DISSOCIATION AND THE EXPERIENCE OF
CHANNELING:
Narratives of Israeli Women Who Practice
Channeling

TALI STOLOVY

Lev Hasharon Mental Health Center, Netanya, affiliated to Sackler Faculty of Medicine,
Tel-Aviv University, Israel

RACHEL LEV-WIESEL AND ZVI EISIKOVITS

University of Haifa, Mt. Carmel, Haifa, Israel

Abstract: “Channeling” is a phenomenon in which people describe themselves as receiving messages from another personality or dimension of reality. Channeling is often regarded as dissociation, which is a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception. This study explored the interface between channeling and dissociation through a phenomenological analysis. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews with 20 Israeli women who practice channeling. The analysis revealed 3 themes: dissociation, absorption, and control. The channelers’ descriptions correspond with what is coined as “dissociative states” and enable an emic view of the etic definition of dissociation.

This qualitative study aimed to explore the interface between channeling and dissociation through a phenomenological analysis of channelers’ narratives of their channeling experience. “Channeling” or “mediumship” is a phenomenon in which people describe themselves as being taken over by or in other ways receiving messages from another personality, from other dimensions, or from levels of reality (Klimo, 1987). The message is directed and purposeful, and the channeler transmits it to an audience (Hastings, 1991). The frequency of channeling is highest among women (Moreira-Almeida, Neto, & Cardena, 2008).

Klimo (1987) distinguishes between full trance channeling and light trance channeling. In the first case, someone or something appears to

Address correspondence to Tali Stolovy, Lev Hasharon Mental Health Center, POB 9000, Netanya 42100, Israel. E-mail: tstolovy@gmail.com

346
occupy the body and uses it for speaking (frequently in a different tone of voice), writing, or moving. Usually, when full trance channeling is over, the channeler regains the customary consciousness and cannot remember the channeling. In light trance channeling, the channeler has partial or full awareness of self and the surrounding environment. The channeled entity is said to be a co-dwelling personality, working alongside the channeler. This state involves some kind of temporary cohabitation of consciousness. Both states enable channeling through automatic writing, in which the channeler is usually aware but has no sense of control over the writing activity.

The alternation of consciousness states, out-of-body experiences, automatic writing states, and loss of memory are all usually considered dissociative states. Moreover, the presence of more than one personality in one body characterizes what is perceived as dissociative identity disorder (Cardena, 1992). As a result, channeling is often regarded as a state of dissociation (Cardena, 1997; Moreira-Almeida, Lotufo Neto, & Greyson, 2007; Seligman, 2005).

Dissociation is formally defined as a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000). The assumption is that trauma produces a natural trance reaction (Van der Kolk & Van der Hart, 1989). Recurrent trauma contributes to the development of dissociative defense mechanisms. These acquired mechanisms, often accompanied by biopsychological tendency, may eventually become a stable dissociative pattern (Brown, 1990). Thus, dissociative disorders are etiologically linked to history of trauma (Dalenberg et al., 2012). Yet, dissociation is considered to range on a continuum from transient everyday experiences like daydreaming, to disintegrative attentional processes, to psychiatric disorders (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986; Myerson & Konickezy, 2009). Moreover, although the common core of dissociative disorders is alternation in consciousness, alternations in consciousness can be considered part of normative behavior (Steele, Dorahy, Van der Hart, & Nijenhuis, 2009).

"Absorption" is part of the essence of normative alternations in consciousness (Dalenberg & Pulson, 2009). Absorption is defined as a disposition for having episodes of "total" attention that fully engage one's representational (i.e., perceptual, enactive, imaginative, and ideational) resources (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). Absorptive tendencies are partially genetic (Finkel & McGue, 1997) but may develop following traumatic history (Dalenberg & Pulson, 2009; DiTomasso & Routh, 1993; Hesse & Van IJzendoorn, 1999). Absorption is distinguished from dissociation by its relation to well-being (Almagor & Ehrlich, 1999), vivid imagery (Pekala, Wanger, & Levine, 1985) and mystical experiences (Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg, & Hagekull, 2007). Absorption
is also linked to hypnotic susceptibility (Nadon, Hoyt, Register, & Kihlstrom, 1991; Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974).

Currently, dissociation is so broadly defined that it may describe a symptom, a cause of symptoms, a psychological defense mechanism as well as normal or pathological alternations of consciousness (Nijenhuis & Van der Hart, 2011). Given this, the claim that channeling is a dissociative phenomenon needs to be carefully examined.

Only a few empirical studies have explored dissociative tendencies among channelers. In these studies, the channelers were compared to people diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder (DID). The conclusion was that in DID, dissociation is a trauma-based defense mechanism, whereas in the case of channeling the dissociation is a learned and functional use of altered states of consciousness (Hughes, 1992; Moreira-Almeida et al., 2008).

Qualitative research among channelers is scarce. Seligman (2005) presented narratives of traumatic life histories of Brazilian channelers. Qualitative research regarding dissociation is limited, but it seems there is growing interest in the phenomenological perspective on dissociation and absorption (Edge, 2004; Hefferon & Ollis, 2006; Krycka, 2010; Snodgrass, Lacy, Francois Dengah, Fagan, & Most, 2011) as part of the understanding that dissociative experiences can be common and functional and can have different qualities among different people (Rodewald, Dell, Willhelm-Gößling, & Gast, 2010).

The phenomenological perspective highlights dissociation as a type of human experience (with subsets called pathological and nonpathological) characterized by the capacity of multiplicity (Krycka, 2010) and self-directedness (Edge, 2004). The phenomenology of deep hypnosis describes alternation in body image, time sense, perception and meaning, sense of being in an altered state of awareness, affect, attention, and imagery (Cardena, 2005). These descriptions seem related to Hughes’ (1991) description of channeling as an experience of altered states of consciousness that involves “harmonic blending” with the channeled entity, feelings of “nonspace and noontime,” euphoria, and ecstasy.

The present article will provide a phenomenological analysis of channelers’ narratives of their channeling experience with an emphasis on the interface with what is currently defined as dissociation. More specifically, we will attempt to answer questions such as the following: What elements of the channeling experience could make it into a state of dissociation? How do the channelers experience this dissociation? What are the boundaries of the channeling experience or the channelers’ dissociation? This may shed added light on both the experience of channeling and on dissociation while addressing the overlap and boundaries between them.
Method

Data for this research were collected as part of a larger mixed-method research addressing the relationship between traumatic history, dissociation, and quality of life among women who practice channeling. The University of Haifa’s Ethics Committee for Research on Humans approved the research.

The research is based on the phenomenological perspective, which allows a thorough understanding of the essence of the phenomenon and enables identification of the multiple meanings ascribed by the participants to what is defined as dissociation (Moustakas, 1994). This etic dissociation is understood in light of the channeler’s phenomenological life world, which has three components: the world around (Unwelt), that is, their relationship with their body and surroundings during channeling; their world-with (Mitwelt), that is, their perception of what others think about their channeling experience; their own world (Eigenwelt), that is, their subjective world or sphere of own-ness (Sokolowski, 2000). These components, derived directly from the channeler’s descriptions, assist in the attempt to derive basic patterns of the channeling experience (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997) and explore its interface with the concept of dissociation.

Participants

The sample was constituted of 20 women, 12 (60%) of them practice channeling as a main source of income and the others (n = 8, 40%) as a secondary source of income. Due to the fact that the frequency of channeling is highest among women, the sample consisted of women only.

For the current study, channelers were defined as women who publicly declare and self-report to be a channel for information from an exterior source, entity, or another dimension of reality. The participants have practiced channeling between 3 to 30 years, with an average of 12.5 years. Seventeen (85%) participants had a university degree and the others (n = 3, 15%) were high school graduates. Seventeen (85%) of the participants perceived themselves to be in good health and to be part of the middle class or the upper middle class. Nine (45%) participants were married, 3 (15%) were single, and the rest of the participants (n = 8, 40%) were divorced or widowed. Fifteen (75%) of the participants had children. The participants’ ages ranged between 35 to 59 years old with an average age of 47. Nineteen (95%) participants were Israeli born and all of the participants were fluent in Hebrew, which was the language of the in-depth interviews. All participants were Jewish and perceived themselves as secular.
The participants were identified at spiritual conventions they attended during the spring-summer of 2010. During these conventions, the first author approached women who presented themselves as channelers with a request for an interview as part of a university-based research study. Some of the participants were contacted by the first author following recommendations by other channelers or clients.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were obtained by semi-structured, in-depth interviews based on an interview guide. The interview guide was based on key issues related to the interface between the experience of channeling and dissociative experiences, according to the existing literature on the topic. The participants were given an opening task (Spradly, 1979): “Tell me the story of your life.” The interview guide included three more tasks: describe how you open and end a channeling experience; describe how you feel during a channeling experience; and describe what channeling means to you.

The interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours. The data were analyzed thematically. First, researchers openly coded individual cases. This enabled the development of content categories for each interview. Subsequently, cross-case analysis was performed by identifying themes that cut across interviews.

Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new themes emerged from the data analysis (Padgett, 1998). In fact, theoretical saturation had been reached following 18 interviews, but two additional interviews were conducted to confirm it.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was achieved by several means. First, referential adequacy was ensured through prior acquaintance of the first author with channeling, as a client. This acquaintance allowed familiarity with the content world involved in channeling and also a way to gain the channelers’ trust before the interviews. Channelers are often concerned by the stigma and criticism towards channeling and the author’s disclosure regarding her interest and familiarity with channeling enabled an open interaction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Referential adequacy was also ensured by tape recording the interviews and transcribing them verbatim, allowing verification from the original (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Secondly, in order to achieve validation, the analytical interpretations were grounded in extensive direct quotations from the descriptive data (Stiles, 1993). Negative case analyses (exceptional cases) were presented and their exceptionality highlighted the similarity of all the other cases (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The various aspects of the data collected in the analysis complemented each
other and created a consistent and complex description of the research (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Van Manen, 1997). Validity and reliability were obtained through the researcher’s reductive point of view: The researcher aimed to overlook her knowledge on channeling in order to present it freshly as it is experienced by channelers. The researcher also carefully refrained from stating that channeling is certainly dissociation. Moreover, the researcher used intuition to search for the most invariant explanation of the phenomenon. This process is a part of the phenomenological method’s search for the essence of the phenomena (Giorgi, 1988). In this research, we focused on the live experience of channeling as the essence of the phenomena.

Results

Three main themes emerged from the data analysis of the interviews: dissociation, absorption, and control. The themes are theoretically inseparable since absorption is perceived as a type of dissociation (Dalenberg & Pulson, 2009) and control or self-directedness (Edge, 2004), is a central component of the emic perspective on dissociation (APA, 2000). We wish to present these three themes that constitute the essence of “how it feels” to channel.

Dissociation

“I can be here and there”: Alternations of consciousness states. The channelers presented an inconsistent perception of their mental state during channeling. They claimed channeling to be a way of experiencing the world and a constant state of consciousness. Nonetheless, all of the participants described a channeling session as bounded and defined by an altered state of consciousness. The participants seem to dislike the term “trance” but used it to explain their state of consciousness. Other terms were “alpha waves,” “meditation,” and “concentration.” The following quotations illustrate the duality regarding the customary versus altered state of consciousness. (All quotes were translated from Hebrew and the names have been changed in order to protect the participants’ privacy.) Sara, a 42-year-old who has been channeling for 12 years, said, “I can be here and there. . . . I’m constantly, simultaneously observing . . . like a united split. . . . The trance occurs by concentrating more.” Another channeler explained:

Look, I don’t sit and channel, the channeling is always there like an intellectual, creative, sensual inspiration. . . . When I channel par excellence I’m sitting in a certain position, concentrating and I ask my guide a question. . . . [S]ome things come spontaneously and some intentionally. It is entering a state of looking through these eyes. (Rose, 37 years old, channeling for 10 years)
The participants' descriptions of a constant state of channeling are related to their sense of coexistence in more than one reality, or one place. This quote illustrates this coexistence: "I don’t need to roll my eyes or connect to a soul or summon a soul, it is just here. . . . I see it [the soul] and experience it in its reality; I can experience things simultaneously" (Gaya, 52 years old, channeling for 12 years).

"Don’t remember anything from channeling": Amnesia. The participants reported that they do not remember some or all of what they said during their channeling and even for whom they channeled. This state can be perceived as amnesia, that is, the inability to recall events that occurred during a discrete period of time that are associated with an experience that would ordinarily be remembered (D. Spiegel & Cardeña, 1991). These quotes exemplify typical descriptions of channelers’ memory loss:

Once the person is gone or the session is over, it is all erased. What’s not erased is if we talked before or after, while I was awake, as Lea . . . I don’t recognize people that were or weren’t. (Lea, 46 years old, channeling for 12 years)

I don’t remember what I said or the person that sat opposite to me. There are people I channeled for that call and ask questions about the channeling and I ask who they are, write down the details and go into channeling again. (Rachel, 39 years old, channeling for 12 years)

"It’s not me": Alternations of identity perception. The participants were clear about their personal identity. What they were less clear about is who or what their alleged entities or spiritual guides are and to what extent their personality is present during channeling. The participants claimed their personalities are not present and their bodies are totally in the service of the other entities. Nonetheless, their descriptions of the entities were ambiguous and it seems their internal distinction between self and not self during channeling is evasive. For example:

I like to ask people what I look like when I channel. They say—like in a fog. It’s not me. . . . I don’t know if it’s [the guide] a he or she. . . . I receive words that come out of me. (Angelina, 54 years old, channeling for 8 years)

Angelina is not clear about who or what she is channeling. Nonetheless, she is clear about the fact it is not her. She feels that she and another entity are both present at the same time, thanks to her altered state of consciousness. She says, "It seems like it is truly coming from something else but it doesn’t enter me. I’m present but probably in some kind of light coma. Because I know I’m there and I know I have to pass it on."

"I become fat, thin, my voice is different": Alternations of the perception of the body. The participants described an altered sense of their body
during channeling. Either their bodies feel different or they do not feel their bodies at all. These states are usually regarded as *depersonalization*, which has been described as detachment of consciousness from the self or the body and perceptual alternations or hallucinations regarding the body (Steele et al., 2009). The following quotes illustrate this:

Even if I was troubled, I noticed that it wasn’t there during channeling . . . a stomach ache, a bladder inflection. . . . Once I was in, it didn’t cross my mind . . . when everyone [the audience] left, the pain came back. (Lea, 46 years old, channeling for 12 years)

I can sit and suddenly say, “I feel someone is coming . . .” and pass it on . . . sometimes I change a lot, sometimes a little . . . I become fat, thin, my voice is different. (Shoshana, 60 years old, channeling for 32 years)

I don’t feel I have a body. The physical postures, the sitting, the swinging . . . it is very comfortable inside my body so much so it feels like there is no body. . . . The feeling in a trance is like a huge space . . . like I’m hanging on nothing. Wide, large, a wave. (Bella, 56 years old, channeling for 15 years)

One distinct experience the participants described, which is also defined as a state of depersonalization, is the out-of-body experience (OBE). In an OBE, people feel that their “self,” or center of awareness, is located outside of the physical body. The reports include sensations of floating, traveling to distant locations, and observing the physical body from a distance (Alvarado, 2000). The participants seem to perceive the OBE as their special ability that manifests during and outside of their channeling sessions. Dana, a 37-year-old who has been channeling for 8 years, said, “I remember myself as a seven year old who would go to sleep, float out of my body and slide into the living room. It was scary as a child, today I control it.”

Anna, another participant, described OBE as a single remarkable event. She experienced it as difficult, exhausting, and frightening and decided to avoid it in the future:

I can’t explain the process . . . My soul disconnected from my body and for a minute we weren’t connected. My soul began wandering in her house and I described it exactly. I was not meditating or fell asleep . . . . It was a difficult experience . . . like dying . . . I’m afraid of it. (Anna, 52 years old, channeling for 12 years)

Another participant described OBE as totally voluntary part of her channeling technique:

I ask the person’s full name and age and a question. I close my eyes, shake my head, open my throat chakra . . . Immediately, I enter [a state of] alpha waves. My voice is different, it’s them, the ninth high council; they are my guides. They answer the questions. I’m not there for an hour. I’m totally out. There is no Shira, I see black. Black with golden sparkles . . . . After being out for an hour, the channeling is over. Even if I don’t end it, they pull me out [of the trance]. (Shira, 57 years old, channeling for 15 years)
One more alternation of body perception during channeling is through automatic writing. This state also is described as depersonalization (Klimo, 1987). The following quotes illustrate the experience. Shira, a 57-year-old who has been channeling for 15 years, said, “I ask a question and my hand writes. It just writes by itself. The [spiritual] guides enter me and they dictate to me [what to write].” Another channeler said, “I draw cards and ask what should I pass on and I start writing endlessly, two–three pages about a person I don’t know” (Sara, 42 years old, channeling for 12 years).

“I’m not really feeling”: Emotional numbness or excitement during channeling. The participants’ emotional state during their channeling is described dialectically. On the one hand, the participants describe emotional numbness as an inbuilt part of the channeling experience. Emotional numbness is defined as a subjective sense of numbness, absence of emotional responsiveness or a feeling of detachment from others (D. Spiegel & Cardeña, 1991). On the other hand, the participants describe positive excitement in the context of their channeling.

This quote illustrates this dichotomy:

Participant (P): I’m not really feeling, it’s not really a feeling; it’s not about feelings here. It’s like you call a handyman and tell him what’s the job and he’s doing a good job. He provides you with that service.

Interviewer: And what are your emotions during channeling?

P: Supreme happiness! There’s nothing to compare with that feeling of happiness! Maybe the moments of childbirth . . . I didn’t understand the question. Because I’m not really feeling. . . . I mean I feel supreme happiness, I feel directed, secure. (Mali, 45 years old, channeling for 7 years)

Other descriptions seem to shed light on the different emotions involved in channeling. Margarita, a 37-year-old who has been channeling for 4 years, said, “During the channeling I don’t feel much, because I’m partly here . . . but, afterwards I feel amazing.” Another channeler said:

While channeling for myself, I feel quiet, cleanliness in my body and it brings big excitement, like waves, butterflies in my stomach. Usually with patients, I’m more apathetic. It doesn’t concern me. Like flow, air comes in; it doesn’t pass over to me. (Rose, 37 years old, channeling for 10 years)

Control: “I Have Always Been Channeling, Whether I Wanted to or Not”

The theme of control has some variations: control over the practice of channeling, control over initiation and termination of every session, control over the quality of the relationship with the channeled entity, and control over the content of channeling.
The practice of channeling is described as a responsibility that is basically compulsory but also welcomed. The following quotes illustrate this:

I have always been channeling, whether I wanted to or not. When I got older, I started to control it. Now that I know myself better, it is easier to control. . . . I just don’t let it in; I turn it off, like a radio. I really tried to make it disappear from my life. I couldn’t. (Dana, 37 years old, channeling for 8 years)

First, it [the channeling] was incited by fear, but, later, it became the thing I was expecting to experience. (Lea, 46 years old, channeling for 12 years)

Nineteen of the participants (95%) described the initiation and termination of every channeling session as controllable. Klimo (1987) distinguished between intentional and spontaneous channeling. During intentional channeling, the channeler controls the phenomenon and produces it at will. Spontaneous channeling has an intrusive quality; the channeler is not able to control the activity. Klimo claims that most of those who are intentional channelers began with experiencing spontaneous channeling. These 19 participants described intentional channeling activities. This is a typical description:

I start channeling like this: I close my eyes and start to get in the high level. I approach the high library of the ninth council and I ask for information. If I get an approval the information starts flowing and I start talking. . . . I go in and out during the whole channeling session. (Rachel, 39 years old, channeling for 12 years)

However, 1 participant described spontaneous channeling:
“Suddenly someone is coming. It’s a gift from the universe. Even when I go to the market, just like that” (Shoshana, 60 years old, channeling for 32 years). The same participant also said:

Principally, my soul came to serve humanity. So I don’t have the ability to say no . . . but sometimes I say no. . . . I begin to argue with them. Sometimes they flood me with so much energy. It’s like you want to give birth, just release yourself from that energy.

This quote reflects an aggressive quality of channeling, like an uncontrolled impulse. This description resembles the spirit possession phenomenon, in which the relationship with the spirit is intrusive and aggressive (Castillo, 1994).

The participants described complex relationships with the entity they are channeling. They expressed contradictory feelings of love, admiration, dependency, anger, and victimization. These quotes illustrate these emotions. “Yes, it sounds aggressive, but I generally thank them. It’s the best thing that ever happened to me!” (Lea, 46 years old, channeling for 12 years). Another channeler explained, “Daily life with guidance in
your life, they are always present. I’m looking for that feeling” (Mali, 45 years old, channeling for 7 years). Bella, a 56-year-old who has been channeling for 15 years, said, “I didn’t speak with MOSHE [the entity] for eight years . . . because of the manipulative way he made me confront him. . . . Lately our relationship is excellent. . . . I have always been very critical of MOSHE.”

The participants did not discuss the content of their channeling sessions since they have no control over it. Only 1 participant described her ambivalence. She said, “Although the language in channeling is different . . . they can’t play a keyboard that is not yours. It’s [the content] not things I don’t understand” (Sara, 42 years old, channeling for 12 years).

Absorption: “Sometimes I See Movies” (during Channeling)

The theme of absorption relates to one of the most experiential and enjoyable elements of channeling, as described by the participants. Theoretically, absorption is linked to dissociation since both manifest in the tendency towards self-altering experiences and the allocation of attentional resources (Carleton, Abrams, & Asmundson, 2010). Nonetheless, absorptive experiences are distinguished mainly by vivid imagery (Pekala et al., 1985), fantasy (Lynn & Rhue, 1986), empathy, and hypnotizability (Carboné, 1992; Wickramasekera, 2007). From the participants’ perspective, it seems like a unique ability to fully absorb themselves in a creative and imaginative state of mind during channeling. Hastings (1991) defines it as “open channeling” in which the channeler demonstrates a variety of creative skills that seem to be immediate, spontaneous, and effortless. These quotes illustrate this state of absorption:

Channeling is . . . like an intellectual, creative, sensual inspiration . . . my imagination produces visions, feelings, when the atmosphere is created. My field is energetic waves reception, influences, movements in a person’s life . . . it’s like painting, a personal creative expression. (Rose, 37 years old, channeling for 10 years)

My channeling is by symbols and words. Sometimes I see movies. . . . I’m a creative person so my channeling is creative. . . . [I see] a sewing machine, why? She [the client] says, my mother is a seamstress. (Chava, 43 years old, channeling for 12 years)

The enjoyable quality of absorption, both as a trait and a state, seems to be the channelers’ ability to absorb in fantasy. They explain. Shoshana, a 60-year-old who has been channeling for 32 years, said, “When I channel peoples’ spiritual mentors, it’s amazing! I see the mentors, I hear them . . . if it’s a musician I hear music, if it’s a choreographer I get to see images of dancing.” Another channeler stated, “I can’t look
at the sky; the sky is a huge energetic body, not space... I see geometric figures. I see spaceships” (Rachel, 39 years old, channeling for 12 years).

This ability to be fully engaged in a fantasy is perceived as a unique variant of absorption, also defined as fantasy proneness (Lynn & Rhue, 1986; Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). Nonetheless, the participants describe their absorption not only in their inner world or their fantasy but also in the person for whom they are channeling. The following quote illustrates this attention towards the client:

I’m a very sensitive person. I have the ability to get inside the person, understand him, feel him, see what he’s going through, what he’s thinking, what he wants, whether he verbalizes it or not. I actually contact the person’s subconscious and get information, that in most cases the person is not aware of. (Varda, 60 years old, channeling for 22 years)

This interpersonal absorption can also be experienced physically, as Anna (52 years old, channeling for 12 years) describes, “My body physically signals me during channeling. I ask, ‘Does it hurt there?’ The client says, ‘I just had surgery there.’”

Anna describes a state that is theoretically related to psychophysiological imitation, a hypnotic process in which a person develops symptoms of a different person (H. Spiegel & Spiegel, 1978; Wickramasekera, 2007). The participants seem to perceive all these absorption states as their unique ability and a practical tool for their channeling.

**Discussion**

This article aimed to present a phenomenological analysis of channelers’ narratives of their channeling experience and to discuss the interface between this experience and dissociation, as it is currently defined. Furthermore, this research aimed to understand the meaning that channelers give to their dissociation.

The channelers’ descriptions correspond with what is perceived as dissociative states and enable an insider’s view on the outsider’s definition of dissociation. The channelers described channeling as an experience of an altered state of consciousness that involves alternation of sense of identity, body perception, and emotional numbness, which is partially or completely forgotten after it ends. This experience has both controlled and uncontrolled features. Most of the interviewees have the ability to initiate and terminate the channeling. They described their channeling role as compulsory but welcomed. Their relationship with the channeled entities is complex and raises ambivalent feelings. Moreover, the channeling experience is characterized by exciting imagery and creativity. From the outsider’s perspective, the
channeling experiences seem like a form of absorption as well as a type of dissociation (Dalenberg & Pulson, 2009).

We interpret the channelers’ narratives as an indication that channeling is a specific expression of dissociation. Channelers present an ability to control their dissociation: its duration and the setting. Their dissociative experience has specific boundaries. Dissociation is basically perceived as distressful reaction to trauma (Dalenberg et al., 2012; Janet, 1889; Van der Kolk & Van der Hart, 1989), but its severity ranges on a continuum (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986). Channeling can be a voluntary and functional utilization of dissociation (Hughes, 1992; Seligman & Kirmayer, 2008). This claim is based on the understanding that our participants’ dissociation is an ability to voluntarily alter states of consciousness in order to generate meaning within the context of this specific spiritual ritual.

The experience that we interpret as dissociation, channelers perceive as channeling. Channelers perceive these mechanisms as a unique ability. Their “alternations of consciousness states” are perceived as an ability for simultaneous experience of more than one reality. Their “amnesia” is interpreted as one of channeling’s basic characteristics. Their “alternations of identity perception” are not experienced as distressful but serve as self-affirmation that they are indeed channeling another entity. Their “alternations of body perception” also are experienced as part of this paranormal situation and “out-of-body states” are perceived as a technique. Thus, all the elements that may reflect pathological dissociation according to an outsider are seen as parts of the capacity to channel from the insider’s perspective.

One central element of a channelers’ experience is absorption. To our understanding, absorption is not only reinforcement to channelers’ “normative” dissociation (Butler, 2004; Dalenberg & Pulson, 2009) but the mechanism that distinguishes their dissociation. Channelers may be predisposed to experience high levels of absorption (Cardeña, 1992) and it is possible that the socialization of this practice involves a process of learning and enhancing absorptive tendencies (Luhrmann, Nusbaum, & Thisted, 2010). The relationship between absorption and increased occurrence of mystical states (Granqvist et al., 2007), high fantasy proneness (Lynn & Rhue, 1986), empathy, and hypnotizability (Cardeña, 1992; Wickramasekera, 2007) may indicate why channelers’ dissociation has this distinct expression. Channeling involves the ability to sense another person and to give him information about himself, even regarding his physical state. This increased sensory ability might be explained by high absorption levels, both as a trait and a state of consciousness. Furthermore, channeling is based on a process of guided imagery, which resembles what is defined as fantasy proneness. In summary, we conclude that absorption is a channeler’s expression of dissociation.
and the connecting link between one’s dissociative tendencies and the mystical realm.

The understanding that channelers’ dissociation is voluntary, functional, and adaptive is consistent with other findings (Hughes, 1991, 1992; Moreira-Almeida et al., 2008) and highlights the difference between this phenomenon and pathological “spirit possession” (“Dybbuk”). “Spirit possession” is defined as an experience that involves narrowing of awareness or stereotyped “involuntary” behaviors and an altered sense of identity attributed to the influence of a spirit, power, deity, or other person (APA, 2000). Some consider channeling as a possession state because of the altered sense of identity (Cardeña, 1992; Seligman, 2005; Winkelman, 1986). Nonetheless, channeling is regarded as nonpathological possession phenomena since it manifests in a specific cultural context and involves no distress (Cardeña, Van Duijl, Weiner, & Terhune, 2009). In line with this, we understand channeling as a positive experience with some uncontrolled features that do not seem to cause distress. Those features may be a result of the altered consciousness state that requires “letting go” the ordinary controlled awareness or a part of the acceptance of what we see as the illogical ideology of channeling. We conclude that the channelers did not tell stories of distress but rather stories of choice and power. Their dissociation is not an expression of division or fragmentation of personality (Nijenhuis & Van der Hart, 2011) but an adaptive division of consciousness.

Another possible explanation may be that channeling is one of a channeler’s finite provinces of meaning (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). In this light, channeling is a province of meaning that channelers have created for themselves to which they go in and out of intentionally. Like going to the theater, they identify and participate with what is happening on the stage, and, when the curtain falls, they return to their other provinces of meaning. Nonetheless, there is a constant leak between people’s finite provinces of meaning (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973), thus the borders are not always finite.

In the context of this research, several limitations should be highlighted. First, a large body of evidence established the relationship between dissociation and trauma (e.g., Briere & Runtz, 1988; Boon & Draijer, 1993; Ferguson & Dacey, 1997; Mulder, Beautrais, Joyce, & Fergusson, 1998; Putnam, Guroff, Silberman, Barban, & Post, 1986). Trauma was found to contribute to the development of immediate and long-term symptoms of distress (Bryer, Nelson, Miller, & Krol, 1987; Chu & Dill, 1990; Kamsner & McCabe, 2000). Dissociation is perceived as one possible symptom of distress, as well as a cause of symptoms (Nijenhuis & Van der Hart, 2011). Thus, in spite the adaptive quality, dissociation and absorption have the potential to become risk factors
for dissociative disorders or other psychiatric disorders (Dalenberg & Pulson, 2009).

Another limitation stems from the fact that our participants have practiced channeling for many years, so the channeling has become a skill. We assume that the experience of a “new” channeler is different and the boundaries between what we defined as adaptive and distressful dissociation are not necessarily clear.

Finally, reservation should be noted on what we interpret as a channeler’s sense of identity. Braude (1995) claimed that channeling may involve self-conscious dissociative parts of the personality. As aforesaid, we claim differently, but it is reasonable to consider that, during absorption, being totally engaged in channeling entities and forming interpersonal connections with the clients may affect a channeler’s sense of identity. Perhaps their sense of identity is extended and perhaps there is some assimilation between the absorptive content and their identity. In any case, we assume there are other unknown factors that distinguish between skilled and well-adjusted channelers and those that experience more distress along that way. We believe that early life experiences and other features of their personal history also are a part of a bigger picture that can explain channelers’ stories.

References


**Dissoziation und die Erfahrung von Channeling: Erzählungen Israelischer Frauen, die Channeling praktizieren**

**Tali Stolovy, Rachel Lev-Wiesel und Zvi Eisinovits**


**Stephanie Reigel, MD**

**La dissociation et l’expérience du channeling: récits d’Israéliennes qui pratiquent ce procédé**

**Tali Stolovy, Rachel Lev-Wiesel et Zvi Eisinovits**

*Résumé: Le channeling est un phénomène par lequel les gens se décrivent eux-mêmes comme étant les destinataires de messages d’une autre entité ou provenant d’une autre dimension de la réalité. Ce phénomène est souvent considéré comme une dissociation, soit une perturbation des fonctions habituellement intégrées de la conscience, de la mémoire, de l’identité ou de la perception. Cette étude a permis d’examiner le point de contact entre le channeling et la dissociation à l’aide d’une analyse phénoménologique Des*
La disociación y la experiencia de canalizar: Narrativas de mujeres Israelíes que practican canalizar

Tali Stolovy, Rachel Lev-Wiesel, y Zvi Eisikovits

Resumen: “Canalizar” es un fenómeno en el que las personas se describen a sí mismas recibiendo mensajes de otra personalidad o dimensión de la realidad. Canalizar generalmente se concibe como una disociación, la cual es una disrupción de las funciones generalmente integradas de conciencia, memoria, identidad, o percepción. Este estudio exploró la interface entre el canalizar y la disociación a través de un análisis fenomenológico. Se obtuvieron datos cualitativos a través de entrevistas con 20 mujeres Israelíes que practican canalizar. El análisis reveló tres temas: disociación, absorción, y control. Las descripciones de las canalizadoras corresponden con lo que conoce como “estados disociados” y permiten una visión émica de la definición ético de la disociación.

Omar Sánchez-Armáss Cappello, PhD
Autonomous University of San Luis Potosi, Mexico