

‘A Transpersonal exploration of epilepsy and its numinous, cosmic states’

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Transpersonal experiences offer personal transformation by highlighting the contrast between felt experience and a previously held sense of self-identity and world (Walsh & Vaughan, 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 et al., 2011). The medical model 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 et al., 2011). Transpersonal psychology takes such altered state of consciousness seriously, rather than rejecting them as anomalous (e.g. Tart, 1975; Tart, 1977; Grof, 1975).

I am using auto-ethnography, a qualitative research method, to explore epileptic experiences from the perspective of a group insider (Hayano, 1979) – both researcher and researched. Auto-ethnography is highly pertinent to Transpersonal psychology, as it emphasises embodied expression and rejects the Cartesian mind-body split (Muncey, 2010). In this talk I will discuss how auto-ethnography enables me to employ an altered state of consciousness – a waking dream technique (Hamilton, 2014) - to explore the specific character and intensity of the feelings that accompany these epileptic events (Trimble & Freeman, 2006).

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