
AN IPA STUDY OF ANOMALOUS EXPERIENCES IN TEMPORAL LOBE EPILEPSY

Louise N. King, Chris A. Roe, & Melinda Spencer

University of Northampton

Northampton, UK

ABSTRACT

The relationship between mystical experiences and epilepsy has been documented since the Babylonian era. Termed the “scared disease” by the Greeks and subsequent cultures, epilepsy was regarded as a divine affliction. Dostoyevsky recorded, in personal letters, his epileptic events which were then introduced into his writing; neurologists subsequently termed his experiences ‘ecstatic seizures’. Since the beginning of modern epileptology in the 19th century, case studies have been published about individuals with epilepsy reporting non-shared, anomalous experiences that include: conversation with spirits, religious conversion, precognition, understanding the meaning of the cosmic order, conversations with God, out of body and near-death experiences. The attribution of anomalous experiences in Temporal Lobe Epilepsy (TLE) is discussed extensively in neuropsychiatric contexts; the DSM V lists such anomalous experiences as delusional or hallucinatory events, symptomatic of ictal (epilepsy related) psychosis. Discussion of case studies of anomalous experiences in epilepsy offer limited qualitative information about the phenomenology of the experience, as they are primarily concerned with differential diagnosis and appropriate medical interventions. Neppe (1983) has presented evidence to suggest that the temporal lobe could be the source of psi abilities, with differences between individuals explained by relative lability.

This study forms the second part of a mixed methods PhD, exploring spirituality in epilepsy. Two of the stated aims of the research are: to record and formally compare the phenomenology of anomalous experiences in TLE; providing a perspective that takes into account well-being and de-stigmatisation; concerned less with anomalous experience, more with human experience. In this qualitative study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to explore these aims and the phenomenological features of anomalous experiences as a result of TLE. Participants were recruited in the UK and adverts were placed on the UK Epilepsy Action research website, epilepsy peer support groups on social media and via word of mouth. Semi-structured interview schedules were devised using the IPA funneling technique. Nine interviews, lasting between 74 and 136 minutes were undertaken across London, Liverpool, Belfast, Dublin and Northampton. Four males and five females, ranging between 23 and 50 years of age participated in the study. Following transcription, a detailed idiographic analysis of each participant was undertaken. The primary researcher was reflexive throughout the analytical process, considering her part in the research by bracketing any preconceptions, as much as possible. The double hermeneutic approach – the researcher interpreting the participants making meaning of their experience – was closely attended to as well as the theoretical underpinnings of IPA. This was discussed by the research team to ensure validity. Following individual idiographic analysis, a more general analysis was undertaken to consider shared and divergent experiences across all participants.

Participants mentioned anomalous experiences that include out of body experiences, near death experiences, precognition, and seeing spirit entities, seeing and experiencing lights and energy, all of which are extensively discussed in the parapsychology literature with non-epileptic individuals. Current preliminary findings from the study are that individuals with temporal lobe epilepsy highly value the abilities that their condition provides, but do not share the anomalous nature of their experiences for fear of stigma and being pathologized by medical professionals. All participants have stated that they enter an altered state of consciousness and believe in an alternate reality as a result of their experiences. The majority of participants stated that they would rather keep their epilepsy and the perceived gifts these anomalous experiences afford, than lose their epilepsy and the spiritual experiences that come from it. This would suggest that the participants do not view their condition as an affliction, but rather a naturally occurring doorway to altered states of consciousness that some non-epileptic individuals go to great lengths to experience..

[louiseking2@northampton.ac.uk]