

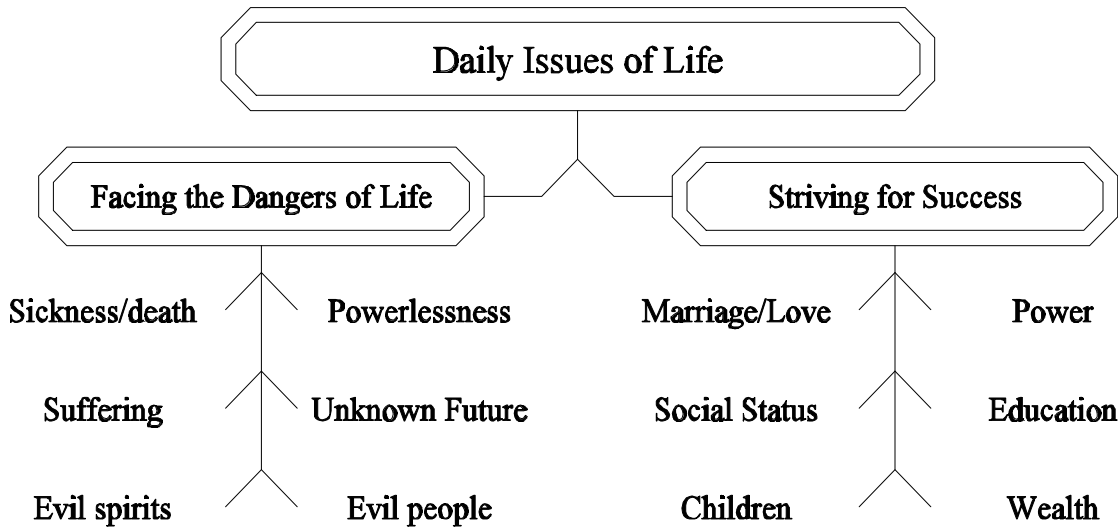
## Section 8:

# Contextualizing the Experiential Dimension

**Themes in the Experiential Dimension of Contextualization**

1. Needs common to all people:
  - a. *Appetites*: Tied to our physical nature and the need for ongoing activities which ensure personal and human survival (e.g., eating, drinking, sexual relations).
  - b. *Significance*: Tied to our spiritual nature, all people are created in God’s image and have an inbuilt need to connect to the One we image. It is that need which drives us towards God which is twisted into seeking God-substitutes.
  - c. *Security*: Tied to our emotional nature, all people seek places of rest and security (speaking both metaphorically and literally). We cannot survive being constantly “on the edge” and need havens in which security may be found. God has made us to find security in our relationship with him, but we substitute for that the pursuit of security through wealth and material possessions, relationships (friendship, love, and marriage), status, power and influence, and so on.

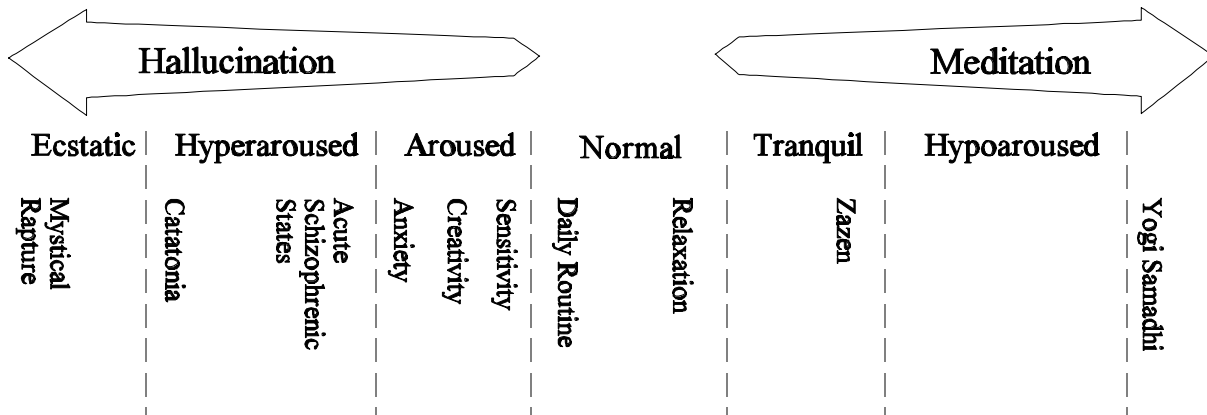
2. The daily issues of life found in all settings include:



3. It is often in the intersection of our needs and the daily issues of life we face that we encounter religious experiences. Personal experience of the transcendent is a universal phenomena. Types of religious experience include:
  - a. Ecstatic worship
  - b. Quiet meditative reflection
  - c. Possession by spirits other than our own

- d. Firm convictions which drive us to action
- e. “Cosmic consciousness”
- f. Emptying of self
- g. Dreams and visions
- h. Spiritual gifts (baptism of the Spirit, prophecy, tongues, interpretation)

States of human experience may be aligned on a spectrum (source: Fischer, "A Cartography of Ecstatic and Meditative States"):

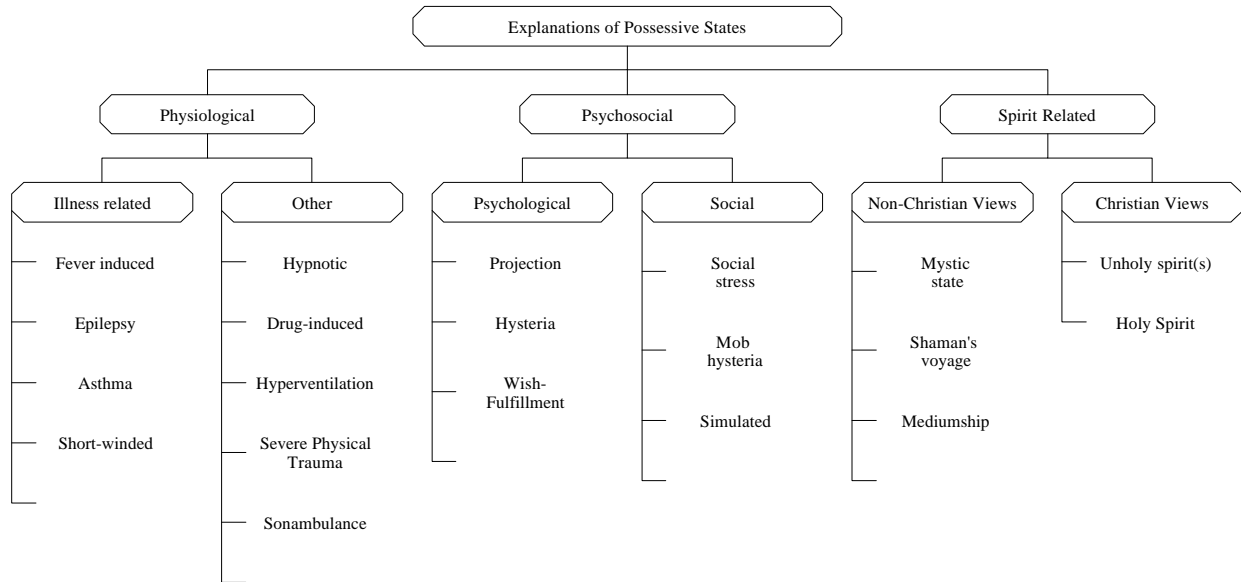


EXPERIENTIAL DIMENSION OF CONTEXTUALIZATION:  
CASE STUDY OF POSSESSIVE STATES

1. Nature of possession: What are the possible explanations of possession?

In all continents, there are groups in which particular persons at specific times undergo startling and dramatic changes of personality—trembling, sweating, groaning, speaking with strange voices or in unintelligible sounds, assuming a different identity, claiming to be a spirit and not a human being, asserting authoritative leadership with commands, or foretelling the future.

Augsberger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* 291



2. What are immediate trigger factors in causing possession phenomena in cultures? Two major classes may be noted:

a. Physiological:

i. Physical stress

(1) From exertion (dancing, drumming, running, cutting, etc.)

(2) From deprivation (fasting, meditating, lack of sleep)

ii. Rhythm related (drums, cymbals, bells, rattles, strobe lights)

iii. Biochemical (drugs)

iv. Spontaneous (i.e., no apparent physiological trigger)

b. Psychological:

i. Tension/stress

ii. Guilt over transgressions

- iii. Need for attention
- iv. Permission within the framework of the culture--available scripts of possession phenomena and appropriate social behavior (e.g., certain types of worship and/or prayer).

3. How is possession manifested in various cultures?

The forms that possession takes vary widely from culture to culture. People cut themselves with knives, walk on hot cinders, climb ladders or razor blades, bathe in boiling oil, or even enucleate eyes while in trance. Or possession may take highly verbal forms of speaking, singing, or prophesying to an audience; or there may be cursing, blaspheming, scatological language, and threatening hostile behavior.

The outward manifestations of spirit possession vary widely—from fainting, trances, glossolalia, rigid postures, violent dancing, acts of extreme agility such as climbing down tree trunks head first, chewing broken glass, gripping hot irons, walking over glowing coals. At the time of the trance state most people are amnesiac, recalling little or nothing.

Augsburger, *Pastoral Counseling Across Cultures* 292

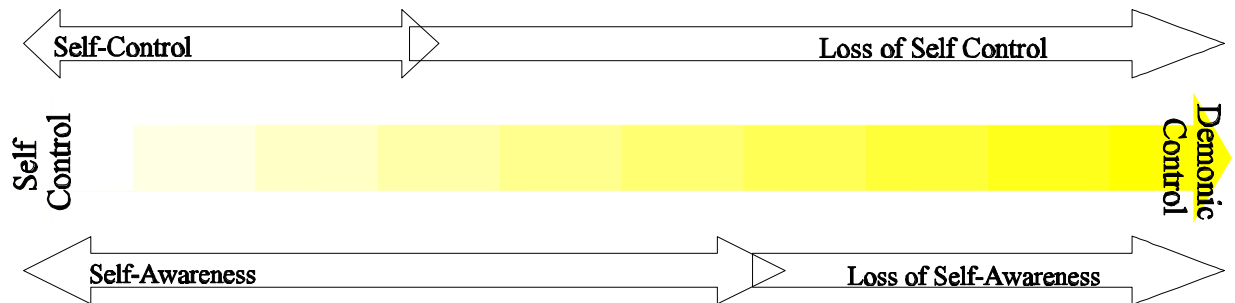
- a. Trance/dissociation
- b. Violence
- c. Strength
- d. Convulsions
- e. Glossolalia
- f. Voice change
- g. Personality change
- h. Knowledge

4. Functions of possession

- a. In meeting the daily needs of life, whether facing life's dangers or striving for success (as culturally defined).
- b. It enables change within the community. This may range from change needed to alleviate social stress (removal of oppressive circumstances) to change in response to cultural collapse (e.g., from an "invasion" of an outside more powerful culture)

- c. It is used to sustain the life of the community, to keep in place the moral sanctions that make up the community.
- d. It is used as a communication channel with the powers.
- e. It affirms the faith of the local group as a genuine faith; it shows that spirit beings are real.

5. The spectrum of possession



Contextualization and religious experience

- a. We will tend to feel most comfortable with religious experiences that fit our cultural and religious background.
- b. Religious experiences can have both positive and negative effects.
- c. While such experiences are not to be used to establish doctrine, neither can they be separated from doctrine.
- d. Unexpected and unsought religious experiences may be the foundation for significant life change.
- e. The range of Christian religious experiences may not be fully addressed in Scripture (e.g, laughter and barking in the Toronto Blessing). This does not invalidate the experience.
- f. Applying labels to experiences is a matter of interpretation rather than revelation (e.g., the baptism of the Holy Spirit). Even if an inappropriate label is applied it does not mean the experience is inappropriate.