

# Possession states in northern Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

**Background:** Possession states are still commonly seen in developing societies as acceptable cultural phenomena in normal persons as well as in those with psychiatric illness. 'Possession' is defined here as the experience of being taken over, controlled or occupied by another spirit or force. **Sampling and Methods:** This is a descriptive cross-sectional study of possession states among psychiatric patients, general population and popular adepts in Northern Sri Lanka, using semi-structured questionnaires and clinical observations. **Results:** Thirty psychiatric patients were identified as having possession states. They were compared with 30 controls each from the general population admitted to a general hospital outpatient department and selected popular adepts in the community. The latter are individuals who are well known as having possession states. An analysis of social factors and other variables showed that education, marital status, age, employment, strength of belief, alterations in personality, past or family psychiatric history, previous exposure to similar phenomena, help-seeking behavior and treatment outcome differed between the three groups. Religion of the subjects or recent changes in values showed no correlation with possession while monetary gain from possession states showed only a partial correlation. Western medical treatment was of value only when possession states were seen as part of psychotic illness. **Discussion:** Possession is a spectrum of experiential and behavioral phenomena seen in culturally acceptable form in normal people, popular adepts, as well as manifestations of psychotic illness. Possession states which fit normal cultural stereotypes could, if necessary, be better managed by traditional methods. However, clinicians need to be familiar with culturally abnormal forms of possession which are manifestations of psychotic illness that benefit from western psychiatric treatment.

## Author keywords

Cross-cultural psychiatry; Phenomenology; Possession states; South Asia

## Indexed keywords

**EMTREE medical terms:** adolescent; adult; aged; article; behavior disorder; clinical article; controlled study; female; human; male; mental health; outpatient department; possession; preschool child; psychiatric treatment; social aspect; Sri Lanka; treatment outcome

**MeSH:** Adolescent; Adult; Aged; Cross-Sectional Studies; Cultural Characteristics; Developing Countries; Female; Humans; Interview, Psychological; Magic; Male; Medicine, Traditional; Mental Disorders; Middle Aged; Patient Acceptance of Health Care; Psychiatric Department, Hospital; Psychotic Disorders; Religion and Psychology; Spiritualism; Sri Lanka; Witchcraft

*Medline is the source for the MeSH terms of this document.*