Possession and Mental Illness: Are They Always Connected?

When it comes to the possession of an individual, and its connection to mental illness, there are many people who would argue that possession (whether it is demonic, spiritual, etc.) is a factor in a mental illness diagnosis, while some others think that it is not an appropriate connection, and that possession does not play a sort of role and is rather “a cultural-bound phenomenon” (Chiu, 14). The purpose of this paper is to try to explain to the readers how mental illness and possession do not always go hand in hand. Even though I assume that most people who choose to read this paper have an idea of the definition of possession, it would still be beneficial to explain it. Possession is said to be a complex series of thinking and behavior. It has also been said that “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).” (Cohen, 246). In other words, with executive possession, the identity of an individual is either transformed or replaced, whereas for pathogenic possession, one pictures possession to be a cause of somebody becoming ill (the illness can be physical or mental) or experiencing lack of fortune. With what I have previously mentioned, it is obvious that the type of possession that is going to be discussed in this paper is pathogenic possession. Possession is said to have traced back into the Middle Ages (from the 5th to the 15th century), where “the medieval peoples (as saints) would make decisions on who to venerate with who is infused with god and who the saints would avoid, such as someone who is possessed by a demon or, in other words, one who has an unclean spirit” (Caciola, 1-2). It should also be added that possession was also believed to
be traced into 12th century in England, where some bishops, such as one by the name of bishop Bancroft “prohibited any minister from taking part in ‘prophesyings’ or in exorcisms by the use of prayer” (Almond, 8) since he was skeptical about the existence of possession and exorcism.

Yet, the actual time period in which possession had first started occurring remains unknown. It has also been said that during the Middle Ages, many people would believe that if someone has any form of mental illness whatsoever, that they were possessed by demons, and as a result of this belief, many of those “mentally ill” people would end up being executed by hanging.

Luckily, those beliefs of executing the mentally ill have been long gone. However, there are many religions that hold some sort of belief that when someone is being affected by a mental illness, that mental illness is being caused by some sort of possession (mostly demonic), with some of those religions being Evangelical Christianity and Catholicism. With the way that I think about it, I believe that even though possession is said by some to cause some forms of mental illness, it does not mean that it is always a factor in other mental illnesses.

To start things off, I will be distinguishing between the symptoms of mental illness and demonic possession. It is obvious that there is something that would make the symptoms of these two topics synonymous. One thing that would make the symptoms of both demonic possession and mental illness alike is the fact that when it comes to some forms of mental illness, those forms of mental illness (which I will be discussing later in this paper) tend to cause hallucinations, changes in behavior, or behavior in which one would harm themselves. In some instances where some people were possessed, those possessed individuals would usually experience those same exact symptoms. However, there are many instances where the symptoms
of possession and mental illness are different. As one may already know, there is not just one mental illness, there are a variety of them. If one were to carefully examine the symptoms of at least a few of those illnesses, (such as schizophrenia, depression, etc.) it is easy to see how the symptoms of possession and most forms of mental illness are different. One way in which those symptoms are different is the fact that those who are possessed tend to first experience an altered state of consciousness (or ASC). In other words, those individuals who are possessed will feel as if they are not in reality, and that “one’s own subjective experience” (Revonsuo et al., 187) will change. Another instance to where the symptoms of possession and some forms of mental illness differ is the fact that some symptoms of many different forms of mental illness can be healed by the use of certain medications, while most symptoms of possession can only be taken care of by someone who specializes in getting rid of whatever the individual is possessed by, such as an exorcist. It should also be added that when it comes to getting help from someone such as a specialist or an exorcist, those with a mental illness are usually willing to get help from someone, while someone who may be possessed is usually the opposite, which they are resistant to getting the proper help from an exorcist.

I shall now go more in depth about some of the many forms of mental illness that can be mistaken with ease for possession, and one of those forms of mental illness is schizophrenia. To start off, schizophrenia is said to be “a mental disorder that is characterized by a change in the affected individual’s normal brain cortical structure” (DeLisi, 119). In other words, the outer layer of the individual’s outer layer of their cerebrum is changed due to the schizophrenia. “Some of its symptoms, such as delusions and hallucinations, can produce great subjective
psychological pain” (Irmak, 774). The person affected by this will feel as they are losing their mind because of these symptoms. Of course, many people would have never thought that schizophrenia would be mistakenly connected to possession. However, some observations were made and some of those observations believed that people who have schizophrenia are experiencing some form of possession. Now, this would seem pretty understandable due to the fact that a person who has schizophrenia usually experiences hallucinations. There are times where those hallucinations would consist of the affected individual hearing voices that they think are there, but they actually are not. Most of those voices that they hear have a tendency to say “bad things” (Irmak, 776) to the individual. Here, this is one of the many instances where many of these observers think that possession plays a factor in schizophrenics. Those hallucinations may be what is referred to as an “auditory input” that happens because of the demons. What is meant by auditory input is that “the inputs of the hallucination can be heard by the affected individual” (Irmak, 776), and they can therefore hear the so-called demons while others who do not have schizophrenia cannot. The same thing would apply to the delusions that the person would experience during a schizophrenic episode. They also say that the so-called hallucinations that the person experiences in a schizophrenic episode, are “illusions that are transformations of perceptions, with a mixing of the reproduced perceptions of the subject’s fantasy with the real perceptions” (Irmak, 775). In other words, the hallucinations from schizophrenia are really what gives a person illusions of seeing things that are not real, and this is obviously true in almost all schizophrenics. However, the main issue here is that there are some observers who think that those hallucinations come from what they would call a “demonic world” (Irmak, 775), so in other words, the hallucinations that the affected person ends up experiencing “may be a result of
the fact that demons in the vicinity of the brain may form the symptoms of schizophrenia” (Irmak, 776). Some observers believe that delusions that the affected person would go through may be the result of the person’s brain being attacked by demons. However, those assumptions that those observers made about the hallucinations and delusions raise the skeptic in me because usually when someone is possessed, whether it is from a spirit, a demon, or anything supernatural, they would usually exhibit symptoms of speaking in tongues and speaking a foreign language in which that person has or has not learned before in their life (most of the time being not). When it comes to observing those with schizophrenia and their episodes, it is rare that those with the mental illness do end up speaking in tongues or speak in a foreign language that they have never spoken before. Another thing that makes this belief of possession being the cause of schizophrenia rather skeptical is that the evidence that is shown in articles that deem possession as the cause of schizophrenia is only based off of “studies that only view the perceptions of faith healers and clergy beliefs, instead of those studies being from the assessment of patients by professionals in this sort of discipline and having possession be diagnosed from a diagnostic system that is reliable” (Karanci, 1691). In other words, there seems to be some sort of religious bias when it comes to these studies that were conducted by these researchers. If someone were to want to study whether possession causes a sort of mental illness, it would be beneficial for them to study a patient that is said to have a mental illness, rather than having them interview a religious individual such as a priest or a faith healer. This sort of issue could be the explanation as to why there is no form of scientific evidence available in these observations.
Schizophrenia is not the only form of mental illness that is commonly mistaken for the possession of an individual. Another form of mental illness that is commonly mistaken for possession is bipolar disorder (formerly known as manic depression). It is “a chronic psychiatric illness characterized by depression and at least 1 manic or hypomanic episode during the lifetime of the illness” (Calabrese et al., 425). In other words, the person who is affected by bipolar disorder can be seen to have episodes of great high moods such as extreme happiness to extremely low (or unhappy) moods. By observing the symptoms of bipolar disorder, it can be easy to see how this mental disorder can be easily mistaken for possession. When observing someone who is possessed by something supernatural, most of the time the possessed individual experiences nearly the same mood swings that someone with bipolar disorder would experience. However, there are some obvious differences between bipolar disorder and possession that people are failing to take note of. One of those differences is that when someone is experiencing an episode due to them having bipolar disorder, there is usually “no loss of self-control” (Isaacs, 263), unlike someone who is believed to be possessed. When someone is possessed, they are usually not in control of their own bodies, meaning that whatever is possessing that individual, whether it is a spirit, demon, or anything supernatural, can make that person do whatever they wish for them to do. Because of this, that person could end up taking part in self-injurious and dangerous behaviors, such as setting one’s self on fire or stabbing one’s self, whereas with bipolar disorder, the person could end up experiencing mood swings but at the same time not engage in any self-injurious behavior that is beyond the manipulation of that individual. Another notable difference between the two is the fact that when someone has bipolar disorder, they experience chemical imbalances in the brain, and those chemical imbalances in the brain can be
easily taken care of by the use of Lithium, since it “reduces the risk of its relapse” (Geddes, 217).

On the other hand, with possession, a person who is believed to have been possessed cannot simply be treated with Lithium or any other mood-alternating drug. Rather, possession would have to be taken care of by an exorcism. This difference cannot be anymore obvious. If one were to try to cure someone with bipolar disorder with an exorcism, it is very likely that no matter how many exorcism sessions the individual would go through, their disorder is not going to go anywhere, because once again, bipolar disorder is caused by abnormal brain chemistry, not anything that would fall into the category of being supernatural.

The final form of mental illness that I will be discussing that can be easily mistaken as possession is major depression. Major depression is basically a more severe form of depression, which consists of many dreadful symptoms such as extreme sadness, unwillingness to live, and social isolation. Even though there are many more symptoms of major depression, these are among the main symptoms. It can be easy to see how someone with major depression can be seen as possessed in a few ways. One of those ways is that people who are possessed tend to socially isolate themselves. Unfortunately, that is also what happens with someone who is affected by major depression. Another way in which someone with major depression can be mistaken is being possessed is the fact that when observing one individual with major depression and another individual with some sort of possession, both individuals are likely to experience some sort of cognitive deficit, whether it is in social cognition (how people store, process, and apply information that they receive), metacognition (the understanding of one’s thought process), or retro-cognition (the ability to discern past events). However, the type of issues in cognition
that an individual with major depression experiences and the type of cognition issues that an individual who is possessed experiences are nothing more than contrastive. When it comes to an individual being affected by major depression, studies have shown that there is “a deficit that the individual experiences with social cognitive ability, as well as the metacognitive ability” (Ladegaard, 269). However, when it comes an individual being under possession, that individual’s retro-cognition appears to be affected. To be more specific, that individual experiences a sudden ability in using retro-cognition when previously they did not possess an ability to do such a thing. Another difference that one should note between major depression and possession is that when someone is suffering from major depression, there are times where the affected individual may partake in self-injurious behaviors, such as cutting or self-mutilation (or “the deliberate destruction or alteration of body tissue” (Favazza, 137)), which is also something that can be observed with someone who is possessed. However, the differences between the self-injurious behaviors that end up taking place between the two is that the individual with major depression is aware that they are injuring themselves, while someone who is possessed, on the other hand, is usually unaware that they are doing this. This is because whatever is possessing the affected individual is the thing that is manipulating the individual’s body, not the person itself.

I will now be discussing some examples of cases where people were mistaken as being possessed (by a spirit, demon, etc.), when in reality, they were actually suffering from some form of mental illness. The first case that I will discuss is a German girl by the name of Anneliese Michel, who had “died on July 1, 1976, after a series of exorcism rituals that extended for
months” (Duffey, xiv). Michel was said to have been possessed by a total of six demons, and according to those who have studied this case, Michel would act abnormally as a result of being in possession by these six demons. She would become aggressive, and she would also partake in self-injurious behaviors. Eventually, these behaviors would deteriorate to the point where she began to hallucinate and see “ghastly, distorted faces” (Goodman, 36). Determined that she was possessed by demons, her concerned parents had decided to seek some exorcists to help get rid of her issues. During the exorcism sessions, the exorcists would observe Anneliese and her “incoherent screams mixed with furious profanity” (Goodman, xii). However, the legitimacy of Michel being possessed by demons is questionable because when growing up, she had a strict, religious upbringing which was said to have played a huge role in what Anneliese was really suffering from, which was a form of mental illness. When a court case took place after Michel’s death, it had been discovered that her so-called “demonic possession” that she was going through was actually a case of religious hysteria. The incoherent screaming and cursing are some of the many symptoms of hysteria, which also happen to be synonymous with some of the symptoms of possession, so it can easily be seen as to why Michel was mistaken to be possessed, when in reality she had hysteria. It should also be noted that those priests that conducted the exorcism sessions acted under some sort of “spiritual hysteria” (Duffey, xv). In other words, those priests acted according to their spiritual beliefs, which could mean that possession could be some sort of religious phenomena, even though that cannot be confirmed yet. Another case in which someone with a mental illness was mistaken to have been in possession by something supernatural was a religious, Indian girl by the name of Daya, who was “a newlywed fifteen year-old girl of the Chamar caste” (Castillo, 142), which is a community in India. It was said that Daya was
possessed by a ghost by the name of “Chand Kor”, who was “a friend of Daya’s who had died after her family had forced her into taking her own life when she had conceived a child before marriage” (Castillo, 142). Around this time in India, having premarital affairs was considered to be frowned upon, and girls who were caught taking part in those affairs would be forced to die. Even though Daya had not taken part in any affairs before her marriage, she was still scared to engage in sexual acts with her husband at first for unknown reasons. After getting married, Daya underwent a process that was well-known in India, which was moving into the husband’s village with his family after marriage. This process is said to take place in stages, with the first visit with the husband’s family being the first stage, the second visit being the second stage, and the third visit being the third stage. The first stage consists of sleeping at the husband’s village with no intercourse. The second stage would be when intercourse would first occur, and the third and final stage would consist of the couple engaging in intercourse regularly. “Her (Daya’s) spirit possession experiences began during the third visit with her husband’s family” (Castillo, 143). As a result of this possession, Daya would refuse to sleep with her husband. The reason to why she would refuse to sleep with her husband is because she would feel ill. Something that should be noted about this “illness” that Daya had is that she “still felt ill even the ‘ghost’ did not have control of the body” (Castillo, 143) (the ghost being Chand Kor), which is something that can raise some skepticism since if she really were to be possessed by this ghost, she would have only felt ill when she was possessed by the ghost. Those who were observing Daya had thought the same thing. Eventually, they concluded that hysteria was the main culprit in Daya’s illness, not possession.
It seems that when it comes to possession being the cause of certain forms of mental illness in patients, there still seems to be a belief among certain religions that all forms of mental illness are caused by some form of possession, whether it is by a spirit, ghost, demon, or anything supernatural. However, it also seems that religious beliefs are not the only factor in people’s beliefs in possession causing certain forms of mental illness. It is also the similarities in the symptoms of possession and certain forms of mental illness that seem to confuse people when determining whether someone is mentally ill or possessed. Yet, by doing proper research and observations of these individuals who are believed to be possessed, as well as having knowledge of the differences in the symptoms of mental illnesses or possessions, more people can have the ability to distinguish mental illness from possession. This is not to mention that people who are mentally ill will less likely be mistaken as being possessed, and therefore less people will have to go through many useless exorcism sessions just to get nowhere, or worse, be innocently killed (even though this occurrence is rare). To add onto this, it also seems that most of the people who believe in possession being the cause of all forms of mental illness are religious people, which leads me to think that this whole ordeal is some religious phenomenon. In other words, it is something that is seen to exist according to those who are deep into religion, such as priests, exorcists, and many other religious individuals. Due to the unlikelihood of those religious individuals giving up those beliefs, it is likely that the debate over whether possession is what causes mental illness or not will continue into the future.
References


