

# Transpersonal perspectives of spiritual experiences in epilepsy

## Summary

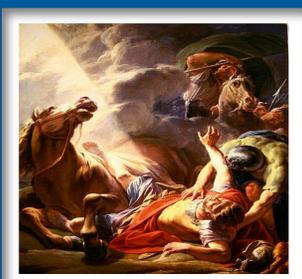
Insight into the phenomenology of spiritual experiences of those with epilepsy offers a move away from current reductive explanations. This research will offer a voice for an often ignored and stigmatised group, aiming to understand their attribution of spirituality to experiences of auras. Connections with other altered states of consciousness will explore whether epileptic experiences of spirituality can be placed within a wider context of well-being and the human condition.

## About epilepsy

Epilepsy is one of the oldest & most common neurological conditions<sup>(1)</sup>, affecting 50M individuals globally<sup>(2)</sup> & c.600,000 in the UK<sup>(3)</sup>. It is identified by the presence of recurrent seizures, originating from excessive abnormal electrical discharges in the brain<sup>(4)</sup>.



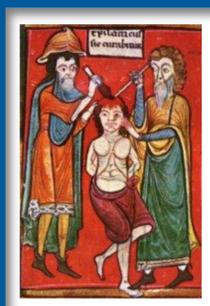
(1) The Greeks called epilepsy 'The Sacred Disease' & it has long been associated with shamanism & the gods.



(2) Suggestion has been made that many mystical experiences are temporal lobe epilepsy e.g. St Paul's Damascus conversion

For many, epilepsy involves auras - unusual feelings and sensations, a dream like state early in the seizure<sup>(5)</sup>, reported as having a very particular quality; a feeling, a cosmic-spirituality<sup>(6)</sup>. The character & intensity of these feelings is particularly intense & sometimes 'ecstatic'<sup>(7)</sup>.

Epilepsy is still not properly understood & it has a long history of stigma<sup>(8)</sup>. Even in more enlightened times, its symptoms often cause alarm & fear for observers.



(3) Before modern medication, epilepsy cures have ranged from herbalism, trepanning & blood letting to asylums & ECT.



(4) Electromagnetic transcranial stimulator or so-called 'God helmet' developed by Persinger & colleagues to measure temporal lobe activity and spiritual experiences for those with & without epilepsy

Psychiatrists often diagnose open expressions of spirituality in epilepsy as a particular type of delusional psychotic symptom, often of temporal lobe epilepsy<sup>(9)</sup>. Neurology reduces spiritual phenomena in epilepsy to anatomical locii, such as the temporal lobes<sup>(10)</sup> or personality syndromes<sup>(11)</sup>, explaining the emotional content by reference to the limbic system & amygdala.<sup>(12)</sup>.

## Auras & other altered states of consciousness (ASC)

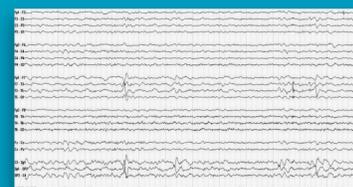
ASC for the non-epileptic can arise from a variety of circumstances<sup>(13)</sup>:

- spiritual practice - meditation,
- recovery from substance addiction<sup>(16)</sup>
- shamanism, visions<sup>(14)</sup>
- psychoactive substances<sup>(15)</sup>
- mystical experiences<sup>(17)</sup>

ASC, spirituality in epileptic auras & ego-death may share more than superficial similarities<sup>(18)</sup>. This suggests an alternative account of their connection - where spirituality is understood in a transpersonal context - concerning experiences that transcend the personal<sup>(19)</sup>.

## Purpose of the project

- 1 Obtain a deep and rich first-hand description of these experiences
- 2 Establish whether they share more than a passing resemblance with other spiritual experiences - & which characteristics they may share
- 3 Propose a revised view of the nature & range of spiritual experiences

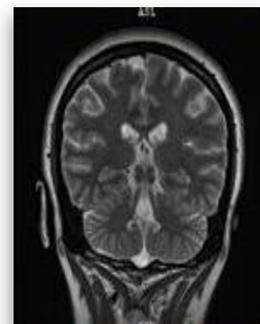


EEG of temporal lobe epilepsy, source: eddybrain.wordpress.com/

## Proposed research methods

### Study 1 - qualitative

- Phenomenology as a starting point.
- Transpersonal waking dream technique' to explore personal auras<sup>(20)</sup>.
- Auto-ethnography as transpersonal research method with the potential for transformation of self & subject<sup>(21)</sup>.
- Thematic analysis to interpret data.



(5) I will use personal diaries, dreams, photographs & artefacts e.g. MRI scans in a reflective personal narrative

### Study 2 - quantitative

- On-line survey to explore the incidence of spiritual experiences in epilepsy
- To record the nature of common /typical experiences, as well as their interpretation.
- Range of measures including ontology, wellbeing, personality & spirituality<sup>(22)</sup>.
- Respondents with epilepsy will include details of diagnosis, medication etc.
- Analysis of thematic, personality & descriptive variables to interpret data.

### Study 3 - qualitative

- In-depth semi-structured interviews of a small number of purposively sampled respondents from study 2<sup>(23)</sup>
- Aim is to explore the phenomenology of spiritual experiences & the interpretations and attributions given.
- Participants will be experiential experts.
- IPA analysis to interpret data<sup>(24)</sup>.



(6) Seeking to understand how others experience epilepsy in their own way.



(4) Connections with ASC have so far been limited to shamanism

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- Images: (1) The Aztec goddess Tlazolteotl, From the Codex Vaticanus B, Vatican Library, Rome; (2) Conversion on the Way to Damascus, Caravaggio, 1601; (3) Epileptic sic curabitur ("The way to cure an epileptic") Sloane Manuscript, collection of medical manuscripts, end of the 12th century - British Museum, London; (4) Kwahkwah kwah shaman Hamatsa secret society in trance, Edward Curtis, 1914; (5) MRI scan of my brain, National Centre for Epilepsy, Chalfont St Latimer, 2014; (6) Networks piece from 'Beyond Seizures' print series. Facilitated by London Brain Project, 2014