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THE MIND POSSESSED: MAPPING THE VARIETIES OF POSSESSION EXPERIENCES

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Grant 346/16

Background: Possession states are poorly understood and there is conflicting evidence about its potential mental health outcomes.

Aims: We conducted two studies to investigate the varieties of possession experiences and assess the psychological characteristics of individuals who regularly experience such possession states.

Method: Study 1 used a set of personality, cognitive, and mental health measures to compare religious participants who regularly experience possession with ritual attendants who have never experienced possession. Study 2 collected possession narratives from Afro-Brazilian and Christian Pentecostal religions.

Results: In study 1 we found that mediums were not significantly different across variables from the control group. Correlational and regression analysis showed that the level of meaningfulness attributed to possession and fusion with the spiritual entity were strongly correlated with most Quality of Life dimensions and negatively with anxiety. Contrary to expectations, there were no detrimental effects of a lower level of bodily control over the possession experience. Study 2 showed that possession experiences are associated with a wide variety of emotional and cognitive characteristics and that there are wide significant phenomenological differences associated with the religious context.

Conclusions: Together our results suggest that individuals regularly experiencing possession within an Afro-Brazilian religious context are psychologically very similar to others who never experienced the same phenomenon, and that the way they appraise their experiences as meaningful, as well as the level of spiritual fusion, are predictors of wellbeing. This project calls into question both the psychological work linking possession with poor mental health outcomes and the understanding of possession as a phenomenon with universal characteristics.

Keywords: Possession, Wellbeing, Quality of Life, Phenomenology

Publications:

The Mind Possessed short film: <https://vimeo.com/430303432>

Under review: Delmonte, R., Farias, M., Bastos, M., Madeira, L., & Sonogo, B. *The Mind Possessed: Wellbeing, Personality, and Cognitive Characteristics of Individuals Regularly Experiencing Religious Possession*

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