

Rebirthing:
**the transformation of personhood
through embodiment and emotion**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the nature of personhood, embodiment and emotion based on twelve months fieldwork within a breathwork/rebirthing community in 2008–2009. The fieldwork included a nine-month rebirthing training program that is the primary focus of this thesis. Rebirthing, a breathing technique reputed to release repressed material and stress from the body, emerged from California in the 1970s as a modality of the New Age. The six participants of this rebirthing training consistently expressed a desire to re-examine their lives, and viewed the training as an opportunity to redefine themselves. They saw the rebirthing training as an opportunity to develop a deepened sense of agency which would facilitate transformations of relationships with themselves and others. The subjective nature of this transformation relies on a particular understanding of personhood in rebirthing discourse; one that is self-aware, reflexive and flexible, and, thus, amenable to this process of change. Employing a narrative perspective I examine the transformative journeys of these six participants as they undertake to challenge their own self-perceptions, values and beliefs as they expose and unravel their life histories. Central to this thesis are two questions. How does the practice of rebirthing impact on notions of personhood; and what role do embodiment and emotion play in the construction and reconstruction of the model of personhood central to rebirthing practice?

The practice of rebirthing is situated within a set of assumptions and presuppositions about the nature of personhood, the mind and body, spirituality, life and death. Rebirthing is specifically embedded in the precepts of 'thought is creative,' 'the self as a spiritual being,' and 'holistic health'. Based on a body constructed of energy, an energy that is cosmologically universal, personhood, in this context, is understood to be both individual and relational, autonomous yet 'porous.' This concept of an energetic body renders embodiment and emotion mutually constitutive. The specific breathing technique of rebirthing is seen as the key tool for accessing somatic and emotional information from the body. Through the rebirthing process the individual is understood to be capable of recalling and reconstructing their past, transforming beliefs and values that enable them to move into the future with a greater sense of agency.

The rebirthing training program is constructed to follow the life course sequentially, from conception and birth to death. My research illustrates the subjective and individualised nature of the transformative process of the rebirthing training program. Each chapter explores the unfolding of individual stories, experiences and understanding of the nature of personhood within the rebirthing context. These chapters chart the gradual transformation of personhood that takes place through the participants' embodied and emotional experiences of the rebirthing training. I argue that by interrogating how personhood is formulated and transformed in the specific cultural setting of a rebirthing training we gain a highly nuanced and deeply intimate insight into how people actively shape and participate in their social world.