

Interpretative phenomenological analysis of depersonalization and derealization states in clinical and non-clinical groups

Alterations in consciousness are common experiences in health individuals and patients with a variety of mental disorders. Depersonalization (a sense of detachment from one's mind or body) and derealization (experiencing the external world as dreamlike or unreal) can be experienced with different intensity and in various contexts, for example, during meditation, religious practices or intense sports exhaustion. Such states may also be natural reactions to traumatic experiences, when the mind detaches itself from overwhelming feelings and one's surroundings as a way of coping. Some forms of depersonalization and derealization are chronic, significantly dysfunctional, cause distress, and are regarded as pathological. Yet there are no empirical studies that compare normal and pathological depersonalization / derealization, how they relate to trauma, and how individuals subjectively experience them.

In this project, structured clinical interviews will be conducted with 40 healthy people (practitioners of extreme sports and participants of charismatic prayer groups) and 100 psychiatric patients with a variety of mental disorders, to analyze and compare their personal experiences of depersonalization and derealization. Such studies are necessary to help clinicians recognize and diagnose these alterations in consciousness which are likely to indicate trauma-related disorders, subsequently leading to better diagnostics, referral, and treatment.