

# What is Spirit Possession?

## Defining, Comparing, and Explaining Two Possession Forms

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**ABSTRACT** *Reviewing anthropological analyses of possession forms cross-culturally and drawing from recent advances in cognitive psychology, this paper attempts to explain recurrent features of spirit possession. Spirit possession concepts fall into broadly two varieties: one that entails the transformation or replacement of identity (executive possession) and one that envisages possessing spirits as (the cause of) illness and misfortune (pathogenic possession). The cross-culturally recurrent features of these divergent conceptual structures may be explained, at least in part, with reference to distinct processes of human psychology, one set of which deals with the representation of person-identity and another that deals with notions about contamination.*

**KEYWORDS** *Comparative anthropology, person-identity, spirit illness*

In 1976, Erika Bourguignon, one of the foremost anthropological scholars of spirit possession, published a book entitled *Possession* in which she presented a cross-cultural analysis of possession beliefs and behaviours. Bourguignon parsed the broad range of possession phenomena into two types. Both types entail the belief that a 'person is changed in some way through the presence in him or on him of a spirit entity or power, other than his own personality, soul, self or the like' (1976:8). The two types were labelled 'possession trance' and 'possession'. *Possession trance* is expressed in altered states of consciousness; in *possession*, such trance states are absent. This particular method of carving up the domain proved useful for assessing the frequency and distribution of possession, possession trance, and trance (an 'altered state of consciousness' entailing no associated possession belief) in cross-cultural survey of a world-wide sample of 488 societies (Bourguignon 1968).

Such apparently tidy descriptions were widely criticized, however, for their failure to capture the complexity, variability, and polysemy that characterise actual representations of possession on the ground. Possession forms, like many other topics of anthropological study, resisted being pinned down to a singular, one-size-fits-all definition. Indeed, it was stressed, abstract context-free definitions of apparently widespread – but different – cultural phenomena, by their very nature, gloss over the very specific, unique, culturally-embedded qualities of possession phenomena in their local contexts. And these qualities, it was proposed, were what anthropological enquiry should be concerned with. As historical and cross-cultural comparative and explanatory approaches increasingly gave way to particularistic interpretive accounts in anthropology, the relevance of a generalizable definition of what counts and what does not count as possession declined. The central contention was that possession was no longer considered a ‘thing’ to be defined or prised apart and dissected from the ‘whole’ within which it could be more adequately and faithfully understood and represented – the parcelling of the socio-cultural domain according to arbitrarily selected and culturally insensitive measures, labels and divisions risked compromising the fidelity of the holistic interpretation.

The general discussion is a familiar one to anthropologists across the discipline, capturing the essence of crucial concerns about the tools of description, comparison, and generalization in the generation of anthropological theory. An enduring and valuable development in anthropological scholarship ever since has been to focus on the interpretive understanding of the constitution of dynamic, symbolic, socio-cultural worlds and the beliefs, concepts, ideologies, institutions, conflicts, and so on that compose them – a broad range of approaches referred to ‘critical hermeneutics’ (Lambek 2002: 6). However, insofar as these anthropological studies of particular cases of particular people in particular places and contexts continue to endeavour to speak to one another, even at a basic descriptive level, the thorny issues of definition necessarily remain uncomfortably salient. What, if anything, unifies what appear to be recognizably cross-culturally, recurrent features of our pseudo-analytic concept of ‘possession’? What, if any, are the criteria by which one might assess the comparative utility of a study of ‘possession’ in one part of South East Asia for the development of an understanding of possession phenomena in another part of the region? How might one explicitly set out the dimensions along which similarity and difference may be reliably measured? Can common features be objectively identified or were

Bourguignon's critics correct – any such typology leads to distortion via the imposition of inappropriate categories?

This paper offers a fresh approach to these core issues and concerns. Any comparative, theoretical approach requires a well-circumscribed description of what phenomena may be usefully and legitimately compared, and of what the theory applies to (and what it does not). In this sense, (tentative) theory informs (the working) definition. Going somewhat against the grain of interpretivism, this paper presents a working definition (or definitions) of possession that is driven by causally significant criteria. It argues that (1) possession concepts demonstrate cross-culturally recurrent features that (2) are the product of the mechanisms and processes of regular cognitive architecture, and that (3) cognitive processes constrain, and therefore explain in part, the form and spread of these features. In short, notions of what constitutes possession and the paths by which possession concepts and practices are transmitted, even across vastly different cultural environments and historical periods, are informed and constrained by recurrent features of cognition that guide perception, representation, thought and action (see also Boyer 2001; Barrett 2004).

This novel but tentative explanatory approach considers possible cognitive causal mechanisms that underpin two core types of possession concepts that have been widely described in the ethnographic literature. Although these types track closely on those identified by Bourguignon – possession and possession trance – they are distinguished according to a different set of premises. I shall call these two types *executive* possession and *pathogenic* possession. Both possession forms entail the direct actions of spirit entities in or on a person's body. *Pathogenic* possession concepts result from the operation of cognitive tools that deal with the representation of contamination (both positive and negative); the presence of the spirit entity is typically (but not always) manifested in the form of illness. *Executive* possession concepts mobilise cognitive tools that deal with the world of intentional agents; the spirit entity is typically represented as taking over the host's executive control, or replacing the host's 'mind' (or intentional agency), thus assuming control of bodily behaviours. The following sections develop an account of the causal significance of this typology in terms of normal human cognition. Such a reconceptualization provides a basis for the development of the comparative analysis of like forms of possession cross-culturally and, ultimately, for a return to explanatory accounts of the emergence, transmission and persistence of recurrent features of spirit possession concepts and practices.

### Explaining Possession Forms

The field of possession studies is no stranger to analytical typologies. Possession forms have frequently been defined in the context of attempts to resolve controversies surrounding how possession behaviour might be adequately interpreted. The distinction between ‘madmen and mystics’ was a widespread preoccupation in early anthropological and medical analyses (see Klass 2003 for a recent interdisciplinary approach to these issues). Spirit possession forms have also been variously defined, and typologized, in terms of their social and communicative functions (Lewis 1971; Firth 1967) and their structural-functional properties (e.g. Rex L. Jones’ [1976] analysis of spirit possession in Nepal).

A more neglected issue concerns the recurrences and variations in the forms that possession ideas take cross-culturally. Bourguignon distinguished between two forms of possession: ‘one form of possession causes a change in bodily functioning; the other form of possession alters consciousness, awareness, the personality or will of the individual’ (1976:3). Further refinement of Bourguignon’s characterization of these forms developed into a distinction that turned on the presence or absence of trance behaviour. Bourguignon claimed this to be an important distinction that recurs frequently in the anthropological literature. Critics, however, objected that the belief-behaviour distinction (as it became characterized) was arbitrarily drawn and led to problematic explanatory analyses premised on a reification of ‘trance’ (the ‘behaviour’ element) and ‘possession’ (the ‘belief’ element) as naturally distinct. The ill-fitting categories, it was argued, are then ‘imposed’ upon widely diverse phenomena in an effort to compare, understand and explain them in terms of arbitrarily selected principles (e.g. Lambek 1989; Maurizio 1995).

In this paper, I agree that the trance-focussed distinction is an unhelpful way of analysing the cross-cultural patterns in possession forms identified. The objections to Bourguignon’s overall approach are not entirely unproblematic, however. Bourguignon’s ambition to identify and apply comparatively useful categories that can cut through the diversity of the phenomenon to identify recurrent, underlying principles and features is potentially of considerable theoretical value. Indeed, Bourguignon picks out what I will argue *are* important patterns in the ways in which possession is represented. I contend, however, that the presence or absence of trance is not a theoretically driven distinction. Consider the following examples of possession belief, used by Bourguignon to develop the possession/possession trance typology. Among the Jews at the time of Christ, beliefs in possession by ‘unclean spirits’ took at

least two principal forms. On the one hand, spirits would inhabit a person's body, speaking through the person to reveal their identity. On the other hand, there were beliefs that entailed the causal attribution of illness or malady (e.g. deafness, paralysis, etc.) to the presence of the possessing spirit in the person's body. A superficial analysis of the component features of these two descriptions of possession could point to any one of a considerable number of differences, including the presence or absence of trance. How, then, can we carve the phenomenon at its joints? What should inform our theories of cultural phenomena? Below I outline the general approach framing the problems and claims in the remainder of this paper.

Possession is not a 'thing' to be explained, but a complex series of patterns of thinking and behaviour. Failure to recognise this fundamental premise has led, in part, to the generation of definitions (or theories) of possession as *something* else that purportedly bears arbitrarily selected similarities, or causal underpinnings (e.g. dissociative identity disorder, or hysteria, or mental illness, and so on). Possession was considered by proponents of such approaches to be explainable, for example, with reference to the biological capacities of humans to experience trance states, or to the largely unknown mechanisms underlying mental pathologies. It was in response to such culture-blind, magic-bullet approaches to understanding possession that anthropologist Michael Lambek presented some alternative ways of conceptualizing possession and trance phenomena (1989). Lambek's key suggestion was that not only is possession a whole social complex, but trance also (generally considered as a psychobiological capacity) is cultural; 'the appearance of trance is mediated by the cultural model, by its social reality; the collective representations of trance precede its incidence' (1989:38). Lambek further suggested that the variability and complexity of trance and spirit possession phenomena should be given central place in cross-cultural investigations – 'in cultural matters, the lowest common denominator cannot tell us very much' (ibid.: 37) – and recommended interpretive over explanatory ambitions. 'Possession', he, and many others since, argued, 'can enter into virtually all areas of life ... It cannot be explained in simple terms. In fact, its very penetration into so many areas of life, the diversity of its functions and expressions, suggests turning away from causal, etiological explanations toward examining its structure, organization, reproduction, and meaning' (ibid.: 45). I suggest that although the turn toward context-sensitive interpretive accounts has richly enhanced our appreciation of the diversity and polysemy of possession phenomena, the turn away from explanatory endeavours altogether was overly hasty.

Explanatory theories should be generated from and consistent with the relevant evidence available. In explanations of cultural phenomena, such evidence *necessarily* includes data concerning the ‘structure, organization, reproduction, and meaning’ of the phenomena. Insofar as these aspects of possession demonstrate historically and cross-culturally recurrent features, albeit manifested in culturally specific settings and ways, I suggest that the identification of general mechanisms at work is a worthy anthropological endeavour that can mutually engage with descriptive and interpretive approaches. Specifically, in generating hypotheses about the incidence and spread of recurrent *and* variable spirit possession beliefs and practices, we must consider both the ethnographic and scientific data on how such concepts and beliefs are represented within and communicated among human minds.

Previous medicalist theories of possession and trance phenomena were not only largely culture-blind; they were also mind-blind. Theories of how possession concepts arise and persist are developed through observations of how people conceptualize possession on the ground. These observations and theories can guide how we carve up the whole domain, identifying like forms of possession, not according to categories imposed from outside, but according to categories produced by natural cognition. It is necessarily through attention to the details and complexities of how people represent possession on the ground that we can develop explanatory theory and hence working categories and definitions for the comparison of truly similar cultural phenomena. The following account of mental processes entailed in the generation and persistence of possession concepts demonstrates the need for a categorical distinction within the broad range of phenomena that are either lumped together in the scholarly literature as ‘possession’ or categorized on arbitrary and superficial grounds. Insofar as the cognitive mechanisms identified represent panhuman capacities, the categories developed should not require any ‘imposition’ on the cultural phenomena we seek to understand.

### **Possession Concepts**

Below I offer some tentative suggestions in an effort to begin to develop at least partial, provisional answers to the question of how possession concepts are cognitively represented. I consider the profiles of two widespread conceptual forms. These forms are preliminarily distinguished and identified according to the basic causal structures that characterize the various possession concepts. The first form appears to entail recognizably recurrent patterns of thinking to do with spirits as entities that cause illness. The second

cross-culturally recurrent set of concepts entails causal reasoning to do with the relationships between persons and bodies. After a brief introduction to these concepts, I consider how these different conceptual structures are underpinned by (at least partially) different sets of cognitive mechanisms and processes and how the relevant cognitive mechanisms serve to constrain their variation and transmission.

In her account of spirit possession in Ghana, Margaret J. Field gives a clear description of certain features of the local possession concept. Her remarks concern the Ga ceremony of 'driving away a bad *gheshi*'. Field writes, 'A bad *gheshi* is thought of as an influence of ill-luck inhabiting a person and bringing him misfortune and unprosperity when circumstances appear propitious. For the expulsion procedure he is taken by the medicine-man and his apprentices to the outskirts of the town and the bad *gheshi* driven out of him into the bush or perhaps tied to a post or even induced to enter a fowl which is then driven away' (1969:11–12). In Susan M. Kenyon's account of *zar* spirit possession activities in Central Sudan, she describes the case of a woman called Amna with a condition the woman described as 'a beating in my stomach, headaches, pains, cramps and vomiting... vomiting until I fainted' (1999:94). Kenyon relates how, after various diagnoses, treatments and setbacks over a period of years, Amna reluctantly entertained the possibility that she was possessed by *zar* spirits. Only when she was close to death did she perform the costly *karama* ceremony in order to meet the demands of the possessing spirits. Following the final ritual procedure, Amna recovered from her long illness. She confidently attributed her recovery to her performance of the *karama* ceremony. Janet McIntosh describes Giriama possession, in which spirits 'may spontaneously possess an individual, making him or her fall ill or ruining their fortunes' (2004:100). On confirming via divination that possession is the cause of illness or misfortune, the spirits are either exorcized or mollified through the host's conversion to Islam. Within the context of 'peripheral possession', in which predominantly women are 'afflicted' with possession, Ioan M. Lewis states that possession is 'diagnosed and treated as illness' (1989:79). The illness is often cured through exorcism of the intrusive spirit or accommodated through the performance of ceremonies that 'tame' the spirit. A catalogue of such possession-as-illness concepts is given, including numerous examples from Africa, South America, and South-East Asia (*ibid.*:64–77).

Although drawn from across many different cultural contexts, these various descriptions of possession manifest important similarities. Principally,

they commonly involve the attribution of misfortune, such as illness, to the intrusion of a spirit into a person's body – an extremely widespread notion cross-culturally. Before we consider more fully the recurrent features of such possession concepts, and the cognitive mechanisms underpinning their structure, let us briefly look at some further descriptions of possession, in which the effects of the possessing spirit appear to be reasoned about quite differently.

In many forms of possession concept, a spirit is represented as entering a person's body and as displacing or eclipsing the agency (or mind or soul or spirit, etc.) of the host, thereby causing a change of identity. For the duration of the episode, the spirit is said to be responsible for all behaviour and speech. Melville Herskovits writes, 'The individual thereupon is held to be the deity himself' (1948:66). In Mayotte possession, according to Lambek, 'Spirits enter the bodies of human beings and rise to their heads, taking temporary control of all bodily and mental functions... The emphasis is on the *change* that has occurred. Despite the fact that the body remains the same, it is now occupied by a different person (1981:40). Paul Stoller writes of Songhay possession, 'Spirit mediumship results from the temporary displacement of a person's double by the force of a particular spirit... The medium's body has become a deity' (1989:31).<sup>1</sup> The same fundamental concept is described by Dan Rosengren in his account of human-spirit interaction in the Amazon; 'The general understanding, it seems, is that the soul of the shaman leaves while the spirit enters his body. This metempsychosis is possible since the body is something exchangeable which can be worn by various users; metaphorically it is described as the dress, *imanchake*, of the soul' (2006:812).

During my fieldwork with a population of Afro-Brazilian religionists in the northern Brazilian city of Belém, the majority of research participants offered similar descriptions of possession. A senior member of the group described possession as occurring when the body of the medium joins with the spirit entity. These two parts, he claimed, make up the new (possessed) person. Another senior member described possession as the moment in which one's own spirit withdraws 'and another spirit comes and throws him/herself into your body'. Drawing a clear demarcation between herself and the possessing spirit, another member described her possession episodes as follows: 'I don't know where my spirit goes. I don't know. I only know that I switch off. I don't remain in me.' When one is possessed, one's own spirit is said to 'lie down', 'journey to the other world', 'dream', 'sleep', or 'remain watching'. The spirit entity is said to 'take control', 'dominate the mind', or 'command



the body and the mind'. As one person stated, 'Possession for me is a state of unconsciousness... in which we are not answerable for our actions, our bodily movements... we don't have control of our bodies anymore. It's the total loss of control of the body and the mind. Something else controls – it is the spiritual being'.

Such possession concepts, which I propose to label 'executive possession' concepts, may be defined as minimally entailing the following features: (a) the presence of an incorporeal intentional agent in or on a person's body, that (b) temporarily affects the ousting, eclipsing or mediation of the person's agency and control over behaviour, such that (c) the host's actions are partly or wholly attributable to the intentions, beliefs, desires and dispositions of the possessing agent for the duration of the episode. These features collectively represent the basic causal structure of *executive possession*.

In contrast, the first form possession concept described above – 'pathogenic possession' – minimally entails the following set of conditions: (a) the presence of an agent in or on a person, that (b) either causes no (perceived) effects (i.e. the spirit is 'dormant')<sup>2</sup> or causes physical effects, such as disease or illness, or psychological effects, such as depression or hallucinations, or existential effects more broadly defined, such as financial misfortune, and that (c) may persist indefinitely or until a diagnosis is made and the agent is dispossessed of the host's body. This concept does not entail the displacement of the person's identity. It does not require, for example, that the person is addressed by a different name – the name of the possessing agent – as is commonly the case in executive possession episodes. The spirit's name is often not known until steps are taken to eliminate or mollify it. Indeed, ritual naming ceremonies frequently appear to concern the establishment of the possessing agent's identity as a person, no longer an unknown, unpredictable, and unbidable thing or force.

There have been various attempts in numerous influential sociological and anthropological theories to capture the general principles common to 'pathogenic' possession. Lewis claimed, for example, that this form of possession was definitive of 'peripheral' cult activity, the domain of oppressed women of marginal social status, and an expression of protest and resistance. Lewis's theory, perhaps the last 'master narrative' of any potential explanatory import, came in for wide criticism partly on the grounds that its predictions about marginality, oppression and resistance failed to resonate with a wide range of cases (see Cohen 2007a:69). Although there has been little further consideration of the possible factors shaping and constraining the range of

forms that spirit possession concepts take, and the cross-cultural transmission, persistence and patterns of distribution of these forms, the same patterns are still implicitly recognized. McIntosh, for example, draws attention to some of the key features of such possession ideas and practices in contrast to other forms. She writes, 'Unlike the short-lived trance possession brought about by drumming and dancing during diviners' spirit-propitiation rituals, possession by coercive Muslim spirits is a chronic state in which hosts go about their lives in a state of ordinary awareness while their bodies and actions are subject to the spirit's intervention' (2004:101). Lurking in this description is a lingering differentiation between possession and 'trance possession' forms that turns on the presence or absence of trance (see also Budden 2003:31-32). I suggest, however, that insofar as trance is apparently present in one form and not in the other, this is yet one further feature of the phenomenon to be explained.

It is important to note that the forms of possession preliminarily defined here do not refer to types of hosts or mediums, or cults or religious systems, or even possession episodes. For example, a person who is conceptualized as experiencing pathogenic possession, as defined above, may be possessed by an intrusive agent that causes a range of undesirable physical symptoms, such as nausea and dizziness. The same person may undergo what is conceptualized as executive possession as part of the prescribed procedure for ascertaining the identity and demands of the possessing agent. If elimination of the agent follows, the person may be conceptualized as being no longer possessed. This preliminary analytical distinction, therefore, is not premised on classificatory systems, as was frequently the case with medicalist and sociological theories, that box types of participants or possession cults together in ways that necessitate the hardening, fixing and artificial naturalization of culturally supple and dynamic phenomena. It parses distinct cultural phenomena at the level of cognitive representation, a level at which the cognitive sciences *are* now identifying a degree of rigidity and constraint, a level at which there are potentially ascertainable material causes and effects upon cultural transmission. To consider how this occurs, let us now turn to the cognitive processes that are activated by these conceptual forms and that give rise to their distinct causal structures.

### **The Cognition of Possession: Executive Possession**

Executive possession concepts employ a vast range of cognitive systems, many of which work below the level of conscious awareness. The majority

of the inferences delivered by these systems go undetected, enabling people to negotiate the mechanics, commands, and simple problems of everyday life effortlessly and automatically. For example, the identification of persons we know well, from one day to the next and from one year to the next, is, on the whole, an effortless process. In fact, there are certain cognitive processes, dedicated to solving specific kinds of problems, that function independently of and even resist conscious control. Recognising faces is one such process. Those of us whose face-identification systems are intact could make every effort to imagine we are prosopagnosic (i.e. face-blind) while watching the news or flicking through our fieldwork photographs, or even to imagine what it must be like to be prosopagnosic, but we would fail quite miserably. We could not help but identify a face when we saw one, and identify the specific persons familiar to us when observing their faces, regardless of how much we consciously endeavoured to switch off such processes. Similarly tenacious systems constrain how we tacitly construe the nature of personal identity, and therefore the nature of identity transformation. These systems are at the core of executive possession concepts.

Erika Bourguignon noted that 'the concept of spirit possession is clearly dependent... on the possibility of separating the self into one or more elements' (1968:4). More precisely, executive possession concepts frequently entail a (literal or effective) separation of person from body. For example, the agency of the host is often represented as withdrawing from the body or assuming a passive role in relation to the control of the body, which is subsequently occupied or animated by the possessing agent. Recent research in developmental psychology suggests that person-identity is underpinned by a dualistic distinction between oneself and one's body that emerges early in childhood (Bloom 2004).<sup>3</sup> Psychologist Paul Bloom refers to this as common-sense, or intuitive, dualism. His argument, drawn from a growing body of experimental research as well as developmental and evolutionary considerations, has generalizable, cross-cultural implications (see Gopnik, Meltzoff & Kuhl 1999; Sperber, Premack & Premack 1995). Dualism, he claims, emerges as an evolutionary by-product of the fact that humans have two parallel cognitive systems engaged in the perception of bodies and persons. These systems, known as 'folk-physics' and 'folk-psychology', are the focus of an extensive literature in the psychological sciences. One system deals with the physical world through the application of intuitive theories about push, pull, cohesion, contact, and so on. The other system deals with the social world and applies causal theories that have to do with mental attributes, such as

beliefs, desires, dispositions and intentions. Bloom suggests that these systems deliver incommensurable outputs. As a result, humans are represented both as psychological agents and physical objects - but these two co-existing sets of cognitive representations never fully achieve coherent integration. This gives rise to a dualistic perception of ourselves and others.

There is compelling anecdotal evidence and growing experimental evidence in support of this position (e.g. Kuhlmeier *et al.* 2004). The failure to integrate body-relevant outputs and person-relevant outputs of these distinct systems is what leads children to suggest, for example, that their brain helps them do maths, but that *they* love their sister or brother (Bloom 2004). Bloom writes, 'Our intuitive dualism grounds our understanding of personal identity. We recognize that a person's body will age; it might grow or shrink, lose a limb, undergo plastic surgery - but in an important sense, the person remains the same' (2004: 195). Intuitive person-body dualism underpins notions that one can survive one's biological death. It supports representations of disembodied spirits as well as, for example, fanciful musings about combining *that* person's mind in *that* person's body (for example, to create the perfect partner).

Of course, there are many situations in which the fact of the 'embodiment' of person-identity is highly significant. Humans identify other persons by paying special attention to the face or voice; we readily appraise persons according to their age, sex, and skin colour (Hirschfeld 1999); we posit intimate associations between who we are - our self-essence - and particular body parts, such as the brain, heart, stomach or blood, and so on. There is some indication, then, that in the course of development, children and adults acquire a deeper understanding of the interdependencies of body and person or self and apply this in reasoning about the social world at least in some contexts some of the time. Nevertheless, there are many situations in which the interdependencies of self and body appear to be denied. Adults commonly distinguish between the things that they consider *they* do and what their *body* does, for example in concepts of death and afterlife, and even in the more everyday recognition, for example, that their body lets them down, or belies their 'mental age', and so on.

Many people explicitly deny holding a strong Cartesian view of the world. On the materialist view, for example, all thoughts, memories, passion, love, as well as mathematical and artistic competence are expressions of brain activity. It is suggested, however, that even materialists can be *intuitive* dualists - their explicit and often elaborate and complex theories largely fail to penetrate or inhibit the activation of their ancient, automatic, and rapid cognitive

processors. Materialism presents difficulties that parallel those experienced when one attempts to simulate prosopagnosia. Even those who know nothing of brains, who have no explicit or lexicalized representation of self- or person-identity, can be *intuitive* dualists, such as when they posit the existence of the self-essence (or, for example, soul) after death or the displacement of the self from the body in a possession episode. There is considerable scope for the systematic investigation of cross-cultural variation and recurrence in the precise conditions that activate 'embodied self' intuitions and the conditions that activate 'self-body dualist' intuitions in thinking about the social world.

Although this field of research is still young, the theories and findings developed thus far, based on experimental, observational and cross-cultural ethnographic research support the conjecture that the cognitive capacity to grasp and employ concepts that represent the autonomy of person-identity and body is widespread, if not universal, and emerges early in childhood (Bering & Bjorklund 2004; Bering, Hernández-Blasi & Bjorklund 2005; Bering & Parker 2006). The cognitive mechanisms that underpin the panhuman capacities to represent persons as having an identity, and that are mobilized in identifying other persons in our environment as in some important way the same person from one day to the next, and from one year to the next, and that guide our intuitions about the relations between person and body also appear to be mobilized by executive possession concepts. These mechanisms support, constrain and organize the ways in which possession is represented.

In keeping with intuitive expectations about person-identity, for example, Spirit x is Spirit x whether he possesses Host A today or tomorrow, and whether he is possessing Host A or Host B. When possessed, the host's body is represented as containing a different person-identity, that of the possessing spirit. The new spirit-host entity may have the *appearance* of the host, but is identified and addressed as the spirit. Proper names are replaced, old conversations are taken up from where they left off previously, and interlocutor and observer endeavour to apply the appropriate identity file to the entity that now stands before them. The semantic and affective information, impressions, and assessments of the possessing agent, contained in the 'identity file', together with basic folk-psychological capacities, enable the observer coherently to interpret the entity's behaviours and utterances. Alterations of voice and vocabulary, special abilities to heal and counsel, and apparently miraculous feats are now explainable against this background of information about the person-identity of the possessing agent.

Executive possession concepts typically entail the effective or literal separation of person from body and the temporary establishment of a new person-body configuration. Such concepts subscribe to a radical form of person-body dualism. As such, they are supported by ancient, efficient, and powerful mechanisms that underpin the capacities to represent our social and physical worlds according to different sets of principles, and to represent people as having identities that are fundamentally continuous, and that are readily conceptualized under certain circumstances as quite separate from the body and persistent in the face of bodily transformations and even death. It is in terms of these cognitive tools that the common principles defining executive possession concepts may be constructively characterized. It is also in terms of these tools that we can appreciate the crucial distinction between executive and pathogenic possession.

### **The Cognition of Possession: Pathogenic Possession**

The distinction between the two forms may be crudely understood as follows: pathogenic possession concepts primarily concern the incorporation of spirit-as-essence, not spirit-as-person, into the body. Although the identity of the particular spirit, or class of spirits, is commonly identified at some point in the diagnosis or curing/socialization/exorcism process, the spirit is primarily and most basically represented as a contaminating substance or essence (material or immaterial). It is often agentized only secondarily, i.e. it is represented as having thoughts and desires and acting in accordance with goals. This representation, however, does not entail the displacement or transformation of person-identity, as in executive possession. Pathogenic possession, therefore, is conceptualized very differently from executive possession, and employs a (partially) different battery of cognitive tools. Below I suggest that this form of possession is guided by cognitive mechanisms that deal with the representation of contamination and illness.

Beliefs about contamination are universal. The range of content expressed in these beliefs and the fears and responses elicited by them exhibit wide inter-individual and cross-cultural variability. The fundamental principles according to which these beliefs are applied, however, demonstrate considerable regularity across all contamination contexts (e.g. principles to do with avoidance, contact, and purification). Many of these principles are in place by early childhood, forming part of young children's understanding of illness. Much of the research on this area in developmental psychology is concerned with the question of whether young children have a biological representation

of the transmission of contagious diseases. Research over the last two decades indicates that young children are sensitive to contamination and that they hold a 'skeletal framework level' understanding of contamination (Raman & Gelman 2005:172). A fundamental principle organizing their theories of contamination concerns contact between contaminants and uncontaminated substances. Young children also understand that contamination may occur through invisible mechanisms (e.g. through the transmission of germs). Further findings suggest, however, that young children have little knowledge of the biological nature of such entities and the biological mechanisms by which they multiply and cause illness. They fail to grasp the underlying mechanisms of transmission and do not differentiate the contaminating processes of poisons, germs and irritants (see Hejmadi, Rozin & Siegal 2004).

Nevertheless, by 4 years of age children have a functional understanding of what sorts of things in the world are regarded by their elders as potential contamination threats and a hyper-efficient emotional (and therefore behavioural) response to such potentially harmful entities. Contaminants evoke strong fear and disgust, or revulsion, responses. Evolutionary psychologists have suggested that such disgust emotions evolved in response to evolutionary pressures to avoid survival-threatening contaminants (e.g. Haidt *et al.* 1997). These responses are so powerful that they often persist despite the removal of all traces of contamination – as Hejmadi, Rozin and Siegal found in their cross-cultural study of Hindu Indian and American children's responses to contamination and conceptions of purification, 'once in contact, always in contact' (2004). The firm principles concerning contact and contamination, and associated emotional responses, emerge early in childhood and form the basis of full adult understandings about contaminants and how to avoid and eliminate them. I suggest that they are also central to successfully spreading pathogenic possession concepts.

Cross-culturally recurrent possession concepts involving the incorporation of agents into the body frequently occupy a place in local aetiologies of disease. Notions about spirit intrusion and infestation and possession epidemics parallel notions about the incorporation of poisonous substances, the ingestion of rotten foods, the contraction of contagious illness, or the inheritance of witchcraft substance. The basic concept resembles concepts of disease and illness the world over, in that it involves a causal structure that links cause (immediate and secondary), symptoms, prevention (e.g. by means of avoidance) and cure (e.g. by means of expulsion and/or cleansing). The details of the specific mechanisms by which spirits enter the body and

interact with the host's biological processes are rarely articulated (or, at least, are rarely reported in the anthropological literature). Empirical observations of the kinds of symptoms that may be diagnostic, the causes to which they may be attributed, and the (ritual) procedures by which they may be treated are readily integrated into a compelling theory without requirement for recourse to underlying mechanisms.

For example, the incorporation of the possessing agent may occur due to weak spiritual or physical defences – defences should therefore be fortified. 'Vaccination' procedures, aimed at barring the entry of these spirits, may be encountered throughout the literature. For example, in certain Afro-Brazilian religious groups, 'the locking of the body' ritual (*fêchamento de corpo*) is believed to guard it from the entry of bad energies. Further, possessing agents are often thought to be ingested in food, or they may pass into the body through any of its orifices. Possession is often believed to be the result of association with other possessed persons. Such persons should therefore be avoided. In the case of Amna (mentioned earlier), we learn that she believed that she had not inherited the *zar* from her mother, but rather she had caught it from a possessed neighbour whom she had visited. The very language used here is consistent with the possession-as-contamination conceptualization. The spirit gets under the skin, so to speak, as do germs or poison, and causes physical and psychological maladies. The minimal concept of possession is then often afforded a much richer, interconnected structure with its wider social and functional significance. Why Amna, and why at that specific point in her life, for example, are deeper, existential questions readily answerable in terms of the principles of social exchange. The notion of an intentional agent with special powers to exert such effects over Amna's body becomes particularly salient. The spirit's demands must be met, and social debts cleared in exchange for the restoration of health and control. In other possession contexts, the spirit may be eliminated from the body, thereby restoring the body to a decontaminated and healthy state. Elaborate ritual procedures are employed to vaccinate people against such intrusions, or to 'bind' the activities of the possessing spirits, or to expel and purge them from the body.

### **The Transmission of Possession Concepts**

The support that certain possession concepts receive from natural and early-emerging cognitive capacities enhances their memorability, communicability, relevance and, therefore, their potential incidence in the cross-cultural record. It appears that people the world over have little difficulty grasping



and applying concepts of executive possession and related concepts that rest on similar underlying assumptions (e.g. to do with the continuity of person-identity after biological death). Indeed, if we break free from the traditional, common sense definition of possession as something necessarily involving other-worldly spirits, and frequently occurring in what may be considered 'religious' contexts, we encounter executive possession in a wide variety of contexts, including novels and films (e.g. *Dr Mabuse and Scotland Yard*). I suggest that these concepts spread successfully because they are supported by panhuman mental capacities that are employed in the resolution of everyday, common problems. Some of these capacities, such as distinguishing between non-agentive objects, such as a bedpost, and intentional, psychological entities, such as mother, are being exercised quite literally from birth (see Gopnik, Meltzoff & Kuhl 1999).

It is important to note, however, that the very same cognitive mechanisms that facilitate the emergence and spread of cross-culturally widespread executive possession concepts also serve to constrain the potential variability of such conceptual forms in cultural transmission. It appears, for example, that although there are numerous logically possible configurations and combinations of spirits and hosts that follow the conceptual structure of executive possession, there is one in particular that appears to have a higher incidence in the cross-cultural record than any other. This concept entails the complete displacement of the host's agency by that of the spirit. Alternative executive possession concepts (e.g. entailing the merging of host agency and spirit agency in the host's body) do arise in the ethnographic record, but are rare and appear to require extra cultural scaffolding in order to facilitate their transmission (e.g. repetitive instruction, rehearsal) (Cohen 2007a). Preliminary experimental and ethnographic analysis suggests that 'displacement' concepts better exploit natural cognitive dispositions and tendencies than 'fusion' concepts and other variants (see Cohen & Barrett, in press a; Cohen & Barrett, in press b). Further systematic, cross-cultural research is required, however, in order to identify more precisely how the contours of person-body reasoning inform the variable emergence and spread of different forms of executive possession concepts.

Likewise, because pathogenic possession notions are supported by early emerging predispositions to acquire certain kinds of concepts concerning contact, contamination, prevention and purification, I suggest that those forms of pathogenic possession that do not capitalize upon these intuitions will be more difficult to grasp, recall and communicate than those that do. Consider,

for example, the transmission potential of the notion that the weaker one's spiritual immune system, the more prepared it is to resist the possessing agent's entry into the body. Or that preventative measures should entail the ingestion of spirit-inhabited substances. Such concepts run counter to the intuitions spontaneously delivered by our cognitive systems. Without recourse to enriched learning conditions, concepts that deviate from the basic structure of contamination concepts are unlikely to enjoy widespread success.

Further, pathogenic possession concepts that specify elaborate theories of precisely how the contaminant works its effects may also require considerable cultural support. A rare example of such an elaborate theory is described by Nancy Caciola in her discussion of spirit possession in medieval Europe (2000). Caciola describes how the medieval Catholic Church developed a model by which divine inspiration (or possession by God or the Christ) could be distinguished from demonic possession. The model was labelled the 'discernment of spirits' and was the means by which 'medieval intellectuals attempted to naturalize the discernment process by elaborating a physiological theory that differentiated the precise, internal mechanisms of divine from demonic possession' (2000:272).

The discernment model made extensive use of medieval medical understandings of the human spirit, or *spiritus*. It was believed that the main seat of the spirit was the heart, but it was thought to pervade the body and to compose three different categories – the vital spirit, the natural spirit, and the animal spirit. Demons, it was proposed, enter the body, interfering with the functions regulated by the natural and animal spirits, such as digestion, heartbeat and respiration. Only the Holy Spirit entered the heart, the seat of the soul, replacing or joining with the human spirit. This latter concept appears to resonate more strongly with the features characteristic of executive possession. Indeed, this is arguably what motivated the elaboration of such theories in the first place – the need to know whether one is interacting effectively with God (a new person-identity) or with a deranged individual whose demons do not replace the soul but rather 'tempt or confuse' it.

This example demonstrates how special socio-cultural conditions facilitated the emergence and transmission of exact theories about the internal mechanisms of possession contamination – in this case, such conditions included the knowledge and integration of theological and medical theory, the presence of an ecclesiastical orthodoxy and elite, the faithful transmission of the discernment model by means of texts and sermons, and the rigorous, principled adjudication of the details of each case according to the conven-

tions and formulas of the model. Factors such as these considerably enhance the transmissive potential of concepts that elaborate considerably upon the basic intuitions delivered by our cognitive systems.

This brings us to some final reiterations and clarifications of the distinction between pathogenic and executive possession, and of the purpose of developing the present approach. First, executive possession does not turn on considerations of whether trance is present or absent. Trance-free divine inspiration, brought about by the incorporation of God into one's body, may be cognitively represented in much the same way as executive possession involving dissociated states. It entails the temporary replacement of agency and the attribution of utterances to the possessing entity. This minimal definition does not assume or necessitate an alteration in the conscious state of the host. The host could be partially or fully conscious of the situation but unable to exert any executive control over his or her behaviour. It is not trance, therefore, that is a central feature of the conceptual structure of this representation of possession, but the change of agency and identity. Possession concepts among the Bigajos Islanders entail transformations of core person-identity without trance – 'defunct women' are possessed by the spirits of uninitiated warriors and undergo posthumous initiation *as* these men, enabling the men to reach their ancestors' land. The defuncts 'manifest the fiery warriors that possess them' – 'wives and mothers are now warriors' (de Sousa 1999:85). Some women show a trance-like behaviour, but this is not a necessary component of the perceived identity transformation. Trance, therefore, is a feature that is frequently associated with, but not causally necessitated by, the perceived temporary resignation of the host's agency and executive control. Furthermore, the concept of pathogenic possession does not preclude the possibility of trance states. In fact, episodes of dissociation and disorientation are regularly recurring psychological effects of this form of possession.

Second, pathogenic possession need not only concern negative contamination. Although much rarer in the ethnographic literature, some possession concepts entail the incorporation of agents that are perceived to cause desirable effects (e.g. fruits of the Spirit). Some agents may be represented as possessing the body but as having no, or neutral, effects. I suggest that theories by which negative, positive, and neutral agents enter the body are guided by a similar set of principles concerning contact and elimination, in much the same way as the ingestion of poisons, antidotes, nutrients and placebos are considered in terms of assimilation and effects. They are, however, accompanied by

very different sets of emotions. The highly salient and persistent negative emotions associated with negative contamination and the associated threat to personal well-being, survival and control may be key factors contributing to the relatively higher incidence of negative pathogenic possession concepts cross-culturally. Such threatening, negative, personally consequential situations are more attention-demanding than those involving positive effects. Ultimately, where attention is not given – for example, when ritual curing is not performed – the host may even face death. Such potential consequences create heightened alertness to the possibility of pathogenic possession, where such interpretations are already considered plausible, and increased demand for vaccination, purification and elimination procedures.

Third, whether possession may be identified as pathogenic or executive necessarily takes into consideration only the fundamental features of the conceptual structure of the possession representation. The distinction is not one between consciousness and dissociation, male host or female host, pathological host or healthy host, good spirit or evil spirit, or ecstatic or sedate state. A person may be pathogenically possessed by a particular spirit at one moment, and executively possessed by the spirit at another, depending on whether the perceptual and conceptual inputs match the conditions that activate contamination systems or person-identity systems in cognition.

Parsing the domain at the level of conceptual structure leads to an interesting final observation. There is considerable common ground between pathogenic and executive possession. As stated previously, both concepts typically entail a representation of incorporeal agents entering the host's body and working various kinds of physical and mental effects. These phenomena may demonstrate considerably greater continuity, however, in terms of their basic cognitive representation and conceptual structure, with other cultural phenomena that are not typically considered within the common-sense category of *possession*. Pathogenic possession concepts, for example, appear to display considerable overlap with certain forms of concepts about witches and witchcraft essences (Cohen 2007b). It has been widely noted by ethnographers that the potential to perform witchcraft is often believed to have its source in a substance or ethereal essence housed within the body of the witch. In the famous case of the Azande, the substance may be inherited from father to son and from mother to daughter (Evans-Pritchard 1976); in the case of Akan it may be caught through contact with objects onto which witches have transferred their witchcraft (Debrunner 1961). Only the removal of the essence or substance guarantees the elimination of the witchcraft potential.

In these examples, the parallels with pathogenic possession and with notions about contamination are clearly evident. Executive possession concepts, in turn, display significant continuities with concepts of reincarnation (as well as lay-understandings of Dissociative Identity Disorder). Both cultural forms share the similar basic cognitive underpinnings and can be grasped and understood according to similar sets of intuitive principles concerning persons and bodies and the relations between them.

### **Conclusion**

Why parse the domain of possession, and the cultural domain more broadly, in terms of underlying cognition? In order to explain patterns of incidence of cultural phenomena, we need to define clearly the parameters and content of the phenomena to be explained. Previous explanatory approaches to possession employed common-sense-derived intuition to do this, producing polythetic and ill-fitting categories, based on arbitrarily drawn, culturally specific measures and criteria. Medicalist perspectives, too, were unsatisfactory because they failed to take into account 'structure, organization, reproduction, and meaning' of the phenomena under question. These aspects are critical to the development of theories about why cross-culturally recurrent possession concepts take the form they do and about what permits their transmission and persistence across diverse cultural contexts and throughout history.

Approaches to these questions have generally started by identifying what appear to be recurrent features, and arbitrarily selecting possible underlying principles that might give rise to these distinctive patterns. To avoid the arbitrariness and randomness of such approaches, and to develop a plausible theory of why possession concepts take the forms they do, I argue that it makes sense to integrate fine-grained descriptive analysis with what we now know about how human thought works. Cognition is a powerfully constraining factor on the kinds of cultural concepts likely to emerge and persist. By identifying the objects of our explanations in terms of their underlying cognitive mechanisms and processes, we classify cultural phenomena, not, for example, according to convictions delivered by common sense, or to aesthetically determined preferences, or empirically impoverished flights of philosophical fancy, but according to causally significant criteria. We can then identify what kinds of phenomena are alike and what are not in terms of these criteria. In the case of possession, we can be clear about which forms and aspects of possession our theories address, and what kinds of evidence are relevant (and which are not) to investigating the theories. Ultimately, we can take steps toward

characterizing the interdependence of cognitive, ecological and contextual factors shaping the transmission and cross-cultural incidence of recurrent and variable forms of possession concepts and practices.

I have suggested that *executive* and *pathogenic* possession are differently represented according to basic sets of panhuman cognitive processes. Executive concepts of possession have at their core a natural conceptualization of the world as composed of two discrete kinds of phenomena – physical bodies that operate according to laws of physical forces (e.g. gravity, contact, cohesion, etc.) and psychological agents that operate according to beliefs, desires, dispositions, and so on. Recent research is beginning to show that the perception of one's self, or person, as distinct from one's physical matter, or body, may be less a product of a particular philosophical tradition, and more the outcome of an intuitive dualist stance on the social world that originates early in infant development (e.g. Bloom 2004). Readily transmittable executive possession concepts (such as 'displacement' concepts) capitalize upon this natural, intuitive position. Widespread pathogenic concepts, in contrast, capitalize upon cognitive systems that deal with problems of contamination and, in many cases, illness. These different sets of cognitive systems and processes are differently activated, make sense of different phenomena in the social, physical and biological world, and mobilize different assumptions and inferences about those phenomena. It is with increasing confidence that we can propose that (and how) the ways in which human cognition parses the world have identifiable and material effects upon patterns of cultural transmission.

Ultimately, why go back to the old debates about types of possession? I suggest that anthropologists retired from these debates prematurely. Possession, it was argued, is an explanation-defying, holistic social reality. 'Its province is meaning', Boddy asserted, 'and it is best addressed in that light' in terms of the 'potential range of its significance within the cultural and social context' (1989:136). Nevertheless, beneath the behaviours we observe (both recurrent and variable) lie universal mechanisms and processes of cognition, the workings of which our participants may be largely unaware. The common structures of this cognitive architecture impose appreciable constraints on the forms that possession concepts (and other cultural phenomena) take. Because there are features of unconscious cognition that 'modify the probability' (Bloch & Sperber 2002:729) that a concept will 'catch on' in cultural transmission, there are therefore significant questions to be formulated about the role of basic cognition in the spread of possession phenomena. Ultimately,

however, we need to balance explanatory and interpretive endeavours for the development of theories that are sensitive to the broad range of factors that shape the recurrent and variable structure, organization, reproduction, and meaning of cultural phenomena. There is now considerable scope for mutual engagement between cognitive science and anthropology. The timing is perfect to revisit these issues in the scholarship on possession and to entertain once again the possibility of articulating increasingly comprehensive explanatory accounts of the complex and variable patterns of thinking and behaviour so eloquently portrayed in the anthropological literature.

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### Notes

1. The 'double' is described as 'the essence of a person's humanity' and is distinguished from the human body (which 'consists of flesh') and the 'life force' (the 'energy of life') (1989:31).
2. See, for example, Giaconda Belli's novel, *The Inhabited Woman*.
3. Labels for what I am referring to as person-identity vary widely cross-culturally. In some places, no such label may even exist. This variability does not constitute evidence of conceptual variability, however, particularly at the level of tacit representation. Note that unless otherwise stated, the term 'person' and person-identity is used interchangeably, but always in the strict sense described above.

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