

“IT’S GIVEN ME THIS HEIGHTENED SENSE OF AWARENESS, AND A HIGHER LEVEL OF BEING”: AN IPA STUDY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN EPILEPSY

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ABSTRACT

This study forms the second part of a mixed methods PhD, exploring spirituality in epilepsy. Preliminary case studies from the study were presented to the BPS Transpersonal Section Conference in 2017 and 2018. This paper provides a consideration of all nine participant interviews in the study.

Since the beginning of modern epileptology in the 19th century, case studies have been published about individuals with epilepsy who report non-shared, spiritual experiences that include: conversation with spirits, religious conversion, understanding the meaning of the cosmic order, conversations with God, out of body and near-death experiences. The attribution of such experiences in Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE) is discussed extensively in neuropsychiatric contexts; the DSM V lists such experiences as symptomatic of pre, inter and post-ictal psychosis. Case studies on epilepsy offer limited qualitative information about the phenomenology of the experience, as they are primarily concerned with differential diagnosis and appropriate medical interventions.

Participants’ experiences in this IPA study are qualitatively very like spiritual experiences in the literature in non-epileptic populations. The value and status of these preliminary findings are at variance with the neuropsychiatric literature, which regards such experiences as problematic seizure-related events requiring medication. The medical model assumes that persons with TLE wish for these experiences to stop and recommended practices are focused toward achieving this; where persons do not wish for this outcome, this can be seen as indicative of psychosis. Accounts from participants in this study are contrary to this view.

Findings include insight that participants with TLE and spiritual experiences highly value the perceived abilities that their condition provides, some do not share the nature of their experiences with medical professionals for fear of stigma and being pathologized. Others assume a lack of interest, disbelief and derision and the participants experienced professionals as focusing solely on the biological and medical features of their condition. Most participants stated that they would rather keep their epilepsy and the perceived gifts these spiritual experiences afford, than lose their epilepsy and the resulting spiritual experiences. This would suggest that the participants do not view their condition as an affliction, but welcome it, seeing

it rather as a naturally occurring doorway to altered states of consciousness that some non-epileptic individuals go to great lengths to experience. Those with an interest in Transpersonal psychology will find this of interest due to the similarity between the reported experiences and other transpersonal and exceptional human experiences.

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