

# The Mind Possessed: Mapping the Varieties of Possession Experiences (346/16)

Final Report — November 2022



Figure 1: Umbanda ritual in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The individual kneeling down is experiencing a possession state.

**Title: The Mind Possessed: Mapping the Varieties of Possession Experiences**

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## General Summary

We have conducted two separate studies on possession experiences, using a mixed methods approach, including validated cognitive, personality and well-being scales, and the phenomenological analysis of possession narratives. We have published one article, one short video, presented at 3 conferences, and we have been awarded extra funding for a PhD scholarship on this topic.

**Abstract:***Background*

Possession is often perceived in a negative light. To be possessed means to be out of control or, within some religions, to have an entity of a malignant nature taking control of one's body and actions. For the modern mind, possession is frightening because it is associated with a discontinuity in identity/personality, and alterations in consciousness and behaviour. Nevertheless, possession experiences are widely reported across cultures, and those possessed are often regarded as a positive channel for various spiritual agents, such as deceased humans (in Spiritism and Spiritualism), nature deities or godlike beings (in Afro-American religions), or the Holy Spirit (in Evangelical Pentecostal churches and the Charismatic renewal movement of Roman Catholicism).

*Aims*

We conducted two studies to investigate the psychological characteristics of individuals who regularly experience possession states, and the varieties of these experiences.

*Method*

Study 1 used a set of personality, cognitive, and mental health measures and compared Umbanda religious participants who regularly experience possession with those who have never experienced possession states. Study 2 collected possession narratives contrasting individuals from Afro-Brazilian *versus* Christian Evangelical Pentecostal backgrounds. The key question used to elicit an account of a possession experience asked: "Have you ever had an experience in which you felt possessed by a presence or power, that you may regard or not as spiritual, and made you feel different from your everyday self?"

*Results*

Data for Study 1 was collected at 11 Umbanda religious sessions in Porto Alegre and São Paulo, Brazil. There were a total of 388 participants who filled in a complete survey; of these, 334 were mediums and 54 control participants who attended the same ritual sessions but had never experienced possession. We found no significant differences between the mediums and the control group across cognitive, personality, and quality of life measures; the only significant difference between groups was that the mediums showed a lower level of anxiety. Further analysis of the characteristics of the medium group showed that the level of meaningfulness attributed to possession and the strength of perceived fusion with the spiritual entity were strongly correlated with most Quality of Life dimensions and negatively with anxiety, and that these characteristics predicted Psychological Quality of Life. Contrary to expectations, there were no detrimental effects of having a lower level of bodily control over one's possession experience.

For study 2, we used a short online survey and advertised it within Brazilian Umbanda and Evangelical Pentecostal social media groups. We recruited a total of 950 participants, of which 372 answered 'yes' to the possession question and provided an account of their experiences. However, many of these either did not provide an episode of spiritual possession, or did not provide an experience which could be coded for. After excluding these accounts, there were a total of 168 codable narratives — from 96 individuals belonging to an Afro-Brazilian tradition, and 72 from an Evangelical Pentecostal tradition. These accounts were coded by two researchers into 82 phenomenological categories which were grouped across 7 domains: (1) Contextual Factors, (2) Emotional Changes, (3) Perceptual Changes, (4) Physiological Changes, (5) Cognitive Changes, (6) Changes in Identity or Self, and (7) Changes in Behaviour (see *Examples of Narratives* and *Table 1* and *Table 2* in the Appendix below).

Both groups showed similar levels of physiological, cognitive, and behavioural changes; however, Pentecostal individuals highlighted more emotional and perceptual changes, while the Umbanda group stressed more changes in identity and self, particularly within the phenomenological categories of 'loss of sense of agency and control' and 'self and other co-inhabiting body' — these appear to be aspects of the possession experience of this group that are mostly absent among the Pentecostal experience of possession. Finally, we uncovered a significant difference in the spread of possession experiences across groups: for 21 of the categories present in the Umbanda group there were no data for Pentecostal individuals. This suggests that the Umbanda possession experience has a wider range of possibilities across the various phenomenological domains.

### *Conclusions*

Overall we found that Umbanda mediums were no different from a control group across all measures, except for anxiety, where they scored lower than the control group. Secondly, we explored the specific characteristics of the medium group and whether we could use these to differentiate positive from negative mental health outcomes. We asked mediums about their level of bodily control during possession states and hypothesized that the less control they had, the worse their psychological outcomes. But we did not find that; instead, a greater sense of control was only associated with a lower propensity to experience unusual and hallucinatory states, and a lower level of meaningfulness and spiritual fusion. Tentatively, we suggest the ability to let go of control - at least within a ritual Umbanda context - is likely to signal belief in the goodness of the possession experience and allows the medium to move deeper into it.

Our second study allowed us to explore in greater depth the characteristics of possession experiences in Umbanda and how these differ from another religious tradition. Given the social tensions in Brazil, where Evangelical Pentecostal groups target Afro-Brazilian religions for believing that they actively engage in demonic worship, we chose Pentecostal individuals who claimed to have experiences of being possessed by the Holy Spirit as a contrast group. Our

results suggest that there are strong commonalities in possession experiences across most domains for these groups. However, we found two significant differences: Umbanda individuals show a greater frequency of self/identity changes where they lose control of their bodies and feel the spiritual entity take over their minds/bodies (confirming the results from study 1), as well as a wider variety of possession experiences. This indicates that the contrasting beliefs of these two religious traditions shape the possession experiences to a moderate extent; for example, it is possible that the more restricted display of possession experiences among Pentecostal individuals may be due to a set of beliefs that inhibits individuals more than within an Umbanda context, which is a tradition more eclectic and permissive in its religious/moral beliefs.

Together our results suggest that individuals regularly experiencing possession within an Afro-Brazilian religious context are psychologically very similar to others who never experienced the same phenomenon, and that the way they appraise their experiences as meaningful, as well as the level of spiritual fusion, are predictors of wellbeing. In addition, we have found that different religious traditions share many characteristics of possession experience, though their different contexts and beliefs may also moderately shape the diversity and qualities of such experiences.

#### *Recommendations*

Possession experiences have been pathologised and marginalised for over one hundred years. The cultural spread of possession religions in Brazil has allowed for a re-evaluation of the psychological outcomes and characteristics of these experiences. We suggest that other studies need to replicate and extend our study, particularly by extending it to other cultures and religious traditions (e.g. Hindu, Daoist, Buddhist). By extending this line of research, we are opening up new venues of exploration into the diversity and depth of human consciousness.

#### **Published work resulting from the project supported with the present grant separated in abstracts (proceedings and meetings), full papers and contributions included in books:**

##### Full Paper:

Delmonte R, Farias M, Bastos Júnior MAV, Madeira L, & Sonego B. (2022). The mind possessed: well-being, personality, and cognitive characteristics of individuals regularly experiencing religious possession. *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry*, 44: 486-494.

##### Short Film

<https://vimeo.com/430303432>

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# APPENDIX

## Examples of Narratives

### Umbanda, 28 Years Old, Female

*It happened in the Center of Umbanda that I go to often. In my first incorporation I felt my legs go wobbly and an inner peace that I never felt.*

*I saw and heard everything around me and everyone around me but I had no control over my body. I went down and stood on the floor with my arms up while my hand did wavy movements.*

*And I thought 'why am I doing this'? I had another thought as if I was thinking 2 things.*

*At the same time I was telling myself to roll on the floor and I felt like rotating on the floor and actually did it a few times.*

*I came to myself and saw that I was in front of the altar.*

*I came out of there renewed, feeling relaxed and clean, peaceful and very calm.*

### Pentecostal, 35 years old, female, Evangelical Christian

*I was with a group of friends from the church. We were all praying and singing praises to God and praying and crying out for the presence of the Holy Spirit of God.*

*It was then that everyone started to behave differently. I felt my legs wobbly, I couldn't stand up, my whole body shivered and trembled. It was like I was going to explode with so much joy, a joy that didn't fit me.*

*I could hear the voice of the Holy Spirit clearly telling my heart that He was healing me, that He was healing my pain, my wounds and that God is a God of peace of love.*

*I felt like He was hugging me. It was like I was on his lap.*

*When I opened my eyes, the trees and leaves around me shone as if they were fluorescent, the moon illuminated us. There we had no lights, no bonfire, no lanterns, but I felt such peace and relief as if an enormous weight had been lifted from my shoulders.*

Table 1: Domains and examples of categories of possession experiences

<b>DOMAINS</b>	<b>1. Contextual Factors</b>	<b>2. Emotional Changes</b>	<b>3. Perceptual Changes</b>	<b>4. Physiological Changes</b>	<b>5. Cognitive Changes</b>	<b>6. Changes in Self</b>	<b>7. Changes in Action/ Behaviour</b>
<b>CATEGORIES</b>	<i>Music</i>	<i>Joy or bliss</i>	<i>Felt presence</i>	<i>Cardiac changes</i>	<i>Amnesia or impaired memory</i>	<i>Diminished sense of body ownership</i>	<i>Automatic writing</i>
	<i>Ritual</i>	<i>Peace or calm</i>	<i>Luminosity</i>	<i>Crying</i>	<i>Diminished consciousness</i>	<i>Self and other co-inhabiting body</i>	<i>Glossolalia</i>
	<i>Place</i>	<i>Feeling of love</i>	<i>Visions or hallucinations</i>	<i>Fatigue</i>	<i>Trance or absorption</i>	<i>Unity or communion with other</i>	<i>Change in speech</i>
	<i>Person/people</i>	<i>Anger</i>	<i>Diminished sensation</i>	<i>Involuntary bodily movements</i>	<i>Insights</i>	<i>Diminished sense of personal identity</i>	<i>Gestures</i>
	<i>Drugs</i>	<i>Fear</i>	<i>Perceptual distortions</i>	<i>Nausea</i>	<i>Communication with other being</i>	<i>Displacement of selfhood by other</i>	<i>Struggle or conflict</i>
	<i>Skill development or training</i>	<i>Distress</i>	<i>Change in perception of time</i>	<i>Sense of Levitation</i>	<i>Precognition</i>	<i>Spatial distance from self</i>	<i>Urges</i>

Figure 1: Major domains of possession experience for Umbanda (Afro-Brazilian) and Pentecostal individuals (in percentage).

