

‘A tale of the temporal lobes and other mystical states’

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In this presentation I propose an exploration of why the temporal lobes are special for paranormal psychology and the non-accidental relationship that auras in epilepsy have with other altered states of consciousness and mystical states.

Transpersonal experiences offer personal transformation by highlighting the contrast between felt experience and a previously held sense of self-identity and world (Walsh & Vaughn, 1980). They are highly subjective — often labelled as irrational or pathological (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993), thus posing difficulty for ‘objective’ approaches to human research (Anderson & Braud, 2011).

My research explores spiritual experiences in epilepsy – Transpersonal experiences that are difficult for traditional empirical research methods to investigate. For many, epilepsy involves an altered state of consciousness, unusual feelings and sensations - ‘auras’ (Fenwick & Fenwick, 1996). Some auras have a very particular quality; a ‘numinous’ feeling, or ‘cosmic-spirituality’ (Dolgoff-Kaspar Ettinger et al., 2011). The medical model is material about them and pathologises these experiences, regarding them as, at best, hallucinations (e.g. Sacks, 2012) and at worst, a symptom of seizure-associated psychosis (e.g. Dolgoff-Kaspar, Ettinger et al., 2011). Transpersonal psychology takes such altered states of consciousness seriously, rather than rejecting them as anomalous (e.g. Tart, 1975; Tart, 1977; Grof, 1975).

Paranormal states and psi arise from a variety of circumstances: religious, mystical or spiritual practice (e.g. meditation, shamanism, visions); ingestion of entheogens (e.g. psychoactive substances - psilocybin mushrooms, ayahuasca, LSD); migranes or recovery from alcohol addiction (e.g. Wilson, 2003). Such altered states of consciousness and ego-death may share more than superficial similarities with the auras and seizures of individuals with temporal lobe epilepsy (e.g. Neppe, 1983, 1984) that warrants further exploration.

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