB, and integration of the experience—with a fifth category about the perceived influence of the HB setting on participants' experiences.

Reasons for seeking HB.

According to participants, the decision to participate in HB was based on personal, psychological, and/or emotional needs. Some participants saw their need to engage HB as related to and influencing the content of their experience as well as the outcomes. Two superordinate themes were developed in this category: healing purpose and interest in self-exploration.

Healing purpose.

Ten participants (83%) decided to engage in HB to experience some type of healing. Participants wanted to feel better, achieve a positive mood, and change their emotional state. The specific healing concerns cited covered a broad range; when condensed, they formed two basic patterns—the attempt to heal a psychological issue, and the search for emotional release and/or emotional renewal.

Regarding the first, five participants' (42%) stories reflected an attempt to comprehend, find the roots of, and heal from long-term psycho-emo-

tional suffering and problems. Their motivations were linked to interpersonal conflicts involving relationships and issues regarding family members. Maria said, "The first time I did breathwork was to see what the hell was happening to me, since I was repressing myself socially quite a bit." Ana shared,

The reason I came [to HB] was to clarify why I couldn't love my mother. . . . That was complicated for me, because one is supposed to love one's mother. It's not a thing you must do, you just love your mother, period. But to me it was an effort, and it was a conflict in my relationship with her.

For Claudio, in addition to a desire to find his spiritual path through HB, he said,

I was also searching for healing, and this I'd say was the [my] most concrete objective. Because I was living in a depression for a period of many years, which had its root in my father's passing . . . I spent almost 10 years taking antidepressants, anxiolytics.

Five participants (42%) presented emotional release and/or renewal as a motive; they wanted to be freed from difficult emotions or from feeling stuck vis-à-vis positive emotions (i.e., they wanted to feel re-energized, experience a sense of flow, and lighten their mood). Andrés attended HB workshops, he said, "Because I feel a weight or I feel there's something there that would be good to let run free, like to let it flow and like me, to undergo that experience." Rubén affirmed,

I believe what's most important to me, and that's the reason why I keep doing it [HB], is to discharge... things I had in my unconscious, such as stones in a backpack. Maybe I didn't understand [the contents of the experience], but I discharged. I feel that's the most important effect I have had from the breathing sessions.

Interest in self-exploration.

Eleven participants (92%) approached HB because of their interest in self-exploration and self-knowledge, an interest related to an open-ended search for new understandings of themselves and a desire to deeply know their own psyches. This was

accompanied by an open attitude toward finding issues that they had not necessarily considered beforehand. The use of HB as an alternative to psychedelics was an explicit part of some records. This theme included the following subthemes: intentions set for self-exploration, open-mindedness, and nonordinary states without psychedelics.

Regarding intentions set for self-exploration, 11 participants (92%) expressed self-exploration as a motive for attending HB workshops. Nino revealed, "I wanted to discover myself more deeply, analyze myself more, see things in a different way." Dana mentioned, "I'm motivated to keep breathing in order to continue knowing myself, to continue finding light where it's sometimes missing." Participants also chose HB as one activity among several that were part of their self-exploration processes:

I frame it in the general process I was living at that time, where I was in a very mystic vibe and I took many psychedelics. I was preoccupied with that, with my mind in that . . . I was in a humanistic-oriented psychotherapy, and the team of psychologists told me about this [HB] and told me it was intense and that it altered consciousness. (Nino)

Most participants' paths of self-exploration included other therapeutic activities.

Eleven participants (92%) revealed an open mindset toward self-exploration in HB, which facilitated a broader spectrum of experiences, including those housing hidden memories that may provoke fear and be challenging. Although some people came with specific reasons, an openness toward challenging emergent situations and a receptivity toward surprise were features of their inner exploration mindset.

The breathing turns into a surprise. I attend with a purpose and I already know I will encounter something that I probably have not seen. Particularly because I believe that's the objective anyway: to encounter something one has not seen in order to find a solution. (Andrés)

Even if something bad happened in breathwork I would understand it. It's like tai chi, a nuclear bomb may come and it gets transformed into a

flower. Whatever comes will contribute, because I am in breathwork mode, in the mode of "today something incredible will happen." (Eduardo)

Esperanza described, "I open myself considerably to the mystery, in which I give it to faith, and in which I allow the healing to happen, that whatever it is I have to heal, so be it." An open mindset incorporated a faith that what takes place during HB will contribute to the individual's betterment.

Five participants referred to HB as an alternative to psychedelic use as a means of altering their mental state. Pablo commented, "I had never had the experience of using a technique to access altered states of consciousness without chemicals [psychedelics]." Andrés "wanted to try something like this, that wasn't that invasive, like in the sense of having to ingest something."

The same five participants remarked on the differences they perceived between psychedelics and HB, stating that HB seemed to be more self-directed. In some cases, the psychedelic state overwhelmed the individual; whereas in HB, participants reported being able to consciously control the depth and the intensity of the experience through their breath. The last reported difference is that in HB, breathers are supported by facilitators in a special setting, while the psychedelic experience may be a solo, unsupported journey.

It was pleasant to feel I could be very high in an altered state of consciousness and also come back to my body little by little. It was calming to feel that I could consciously return to my body, which is very different than in psychedelic experiences, where one depends much more on the chemical effect and where one trusts that the process will come to an end. Here [in HB] the process is a little bit more self-directed and accompanied by the facilitation. (Pablo)

Rubén commented, "In breathwork, you guide your journey a little, you have more control. If you like to enter more deeply, you breathe more, while with psychedelics you have to allow yourself to be taken or to take you to a state." One participant who had negative experiences with psychedelics valued HB for its gentleness:

In breathwork I feel that everything has an order and it is slower paced, much more subtle yet not less deep. It is as if you surrender to the experience more smoothly. . . . In spite of it [HB] being equally intense—in fact it leaves you with a profound effect in the sense of understanding and re-understanding some themes—it is different from this [weed], which was like a slap. (Andrés)

Qualities of HB experience.

The second broad category of analysis included the qualities of experiences during HB. This category embraced psychological events and insights, and focused on subjective experiences with three superordinate themes: the psyche as an inner source of knowledge, increased self-awareness, and resolution/closure.

The psyche as an inner source of knowledge.

Breathers accessed and recognized an intrinsic healing power and wisdom within their psyche. They felt connected to an inner knowledge: a deeper source of valuable and purposeful information that provided responses to issues of psychological relevance through symbolic language. Some participants noticed the same wisdom is accessible through other means.

All witnessed emotionally charged symbols sometimes accompanied or followed by meaningful interpretations. This symbolic language not only appeared to have an embodied nature due to its emotional and physical features, but it also was perceived as coming from a profound inner intelligence.

I recall having imagined a golden energy coming out from the palms of my hands. I felt indeed that energy coming out of my hands. Then I saw myself from outside, saw sort of a doll lying down like me, covered in gray paint. Then I imagined that this energy, instead of coming out from the palm of my hands, was coming out from each of my pores. And looking at this doll from the outside I saw how the paint that covered it started to break into holes. And first, very fine light rays came out, starting to erode the paint bathing or covering this doll. And this was dissolving the paint, leaving this

figure completely luminous. . . . To date I don't know what this blockage is about. . . . And I felt this blockage had been dissolved. The weight disappeared. . . . I recall I said: "I'm clean." . . . And that brought me tremendous joy. (Claudio)

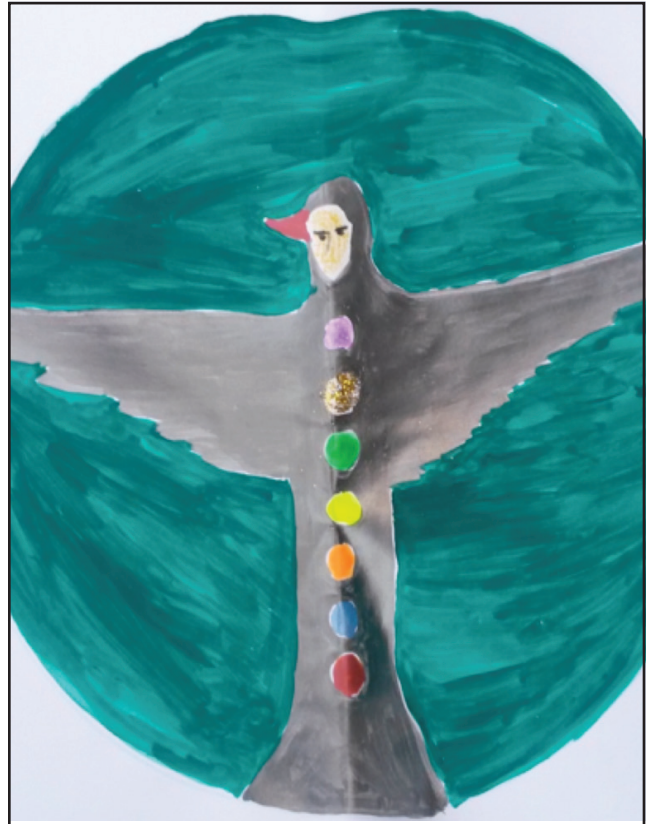


Figure 1. Maria's mandala.
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Participants related emergent symbols and insights to psychologically relevant situations. Paula "had images of wars. My interpretation is that, in part, I no longer need to keep fighting." Nino said, "I thought and imagined that if my parents died I would think of certain things. I said: 'I'd like to work on that while I still have this remaining time with my parents.'" Most symbolic language increased participants' awareness about an emotionally relevant and personal matter.

Some symbols lacked meaning, however, which was considered a challenging, negative, or difficult part of the HB integration process by two. Andrés commented, "It has happened to me in breathwork—seeing some images and not knowing if they were really images from other places and times, or if they were symbolic images [symbols representing

something else].” Pablo affirmed the importance of ascribing meaning: “I believe that changes are lasting to the degree one signifies them.”

Nine participants (75%) referred to the psyche as a site where existing knowledge resides, and acknowledged the psyche as the prime source of healing—a reservoir of answers, relevant insights, and wisdom. The kind of relationships participants forged with their inner source of knowledge and its interpretation varied.

The awareness of an inner source of wisdom left many breathers with a sense of their inner voice’s truthfulness, increased self-trust, and greater inner strength. Paula stated, “I think that one of the most important things is this: that there is an inner wisdom that doesn’t make mistakes.” Dana discovered “an inner strength and self-trust to confront some situations,” and HB “shows [her] things that already are in [her] head, things that will come, and things that are already happening.”

Eduardo interpreted inner knowledge as already-extant information, and said HB facilitated access to that knowledge:

[The session] reinforced very much the idea that there is an existing knowledge I did not have before breathwork and that came to me during the session. I validated the existence of a channel. . . . I believe I couldn’t have learned about these things in another way.

Two participants understood the psyche as a higher realm of reality, as Ana disclosed while pointing upward: “It’s like a telephone, a direct line to the masters.”

Increased self-awareness.

Study participants reported an increased awareness of their subjective and psychological realms during HB. They accessed forgotten events and unconscious material, which included traumatic memories. Some discovered their feeling of belonging to a greater realm of existence by transcending their biography and their sense of themselves as an isolated being.

All participants mentioned an increased awareness of unfinished psychological material, which in some cases incorporated traumatic memories. Some breathers’ confrontations with

unconscious material helped them trace the causes of current situations and heal inner wounds. Esperanza said, “It led me to see several types of abuse in my past relationships, in my childhood. Not coming from adults but from other children.” She added that HB sessions had been “visits to the darkest and most painful parts” of herself.

Claudio disclosed, “I reached the origin of my problem: the stage in which the family I formed with my father and mother disintegrated.” Maria shared, “There was child abuse . . . it stayed so hidden in me that only now am I able to tie [together] what has been happening in my life. Now I’ve been able to work on it.”

Ten participants (83%) mentioned a sense of belonging to a higher realm beyond personal biography. Through an awareness of a bigger and all-encompassing psyche to which they are intrinsically connected, breathers witnessed the intersection between personal existence and transpersonal realms, and perceived themselves as an integrated part of a greater whole, system, or higher reality, expressed through terms such as “spiritual realm,” “soul’s story,” “cosmic principle,” “feminine and masculine energies,” or “the mystery.”

I had a very strong connection with the women in my life: mother, grandmothers, girlfriends. I sensed a very large force coming from that side . . . I felt that feminine force and connection very strongly . . . I recognized them and they were adding to something I was building within me. Once that was over I felt maybe more whole, or stronger, and there it was when I felt this connection with that all. (Dana)

I came out with such clarity about what had happened, I recall having thought: “My family isn’t a coincidence; it is the conjunction of three persons who were together thousands of years ago. Therefore, this moment, this coincidence, is cosmic.” (Eduardo)

Eduardo created a mandala representing the cosmic connection he discovered between himself, his wife, and their daughter (Figure 2).

Paula stated, “I am a person living this life. . . . But there is much more than this, this is

a circumstance. . . . It is something much larger, it is a sensation of having transcendence.” Pablo corroborated the existence of “a spiritual dimension, an underlying dimension that is part of the earthly, daily world... one can access through certain methods....”



Figure 2. Eduardo's mandala.
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Resolution/closure.

All participants reported a resolution of a psychological or emotional issue as a result of the HB experience, whether it occurred in one HB session or a round of several sessions. The transformative nature of resolution and closure seemed to be a key element of the HB experience.

Emotional expression/catharsis, an element related to resolution, involves difficult or challenging emotions; for breathers, catharsis allowed access to “positive,” more comfortable emotions, such as inner states of balance, peace, and harmony. Rubén disclosed, “I cried, cried, cried. I entered a state of much peace, of much tranquility.” When he shared his mandala (Figure 3), he said, “The blue that surrounded everything and that was in me and that was outside of me was like the totality, tranquility and peace.”

Esperanza reported, “I feel each breathwork session is very liberating, very liberating.”

All participants reported closure regarding an intimate psychological issue, even though closure was not explicitly sought by all. The experience of closure consisted of a sense of leaving behind that which belonged to the past and moving toward a new stage of life, sometimes by experiencing a regression to finish a previous chapter. The ways

by which participants closed their psychological material varied: an act of forgiveness, the return of love to a relationship, a meaningful insight, or a new understanding of a situation. Eduardo reported,

I entered that full, meditative rest, and while in it I understood...that I dwelled in the stars for 2,000 years. I made a mistake out of love, got punished, and I was 2,000 years asking for forgiveness . . . I had an issue with the role of victim. I never do bad, I never have bad intentions, I never make mistakes—and the other doesn't understand, or the other does something to me, and I'm helpless. (Eduardo)

He added, “it was fine to pay for it, it was like I was at peace with the role of victimizer.” He made peace with the potential to victimize others.

Ana said, “My issue was resolved. From there on I didn't feel scared, nor . . . abandoned. I felt deep love because I now know where my mother is.

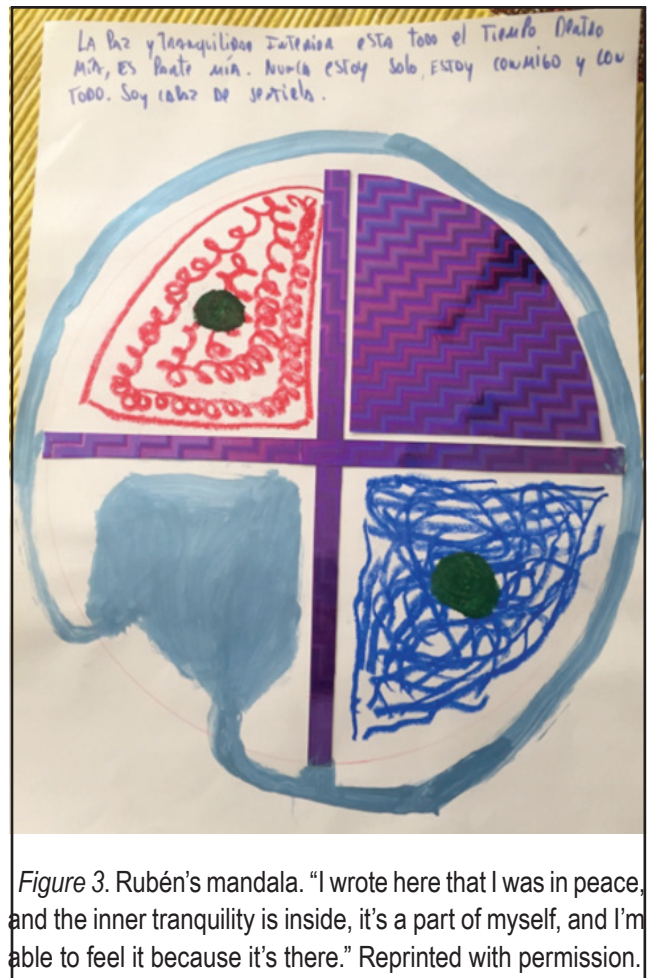


Figure 3. Rubén's mandala. “I wrote here that I was in peace, and the inner tranquility is inside, it's a part of myself, and I'm able to feel it because it's there.” Reprinted with permission.

[. . .] My human mother is a person that must exist to give me life. I appreciate her, I respect her, period..” Claudio, who relived the moment when his family broke apart, was able to close that chapter: “I gave a hug to each one of them and told them I forgave them. . . . Forgiveness released me from that load.”

Five participants (42%) who had declared psychological healing as a motive for engaging in HB reported finding a solution to their issues, highlighting the role of setting personal intention. Ana said the following dialogue with her spiritual masters occurred in her first HB session:

And there I asked myself: “What do I have to do with my family on Earth? I have never connected with this family. What happens with this mother?” . . . I was there. I felt a warmth, a placidity. With that action my question was explained to me, all my questioning. That is: “You complain that there is no connection with your mother, you say there is no love, you say you don’t feel love for her, that she doesn’t feel it towards you, that there is no bond. This is the bond.” The universe gave me the answer.

Maria, whose motivation for participating in HB was to understand why she repressed herself in social situations, disclosed,

I understood my search: I was a girl looking for support. Without that support I couldn’t understand where my life was going I didn’t know what I was looking for, yet I knew I had to do something to move on . . . Without breathwork I wouldn’t know anything. I was a child crying and a connection between adult and child occurred.

Lasting impact of HB.

Participants noticed the HB experience produced longer-term effects beyond the workshop. They perceived these effects as intrapsychic changes as well as changes within their close relationships.

Perceived changes within oneself.

All participants reported an increased awareness of their inner world as a lasting feature: their identities were modified and enhanced, thanks to their increased awareness of previously hidden

characteristics. For some, their enhanced take on “who they are” embraced an acceptance of their life’s purpose and mission; in turn, this revised understanding inspired them to pursue their singular voice and true expression in the world.

Eight participants (67%) reported the expansion of identity, opening to new dimensions of their selves. During HB sessions, these breathers experienced identification with other selves, other time frames, and other cultures, expanding what they thought about themselves. Esperanza, for example, stated, “That variety, that breadth of consciousness, yes, it has changed a bit the way I defined myself or what I believed I was to that point.” Eduardo said, “I’m still the warrior who killed in that tribe for one of them. So, I have the sense that nothing can knock us down.”

Half of the participants reported changes in their beliefs or worldview. Some reported a shift from a materialistic and atheistic worldview to one that was more spiritual. Ana disclosed, “This ideological thought vanished at that moment. Afterwards I didn’t dare to tell others I wasn’t a communist nor an atheist anymore.” Valeria recognized a development of her ecological awareness: “Today I have a garden and I take care of it.” Rubén’s first HB session “was [his] opening to the spiritual world, like a sort of initiation.” Subsequent HB sessions helped him discover that nonordinary states might be depathologized and normalized: “It opened up my vision. . . . My mental schemes fell down about what is normal or not, what people do or not, and what behaviors are allowed.” He began to tell his parents about his experiences “to normalize these type of experiences, to talk about it, to show that they are normal in some parts [contexts].”

Four participants (33%) either experienced an encounter with their life purpose and vocation during the HB journey or were moved to assume their unique voices and missions. Ana said, “This is related to my task, which is to listen, to receive, to support healing. That is my job.” Paula disclosed, “I believe this is what made me take on this path. . . . People’s emotions—that’s what I wanted to translate.” Her response entailed a play on words; in the past, she had worked in text translation. Paula realized that she wanted to work as a therapist,

translating the emotional language behind people's symptoms and their psychological issues.

Increased awareness of self and others.

All participants perceived lasting changes in their close relationships after HB sessions. The relational impact of HB is based on a qualitative change in the perception of one's emotional needs accompanied by a heightened awareness of some relationship dynamics; however, the relational impact sometimes included the emergence of new conflicts with close people (e.g., family members). In some cases, this understanding included an awareness of others' situations and contexts that led to an empathic and compassionate view of others.

All participants reported increased awareness of and changes in their relationships with family members; this heightened consciousness focused largely on relationships with parents and was accompanied by the will to take action toward improving the relationship's quality. The clarity of participants' emotional needs and their search for harmonic relations became a driving force to facilitate positive changes. For example, Pablo attended a HB workshop soon after becoming a father during a time when he was revising familial roles, including his simultaneous roles as son and father. He said, "It made me take a concrete action in my life. I think that's the most valuable part of it. From then on, I experienced a change in the relationship with my parents, there was a step forward." After the session, Pablo shared with his parents some intimate feelings linked to unfinished issues, and received good feedback. Similarly, Paula's relationship with her mother improved: "Until then my mother was a coincidence in my life, there was no bonding; it wasn't even an issue to treat in therapy. . . . Since then, I started to approach my mother, the feminine in general."

Esperanza's relationships with her father and brother were problematic: "I had a very tense relationship with my brother, full of problems. Now we understand each other better, communicate better, bear with one another, respect each other." Although her relatives did not explicitly appear in her HB sessions, she acknowledged HB's impact on this aspect of her life: "They [my father and brother] have never appeared in my breathwork sessions, but it has been an effect of breathwork."

Four participants (33%) acknowledged the emergence of new conflicts in close relationships after HB. One cause seemed to be a breather's increased awareness of their own needs and subsequent belief changes, which added tensions to familial relationships. According to Ana, a shift toward a more spiritual comprehension of life contradicts her family's worldview, and she perceived her relatives' negative responses:

My family system expelled me because my change has been too large. They look at me and ask me if I'm crazy . . . I'm no longer part of their clan, because I don't be or do what the clan dictates for its members.

A heightened awareness of how family members relate to each other raised new conflicts as well. Valeria commented: "The type of conflicts we've had are related to this, to me seeing things in the family dynamic that the others don't see."

Sometimes the participant's understanding of a past family experience led them to change their interpretation of the situation:

My daughter weighed much in that experience, and my wife little. I believe I brought that back with me. To me it's very difficult to hide or to not show something that's so evident: that I stay staring at my daughter and that she is everything. . . . It's unfair to blame the breathwork experience for this. But I believe that breathwork marked me. I believe it degrades a bit the marital relationship to be so devoted to my daughter the whole day. (Eduardo)

Six participants (50%) reported increased empathy and closeness as a lasting effect of HB, describing heightened compassion and a greater openness to others, accompanied by a more open approach to relationships.

I believe I am more humble. I believe that at the same time it [HB] has helped me in being able to connect with another person in a way that was more difficult before. Before I was harder, in some way inflexible. Also, now I can feel a connection with others that goes beyond what I felt, a connection I might not have felt before. (Dana)

Other participants reported greater empathic resonance after HB sessions. Valeria said, "I feel I have a different approach to the experience of pain. It makes me vibrate more, resonate more with the painful experiences of others. I feel more empathetic, delicate, feminine, more ready to receive." Paula commented,

I was able to understand the other side [her mother's side], I was the poor thing . . . to see her anguish allowed me to be in her place . . . it softened me, it allowed me to open a space that wasn't there before. A space to listen to her, to consider her, she was no longer the bad in the movie.

Claudio shared a similarly deep understanding of his mother's behavior; she abandoned him and his brothers as children, leaving them in the care of his father, a violent man. "My mother opted to leave us with my father, with whom probably her life wasn't pleasant. Her life must have been something pretty terrible."

This theme suggests that an increased awareness of self and others incurs a responsibility to act to resolve past tensions and uncomfortable feelings in relationships. While an increased awareness of one's role in the family might cause new conflicts, it appears that lasting effects can include compassionate interpretations and increased empathy as well.

Integration of experiences.

The fourth category of results concerns the ways in which participants integrated their HB experiences. HB workshops include creative expression after each session, and every workshop ends with a collective space for breathers to share their experiences and suggestions for further integration.

Integration as a process.

Integration refers to the process of giving meaning to HB experiences, and subsequently incorporating those experiences and accompanying knowledge into ordinary life. Based on the findings, integration is a dynamic process that takes time and demands a degree of self-reflection for further assimilation. Integration is related to breathers' interpretation of their experiences; while meaning attribution is

linked to their psycho-emotional situations at that time. Given time and perspective, some breathers may discover new insights and fresh interpretations for their HB experiences. All participants made reference to integration in some way.

Eight participants (67%) reported taking concrete actions in the days following their sessions, which appeared to give coherence to, complete, and materialize participants' HB experiences in accordance with the awareness and insights gained. These concrete behaviors seemed to invoke a final closure of personal and relational issues in some cases. Eduardo commented, "[An HB session] touched me to the point that I wrote it in my arm. I got a tattoo. The tattoo represents us: my daughter, myself, and my wife. And a baby that passed away from us" (Figure 4).

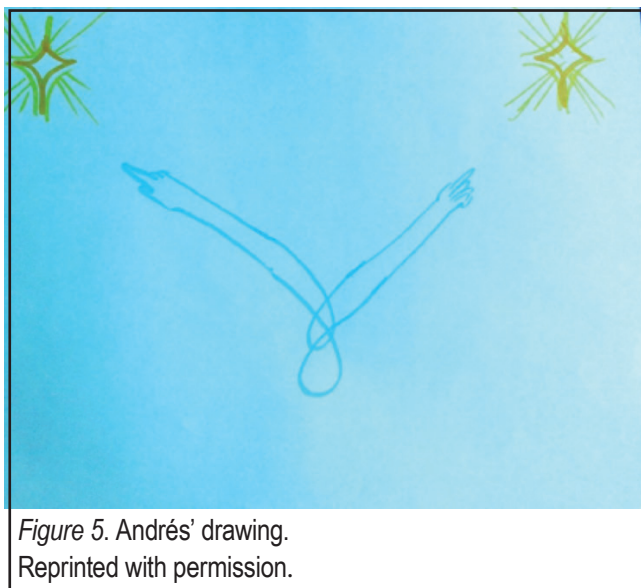


Figure 4. Photo of Eduardo's tattoo.
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In other cases, the behavior that followed the session pertained to a participant's deeper truth. Nino disclosed, "From then on I have expressed a great deal in the area of writing. What I write I like and I write it truthfully." Pablo said, "I decided to talk to my parents." He then wrote an email that moved their relationship forward.

Eight participants (67%) cited using verbal and nonverbal means to facilitate integration. Maria mentioned, "The flower essences have been a tool of great support and self-knowledge to me." She accompanied the essences with energetic therapy. Valeria reported, "I've been working on it with my psychologist." Some enjoy talking about their experiences and get to know themselves better that way. Rubén commented, "I talk with some friends. While talking I was integrating the parts [of HB] I talked more about."

Eight participants (67%) acknowledged that the passage of time allows them to see their experiences with more perspective and less emotional attachment, leading to new interpretations and meanings. Nino commented, "Now it's much easier to talk about my experience...I feel less vulnerable when talking about it. Andrés stated, "The meaning of things broaden with time." In one session, he reported seeing "two hands crossed and pointing to different directions. . . . It made [him] think that [they] weren't made for each other" (Figure 5).



Time's passing may also allow forgotten parts of the sessions to be remembered, as Dana disclosed: "It happens to me that I forget some things, I come to remember the following days. One time, I even remembered a month after breath-work."

Seven participants (58%) reported self-reflection as a way of incorporating and integrating their HB experiences; this involved taking time to remember the session's contents and spending time alone in silence. Eduardo commented, "The next day I tend to be very reflective, thinking about what happened to me. . . ." Pablo reported, "I talked a little about the experience with my wife, but it was much more an inner processing."

Half of the participants suggested that HB should offer more spaces, time, and tools for subsequent integration, especially to breathers who might not have the resources to do it alone. Participants who were psychologists in clinical practice reported this concern. Some offered ideas about how HB facilitators can offer post-workshop support for those who might need it. Pablo stressed the importance of support in addition to ascribing meaning to what happened while breathing, as opposed to relying on the experience itself for a lasting effect. The integration of HB experiences can indeed be difficult. Esperanza said, "What has been difficult to me is the very same assimilation of the experiences." Nino disclosed,

It was too soon [to draw after breathing] and in reality the theme that really affected me wasn't the one I was going to share. I knew that, and I truly tried to do so, but it was difficult to share. I wasn't comfortable sharing that, moreover while coming out of that experience, still feeling naked.

Context of HB.

The final broad category of analysis centers on the context of HB by way of the influence of the HB setting and the facilitator's role.

Influence of the HB setting.

All participants said the context of HB sessions actively affected their experiences, either positively or negatively. Nine participants (75%) valued HB as a group activity that allows people to meet and build a sense of community, making easier to normalize their experiences. The acceptance of different ways of being then extends to an understanding of what other people do in their daily lives. HB workshops also seemed to be gatherings of spiritual seekers, attesting

to the importance of practicing the method as a group.

Before that [HB session] I felt lonelier, like thinking truly that “we, the crazies, are very few.” I don’t want to call them crazy, that’s my own language, but I realized that truly the experiences are practically the same for all. . . . Like when the black sheep get together . . . I felt like that, more supported. (Nino)

Esperanza disclosed, “I feel there is a sort of sisterhood. Everybody was going along more or less the same, in distinct areas. I also feel connected with all of them.”

Nine participants (75%) reported the pair-work aspect of HB as important. The surrender of the breather to the process is an act of trust in the sitter, who maintains the breather’s safety. The presence of a sitter engaged in one-on-one work with the breather can instill trust and a sense of being emotionally supported, as Rubén highlighted: “I like to work in pairs. I feel protected, cared for.” Pablo stated, “The trust in my sitter, my partner. A good relationship was formed since the beginning and that supported the work.”

Dana mentioned that she is deeply moved by sitting: “Seeing the others breathe moves personal things in me. So, it is like a double breathwork.” Maria talked about sitting as well: “I want to breathe again, to journey and be there for the other without intervening. Being a sitter is a privilege.”

Half of the sample referred to music as an important feature of their HB experiences, mainly in terms how it guides the process and facilitates the experiences. Nino disclosed, “I was feeling the music was like a guide . . . I requested the music list from the facilitators, and since then I have the Krishna Das music. I associated it to that experience forever.”

Four participants (33%) mentioned the ritual elements they perceived when attending HB workshops, such as the silent and calm atmosphere, the known activity schedule, the gathering of a group, and the workshop structure. Ana said, “It was the first time I attended an activity where all the people were congregated at one time, with a very nice ritual silence, with a peaceful atmosphere,

and from there a very spiritual connection began.” Pablo reflected, “I became aware of the difference between doing inner exploration with and without a frame. . . . The way of accessing the spiritual world is through concrete ways that are more or less ritualized.”

Four participants (33%) commented that big groups negatively affected their experiences by changing the setting’s nature, which led some breathers to sense a lack of containment. Ana said, “I believe small groups connect the experiences of breathers. . . . In a larger group that’s lost, it becomes more diffuse.” A large group of people may well limit the breather’s physical space. Rubén reported, “A couple of times I felt uncomfortable with the amount of people in the workshop. I repressed myself a bit in order not to hit someone, nor to move strongly. I felt limited by space.” Big groups also entail longer closing circles, because everyone must have time to share about their breathing experience. Esperanza disclosed, “Sometimes I don’t like it when the workshop turns out too long, when we end up at 10 at night. I am too tired.”

Facilitator’s role.

According to 11 participants (92%), facilitators play an active role in building an appropriate environment for HB. Nine participants (75%) mentioned the introductory lecture as a positive influence that helped by bolstering a sense of trust in first-time breathers in particular and promoting trust between facilitators and attendees in general. Maria said, “The previous activities build trust in you: how will I work, to whom will I give myself.” The preparation meeting was also cited as the point at which some people decided to join the full-day workshop. Claudio recalled, “In that talk I got convinced I had to try it [HB] out.” Breathers valued the compassionate, simple explanations of necessary information for the workshop: “If you have a doubt, the facilitators lovingly give you an explanation, with pears and apples if needed” (Valeria).

Nine participants (75%) acknowledged that facilitators’ presence allowed breathers to trust in their competencies for supporting their breathwork, which in turn increased breathers’ ability to surrender to their HB experiences. Andrés, who previously had a bad, unsupervised trip with marijuana, said, “The

facilitators' disposition is important . . . I feel that this container is what it should be." Paula emphasized that all facilitators "have a baseline given by their training. Not everybody is the same, but they have something that instills trust. To know the amount of hours they do breathwork, that gives me trust." Claudio said,

It was easy for me, first, because the attitude of the facilitators, in addition to the human group we were getting to know, made the integration [with the group] very easy. . . . So I lowered my defenses against the fear I was making a fool of myself.

The Grofian theory shared at the preparatory meeting and the principles of HB influenced some breathers' interpretations of negative post-HB session effects, such as new symptoms, difficult moods, and physical issues. These eight participants viewed negative effects from a positive, evolutionary perspective or as the cost of being conscious. Paula commented, "Once after a breathwork my liver hurt a lot. I had certainly not settled [the process]. I didn't ask for more help during the workshop, because I always do." Claudio stated, "I obviously prefer to be angry than to be depressed. That's the reality. The cost of being conscious is that I'm not depressed by this [over time he became angry instead of depressed at his deceased father]."

Participants appreciated the interview as space to talk about their experiences and reflect on their process, which gave them an opportunity to make new connections and glean more insights. Dana mentioned, "I'm seeing the color or the meaning I haven't seen before. Now I see it more concrete." Maria disclosed,

Thanks to this interview, I've made this connection . . . I'm proud of all the work I've done. It has been a long and painful process. The good thing is that several years have passed, and the time has flown by.

Discussion

Some of the findings provide empirical support for HB's existing theory and practice—participants' HB experiences, in particular the psyche as

the source of knowledge, increased self-awareness, the resolution/closure of psychological material, and perceived changes within oneself—are consistent with Grof's phenomenological descriptions (e.g., Grof, 2002, 2012a; Grof & Grof, 2011). This study's findings are in line with previous studies that found HB to have healing potential thanks to the access and liberation of unfinished past material (e.g., Brewerton et al., 2011; Byford, 1991; Contreras & Zenteno, 2014; Metcalf, 1995). All participants experienced at least some sense of resolution while a smaller set attained the desired healing, which indirectly resonates with previous findings that HB can help alleviate prior symptoms (e.g., Hanratty, 2002; Pressman, 1993; Puente, 2014a).

Participants described the influence of the HB protocol and context over their experiences. These elements provide empirical support for the practice of HB as taught by the Grofs (Grof & Grof, 2011; Taylor, 2007). However, neither this study nor other studies providing data on the HB process (e.g., Byford, 1991; Holmes et al., 1996; Mazonco, 2014; Pressman, 1993; Rock et al., 2015) have involved comparison groups with differing conditions, including comparisons involving individual HB sessions and group sessions.

Some participants reported changes at an identity level similar to the ones in Grof's books (e.g., Grof, 1985, 1988, 2002); these changes are similar to some effects of HB (Binarová, 2003; Grof, 2012a; Grof & Grof, 2011). It seems that with more involvement in HB people are able to better articulate and give deeper meaning to their HB process instead of focusing on specific needs, as was observed in participants who attended at least four HB sessions. This finding suggests that breathers had an open-minded search for themselves, and implicitly express a positive approach toward HB and agreement with the Grofian theoretical and practical stance.

Some of the current study's results expand on or differ from the theory and practice of HB. Along with the interest in self-exploration (Theme 2), clearly defined healing purposes (Theme 1) may influence the experiences and outcomes of HB. When breathers had a conscious, articulated, and sufficiently pressing intention to heal, and expressed

a solution-oriented tactic for HB accompanied by open self-exploration, it seems that HB can facilitate a resolution to their respective issues. Grof (1980) acknowledged the importance of intentions and expectations prior to psychedelic sessions, but in his HB work he highlighted the significance of entering HB sessions with a “beginner’s mind,” suspending all previous knowledge and expectations (Grof & Grof, 2011). These findings expand Grof’s arguments and suggest that HB may be used in a different way, including specific preparation interventions to bring to the surface breathers’ healing needs.

Previous studies have not identified the healing intention that drives people to HB, and per the literature on “set” or intention, having a conscious intention is a suggested and useful strategy to maximize insights and outcomes when working with nonordinary states (e.g., Grof, 1980; Fadiman, 2011). This strategy is in line with current trends in psychedelic research, per the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) *Manual for MDMA-Assisted Psychotherapy in the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* (Mithoefer, 2017). The MAPS manual suggests several one-on-one preparatory sessions to create a therapeutic alliance between therapist and patient; gather details about the patient’s history; and address the patient’s expectations, motivations, and concerns. Securing this information by preparatory individual meetings may allow HB facilitators to track each participant, build a therapeutic alliance, and address undisclosed therapeutic goals—something more likely in today’s HB group modality only when a facilitator is also the breather’s therapist and able to continue the work in therapy. Exploring intention and information-gathering might enhance the positive results of HB, and might help with breathers who have neutral or negative HB experiences.

The sample largely consisted of people engaging in self-exploration, and HB was one of several such activities. This theme aligns with some of Puente’s (2014a) findings: before joining HB, some people display dispositions toward searching for self-transcendence and novelty, and some participants showed low harm avoidance, suggesting openness to trying risky experiences. The need to alter consciousness can be considered a driver for

some HB participants, and for unknown reasons such as self-exploration, general betterment, or trying something different or even risky in their own view (or that of others). It would be useful to explicitly track the reasons behind engaging HB, including relevant biographical data, in order to provide specific therapeutic support. In the group modality of HB, people are asked to fill out a medical form, but individual meetings to disclose relevant information are not used.

After HB some breathers shifted from a materialistic framework toward a spiritually oriented understanding of reality and life, while others normalized nonordinary states and reached an expanded sense of identity and purpose. Previously, Binarová (2003) found HB increased a sense of having a life purpose, but did not propose how HB might contribute to that. Based on the results of the current study, it seems that by accessing one’s deeper needs while breathing, accompanied by a more flexible way to interpret experiences and reality, one is more able to find one’s voice and right place in the world. This interpretation has indirect parallels in Carhart-Harris (2018), who proposed that brain activity changes during psychedelic states, allowing access to a greater consciousness and an increased flexibility of mind, thus creating conditions suited to experience new insights and develop new meanings.

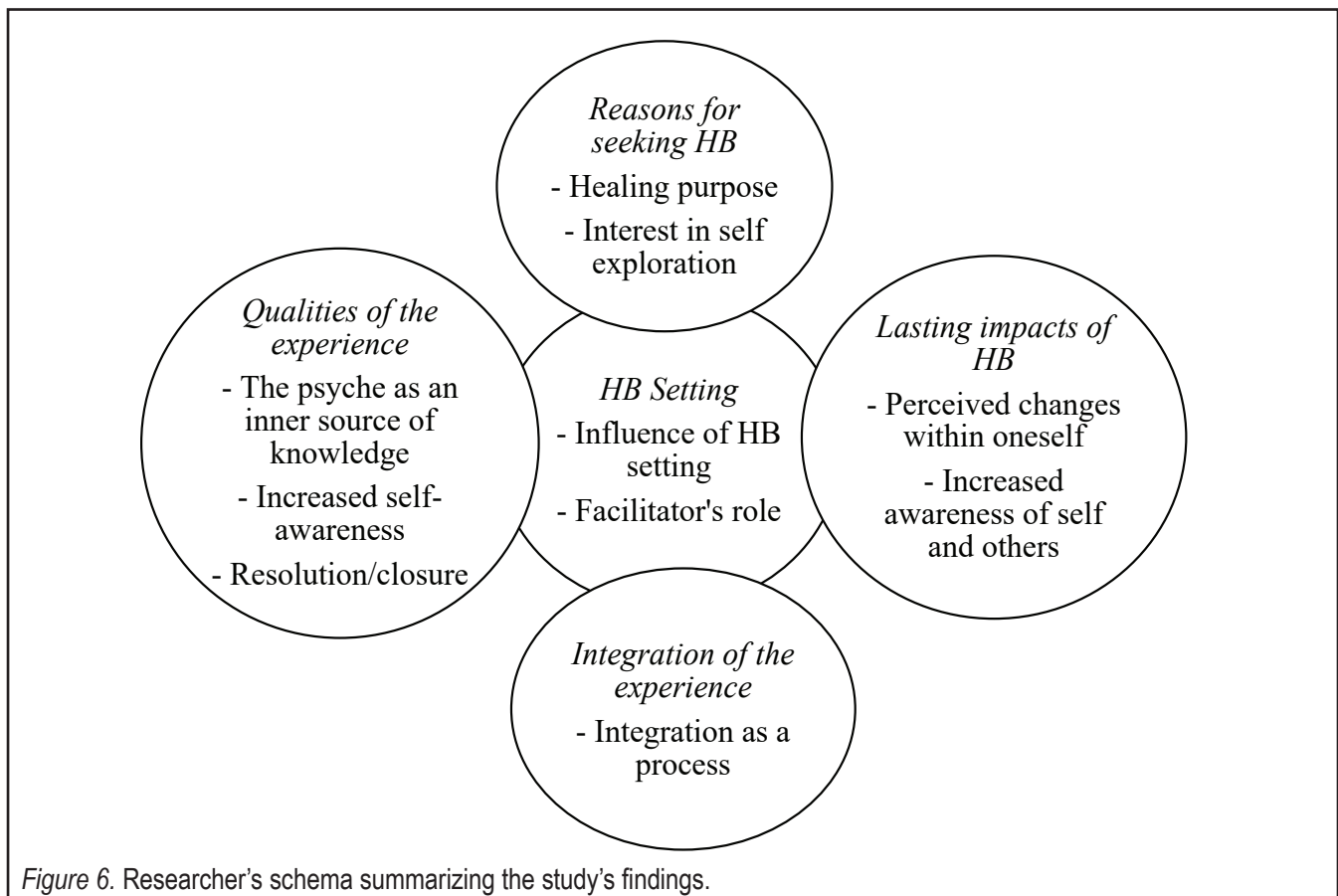
The increased awareness of one’s story and emotional pain from past experiences appears to help participants see others from a different perspective, leading to more empathetic and compassionate relationships and thus supporting Binarová’s (2003) findings of improved capacity for warm interpersonal relations after HB. This finding also resonates with Bache’s (2000) high-dose LSD work, his experience of collective pain, and an identification with a greater self. The experience of a greater identity as described by Bache (2000) used to be a paradox: while one’s identity is stretched, identification with a greater being or group of beings can take place. From the current study’s results, it may be that blurring boundaries between the individual and other beings may cause a greater sense of identification to naturally emerge, opening access to healing and insights related to compassion

and forgiveness. The theme of belonging to a higher realm of existence also showed strong similarity with Bache's (2000) notion of an enlarged identity during LSD sessions; in this current study, this important element was found in relation to transpersonal experiences, providing people with a certain sense of cosmic belonging (Bache, 2000; Grof, 2002, 2012a).

The way participants approached and explained their own experiences appears to have a primary role in qualifying the impact of HB, especially considering the Grofian framework that is an essential part of HB. Grof (e.g., 1980, 1985, 1993, 2002, 2012a) described several levels and types of experiences, highlighting the death–rebirth experience as the most powerful experience in HB. The results of the study suggest that it might be valuable to review the integration procedures in HB. The inclusion of a follow-up session devoted to integration and to address specific breather's needs, might be the most straightforward practice, possibly some days or weeks after the HB workshop to have time

for more perspective. In recent years GTT developed a module for trainees devoted exclusively to integration, acknowledging that integration needs further development. Integrative work beyond an HB workshop is missing today as a regular practice offered by facilitators, and is mainly left to the will or personal work of attendees (e.g., S. Grof, 2002; S. Grof & C. Grof, 2011; Taylor, 2007).

The enterprise to recall, to integrate, and to give meaning to experiences in different states of consciousness might be a tough one (e.g., Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001; Tart, 1975; Thonnard et al., 2013). Despite the differences in the logic and in the experiential range during nonordinary states compared to daily consciousness, integration is acknowledged as an important practice. Bache (2000) stressed the relevance of the coherent anchoring of the experience by a cognitive structure, referring to the process of meaning making as *integrated transcendence*: the goal is the conscious integration of the experience rather than having experiences that are not able to be recalled afterwards.



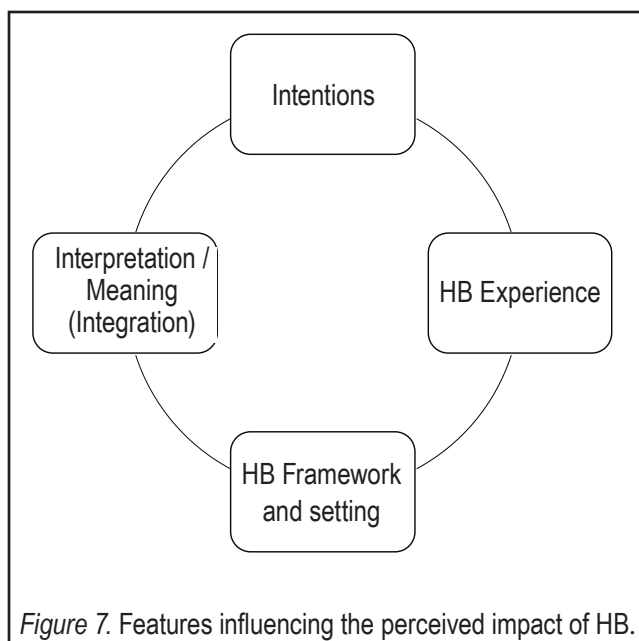


Figure 7. Features influencing the perceived impact of HB.

As shown in Figure 6, all themes are intrinsically related and are influenced by the core feature of the HB setting.

According to this study's results, the experiences in HB are influenced by the breather's expectations, while integration and giving meaning to experiences in HB seem to be an ongoing work influenced by the Grofian framework and goes beyond the HB workshop time frame. Thus, the perceived impact of HB is directly related to the way people explain their own processes, which is also influenced by several personal and contextual features, including the reasons for seeking HB, the experience itself, and the meaning the experience has for the individual over time (Figure 7).

Working with different but similar experiences, Mithoefer (2017) proposed several follow-up meetings after each MDMA session when working with patients suffering from PTSD for processing and addressing the unfolding psychological material. MAPS's model of MDMA-assisted therapy offers a protocol for follow-up sessions, which HB lacks. Based on the findings of this study, some attendees of HB would benefit by group or individual follow-up sessions, challenging facilitators on how to address the deep needs of attendees, while sustaining the valuable feature of working in group in HB. Developing a stable group to work with HB, including preparation and integration might be an option for further exploration.

The Perceived Impact of Holotropic Breathwork

In this study, some participants felt compelled to materialize their insights into actions to complete the experiences in HB. The breather's awareness of new potentials might start at HB, but should be confirmed and systematically done afterwards. The insights in nonordinary states should be enacted in daily life to nurture the relation to the unfolded experiential dimension and allows psychospiritual growth (Ferrer, 2003; White, 1994, 1999a, 1999b). The ongoing work with the unfolded material in HB, the meaning given to the experiences, and the relation established with it, seems to be of prime relevance, overlooked in previous HB research, and needing further revision in its regular practice.

Cultural Influences on the Results

It is possible that the stress on relational elements in the results may be due to Chilean cultural dynamics, notably (a) the presence of the *huacho* (bastard) figure in the Chilean context, (b) the social trauma of the dictatorship in Chile between 1973 and 1990, and (c) the collective nature of Chilean culture.

The *huacho* refers to the bastard—a daughter or a son who has a present (sometimes ever-present) mother and a father who is almost completely absent (Alvarado, 2016; Montecino, 1997). The *huacho* is a colonial-era legacy and an consequence of miscegenation, when Spanish conquerors encountered native women. The *huacho* is rooted at the beginning of the half-blood race and, as such, not only pertains to Chile but to Latin America and other regions. According to Montecino (1996), to configure an identity an individual takes elements from the culture; in this case a culture of truncated family lineages. The emotional pain and emptiness related to the father's absence is thought to create a conflicted family structure that may remain in the present day (Montecino, 1997). In this type of familial structure, the father may be a mysterious and sometimes violent figure, such that the daughters and sons grow up only with their mother's support, carrying with them unfinished attachments and psychological conflicts with their relatives.

Second, it was only in 1990 that Chile returned to democracy after a 17-year military dictatorship characterized by violence and oppression, including the arrest of tens of thousands of people,

and the torturing, murder, and “disappearing” of thousands. As some scholars (e.g., Cabrera, Aceituno, Matamala, & Fischer, 2017; Gómez, 2013; Lira, 2013; Martín-Baró, 1988; Ruppert, 2012b; St. Just, 2007, 2010) have proposed, the social trauma provoked by long periods of extreme violence within a country can be a cause of personal, interpersonal, and familial issues. Certainly, traumatized people can have problems in expressing their emotions, which directly affects the next generation; even though daughters and sons were not alive during the traumatic period, parents can transmit the trauma through their emotional bonds (Gómez, 2013; Ruppert, 2012b; St. Just, 2007, 2010). Child-bearing and -rearing during such a period becomes not only a time of nurture, but also one of passing to children unfinished psychological and emotional issues, including trauma. Problems in the parent-child relationship can imply different sorts of entanglement and symbiotic relations, in which the daughter or the son does not have clear boundaries with their parents and their issues, causing emotional suffering (Ruppert, 2012a, 2012b, 2014). HB in Chile seems to surface unfinished material about family members, and some participants reported emergent conflicts due to what can be understood as unclear boundaries. Without comparing Chilean HB experiences and their sequelae to those of participants in cultures without the same kind of colonial or political trauma, it is impossible to gauge the degree to which these experiences may reflect Chilean cultural influences as opposed to more universal themes.

Finally, Chile’s culture is more collectivist, or relationally oriented, than the European and American cultures in which HB was developed. According to Geert Hofstede’s (1980; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) multicultural research rating cultures on a continuum from individuality to collectivity, Chile rates relatively high on collectivity compared to the United States (the most individualistic country) and northern and central European countries. In a collectivist culture people care more about belonging to the family/clan, experience a sense of “w-ness,” and tend to identify with the social group or system, in contrast to individualist societies in which individuals should take care of themselves and identity is mainly based on the individual (understand-

ing that helps contextualize the importance participants placed on their familial relationships and on the relational impact of HB). To date, no study has investigated the influence of cultural factors such as individualism and collectivism on HB participants, so conjectures about the influence of such factors, while suggestive, remain speculative.

Limitations of the Study

Limiting participation to those who perceived some impact of HB and were willing and able to talk about those effects, rather than people who not have had a significant HB experience or been able to connect their HB experience to ordinary life, created a positive bias for the power of the process as a transformational method. By including people with several experiences of HB it was acknowledged they might have a positive bias toward it, and their willingness to join the study expressed an implicit expectation to collaborate in the development of HB. Due to the ethical requirement to exclude volunteers with traumatic or unresolved experiences, the study did not explore how HB might have left a positive or negative impact on that population. It is unknown how many people only joined one or two regular workshops and left the HB community with a “bad taste” after having an unpleasant experience. This matter needs further investigation.

Although the participants were not training or certified facilitators, they listened to a great deal of Grof’s theory at the HB preparation talk, which might create expectations and direct in some way what unfolded while breathing, affecting the set and setting for the experience. Furthermore, a question remained about the ability of breathers to unfold the meanings of the symbols and somatic manifestations they experienced during HB: for some it might have been easy to connect with themselves, while others might have experienced more difficulties when dealing with powerful emotional expressions and unknown symbols emerging into their conscious awareness.

Some experiences in altered states are difficult to name; thus, those unable to express their experiences with language were left out as well. In this regard, the results might be affected by the use of different languages, too, since language and culture are important to thought (Seidman, 2006). The use of adequate wording when translating always presents

problems when the aim is to maintain the original sense. Although participants did not use Chilean slang during the interviews, the bilingual researcher took special pains in translation, and a committee member who spoke both English and Spanish reviewed the texts; however, it is always possible that the original significance of the participants' expression was diminished when translated to English and read by people from another culture. It is possible that the study's sample might have influenced the degree to which findings relating to healing purpose and interest in self-exploration—and the experiential healing obtained—were present. Participants seemed to be mainly concerned with working on their own issues. In fact, participants came to HB with specific healing outcomes in mind, and/or with an interest in self-exploration, indicating that this sample viewed HB *a priori* as a therapy or a method with therapeutic potential.

The structure of the interview protocol was formulated based on the researcher's own understanding, and personal and professional involvement in HB, which indicated that the impact of HB should be more than hyperventilation and could include timeframes before and after the workshop. The results might be biased by the type of questions and by the general structure of the protocol, which acknowledged that something happened for breathers before, during, and after HB. The researcher's deep involvement in HB was both a bias and a driver before and during the study, and may have affected the results in unknown ways.

Future Research

Due to the limited number of studies in HB many areas might be of interest for future research, such as (a) the role of participants' motivations for undergoing HB; (b) those who might not report an impact at all; (c) querying experienced facilitators and therapists in order to understand what they do to help people integrate and give meaning to their HB experiences; (d) studying to differentiate groups of people who successfully integrate their HB experience from those who cannot by unpacking baseline differences (such as intentions and personality traits), details of the experiences, and integration strategies (including people who do not do any integrative work and those who do integrative work

beyond the Grof Transpersonal Training guidelines); (e) examining what role HB plays in relation to other methods or techniques for increasing self-knowledge, and the differentiation of HB from those methods and techniques; (f) inquiring into the effects of HB in specific conditions and working with purposive samples, such as people diagnosed with mild depression, anxiety, fear of death, and so on; (g) inquiring into the effects of HB with a different preparation; and (h) investigating the specific features of the HB process and their perceived efficacy.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Of all your Holotropic Breathwork experiences, can you describe at length the one(s) you consider has had an impact on you? Are there any specific moments that are particularly vivid in your memory that you associate with this HB session? What emotions, sensations, images, or symbols appeared during your HB session?

1. Can you describe the impact of HB for you? Can you be more specific? In what manner(s) has/have the experience had an impact on your life? Did you observe any positive impacts? How about negative impacts? How many HB sessions did you take part in before you experienced that impact?
2. What aspects of the experience itself, if any, informed you about its impact?
3. What characteristics/aspects of the holotropic breathwork setting you consider influenced your perceived impact of your holotropic breathwork experience? (for example, structure, talk the previous evening, qualities of the facilitator or sitter, mandala drawing, etc.)
4. I would like to talk a little about the time before your HB experience. Why did you choose to participate in HB? What were your expectations, needs, or motivations when coming to HB?
5. About the time after your HB experience, Can you tell me something about your strategies, if you have any, to integrate or to make meaning of your HB experience in the days/weeks/months afterward?
6. Is this HB experience connected with your current life and your decisions? If so, in what ways?
7. Did you bring art material related to your HB experience? What meaning(s) does this material have for you?

8. What did you learn from your experience with HB? What is the meaning of these experiences for you?
9. When reflecting on your HB experience in the present, how do you feel about it?
10. Are there other aspects of the experience that you think are important that we might not have covered?

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