

A QUALITATIVE STUDY: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION, RELIGION, AND CULTURE ON PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TRANCE PHENOMENON IN EAST NUSA TENGGARA

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Abstract. The phenomenon of 'trance' can occur in various places, but education, culture, and religion influence how people perceive the trance phenomenon. A qualitative approach was used with a purposive sampling technique, by interview. This study aims to determine the role of education, religion, and culture on the perception of psychology students, at Universitas Nusa Cendana about the trance phenomenon in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). A total of seven students participated in interviews in this study. Thematic analysis resulted in four main themes: emotional experience when seeing a trance, the influence of religion in explaining the trance phenomenon, the meaning of trance in NTT culture, and the awareness of self-balancing. It was found that initial views on the phenomenon of 'trance' were influenced by religion and culture. However, education as a psychology student provided a new perspective on the concept of Dissociative Trance Disorder (DTD).

Keywords: Trance, NTT Culture, DTD, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

The belief that humans coexist with the spiritual world is still recognized by Indonesians today. An event where spirits from the spiritual world enter and control humans is the definition of trance for Indonesians. Various historical records from China, Egypt, Babylon, and Ancient Greece show that people in ancient times saw trance as a phenomenon where evil spirits entered, so to overcome it was to perform an exorcism by drinking medicine from a mixture of certain ingredients, and even inhumane practices such as not feeding and whipping (Kring et al., 2012). However, in psychology, the phenomenon of trance can be explained by Dissociative Trance Disorder (DTD). Dissociative is a behavioral disorder that is shown by changes in mental status or consciousness so that it makes someone who experiences it look like they have different memories and identities (Ginting & Effendy, 2019). The term trance is taken from two Latin words, 'transitus', which means passage, and 'transire', which means passing through so that the word trance means an event where natural or normal consciousness moves to an unnatural or abnormal state of consciousness (Gosseries et al., 2024). 'Trance' in psychology can be explained as DTD which is an event where a person loses his awareness of the real world caused by stress due to social pressure, or trauma such as victim of natural disasters, malnutrition, economic pressure, and social pressure, any inability to express feelings or thoughts is a manifestation of 'Trance' (Hidayatin, 2017).

Although the phenomenon of trance has been described as a disorder in psychology. Society today still sees the cause of mental disorders as being possessed by evil spirits, and this belief has become a doctrine, recognized in religious teachings and inherited (Irkani, 2018). In addition, several other factors cause a person to experience DTD, namely genetics, socio-culture, trauma, especially in childhood, and economic factors (Ginting & Effendy, 2019). A study by Irkani (2018) found that there are differences in perceptions between psychologists and *peruqyah* (jinn exorcists in Islam) towards the phenomenon of trance, where psychologists view the phenomenon of trance as caused by psychological conflicts, then trance occurs as a form of self-defense, while *peruqyah* has the main

view that trance is caused by jinn entering a person's body.

The study proves that there are differences in perspective between people who have received psychology education and those who have not received psychology education. This can be implied that the level of education, knowledge, and experience can affect a person's perception of the trance phenomenon (Irkani, 2018). Besides education, culture also influences the perception of trance. Each culture has a different perspective on the causes of trance. However, the phenomenon of trance has a high potential to be experienced by people who live in a culture that nurtures a demonological mindset for generations, and therefore the phenomenon of mass trance is not a new thing in Indonesia. The same case with the culture in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). In NTT, people still believe that trance is caused by spirits from other realms entering a person's body.

In the beliefs of NTT people, such as research conducted by Jebadu (2019) found that the trance phenomenon is interpreted as the influence of evil spirits transferred by witches (*suanggi*). Trance occurs as a medium for the transfer of evil spirits that NTT people believe in (Jebadu, 2019). This research also shows that most people in NTT are still attached to cultural beliefs about evil spirits. Another study by Setio & Molla (2022), found that there are people in NTT who still believe that the cause of the trance phenomenon is because they are controlled by spirits, controlled by spirits who have died, and debts from family legacies or unfinished ancestors. The ritual of summoning a deceased spirit to communicate through another family member who will die soon is also carried out by fulfilling other conditions according to the request of the deceased spirit (Setio & Molla, 2022). From this research, it can be seen that the people of NTT still have a strong view that the phenomenon of trance is not included in a disorder that can be explained scientifically.

Besides culture, religion also influences the perception of the phenomenon of trance. Research by Charan et al., (2020) found that religion has a significant role in handling the phenomenon of trance. The study, which was conducted in Pakistan, saw that people who had experienced trance were people who did not have an attachment to God in the participant's religion, this belief made participants believe that trance occurred due to the entry of evil spirits. Various rituals are performed by people who are considered to have power from God (Charan et al., 2020). However, not many studies have examined how these aspects of education, culture, and religion affect perceptions of trance, so research is needed that specifically examines these three aspects. This study aims to determine how the role of education, religion, and culture affect psychology students' perceptions of the phenomenon of trance in NTT. This research can provide information about the various perspectives that are considered by audiences and psychology students in seeing the phenomenon of trance.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study focused on 3rd, 5th, and 7th semesters psychology students from Universitas Nusa Cendana (UNDANA) who live in Kupang City and whose area of origin is East Nusa Tenggara. NTT province is famous as Flobamorata, which stands for a collection of five major islands in NTT, namely Flores, Sumba, Timor, Alor, and Lembata. Diverse regions indicate different perceptions from each region, especially the perceptions held by Undana Psychology students based on beliefs, culture, and science.

This qualitative research used interviews as the main method of data collection. Every story obtained during the interview became the primary data in this study. A total of 7 psychology students who are students in the 3rd, 5th, and 7th semesters, are willing to be interviewed and be part of this study. Sampling was done purposively by considering six criteria, namely (1) active undana psychology students in semesters 3, 5, and 7, (2) aged 17-25 years, (3) believe in God, (4) have a religion (5) comes from NTT (6) has seen the trance directly. These criteria had to be appropriate, to obtain in-depth data and by the objectives of this study. Further information about the participants is detailed in Table 1

Table 1. Demographic Data.

Initials	Age	Semester	Origin
A. C	21	3	Flores
A. L	19	3	Rote
M. F	20	3	Flores
N. B	20	3	Flores
O. L	19	3	Timor
S. F	20	5	Sumba
V. T	21	7	Timor

The entire research process was conducted from October 2024 to November 2024. The three researchers acted as interviewers and each person was assigned two to three interviewees. The research began with contacting potential interviewees in person. The candidates were given a detailed explanation of the study. After the candidates agreed to be interviewed, the time for the interview was scheduled according to the participants' available time. The interview process was structured, and each participant received the same safety and comfort during the interview process. Each researcher acted as an observer and was in charge of voice recording during the interview process. All interviews were completed using a mixture of Bahasa Indonesia and Kupang-Malay Kreol. On the most average, interviews lasted around 30 to 45 minutes. After the interviews, all authors will transcribe the interviews, and code them, then the first author will analyze the data using thematic analysis.

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were conducted by the three researchers, no later than 5 days after the interview. Furthermore, the 7th transcripts were coded by each researcher according to the verbatim. All codes were checked by the first author. After that, the first author coded without using any help from the qualitative research application and also manually extracted the themes. The themes were then discussed by all authors and also given to the participants for feedback. The writing of the paper was done mainly by the first author with help from the other authors

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Based on the results of interviews and thematic analysis about the role of culture, religion, and education on the phenomenon of trance in NTT among psychology students at Nusa Cendana University, the following four themes were observed: emotional experience when seeing a trance, the influence of religion in explaining the trance phenomenon, the meaning of trance in NTT culture, and the awareness of self-balancing

Table 1. Four Themes

Theme	Description
Emotional experience when seeing a trance	Various emotional feelings appear when you directly see a 'trance'.
The influence of religion in explaining the trance phenomenon	Religion makes psychology students confused about the truth of the existence of evil spirits.

The meaning of trance in NTT culture	Culture persuades psychology students that trances are caused by the spirits of family or ancestors.
The awareness of self-balancing	Despite receiving psychology education, students still maintain a balanced point of view.

1.1 Emotional experience when seeing a trance

When witnessing the phenomenon of trance firsthand, several expressions described the experience, namely surprise, and confusion, and the majority answered fear. These feelings arose because participants often witnessed someone who was in a trance show unexpected behavior. Some participants also said that there were events during the trance phenomenon that sometimes could not be explained logically.

At school, there was a mass trance, and those in the trance behaved very strangely, lifting their skirts, those who had never smoked suddenly smoked, cursing the teacher, and then their bodies suddenly became heavy to lift. I have also witnessed a trance at home that happened to my brother, he suddenly said his body was very hot and spoke in a voice that was different from his original voice, at that time I felt confused and scared. (N. B)

In addition, other factors influence the emergence of these feelings such as the environment that responds excessively when a trance occurs. All participants stated that people around them were very expressive by shouting or running when there was a trance. As a result, some participants stated that panic and confusion were felt.

At that time I was in the second grade of junior high school, we were taking notes in class, and I was sitting in the front seat, then without realizing it, one of my friends stood up and walked like a lifeless person, he was like another person, it looked like a Chinese ghost, at that time my friends who were sitting at the back screamed and ran out of the class, at that time I was confused, but when I turned back I saw my friend (who was possessed) was near me and wanted to hold my shoulder, I immediately ran out of the class following the others. I was so scared. (O. L)

Participants also expressed how beliefs about trance as a phenomenon where a spirit enters and possesses a person were reinforced because they often witnessed the phenomenon firsthand. In settings such as places of grief, trance often occurs and is considered a common occurrence. The spirit of the deceased will enter and deliver its message to the living family members.

I once saw my dead grandfather being called by a "smart" person to enter his body, and then my grandfather communicating with my grandmother. I believe more and more that trance exists because I have seen it several times, most often in a place of grief, so the dead person enters the body of a living person, then conveys their will or whatever has not been conveyed. (V. T).

1.2 The influence of religion in explaining the trance phenomenon

Religion strongly influences one's view of supernatural events. This was felt by the participants. Participants in this study revealed that religious teachings specialize in trance as an event where evil spirits enter and take control of a person.

In my religion, trance happens when evil spirits possess someone because their faith is not strong. (A. L, Christian)

Some participants also revealed that to prevent trance, they must pray diligently and get closer to God. This view is reinforced because the exorcism event is described in the Bible. Some participants mentioned the incident where the Lord Jesus cast out an evil spirit that entered a man's body and transferred it to a herd of pigs, which is described in the Bible. The description of the event in the Bible strengthens the belief that trance exists.

I don't know whether to believe it or not, but in the Bible, there is an incident in which the Lord Jesus cast out an evil spirit and transferred the evil spirit into pigs. I don't want to believe it, but that's what my religion teaches (A. C, Catholic).

Then, there was a participant who revealed that his religion did not consider it taboo for the phenomenon of trance to be described as a disturbance. The religious leader where she lives teaches that not all trances are caused by evil spirits. Of the many cases handled, only a few trances were caused by evil spirits.

In the Catholic church, the trance could be overcome with an exorcism. However, I was taught by a teacher who usually works with priests that if a priest views trance as a mental problem, only a few percent of trance cases are caused by evil spirits. The rest are due to cognitive problems. (N. B, Catholic)

1.3 The meaning of trance in NTT culture

Views on trance were influenced by the participants' culture. Almost all participants said that their culture of origin sees trance as an event where spirits or spirits of deceased relatives have entered and want to convey a message. Trance does not always have a negative connotation.

In my culture (Timor), trance can be a sign when our 'Guardians' are passed down from generation to generation, for example from the ancestors to his parents, and then to him. So trance is like destiny because the 'figure' of the guardian will appear to convey a message when something happens. (O. L)

Meanwhile, in other participants' cultures, a trance is an event that must occur during a traditional ceremony. However, there is a common view that the spirits that enter are the spirits of ancestors or close relatives who have died. Trance is a way for those who have died to tell stories of unfinished business.

In Manggarai (Flores), when we have a traditional ceremony, one of the family members who is participating in the ceremony must go into a trance, and it is the ancestors or family members such as the deceased grandfather who enter. At the time of the trance, the people who are participating in the traditional ceremony must have known "Oooh this is grandfather entering" for example. Usually, he enters to convey something. (M. F)

On the other hand, one participant stated something different. A trance is an event that has a negative connotation because someone in a trance must have broken customary law or been abused. Even in open places such as tourist attractions, there are customary laws that apply and must be obeyed. In my place (Flores), if for example, we go to a waterfall, there are rules (unwritten). For example, if we go to a waterfall, we must wash our face with the water before swimming. If not, don't be surprised to come home from the waterfall sick. But I also believe that trances are caused by people (witchcraft). (N. B)

1.4 The awareness of self-balancing

The psychology students who participated in this study showed a high awareness that they need to balance traditional views and the knowledge gained as psychology students. This is due to their learning about pathological concepts, especially about DTD. This well-developed understanding also helped them to de-stigmatize people who had experienced trance.

I now see people who are called 'trance' and don't immediately believe it. Because I have studied (psychology), especially when it is explained in the DTD concept. So I already know the characteristics when a person is in a trance and whether they fulfill the symptoms of DTD. I don't give direct judgment like "You're in a trance because of this and that", I have more consideration now. I also don't agree with them (the surrounding community) considering trance as a traditional disease that cannot be cured. (S. F)

In addition, some participants revealed that they still maintain the traditional view that trance can be caused by external forces such as spirits. This broad perspective helps participants to be wiser when looking at the phenomenon of trance. By understanding the concept of DTD, many participants realized that trance can occur due to psychological conflict or trauma. Therefore, the role of psychology students is to balance society's views by starting from ourselves, without ignoring our cultural and religious values.

Initially, I thought that trance happened because of the possession of a spirit. However, after studying and knowing that this is a science that I must hold, I began to reduce the prominent belief in one aspect only (religion or culture). I understand that trance can be caused by other factors. (A. L)

Perceptions of trance in this study look at how three major factors namely education, religion, and culture have influenced the perceptions of psychology students in seeing the phenomenon of trance in NTT. Through data analysis, four themes were determined, the first theme, namely The emotional experience of witnessing the phenomenon of trance, illustrates how the participants' emotional feelings when the phenomenon of trance in the past occurred, namely there were feelings of surprise, confusion, and fear. Participants revealed that these emotional feelings arose because someone in a trance often behaves strangely, and aggressively and there is a strong intense reaction from people around. These emotional reactions follow the findings of research by Hamzah (2021), that when a mass trance occurs at school, the response of other students is panic, fear, and trying to stay away from the location of the trance.

The reaction reinforces the belief that participants in this study believe trance is real. This can be attributed to the participants' cultural belief system as the meaning of 'trance' is influenced by cultural context (Maraldi et al., 2020). The emotional feelings that arose in the participants indicated that the participants' cultural belief system considered DTD as a trance. In the second theme, The influence of religion in explaining the phenomenon of trance, when the data was "How is the phenomenon of trance explained in your religion?", all participants answered that trance was caused by "evil spirits", "jinn" and "not strong faith". Some Christian and Catholic participants mentioned exorcisms in their religious teachings. DTD is more often explained by the phenomenon of trance where evil spirits enter due to a lack of faith in Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Paganism, Wiccan, Voodoo, and traditionalism in Africa (Ventriglio et al., 2018). Meanwhile, in Islam, DTD is seen as a trance phenomenon that occurs because a person has many sins and is possessed by a jinn. Research conducted by Siswanto et al., (2020), on six children aged 13-18 years who had experienced trance, through semi-structured interviews found that three participants had experienced trance disorders thinking that participants should not be far from their Creator, must pray diligently, otherwise the participants thought they would be possessed by spirits and possessed again.

These findings illustrate that religion plays a role in shaping psychology students' perceptions of the trance phenomenon in NTT. The third theme, namely the meaning of trance from the perspective of NTT culture, participants explained how the participants' culture of origin has its point of view

regarding the phenomenon of trance. It was found that there are similarities between the cultural perspectives of participants who came from the NTT area in this study, namely that trance is a phenomenon where ancestors or ancestors possess the body to convey messages. Trance can be perceived as "good trance" and "bad trance". Almost all participants in this study explained that trance has the connotation of "good trance" because of the entry of the spirits of dead ancestors or family to convey messages and make it easier to get information about something. By the opinion of Pietkiewicz et al., (2019: 9) "There seems to be a thin line between malignant and non malignant possession". The findings in the study were that almost all participants revealed that trance could occur because they violated customs or the deceased wanted to provide information to solve unfinished problems during their lifetime. Although the experience of trance can happen to people in different places, culture influences how it is viewed and handled (Maraldi et al., 2020).

All participants from the NTT region in this study also revealed that the phenomenon of trance is common in several places, for example in schools, places of grief, places that are believed to have guardians, and during traditional ceremonies. The belief that every place has a 'Guardian' shapes participants' perceptions of the trance phenomenon. The fourth theme, Awareness of self-balancing demonstrates that participants do not separate traditional views and pathological views in perceiving the phenomenon of trance. Participants' views on trance shifted after receiving psychopathology courses, especially learning about DTD. Participants realized that the phenomenon of trance, which was previously only known as a manifestation from a traditional perspective, could be explained from a pathological perspective. Some participants stated that they came to understand that trauma and stress can cause someone to go into a trance. This new pathological perspective has resulted in less stigma and fear towards people who have been in a trance, so they think that it takes careful consideration if they want to judge and say someone is in a trance.

However, psychology student participants in this study also revealed that there is a dilemma in understanding and perceiving the phenomenon of trance. As psychology students, there is a responsibility and a 'burden' that is borne if they do not see the phenomenon of trance from a pathological perspective. But, on the other hand, they realize that they can't eliminate the cultural and religious values that they have carried since childhood. Therefore, the participants fully realized that it is very important to balance the perception of the phenomenon of trance from the traditional and scientific points of view. As psychology students, we should not reject one point of view and only accept one of them. This means that participants were aware of their role as psychology students and their role as individuals living in a traditional environment.

CONCLUSION

The perception of the phenomenon of trance among psychology students in this study was influenced by cultural and religious views before getting psychopathology courses, but after getting psychopathology courses, participants understood that trance could be caused by psychological factors, namely the explanation in DTD. There is a shift in perspective regarding the cause of 'trance'. Understanding the role of psychology, religion, and culture in interpreting the phenomenon of trance can increase positive awareness by looking at a phenomenon from various perspectives. The social stigma of trance as a phenomenon of spirit possession must be balanced with explanations from a pathological perspective. This knowledge can increase the awareness of psychology students and the community in placing the perception and handling of 'trance'.

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