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Spiritual Tracks in Life Span Development: Restoring the Human Person

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In transpersonal psychology, spiritual transformation is considered implicit to development. Templeton Foundation research links religious experiences to stages in gradual personal transformation throughout one's life-span. Fowler reported religious conversion depends on innate ontogenic structures that unfold invariably throughout life. Relationships among spiritual experiences (SE) and development acquire additional importance with accumulating evidence of spontaneous SE occurring in people outside of traditional their religious or spiritual practices. This report examines longitudinal data from a phenomenological study of spiritual transformation (also known as "spiritual emergence") over a period of 20 years. The investigation included counseling people interested in spiritual development and personal growth. More than 500 informants, ranging in ages from 8 to 85, participated in this study. Results reveal three SE-associated developmental tracks: those without SE, those with self-identified normal "healthy" SE, and those with SE associated with psychological or health problems. Depending on the context, SE may serve as: a) indicators of particular developmental stages; b) development catalysts; and/or, c) trauma leading to the developmental arrests. Within SE-associated tracks, several development subtypes focus on self-actualization, self-knowledge, creative expression, sexuality and/or development of bodily awareness. Particular SE are associated with specific changes in self-awareness, self-identification, and motivation. Successful development that includes SE leads to balanced character structure associated with the sense of wholeness and well-being. This suggests that SE are essential components of the healthy human "self." It resonates with research on human development suggesting that conventional ego development may switch to spiritual development, and reports that advanced forms of cognitive functioning happen early in life. The model also is consistent with developmental sensibilities in some Eastern systems, including Kundalini Yoga. This research indicates that life-stage psychology should account for at least two different developmental tracks (i.e., conventional and spiritual), thereby providing novel openings for nontraditional counseling and psychotherapy.<