Across cultural boundaries: Psychophysiological responses, absorption, and dissociation comparison between Brazilian spiritists and advanced meditators

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Abstract

A psychophysiological study was conducted with two Brazilian claimant mediums and a non-medium living in Recife, Brazil and 7 North American advanced meditators from the esoteric school, Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment, located in Yelm, Washington. Results revealed specific incongruence in the peripheral nervous system (PNS) and central autonomic nervous system (ANS). For Brazilians, there was a general reduction of sympathetic PNS vasoconstriction and increased muscle tension (EMG) during the imagined incorporation of spirits, and an increase in (EMG) and alpha wave percentage (EEG); both were paradoxical. Increase in fronto EMG while imagining spirit incorporation is consistent with a hypothesis of increased muscle tension possibly driven by intrusive cognitions and/or affect; however, the mediums reported feeling calm, not agitated. The non-medium control showed a large increase in EEG alpha wave percentage and decreased EMG in the eyes closed conditions. The mediums’ imagination condition was discrepant from what is typical during an eyes closed imagination condition, and EMG and EEG were positively correlated contrasting research findings from other studies revealing a negative correlation. This supports previous findings that physiological incongruence are frequent outcomes of individuals claiming “mediumistic” abilities; they are described as living episodically in two worlds (i.e., critical, rational, and practical; expansion and deepening of fantasy and emotional reactivity). As such, medium/mediumistic-like practitioners may be “at risk” for psychosomatic illnesses, but these descriptors do not particularly apply to the Brazilian control showing no noticeable incongruence. The advanced Ramtha meditators were not tested with an EEG, but also showed sympathetic activation during the meditation session and reported minimal/no negative affect. Incongruence between CNS and ANS are not unusual among spiritual practitioners, and other studies have noted sympathetic activation during meditation styles that use cognitive faculties and/or accelerated breathing (voluntary hyperventilation) techniques. The findings suggest medium/mediumistic-like practitioners may need to create “buffers” to maintain physical and emotional well being.

Keywords

mediumship, channeling, psychophysiology, Umbanda, Kardecismo, Candomble’, Ramtha

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Supporting Agencies

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mediators. 6. commonality of belief in the power and efficacy of spirit agents and the ability of humans to interact with and embody these agents through ritualized methods of dissociative trance, such as voluntary "incorporation". Current emphasis on the relationship between dissociation and trauma-related pathology has given renewed momentum to the study of dissociative responses within the psychiatric literature. It is often assumed that dissociation across these different settings involves the same underlying psychophysiological mechanisms. However, this remains uncertain given the state of current knowledge about both the mechanisms and functions of dissociation. In turn, understanding dissociation in social and cultural context offers clues to its underlying cognitive and social mechanisms and challenges the tendency to see dissociation as evidence of psychopathology. Background: Numerous world cultures believe channeling provides genuine information, and channeling rituals in various forms are regularly conducted in both religious and non-religious contexts. Little is known about the physiological correlates of the subjective experience of channeling. Methods: We conducted a prospective within-subject design study with 13 healthy adult trance channels. Background: Numerous world cultures believe channeling provides genuine information, and channeling rituals in various forms are regularly conducted in both religious and non-religious contexts. Little is known about the physiological correlates of the subjective experience of channeling. Methods: We conducted a prospective within-subject design study with 13 healthy adult trance channels.