

Selflessness, core of all major world religions, has neuropsychological connection

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(PhysOrg.com) -- All spiritual experiences are based in the brain. That statement is truer than ever before, according to a University of Missouri neuropsychologist. An MU study has data to support a neuropsychological model that proposes spiritual experiences associated with selflessness are related to decreased activity in the right parietal lobe of the brain. The study is one of the first to use individuals with traumatic brain injury to determine this connection. Researchers say the implication of this connection means people in many disciplines, including peace studies, health care or religion can learn different ways to attain selflessness, to experience transcendence, and to help themselves and others.

This study, along with other recent neuroradiological studies of Buddhist meditators and Franciscan nuns, suggests that all individuals, regardless of cultural background or religion, experience the same neuropsychological functions during spiritual experiences, such as transcendence. Transcendence, feelings of universal unity and decreased sense of self, is a core tenet of all major religions. Meditation and prayer are the primary vehicles by which such spiritual transcendence is achieved.

"The brain functions in a certain way during spiritual experiences," said Brick Johnstone, professor of health psychology in the MU School of Health Professions. "We studied people with brain injury and found that people with injuries to the right parietal lobe of the brain reported higher levels of spiritual experiences, such as transcendence."

This link is important, Johnstone said, because it means selflessness can be learned by decreasing activity in that part of the brain. He suggests this can be done through conscious effort, such as meditation or prayer. People with these selfless spiritual experiences also are more psychologically healthy, especially if they have positive beliefs that there is a God or higher power who loves them, Johnstone said.

"This research also addresses questions regarding the impact of neurologic versus cultural factors on spiritual experience," Johnstone said. "The ability to connect with things beyond the self, such as transcendent experiences, seems to occur for people who minimize right parietal functioning. This can be attained through cultural practices, such as intense meditation or prayer or because of a brain injury that impairs the functioning of the right parietal lobe. Either way, our study suggests that 'selflessness' is a neuropsychological foundation of spiritual experiences."

The research was funded by the MU Center on Religion and the Professions. The study – "Support for a neuropsychological model of spirituality in persons with traumatic brain injury" – was published in the peer-reviewed journal *Zygon*.

"Our research focused on the personal experience of spiritual transcendence and does not in any way minimize the importance of religion or personal beliefs, nor does it suggest that spiritual experience are related only to neuropsychological activity in the brain," Johnstone said. "It is important to note that individuals experience their God or higher power in many different ways, but that all people from all religions and beliefs appear to experience these connections in a similar way."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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