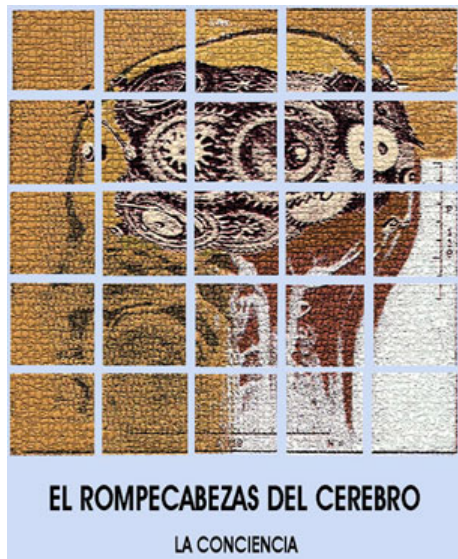


Debunking 'auras' and other magic in Spain

By Jennifer Riggins | May 17, 2012, 3:21 AM PDT



GRANADA—In a country where psychic hotlines dominate public airways at nighttime, university psychologists have begun to prove the ability to read auras is simply an added biological trait.

Emilio Gomez is the supervisor for Oscar Iborra's doctoral thesis, regarding special infrequent types of "synesthesia," which in ancient Greek is "together" and "sensation." Essentially, it is how one sensory or cognitive pathway involuntarily affects another pathway.

"We have explored overall person-color synesthesia, in different populations, artists overall. Then we thought that it was similar to the esoteric aura and then decided to explore the relationships," Gomez says. Artists, persons of religion, and mind readers and the like each have been historically-perceived as depicting the auras of others, which can be a colored radiation of light surrounding their patients and customers. "The phantom experience is not always a color, it can be also a temperature or a number," Gomez

clarifies. The colors are often then interpreted, ending in the giving of medical, emotional and spiritual advice or even alleged healing.

"About the extra-sensory psychic powers like reading auras, we think that (emotional) synesthesia can explain the origin of the beliefs in auras—person-color synesthesia—and (healing by) hand, mirror-touch synesthesia," Gomez says. Essentially, the University's research attempts to prove that there may be some reality to what healers and readers are perceiving, but that there is a logical neurological basis behind it, not some sort of higher power.

Gomez admits that this is just a theory, and they still have a lot of work to do. "Our main idea is that person-color synesthesia is very heterogeneous and related to very different parts of the brain. Sometimes the connection is between color zone and emotional brain, but others between motor brain and color zone, or between memory areas and color zone," he says.

"I do not know about other countries, but in the south of Spain a lot of people believe in an esoteric world, reading hands, (healing) by hands, bad eye, different (visions) and so on. It is not difficult to find in small villages people with these 'powers'," Gomez says with air-quotes.

Gomez teaches at the University of Granada, near one of Spain's most famous holy figures "Santo" Esteban de Baza. In 1983, Esteban claims—after falling from a cliff and losing consciousness—to have seen the Virgin Mary, who then bestowed him with healing powers, at the age of 11. Since then, about 40 people a day come to him for healing of all sorts, especially eye ailments. Esteban is one of many fortune tellers and healers alleged to be in the areas of Baza and Gaudix, which economically benefit from incoming tourists and worshipers.



Apparently, certain jobs, like priests and painters, are more likely to have the neuropsychological phenomenon of synesthesia. The research saw a higher likelihood of synesthesia in artists and persons of religious, but Gomez says it is not a sufficient condition unto itself.

“You need also other personality traits. To be a religious person of this kind, a holy man, your frame of beliefs must be related to schizotypal (personality) or similar,” which is a type of social anxiety disorder. “About the artists, if your brain is more interconnected and it offers to you more emotional intelligence or different points of view, more cognitive flexibility and so on, then this type of mind is congruent with the artistic way of life.”

Gomez explains that he doesn't believe this extra neuropsychological trait is necessary in order to be a successful artist or person of religion, but that it helps. “You can be a good non-synesthete artist and vice versa. We do not know if to be a synesthete makes you a good or a bad artist. In the same sense, I think that to be synesthete make you a better (holy man) or religious person. I mean, your powers can be not real, but you are more emotional and convincing,” Gomez says. “Not all people of religion have it. Only the frequency is higher than in general population, but probably” even higher in artists, he further explains.

If you don't have this natural trait, you can still acquire it. “Yes, there is always the option of associative learning, but the learned synesthesia is poorer, less emotional, different,” Gomez says.

He doesn't think their research is finished, as the brain contains infinite mysteries that he and his students will continue to try to unlock. He assures that his goal is scientific, not to disprove anyone, but to prove science.

“I mean for me it is not a question of all or nothing,” Gomez says, assuring that he isn't aiming to disprove all healers as crock. “In the same sense that probably there are not super heroes like Superman, but you can find real heroes.”

To read the actual paper, go to Gomez's student's thesis. This research is based on Chapter 9, starting on page 157.

Photo of Esteban: La Casa del Arcoiris

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