



SYMPOSIUM/OTHER PROPOSAL
2010 APA Annual Convention

Proposal ID: sym10035

- 1. Type of program:** Symposium
- 2. Title of program:** The Neurobiology and Neurophenomenology of Spiritual Experiences
First index term: 10 Clinical/Counseling/Consulting
Second index term: 53 Neuropsychology
- 3. Division to submit this proposal:** 30 - Hypnosis
Suggested co-sponsoring divisions: 32 - Humanistic
- 4. Other division appropriate for submission:** 36 - Psychology of Religion
- 5. Length of time requested on program:** 1 hr. 50 min.
- 6. Chair(s) of session:**

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7. Participants:

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Membership status: APA Student Affiliate
Title of presentation: JUNGIAN THOUGHT, BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY, AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES
Electronic Archiving: Yes

(2) Alexander de Moreira-Almeida, MD, PhD

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Membership status: Non-Member

Title of presentation: SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AND MIND-BODY RELATIONSHIPS

Electronic Archiving: Yes

(3) Michael Jawer, AA

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Title of presentation: EXTREMELY SENSITIVE PEOPLE AND THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF EMOTION

Electronic Archiving: Yes

(4) Julio Peres, MD

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Membership status: Non-Member

Title of presentation: WRITING THE SOUL: A NEUROBIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Electronic Archiving: Yes

8. Discussants:

(1) Joan Hageman, PhD

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9. Accommodation request: None

10. Submit for CE: No

The Neurobiology and Neurophenomenology of Spiritual Experiences

This symposium presents a panorama of perspectives regarding spiritual experiences and mind-body relationships. Spiritual experiences are defined as phenomenological reports in which an experient claims to have made contact with an agency, entity, or realm beyond his or her ordinary comprehension, and reacts to it with a feeling of devotion and/or awe. It opens with a comparison of Buddhist and Jungian thought and how facile comparisons between the two are not only superficial but incorrect. It continues by calling for neurobiological and neurophenomenological methods to be used in understanding mind-body relationships, proposing several research strategies. An exposition of the neurobiology of emotion follows, as well as a discussion of highly sensitive people and a proposed explanation of why they should report so many spiritual experiences. The symposium closes with a neurobiological study in which ten Brazilian mediums were observed engaging in psychography, an experience similar to automatic writing. When compared to ordinary writing tasks while in ordinary wakefulness, SPECT analysis noted some dramatic

(1) JUNGIAN THOUGHT, BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY, AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Carl Jung established a connection between depth psychology, especially analytical psychology, and Eastern psychospiritual traditions. Jung was amiss, however, when he asserted that the high states of consciousness in Eastern traditions correspond “to what we in the West call the unconscious” and that the two are “logically identical.” Practitioners of Buddhist and Taoist meditation, for example, claim they are fully awake and aware of what is going on in their embodied mind – or minded body, even though it might seem strange to non-meditators. These meditations can come out of such an altered state any time they prefer, which is unlikely to happen when the Jungian unconscious takes over. The fact that meditation practice may lead to the “higher consciousness” can also induce psychological problems much the same as when the unconscious breaks through. The unconscious as conceptualized by Jung does not resemble the “higher consciousness” depicted in several Western models of spirituality. This symposium illustrates the various contributions that depth psychology, neurophenomenology, case studies, and neurobiological methodology can make to understanding spiritual experiences held as valuable and meaningful to the experients.

(2) SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AND MIND-BODY RELATIONSHIPS

Debates on mind-body relationships have gone on for several centuries. However, these controversies are usually based on a narrow range of phenomena, often contaminated by several theoretical and methodological biases. This paper discusses how some of these disagreements can be resolved by rigorous investigations of spiritual experiences from neurobiological and neurophenomenological perspectives. The latter perspective combines psychophysiological and experiential recording and reporting. Applying contemporary research methods to near-death experiences, mediumship experiences, and past life experiences may provide a badly needed broadening and diversification of the empirical base needed to advance our understanding of the mind-body problem. This field is probably in a Kuhnian pre-paradigmatic phase, so we should take seriously all empirical data available on this wide range of human experiences. Neurobiology and neurophenomenology enable use to go beyond trivial observations while avoiding dogmatic rejection of theoretical possibilities. We need to combine a truly scientific rigor with humility and openness while we look for explanations and mechanisms underlying spiritual experiences.

(3) EXTREMELY SENSITIVE PEOPLE AND THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF EMOTION

Could the flow of feeling that literally “moves” us be responsible, at least in part, for our most intriguing and perennially baffling experiences? Evidence is presented that some people are predisposed toward a range of sensitivities that, in novelty as well as intensity, distinguish them from the general population. The neurobiology of feeling may help explain not only various forms of sensitivity (allergies, migraines, chronic pain and fatigue, synesthesia, electrical and chemical sensitivity, post-traumatic stress) but why many of these extremely sensitive people affected by these conditions also report spiritual experiences. An examination is made of the salient findings on the neurobiology of emotion, and how this can begin to explain the longtime puzzle of spiritual experiences. The key is that different individuals process feelings differently within their body/mind.

(4) WRITING THE SOUL: A NEUROBIOLOGICAL STUDY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

Spiritual experiences often involve dissociative states, and have been the subject of increasing scientific interest. Little research has been conducted on the spiritual experience known as mediumship, a dissociative experience in which an individual, the medium, is believed to be in communication with, or under the control of, the personality of a deceased person. We investigated whether psychography (a process similar to automatic writing) is associated with alterations in cerebral activity. Ten Brazilian psychographers, free of mental disorders, were examined using single photon emission computed tomography during psychography and while writing an original text in ordinary wakefulness. Although they claimed to be in an altered attentional state during psychography, the written content was coherent and understandable. Neurobiological (SPECT) results showed decreased activity in several cognitive processing regions during mediumship compared the control task. These differences preclude the possibility of faking or role-playing, both of which have been offered as explanations of psychography.