

FORUM

Changes Resulting from Paranormal/ Spiritual Experiences and their Effects on People's Wellbeing: An Exploratory Examination

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The aims of this study were to evaluate the effects of paranormal and mystical/spiritual experiences on people's lives and to evaluate changes resulting from such experiences. Twenty-four participants attended workshops about paranormal/spiritual experiences. The *Index of Changes Resulting From Experiences* and a checklist of possible effects of paranormal or transcendent experiences were used. All of the respondents reported at least one paranormal experience, and 83% reported at least one transcendent experience. The high percentage of paranormal experiences reported may reflect the fact that respondents were recruited based on interest in parapsychology and the paranormal. Seventy per cent now have a purpose in life as a result of their paranormal or transcendent experience; 62% have had paranormal and/or transcendent experiences since childhood; 54% said they became significantly more spiritual or religious as a result of their experiences; and 54% were helped to understand and accept death. The fact that anomalous experiences apparently induce positive reactions in some people provides a strong impetus for further research. This line of research also has significant implications for understanding better not only those people who volunteer to participate in parapsychological experiments but also the results of those experiments.

KEYWORDS paranormal/spiritual experiences, wellbeing, positive reactions

Introduction

A worldview that is open to aspects of life beyond the physical-materialistic realm can be conducive to health and wellbeing (Borysenko 1993; Gartner, Larson and Allen 1991). Milton (1992) reported a small initial survey of the effect of psychic experiences on people's lives. Interest in research on mind-body medicine and the link between spirituality and health is now growing rapidly. For those who find their experiences disturbing and frightening, however, participation in some form of therapy may be beneficial (see Kohls 2012; Montanelli and Parra 2004). 1

A need for reassurance may manifest itself in various degrees. Some people may simply want to talk to someone about their experience rather than seeking counselling as such. Many parapsychological experiences are so uncanny that experiencers often fear friends will laugh if the incident is confided to them. Thus, the opportunity simply to verbalize the experience to a non-evaluative listener permits experiencers to reassure themselves that the experience really happened and to make the incident seem more coherent in their own mind.

Other people want confirmation that the experience was paranormal and not delusory. The parapsychologist might, therefore, help the individual to work through the experience to establish its personal significance: regardless of the paranormality of the experience, what does the experiencer take to be its meaning and its place in her/his life? This is not to suggest that all ostensibly paranormal experiences are crucially meaningful in a psychodynamic sense; the idea of their functional significance certainly should not be pushed dogmatically by the parapsychologist. But the individual's very interest in the status of the experience is often an indication that it is associated with an issue of some psychological significance — and the experiencer can at least be invited to explore that possibility.

Although one might expect that psychic experiences would promote this type of worldview, little research has been done in parapsychology on the effects of psychic experiences on people's lives and worldviews (Kennedy and Kanthamani 1995; Kennedy, Kanthamani and Palmer 1994; Milton, 1992). Several studies have found that near-death experiences induce positive changes or transformation in many people (Gallup with Proctor 1982; Greyson 1997; Greyson and Ring 2004; van Lommel 2004; van Lommel, van Wees, Meyers and Elfferich 2001), but this investigation generally has not been extended to other types of paranormal experiences.

Therapy in these cases may be more effective if cognizance is taken of the parapsychological elements rather than dismissing their possible paranormality out of hand. Belz-Merk (2002) recommends attention to the following issues during the course of counselling: de-dramatizing and de-mythologizing the parapsychological experience; assisting the client to explore possible explanations of the experience other than that which the client initially embraced; helping to integrate the experience with the client's self-concept and worldview; and guiding the client towards a restored sense of control over life.

Many people are quite disturbed by their parapsychological experience (Montanelli and Parra 2004; Targ, Schlitz and Irwin 2000) and need counselling in order to come to terms with the incident. One of the most common instances of

this type is the pre-cognitive experience: the experiencer had a premonitory dream of a tragic incident and, when the latter actually occurred, felt very guilty for not doing more to prevent the tragedy. Be this as it may, a useful issue to pursue in therapy is the possibility of functions other than intervention that the pre-cognitive experience might have served. The Near Death Experience (NDE) is another parapsychological experience that may have disturbing effects on the experiencer, quite apart from the actual threat to life. Although many people who have had an NDE are reassured by their experience, some are distressed by the apparent command to leave the paradisaical realm and to return to their earthly existence (Greyson, 2005); others are frustrated by the experience's ineffability which prevents its profound nature being shared with someone else.

Information on the effects of paranormal experiences may also provide insights into motivational factors that are widely presumed by parapsychologists to guide or underlie psi phenomena. Although motivational factors are thought to be pivotal for psi phenomena, very little research has been aimed at investigating the overall effects of paranormal experiences. This type of research may provide one of the best windows to the motivations underlying the phenomena. Information on the effects of psi phenomena for people who volunteer for parapsychological research may be of particular interest to experimental researchers.

The aims of the present study were (1) to evaluate the effects of paranormal and mystical/spiritual experiences on people's lives and (2) to evaluate changes resulting from such experiences.

Method

Participants

Adults who had had anomalous/paranormal experiences were recruited by an announcement placed on the Internet (www.alipsi.com.ar) at the Instituto de Psicología Paranormal in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Twenty-four participants, in the age range 22–71 years, of whom 65% (N=17) were female and 35% (N=7) male, completed the study. Sixty per cent had high school as their highest educational level; others had bachelors and higher degrees. Participants included people who were seeking information about anomalous/paranormal experiences they had had or were currently experiencing.

Membership of the participant group was voluntary, and material discussed in the group was confidential. One of the present authors (JMC) made an audio-tape recording of the verbalization of each member's experience. Over a period of five months, the group was led by two trained therapists who assumed a non-expert role which respected the participants' anomalous/paranormal experiences (which were not necessarily distressing or disturbing). Participants took part in weekly two-hour group sessions.

Informed consent was obtained, using language understandable by the participants. The informed consent implied that the person (1) had the capacity to consent; (2) had been informed of all significant information concerning the research process; (3) had freely and without undue influence expressed consent;

and that (4) consent had been appropriately documented (Barden 2001; Beahrs and Gutheil 2001).

Data collection¹

We used two primary questionnaires for this study based on previous research (see Kennedy and Kanthamani 1995; Kennedy, Kanthamani and Palmer 1994). This was influenced by several factors, among which were our previous experience with people reporting anomalous experiences and our preliminary explorations with various questionnaire strategies (Gómez Montanelli and Parra 2000; Parra 2006; Parra and Corbetta 2012). The Index and the Checklist were developed for use in two previous studies (Kennedy and Kanthamani 1995; Kennedy, Kanthamani and Palmer 1994) and in an Argentinian study (Parra 2008).

These questionnaires focus on paranormal and transcendent experiences. This broad subject matter was selected because our initial explorations found that people described a wide variety of anomalous experiences as affecting their lives and sometimes reported interactions among different types of experiences. Transcendent experiences included profound mystical or spiritual experiences. We were more interested in the effects of the experience than a precise categorization of the type of experience, however Table 1 illustrates percentages of different experiences.

In addition to the two questionnaires on the effects of the experiences, the participants were asked how many times they had had each type (paranormal or transcendent) of experience and to describe briefly their most important experience. Some experiences had both paranormal and transcendent features and were counted in both categories. Participants were also asked their age at the time of the experience and were given the option of *not* sharing the details of the experience for personal reasons. Each of the present authors independently classified the experience descriptions as paranormal, transcendent or both, and any discrepancies were subsequently resolved through discussion. Because we were primarily interested in the effects of the experiences, we accepted the participants' interpretations of their experiences and did not exclude experiences that appeared to us to be doubtful or of 'poor quality'.

Questionnaires

Index of Changes Resulting from Experiences. This questionnaire asks respondents whether their paranormal or transcendent experiences resulted in an increase, decrease, or no change for each of 21 feelings or characteristics: (1) How did this characteristic or feeling change as a result of the paranormal or transcendent experience(s)? and (2) To what degree did you have this characteristic or feeling before the paranormal or transcendent experience(s) occurred? (Very much, Some, Very little, and Don't know).

Checklist of Effects of Experiences. This questionnaire lists 20 statements (Yes/No) of possible effects of paranormal or transcendent experiences and asks the respondent to check all those that apply to him or her. Although a variety of sources

¹ Note that the exploratory tools used are not meant to be a serious clinical device, and no claims are made as to their validity or reliability.

TABLE 1
 PARANORMAL EXPERIENCES REPORTED BY GROUP PARTICIPANTS (N = 24)

<i>Paranormal/anomalous experiences</i>	<i>N (%)</i>
1. Telepathy awake	17 (70)
2. Spirit contact	16 (66)
3. Paranormal experiences in dreams	16 (66)
4. Spontaneous healing (as a healer)	16 (66)
5. Out-of-the-body experiences	14 (58)
6. Mystical experience	13 (54)
7. Spontaneous psychokinesis	12 (50)
8. Haunting (or seeing apparitions)	12 (50)
9. Spirit possession	9 (37)
10. Lights/energies (aura) perception	9 (37)
11. Near-death experiences	3 (13)
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was used to develop this list of statements, the primary source was the detailed responses from over 40 people to an earlier, preliminary open-ended questionnaire about the full effects of their anomalous experiences (see Parra and Corbetta, in press). [2]

Results

Range of experiences

The majority of participants reported multiple paranormal and transcendent experiences. As shown in Table 1, the high percentage of paranormal experiences may reflect the fact that participants were recruited based on interest in parapsychology and the paranormal. All reported at least one paranormal experience, and 83% reported at least one transcendent experience.

Index of changes resulting from experiences

The *Index of Changes Resulting from Experiences* questionnaire indicated increased interest and belief in spiritual matters and increased well-being. As

shown in Table 2, the most extreme changes were for spirituality-related items such as desire to achieve a higher consciousness, belief in life after death, and interest in spiritual or religious matters. A preponderance of positive responses was also found on well-being items such as feelings of happiness and well-being, sense of connection to others, optimism about the future, purpose or meaning in life, and motivation to maintain health. Reciprocal responses were found on the negative well-being items: feelings of isolation or loneliness, feelings of depression or anxiety, and worry and fears about the future.

For all but two items the changes resulting from the experiences were not related to the degree that the person had the feeling or characteristic prior to the experiences. The two exceptions were 'depression or anxiety' and 'worry and fears about the future', which had greater decreases associated with reported higher levels before the anomalous experiences.

TABLE 2
RESULTS FROM INDEX OF CHANGES RESULTING FROM EXPERIENCES (N = 24)

<i>Characteristic or Feeling</i>	<i>To what degree did you have this characteristic or feeling before the paranormal or transcendent experience(s) occurred?</i>								<i>How did this characteristic or feeling change as a result of the paranormal or transcendent experience(s)?</i>					
	<i>Very much</i>		<i>Some</i>		<i>Very little</i>		<i>Don't know</i>		<i>Increased</i>		<i>No Change</i>		<i>Decreased</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
1. Sense of purpose or meaning for my life	10	42	8	33	3	13	3	13	15	63	7	29	2	8
2. Worry and fears about the future	4	17	3	13	17	70	0	0	5	21	11	46	8	33
3. Fear of death	2	8	7	29	13	54	2	8	4	17	10	42	10	42
4. Desire to help others	16	66	4	17	2	8	2	8	19	79	5	21	0	0
5. Feelings of depression or anxiety	3	13	9	38	10	42	2	8	6	25	10	42	8	33
6. Sense of connection to others	9	38	11	46	4	17	0	0	18	75	6	25	0	0
7. Focus on living in the present	13	54	7	29	3	13	1	4	12	50	11	46	1	4
8. Interest in the paranormal	16	67	8	33	0	0	0	0	20	83	4	17	0	0
9. Desire to have a high standard of living	15	63	7	29	2	8	0	0	11	46	12	50	1	4
10. Belief in a higher power	12	50	8	33	4	17	0	0	11	46	12	50	1	4
11. Frustration with incompetent people	5	21	10	42	5	21	4	17	3	13	18	75	3	13
12. Feelings of happiness and well-being	9	38	11	46	4	17	0	0	13	54	9	38	2	8
13. Ability to express love	9	38	10	42	5	20	0	0	14	58	8	33	2	8
14. Feeling that my life has no direction	2	8	7	29	13	54	2	9	6	25	12	50	6	25
15. Motivation to maintain my health	14	58	7	29	2	8	1	4	15	63	8	33	1	4

Checklist of effects of experiences

The results from the *Checklist of Effects of Experiences* confirm the impacts on spirituality and well-being. As shown in Table 3, 70% of participants say they have a purpose in life as a result of their paranormal or transcendent experience; 62% had had paranormal and/or transcendent experiences since childhood; 37% are certain there is life after death; 54% became significantly more spiritual or religious; and 54% were helped to understand and accept death better.

Discussion

The present results are similar to findings obtained by Kennedy and Kanthamani (1995). People who are actively interested in parapsychology and have had experiences they interpret as paranormal or transcendent report that these experiences have enhanced their spiritual beliefs and well-being. The beneficial

TABLE 3

RESULTS FROM CHECKLIST OF EFFECTS OF EXPERIENCES NUMBERS OF PARTICIPANTS WHO CHECKED 'YES' ARE SHOWN AS (N, %)

1.	(8, 33%)	One or more paranormal experiences helped me avoid injury or avoid a serious personal or financial problem.
2.	(13, 54%)	One or more paranormal or transcendent experiences helped me accept and understand death.
3.	(12, 50%)	As a result of my paranormal or transcendent experience(s), I am certain there is life after death.
4.	(9, 37.5%)	I have seen or experienced paranormal phenomena that made me very afraid.
5.	(11, 46%)	A paranormal or transcendent experience was one of the most wonderful experiences of my life.
6.	(11, 46%)	When I was thinking about making a major life change, one or more paranormal or transcendent experiences seemed to confirm or reinforce that I should make the change.
7.	(9, 38%)	One or more paranormal or transcendent experiences motivated me to make a major life change that I was not previously thinking about making.
8.	(13, 54%)	I became significantly more spiritual or religious as a result of my paranormal or transcendent experience(s).
9.	(11, 46%)	One or more paranormal or transcendent experiences seemed to confirm or reinforce that I was doing what I should be doing.
10.	(18, 75%)	I feel like I have a purpose or mission in life as a result of my paranormal or transcendent experience(s).
11.	(8, 33%)	One or more paranormal experience(s) played a role in helping me meet someone with whom I formed an important personal or professional relationship.
12.	(15, 63%)	I have had paranormal and/or transcendent experiences since childhood.
13.	(11, 46%)	One or more paranormal or transcendent experiences played a role in helping me overcome a difficult personal problem.
14.	(13, 54%)	As a result of my paranormal or transcendent experience(s), I believe my life is guided or watched over by a higher force or being.
15.	(11, 46%)	My paranormal or transcendent experience(s) have made me more happy and confident.
16.	(3, 13%)	My paranormal or transcendent experience(s) have made me more anxious and insecure.
17.	(0, 0%)	My paranormal experience(s) have been scary with no positive value that I can find.
18.	(21, 88%)	I have had one or more experiences that I am certain were paranormal, and not just coincidence or imagination.
19.	(15, 63%)	One or more of the statements checked above was due to a sequence or combination of more than one paranormal and/or transcendent experiences.
20.	(2, 8%)	My paranormal and/or transcendent experiences have had little effect on my life so far.

effects reported here presumably are manifestations of the operative motivations and certainly merit further investigation. The sense of purpose or meaning for my life (63%), the desire to help others (79%), the sense of connection to others (75%), the interest in the paranormal (83%), the belief in life after death (75%), and the desire to achieve a higher consciousness (85%) all increased as a result of the paranormal or transcendent experience. Other emotional reactions decreased as a result of the paranormal or transcendent experience, such as worries and fears about the future (33%), fear of death (42%), depression or anxiety (33%), no direction in the life (25%), and feelings of isolation or loneliness (25%). Kennedy and Kanthamani suggest that different types of anomalous experiences may induce similar effects as near death experiences (see also Greyson and Ring 2004) and religious experiences (Hay 1979). This has important implications for clinical psychology. These factors could also be routinely monitored in clients who participate in psychotherapy as a consequence of these kinds of experiences.

The reports of increased well-being and other positive effects resulting from paranormal/spiritual experiences are consistent with the common assumption that paranormal phenomena are guided by motivations or needs (Broughton 1988; Weiner and Geller 1984). Many of the participants in our study have had paranormal and/or transcendent experiences since childhood, and they feel as though they have a purpose or mission in life as a result of their paranormal or transcendent experience. Although spirituality-related effects were most prevalent, of course, a paranormal experience with a relatively 'mundane' benefit, such as avoiding personal injury, could also enhance a person's spiritual perspective.

We believe that the present findings are reasonably representative of people who are actively interested in paranormal phenomena. Although this selected population is of interest in its own right, these findings, like the results of experiments using similarly recruited subjects, cannot be confidently extended to the general population. However, even with such a positive bias, the data may offer useful information about the relative prevalence of different positive effects and associated motivational factors.

The present findings also suggest that the most prevalent self-reported positive effects of anomalous experiences pertain to factors of spirituality and worldview. It might be helpful to use not only quite idiosyncratic scales like the ones used here, but also some instruments, such as scales of psychiatric symptoms (i.e. Symptoms Checklist, SCL-90), or well-being scales that are gauged and would allow at least some indirect comparison.

Research on the effects of paranormal experiences must also include a wide range of experiences. Our finding that the overall effects of anomalous experiences are generally a combined result of more than one paranormal experience (87.5%) implies that research efforts focusing on only one or a limited range of experiences are likely to miss important effects. Previous surveys by George et al. (2000) and Haraldsson and Houtkooper (1991) also suggest that the distinction between those with many paranormal/spiritual experiences versus those with few or none is more interesting than the distinction between those with versus without any experiences. At the same time, the hints in the present data that transcendent experiences may be associated with greater positive after-effects than psychic experiences is

consistent with previous data (Kennedy, Kanthamani and Palmer 1994) and suggests that different types of anomalous experiences should be distinguished and tracked in future research.

Further research should also investigate the extent to which the findings for this selected sample apply to other populations and the extent to which motivations relating to spirituality direct or underlie the occurrence of paranormal phenomena, including in experimental settings. Fear is apparently a relatively common initial reaction to paranormal phenomena but the overall, long-term effects appear to be positive in this group. The extent to which these findings generalize to other groups remains to be investigated.

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