



Peak-experiences among norwegian youth

Edward Hoffman , Valentina Iversen & Fernando A. Ortiz

To cite this article: Edward Hoffman , Valentina Iversen & Fernando A. Ortiz (2010) Peak-experiences among norwegian youth, *Nordic Psychology*, 62:4, 67-76, DOI: [10.1027/1901-2276/a000022](https://doi.org/10.1027/1901-2276/a000022)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1027/1901-2276/a000022>



Published online: 11 Jul 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 15



View related articles [↗](#)

Peak-experiences among norwegian youth

EDWARD HOFFMAN, Yeshiva University

VALENTINA IVERSEN, Norwegian University of Science & Technology

FERNANDO A. ORTIZ, Gonzaga University

Key Words: Peak-Experiences, Abraham Maslow, Norwegian Youth, Nordic Youth, Humanistic Psychology, Positive Psychology

Correspondence: Dr. Edward Hoffman/Adjunct Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Yeshiva University, 500 West 185th Street, New York, NY 10002, Email: elhoffma@yu.edu

Dr. Valentina Iversen/Research Consultant-Associate Professor, St. Olav's University Hospital, Division of psychiatry, Østmarka, Department of Neuroscience, Norwegian University of Science & Technology, Box 3008 Lade 7441, Trondheim, Norway, Email: valentina.iversen@ntnu.no

Dr. Fernando A. Ortiz/Assistant Director, Counseling and Career Assessment Center, 502 E. Boone Avenue BOX 94, Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA 99258-0094, Email: ccac@gonzaga.edu

Abstract

This study marks the first empirical investigation of youthful peak-experiences among Nordic persons. The sample comprised 309 native Norwegian college students who generated 318 retrospective reports (occurring below the age of 14). Early peaks involving interpersonal joy--especially the 3 sub-categories of family togetherness, the birth of a baby sibling or cousin, and romantic bliss--were most frequently reported. In frequency, these were followed by peaks involving nature and developmental landmarks. The relevance of these findings for fostering Nordic youth development from a positive, strength-based perspective is discussed. Avenues for future research are highlighted.

Introduction

Positive psychology has become a dominant paradigm in contemporary psychology. In their efforts to develop a science of positive human functioning that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries, psychologists are investigating the universality and cross-cultural generalizability of positive psychology constructs (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008; Nelson, 2009). Some conduct studies in a variety of specific settings in order to explore particular positive psychological

constructs. Others investigate positive psychological constructs in other cultures and countries, especially outside of the United States, in order to build a psychology that is ultimately inclusive and universal (Sandage, Hill & Vang, 2003). Ultimately, a universal and multicultural positive psychology requires that psychologists investigate the expression of positive psychology constructs in different cultures. In this article, we summarize the research results of the types of "peak-experiences" provided by a Norwegian sample.

Peak-Experiences: Uplifting Experiences in Everyday Life

Abraham Maslow, whose writings helped to lay the theoretical foundations of the humanistic psychology movement, considered spirituality to be a major component of the humanistic vision. He also viewed spirituality as a universal and cross-cultural human phenomenon. For Maslow (1970), spirituality was intimately connected with "peak-experiences," or mystical encounters characterized by intense feelings of awe, reverence, bliss, and ecstasy. Maslow (1970, 1996) regarded peak-experiences as having powerful effects for personality growth, creativity, and even physical well-being. In addition, he believed that peak-experiences, although cross-cultural, have been interpreted within the framework of particular cultural or personal belief systems (Schneider, Bugental, and Pierson, 2002).

Peak-Experiences as a Cross-Cultural Construct

Hoffman and Ortiz (2009) showed that youthful peak-experiences can be elicited in cross-cultural studies using retrospective recall methodologies. They reviewed the existing literature and found that 8 particular types of early peak-experience were salient in Canada, Mexico, Norway, Singapore, and Venezuela, suggesting that youthful peak-experiences are widely experienced, rather than unique to specific cultures.

In this study, we wished to extend these findings in two ways. First, we sought to elicit peak-experiences in descriptive retrospective recall reports beyond the already studied cultures. Second, we wished to explicate peak-experiences in the Norwegian context by referencing these specific cultural values and provide additional cross-cultural validity evidence for the typology of peak-experiences emerging in other cultural contexts.

Accordingly, we collected new data in Norway. According to Hofstede (2001) and other researchers, Norway is among the most individualistic cultures. For example, in value-based indices of 50 cultures, Hofstede (2001) rated Norway 31 on Power Distance, 50 on Uncertainty Avoidance, 69 on Individualism/Collectivism, and 8 on Masculinity/Femininity, whereas the United States was

rated 40th, 46, 91, and 62nd on the same dimensions. Small power-distance countries, such as Norway, show limited acceptance of power inequality, less dependence on top-down decision-making, and a preference for consultation and cooperation. A low score on uncertainty avoidance indicates the ability to accommodate ambiguity and uncertainty. The United States scored highest of all nations on the individualism dimension, while Norway scored moderately high. Norway scored lower than the United States on the masculinity and femininity dimension, suggesting that Norwegian social gender roles are less distinct (Kolstad & Horpestad, 2009; Sornes, Keilberg-Stephens, Sætre, & Browning, 2004).

Hypotheses

These authors proposed to develop a better understanding of the relationship between cultural values and youthful peak-experiences in the Norwegian cultural context. Our specific hypotheses were the following:

Hypothesis 1: Self-reported youthful peak-experiences can be elicited and identified through retrospective recall in all cultures and will exhibit cross-cultural content similarity.

Hypothesis 2: Self-reported youthful peak-experiences can be meaningfully categorized across cultural samples encompassing the following categories: 1) interpersonal joy; 2) uplifting experiences involving nature; 3) external achievement; 4) developmental landmark; 5) materialism; 6) skill mastery; 7) aesthetic bliss; 8) near-death or health-crisis episodes, 9) peak moments during intense and personalized prayer, 10) exalted perceptions in formal religious settings, 11) spontaneous moments of bliss, 12) profound musing, such as about self-identity or life-and-death; 13) uncanny perceptions (e.g., visions, bodily kinesthetics); and 14) unforgettable dreams.

Hypothesis 3: Self-reported youthful peak-experiences will be at most moderately associated with cultural values.

Method

Participants were recruited from 7 undergraduate classes at a teacher's college and 5 undergraduate classes at a college for health and social workers. To reflect the exploratory nature of this cultural study, we adopted a qualitative approach. Data reported here are mainly responses to two questions asking: (a) "To describe an experience when you felt joy and happiness prior to the age of 14" and (b) "To describe the impact of this experience on your life." No time limit was set. In total, 360 students received two open-ended questions developed by Hoffman (2003), which had been translated into Norwegian and then back-translated

independently to insure accuracy. Participation was voluntary. Participants were given 30 minutes in class to complete the questionnaire. 310 questionnaires were completed, for a response-rate of 86.3%. One completed questionnaire was not usable, yielding a number of 309 for data analysis. The narratives were subsequently independently translated into English.

Participants

A total of 309 undergraduate students provided complete data. Data was collected by the second author. In terms of college majors, the sample comprised 147 (47.6%) in education, 79 (25.6%) in nursing, (47)15.2% in social work, and 36(11.7%) in physical therapy. The sample was ethnically homogenous, predominantly from middle-class Christian families, and everyone reported having been born in Norway. The sample encompassed 257 females and 52 males. The mean age for females was 20.8 years (range 16-26) and for males 18.8 years (range 16-29). Most lived in apartments near campus, with smaller percentages respectively living in student housing or with their parents. Consistent with the results of previous studies, some students reported more than one youthful peak-experience. Hence, there were 318 usable reports generated by the sample.

Data Analysis

To code the responses, we used the detailed coding system developed by Hoffman & Ortiz (2009). It basically consists of a classification scheme to organize the reported early peak-experiences into 14 meaningful categories (e.g., interpersonal joy). However, to strengthen the rigor of the coding methodology, Hoffman and Ortiz (2009) have derived some more specific facet categories subsumed in the general peak-experience categories (e.g., family togetherness, peer camaraderie subsumed under interpersonal joy). To achieve this objective, we read the responses independently many times, interpreting meanings, looking for peak themes, and organizing these peak themes. Each researcher developed a tentative typological classification.

The following comprehensive guidelines were used to analyze the self-reported accounts of the participants: (a) any self-report might receive several theme codes; (b) to classify a specific peak-experience, one should try to understand the whole set of retrospective statements made by the participants, and not just isolated sentences or pieces of information; (c) finally, for any peak-experience category, we attempted to clarify both general and facet categories. The research team then engaged in thorough discussion, comparing and revising the tentative classifications. Eventually, the group reached a consensus on the master typology

scheme comprising 14 peak-experience categories. Minor coding disagreements (fewer than 5 protocols) were attributed to ambiguously-worded reports and were resolved by discussion between us to produce 100% agreement. This coding discussion and revision process was necessary to achieve intersubjectivity, a characteristic of qualitative methodologies, hence ensuring acceptable reliability and validity for the study (Wan, Chiu, Peng & Tam, 2007).

One method of improving validity in cross-cultural qualitative research is to ask local cultural informants for their understanding and reactions to any findings. The second author, who has resided in Norway for 17 years and is quite familiar with Norwegian culture, served as our cultural informant. The classification and interpretation of the self-reported peak-experiences was an iterative process of ongoing consultation with this cultural informant.

Results

Table 1

Superordinate (or General) Classification: Types of Norwegian Peak-Experience

Category of Peak	Example
Interpersonal Joy	Becoming an elder sister again
External Achievement	Winning a skiing competition
Developmental Landmark	Far traveling alone for the first time
Nature Encounter	When I got a parakeet, my first pet
Aesthetic Bliss	Writing a poem during my parents' divorce
Skill Mastery	Climbing a tall chestnut tree
Materialism	Getting a new bike for my birthday
Recovery from health crisis or accident	Recovering from appendicitis surgery

Results support hypotheses 1 and 2. That is, Table 1 presents the various types of childhood peak-experiences found in this Norwegian sample and provides further evidence that self-reported peak experiences can be elicited through retrospective recall methodologies in cross cultural samples. Furthermore, these peak-experiences bear content resemblance to the typology of peak-experiences already previously identified by Hoffman (1998; 2003). These self-reported peak-experiences can be accurately and reliably scored and classified into interpretable categories.

Table 2 shows the frequency distributions of the various peak-experiences in the Norwegian sample. Seven typological categories clearly dominated in our content analysis, with interpersonal joy (39.3%) being the most frequently elicited youthful peak-experience type, followed by nature (18.6 %), developmental

Table 2
Reported Frequencies of Peak-Experience (N = 318 narratives)

Peak Experience	Number	Frequency (%)
Interpersonal Joy	125	39.3
Nature	59	18.6
Developmental Landmark	50	15.7
External Achievement	35	11.0
Materialism	17	5.3
Aesthetics	16	5.0
Skill Mastery	13	4.1
Recovery from Illness or Accident	1	0.3
Philosophical Musing	1	0.3
Near-Death Experience	1	0.3

landmark (15.7%), external achievement (11.0%), materialism (5.3%), aesthetics (5.0%), and skill mastery (4.1%); recovery from illness or accident, philosophical musing, and near-death experience were each elicited by 0.3%. No responses involved four previously established categories: exalted perceptions in a formal religious setting, personalized prayer, uncanny perception, and unforgettable dream. The surprising absence of any early peaks involving prayer or formal religious participation may reflect the predominantly secular, middle-class families of this Norwegian sample. More broadly, this result may also indicate that joyful, overtly spiritual experiences (such as relating to theology or ritual) are now rare among Norwegian youth (Sande, 2002).

In order to further investigate the cultural basis of the Norwegian typology of peak-experiences, we specifically examined the frequencies by gender (see tables 3 and 4). We found that interpersonal joy was particularly salient in both genders (26.4% in males and 41.9% in females). Whereas among males, the second most frequently elicited peak-experience was external achievement (18.9%), nature was the second-most frequent peak experience for females (19.2%). However, developmental landmark was third in the typology for both genders (18.9% males, 15.1% females). Whereas nature was categorized as 4th (15.1%) among males, external achievement was the fourth category (9.4%) among females. Relatively small, similar percentages concerning peaks of aesthetics, materialism, and skill mastery, were found in both genders. Peaks involving recovery from illness or accident, philosophical musing, or a near-death experience were reported by one female per category, but by no males. Interpersonal joy has been found to be a prominent peak-experience across

Table 3

Peak-Narratives of Males (N=53 narratives)

Category	Number of narratives	% of male narratives
Interpersonal Joy	14	26.4%
External Achievement	10	18.9%
Developmental Landmark	10	18.9%
Nature	8	15.1%
Aesthetics	6	11.3%
Skill Mastery	3	5.7%
Materialism	2	3.8%

Table 4

Peak-Narratives of Females (N=265 narratives)

Category	Number of narratives	% of female narratives
Interpersonal Joy	111	41.9%
Nature	51	19.2%
Developmental Landmark	40	15.1%
External Achievement	25	9.4%
Materialism	15	5.7%
Aesthetics	10	3.8%
Skill Mastery	10	3.8%
Recovery from Illness or Accident	1	0.4%
Near-Death Experience	1	0.4%
Philosophical Musing	1	0.4%

several studies in other cultures (Hoffman, 1998, 2003; Hoffman & Muramoto, 2007; Hoffman & Ortiz, 2009). In the Norwegian sample, women provided a relatively large percentage of interpersonal joy peak-experiences as compared with men. The Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, who specializes on Norwegian culture, has found that gratifying social relations are very important for Norwegians. Moreover, she found that Norwegians often use the words *fred* ("peace") and *ro* ("quiet") to describe interpersonal relationships. *Fred* is not necessarily "absence of war," but rather a sense of being "free from disturbances from others." In interpersonal contexts, they use *ro* to refer to a "state of mind characterized by wholeness and control." To be free from disturbances from others – that is, to "find peace" – is necessary for the achievement of the desired state of personal "wholeness and control" (Gullestad, 1996). In order to elucidate

Table 5

Facet Frequency of Specific Types of Interpersonal Joy

Sub-Category	TOTAL N	Female		Male	
		N	Percentage*	N	Percentage*
Family togetherness	36	33	29.7%	3	21.4%
Peer camaraderie	16	11	9.9%	5	35.8%
Birth of baby	35	33	29.7%	2	14.3%
Intense friendship	9	8	7.2%	1	7.1%
Romantic bliss	20	18	16.2%	2	14.3%
Recovery of beloved from illness or injury	6	6	5.4%	0	0%
Receiving care from a non-family member	3	2	1.8	1	7.1%

Note. *For each gender, the percentage refers to the percent of reports of interpersonal joy that pertained to the specific sub-category. Thus, family togetherness comprised 29.7% of the females' reports of interpersonal joy peaks and 21.4% of the males' interpersonal joy reports.

the content of the interpersonal joy experience, we also examined the specific types of interpersonal joy (see Table 5). We developed a classification to code the various facets of this superordinate domain, yielding the following categories: family togetherness, peer camaraderie, birth of baby, intense friendship, romantic bliss, recovery of beloved from illness or injury, and receiving care from a non-family member.

In addition to interpersonal joy, the peak-experience of nature was one of the most frequently mentioned and these experiences were particularly rich in description and in detail. This makes sense from a cultural perspective. According to Riese & Vorkinn (2002, p. 199), "under the influence of Romantic ideas prevalent in Europe...nature and the outdoors became important symbols of what is meant to be Norwegian," and "Norwegians are considered to have a special close bond to nature. Some claim this national characteristic has roots reaching as far back as the beginning of the last millennium, and is reflected in early literature and oral traditions. Further, the ideal outdoor recreation in Norway includes hiking, with the intention of enjoying the hike through its promotion of simplicity and exposure to the natural surroundings." (p.200). A statement by Fritjof Nansen, the famous Norwegian explorer, provides another illustration of the importance of nature in the Norwegian culture: "To be able to withdraw from the masses, from all the confusing noise that so much infuses our lives. To visit nature, receive new and grand impressions from the woods and the fields, the wide mountains, and the enormous space. To me this stands as probably the most important part of outdoor recreation" (Riese & Vorkinn, 2002, p.199, quote translated in Sande, 1998).

Discussion

The results of this study indicated that (a) peak-experiences can be reliably recollected and categorized (hypothesis 1); and (b) coders can content analyze them and categorize them along specific dimensions based on an apriori typology (hypothesis 2). As expected, these peak-experiences appear to be correlated to cultural values or orientations (hypothesis 3). Though we were not able to conclusively correlate the peak-experiences to the dimensions of individualism and collectivism, we can hypothesize that some of these dimensions may be, at least moderately, related to individualistic and collectivistic tendencies. For example, future studies can examine the empirical and conceptual relationship between interpersonal joy, nature, aesthetics and collectivism. These experiences suggesting relational (with others, nature, art, and kin) experiences may be more pronounced in collectivistic and allocentric cultures. Similarly, in cultures where the autonomous, independent, and individualistic self is highly valued, one may expect that self-focused experiences such as achievement, developmental landmarks, and skill mastery would be more highly endorsed.

Limitations

Two limitations of the study should be noted. First, we did not directly assess peak-experiences in this sample with a questionnaire presenting various peak-experience items. This was a qualitative and exploratory study and some of the findings might be inconclusive. Our results generally conform to hypothesized expectations regarding the typology of peak-experience. Another limitation of the study is that it includes one target culture of interest, and it would be helpful to directly compare the findings with those of another culture. For example, an alternative would be to concurrently collect data in a collectivistic culture and compare the results to this sample with its high level of individualism.

Despite these limitations, the study provided significant support for the possibility of generalizing across cultures with regard to our typology of peak-experiences and its utility in testing hypotheses that include cultural perspectives. Ultimately, the goal is to integrate all of the existing cultural studies on peak-experiences and to develop a cross-cultural typology of these significant experiences and use them in applied contexts such as strength-based counseling and enhancement of religiosity and spirituality and coping.

REFERENCES

- Christopher, J. C., & Hickinbottom, S. (2008). Positive psychology, ethnocentrism, and the disguised ideology of individualism. *Theory & Psychology, 18*, 563-589.
- Gullestad, M. (1996). From obedience to negotiation: Dilemmas in the transmission of values between generations in Norway. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 2*, 25-42.
- Hoffman, E. (1998). Peak experiences in childhood: An exploratory study. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 38*, 109-120.
- Hoffman, E. (2003). Peak experiences in Japanese youth. *Japanese Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 21*(1), 112-121.
- Hoffman, E., & Muramoto, S. (2007). Peak-experiences among Japanese youth. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 47*, 524-540.
- Hoffman, E. & Ortiz, F. (2009). Youthful Peak-Experiences in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Implications for Educators and Counselors. In L. Francis, D. Scott, M. de Souza, & J. Norman (Eds.) *The International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care & Well-Being*. Spring, New York.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences, comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Kolstad, A., & Horpestad, S. (2004). Self-construal in Chile and Norway: Implications for cultural differences in Individualism and Collectivism. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 40*, 275-281.
- Maslow, A. (1970). *Religions, values, and peak-experiences*. New York: Viking.
- Maslow, A. (1996). The health implications of peaks-to-completion. In E. Hoffman (Ed.), *Future Visions: The Unpublished Papers of Abraham Maslow*. Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage.
- Nelson, D. W. (2009). Feeling good and open-minded: The impact of positive affect on cross-cultural emphatic responding. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 4*, 53-63.
- Riese, H., & Vorkinn, M. (2002). The production of meaning in outdoor recreation: A study of Norwegian practice. *Norwegian Journal of Geography, 56*, 199-206.
- Sandage, S. J., Hill, P. C., & Vang, H. C. (2003). Toward a multicultural positive psychology: Indigenous forgiveness and Hmong culture. *The Counseling Psychologist, 31*, 564-592.
- Sande, A. (1998). Can we regard outdoor recreation as a modern form of religious activity? Or as an urban lifestyle outdoors? *Research in Open Air – National Conference on Outdoor Recreation and Research, Stjørdal 18-19 November 1998*, 17-32. Friluftslivets fellesorganisasjon, Oslo.
- Sande, A. (2002). Intoxication and rite of passage to adulthood in Norway. *Contemporary Drug Problems, 29*, 277-303.
- Schneider, K. J., Bugental, J. F. T., & Pierson, J. F. (2002). *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Sornes, J.-O., Keilberg-Stephens, K., Sætre, A. S., & Browning, L. D. (2004). The reflexivity between ICTs and business culture: Applying Hofstede's theory to compare Norway and the United States. *Informing Science Journal, 7*, 1-30.
- Wan, C., Chiu, C.-Y., Peng, S. & Tam, K.-P. (2007) Measuring cultures through intersubjective norms. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 38*(2), 213-226.