

Qualitative analysis of phenomena and symptoms associated with possession

'Possession' relates to change in behaviour and sense of identity, attributed to supernatural forces. The 'possessed' often seek help from priests, hoping that exorcisms will help them restore a sense of control over their body, speech or mind. There are Christian communities in Poland where individual and group exorcisms are held regularly. Studies show that people with 'possession' have often had traumatic experiences, including emotional, physical or sexual abuse, but they rarely linked these events with possession. Focusing on possession and exorcisms can delay treatment, divert attention from problems in the family, and also have potentially re-traumatising effects in the case of people with trauma history. Although 'possession' evokes the interest of many anthropologists, very few psychological studies have been carried out, even though symptoms relating to possession are described in psychiatric manuals. There have been no studies applying comprehensive clinical examinations to diagnose the possessed and understand their symptoms dynamics. The main objective of this project is to analyse and produce a systematic description of phenomena and symptoms accompanying possession, compare different clinical presentations of possession against diagnostic criteria of various disorders, analyse alterations in consciousness and behaviour in terms of memory, sense of control, accompanying affects and other clinically significant symptoms, and explore how people make meaning of their experiences and seek help.

This study will involve recruitment of about 40 people who are members of Christian groups, report being possessed and use exorcisms. They will participate in an in-depth interview about their changes in behaviour and identity, a diagnostic interview and mental state assessment performed by a psychiatrist. Transcripts of the in-depth interview will be subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis. This popular qualitative methodology is used in psychology to study how individuals experience and interpret phenomena under investigation. Clinical presentations will be separately analysed for differential diagnosis and to describe symptoms in reference to the theory of structural dissociation of the personality. The project team will include psychologists, psychotherapists and a psychiatrist, all experienced in research and clinical work.

This project will contribute to the development of knowledge about phenomena and symptoms accompanying 'possession', how they are experienced and interpreted, and about coping strategies people use to regain a sense of control over their behaviour. Implications from this study will help identify and distinguish between symptoms of clinical significance. The project will also increase knowledge on how culture affects the expression of symptoms, making a contribution to clinical psychology, psychology of religion and medical anthropology.