

Are Spontaneous Anomalous/ Paranormal Experiences Disturbing?: A Survey Among Under-graduate Students

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Introduction

Often people have strong reactions when they think they have had a psychic or “psi” experience. Parapsychologists have given little attention thus far to methods of dispelling anxiety arising from psi experiences. For example, Hastings (1983) and Stewart (1986) has suggested some kind of parapsychological counseling and crisis-intervention techniques.

Many surveys of paranormal/anomalous phenomena were administered using representative samples of the general population. Over a sample from 13 European countries ($N = 18,607$), 34% reported telepathy, 25% contacts with the dead, and 21% clairvoyance. They also evaluated the percentages for the United States, which were considerably higher: 54%, 30%, and 25% respectively (Haraldsson and Houtkooper, 1991).

Reaction patterns have been observed among individuals seeking help as a result of an unusual experience. The six most common reactions have been: fear (i.e. of being hurt, of going crazy, of someone else being hurt, of losing control) sense of responsibility toward another or feeling divine or specially gifted, and the desire to develop abilities (Siegel, 1986).

Every parapsychological laboratory receives requests from individuals who are distressed by a psi experience. It is unclear whether these individuals are experiencing distress because of a psi or pseudo-psi experience or if their lives are already in distress and the psi or pseudo-psi experience represents an unusual attempt for therapeutic relief. In either case, the individuals report similar behavior patterns. These individuals are suffering from

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legitimate mental stress. Although the phenomena may vary, the individuals describe an intrusive rerunning or mental reexperiencing of the psi event often without warning or control, mood swings from grandiosity to bewilderment and despair, a disorientation from the individual's previous understanding, of the world with accompanying numbness to the environment (e.g., marked disinterest in previous activities/relationships or a feeling of estrangement from others). One might expect that psychic experiences would promote healthy and well-being worldview, virtually few research has been done in parapsychology on the effects of psychic experiences on peoples' lives and worldwide (McClenon, 1994; Palmer, 1979).

Several studies have found that near-death experiences induce positive' changes or transformation in many people (Gallup, 1982; Greyson and Stevenson, 1980; Ring, 1980, 1984), but this investigation generally has no been extended to other types of paranormal experiences. White (1990) and Blackmore (1988) have called for such research and Milton (1992) reported a small initial survey of the effect of psychic experiences on people's lives. On the other hand, the fact that some people are disturbed by psychic experiences and may need counseling has often been discussed in parapsychology (e.g., Hastings, 1983; Siegel, 1986) but the frequency of occurrence of negative reactions has not been quantitatively described, so that very little research has been aimed at investigating the overall effects of paranormal experiences. Information on the effects of psi phenomena for people who volunteer for parapsychological research may be of particular interest to experimental researchers.

Patterns in experient's thoughts, feelings or actions can lead researchers to form new theories about what is going on in some types of spontaneous case. For example, Roll (1978) noticed that after an apparent RSPK incident (e.g. one of a series of incidents in which objects appeared to move or be physically affected by unknown means), the boy at the centre of the case felt a relief of tension. Roll knew that some epileptics feel a relief of tension after a seizure, and this similarity helped to fuel his speculation that RSPK events may be linked to disturbances in the central nervous system.

Through Latin America there are very few studies that evaluate psi experiences. Zangari and Machado (1996) adapted Palmer's (1979) original questionnaire and administered it to a sample of 181 Brazilian university students. Their results showed that almost nine of every ten said to have gone through—at least—one parapsychological experience. For example, respondent's Palmer had reported had significantly influenced or changed any of their "feelings or attitudes" or changed any of the important decisions they had made in their lives, attitudes such as the self, the humanity, spiritual beliefs, and life. Argentina unfortunately there are no data related to parapsychological experiences.

The aims of this exploratory study were (a) to explore type and frequency of paranormal/anomalous experiences on people's lives and (b) to explore the psychological negative effects of them. With these aims in mind, we conduct a survey amongst undergraduated students examining experient's feelings.

Method²

Participants

Three hundred ninety two questionnaires were usable for this study. The sample included both sexes (male 12.5% and female 87.5%). Age ranged from 18 to 66 years (Mean = 25.53; SD = 7.89). We have analyzed students who reported anomalous/paranormal experiences as well as those who did not report any. The majority of them reported to be little (4.8), moderately (33.8%) and very (28.0%) spiritual. Thirty three percent reported to be not spiritual.

Emotional reactions to anomalous/paranormal experiences

People may react with fear, depression, anxiety, and in many instances, inflation, a paranormal disturbed experience refers to a confrontation between emotions and/or thoughts about the anomalous experience (Hastings, 1983; Stevenson, 1970; Tart, 1994). For example, people who report emotional malaise because they cannot avoid having precognitive dreams related to situations of death or catastrophe—a common reaction is to feel responsible for causing the event, compelled to prevent it, or a need to protect the “target” person—or some poltergeists cases or spirits possession, in which the person may feel completely overwhelmed by the impotence or loss the control such a situation.

By other way, many people experience psi as real and meaningful, psychological problems are more frequently reported when psi occurs in a spontaneous or unexpected manner. Even if disturbing, the psychological syptoms that often accompany a psi experience may provide a window into spiritual growth with the support and guidance of a professional counselor (Harary, 1993; Hastings, 1983; Tart, 1994).

Questionnaire

A self-administered questionnaire designed by us was divided in three parts: (a) anomalous/paranormal experiences (precognitive dreams, telepathy, poltergeist, perception of lights, out-of-the-body experiences, near-death experiences, past lives memories, spiritual contacts, and mediumship) and each question was also subdivided as (1) frequency of each experience (once, several times, and almost always) and (2) disturbing level—little, moderately, or very, (b) counselor and type of advice or treatment as a consequence of these experiences (in affirmative case), and (c) response of the counselor and/or treatment.

2. Thanks are due to Juan Carlos Argibay for his statistical advice.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed among first year students (General Psychology) of the careers of Psychology and Social Work, of the Faculty of Psychology and the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Buenos Aires in the Capital Federal, and the National University Nacional of Luján in the Province of Buenos Aires³. Three hundred thirty nine were usable for this study.

Analices

The percentages presented were produced using *SPSS 7.5* (1996).

Results

Over the 392 university students polled, more than half say to have experienced—at the least several times—two different types of psi phenomena, such as telepathy and extrasensory perception in dreams (66.3% and 50.7%, respectively). One third of this sample indicate to have memories of past lives (32.1%) and somewhat less than a quarter say to have experienced disturbances of the poltergeist or RSPK (42.8%).

The anomalous/paranormal experiences revealed a high tendency to disturb. Mediumship, possession, PKER-like disturbing, and spiritual contact

Table 1:
*Type of Anomalous Experiences**

<i>Experiences</i>	Yes			Yes (Total)	No
	One time	Sometimes	Almost Always		
1. ESP Dreams	68 (26.1)	183 (70.3)	9 (3.6)	260 (66.3)	132 (33.7)
2. Telepathy	40 (20.1)	148 (74.3)	11 (5.6)	199 (50.7)	193 (49.3)
3. RSPK ¹	50 (54.9)	39 (23.2)	2 (21.9)	91 (23.2)	301 (76.8)
4. Perception of lights/energies	25 (55.5)	18 (40.0)	2 (4.5)	45 (11.4)	347 (88.6)
5. Out-of-Body Experiences	40 (30.0)	90 (67.6)	3 (2.4)	133 (33.9)	259 (66.1)
6. Near Death Experiences	12	—	—	12 (3.6)	380 (96.4)
7. Past lives recall	24 (19.0)	89 (70.6)	13 (10.4)	126 (32.2)	266 (67.8)
8. Spiritual contacts	58 (33.5)	105 (60.6)	10 (5.9)	173 (44.2)	219 (55.8)
9. Mediumship	11 (55.0)	9 (45.0)	—	20 (5.1)	372 (94.9)
10. Distance control–Possession	19 (27.5)	49 (71.0)	1 (1.5)	69 (17.6)	323 (82.4)

1. Refers to electromagnetic disturbances and objects flying and/or breaking and burning.

*The results are presented in terms of number of cases and as percentages in parenthesis.

3. We are grateful to Alicia Faiblum, Griselda Massa, and José Töpf, professors of these courses, and their cooperation in the administration of the survey which was very valuable.

Table 2:
Disturbing Associated With Anomalous/Paranormal Experiences

<i>Anomalous Experiences</i>	Yes			Yes (Total)	No	N
	Little disturbing	Moderately disturbing	Very disturbing			
1. ESP Dreams	55 (57.8)	27 (28.4)	13 (13.8)	95 (36.6)	165 (63.4)	260
2. Telepathy	42 (67.7)	13 (20.9)	7 (11.4)	62 (31.1)	131 (68.8)	193
3. RSPK	30 (54.5)	14 (25.4)	11 (20.1)	55 (60.4)	36 (39.5)	91
4. Perception of lights/energies	9 (75.0)	—	3 (25.0)	12 (26.6)	33 (73.4)	45
5. Out-of-Body Experiences	31 (57.4)	12 (22.2)	11 (20.4)	54 (40.6)	79 (59.4)	133
6. Near Death Experiences	3 (60.0)	—	2 (40.0)	5 (41.6)	7 (58.3)	12
7. Past lives recall	33 (75.0)	8 (18.1)	3 (6.9)	44 (35.0)	82 (65.0)	126
8. Spiritual contacts	48 (50.0)	23 (24.0)	25 (26.0)	96 (55.4)	77 (44.6)	173
9. Mediumship	3 (20.0)	7 (46.6)	5 (33.4)	15 (75.0)	5 (25.0)	20
10. Distance control–Possession	24 (48.9)	9 (18.3)	16 (32.8)	49 (71.0)	20 (28.9)	69

*The results are presented in terms of number of cases and as percentages in parenthesis.

were the experiences related to psi indicated as highly disturbing by almost two thirds of the population.

It is notable that the third part indicated not to have consulted actually for an orientation or advice about their experiences. Relatives, friends and acquaintances were the more consulted, and this help resulted effective for more than two thirds. Neither the physician nor the parapsychologist were indicated as consultants. When the participant polled responds if he is presently looking for orientation, the tendency is still more intense: 94.3% are not looking for orientation (Table 3).

Table 3:
Respondents Who Requested Orientation And Consulted

<i>Consult</i>		
I have not experience	41 (10.5)	
I have experience	351 (89.5)	
Yes	92 (30.6)	
No	300 (69.4)	
<i>Consultant (N= 92)</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>Effective Consult</i>
Physician	—	—
Relative/Friend/Acquaintance	74 (80.4)	65 (87.8)
Psychologist/Psiquiatrist	11 (11.9)	10 (90.9)
Religious	4 (4.3)	4 (100)
Parapsychologist	—	—
More than one consultant	3 (3.2)	3 (100)

*The results are presented in terms of number of cases and as percentages in parenthesis.

Table 4:
Intercorrelations Between Anomalous/Paranormal Experiences

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. ESP Dreams	—	.162	-.031	.191	.095	.144	.264	-.007	.103	.085
2. Telepathy		—	.179	.124	.145	.186	.248	.136	.107	.227
3. Perception of lights/energies			—	.097	.122	.112	.196	.207	.044	.200
4. Out-of-Body Experiences				—	.185	.164	.264	.177	.221	.027
5. Near Death Experiences					—	.100	.081	.026	.073	.078
6. Past lives recall						—	.158	.188	.227	.100
7. Spiritual contacts							—	.097	.277	.217
8. Mediumship								—	.167	.175
9. Distance control–Possession									—	.174
10. RSPK										—

Table 4 presents correlations between the different experiences claimed by the participants. There are 45 correlations, 22 (48%) of which were significant. To calculate these correlations we used chi squares and Phi. On the table we present the Phi values for the association between the variables. The bolded values show those correlations significant at the .001 level, adjusted for 45 cases to a .05 level.

These correlations show that those participants that had one of the experiences had a tendency (compared to those that did not had the experience) to have another experience. For example, the participants that had spiritual contacts (such as apparitions) also experienced more ESP dreams, telepathy, perception of lights/energies and out-of-body experiences than those that did not report the experience. But we have to recognize that these are not cause and effect relationships.

Discussion

Results presented here show that the degree of disturbing that the anomalous/paranormal experiences have is a value that cannot be neglected. Clinical psychologists and social psychologists should pay attention to the reports of parapsychological experiences, since these reveal the impact that they seem to have over the general population.

Most psychological and parapsychological institutes are not prepared to provide the necessary clinical services themselves. Other than general information about paranormal phenomena, most institutes can only advise callers to seek out psychiatrists or psychologists with an interest in the paranormal, who are more or less “open” to this type of experience. However, many parapsychologists has shown a growing interest in the systematic development of clinical knowledge within the field. A number of current publications from a variety of such countries as Holland, Sweden and the United States provide evidence of this (Harary, 1993; Kramer 1993; and Parker 1993).

However, there are many experiences emotionally intense that are not necessarily unpleasant. In fact, the near-death experience may not be highly emotional, since often such experiences are accompanied by a reevaluation of the meaning of life and decrease the fear of death (Ring, 1984). An experience of ESP in dreams or an spiritual contact can be—in the same sense—emotionally intense, but its contents result either pleasant and gratifying or unpleasant and threatening for the person.

By other hand, 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. These effects are generally a combined result of more than one anomalous experience and a larger number of experiences are associated with greater effects. Fear apparently is a relatively common initial reaction to paranormal phenomena, but the overall, long-term effects appear to be positive to those people.

These findings are also consistent with other studies that (a) found positive overall ratings for the effects of anomalous experiences but did not investigate what aspects of life were affected (Gabbard and Twemlow, 1984; Kennedy and Kanthamani, 1995; Richards, 1991), and (b) reported changes in various aspects of life, but did not report whether the changes were positive or negative. Psi experience with a relatively mundane benefit, such as avoiding personal injury, could also enhance a person's spiritual perspective.

Probably the present findings are reasonably representative of people who are not actively interested in paranormal phenomena, but this population which is out of interest in psi research, cannot be extended the general population. This population may be a self selected group with unusually positive reactions to anomalous experiences. Many of these kind of experience reach the range of emotional reactions which included the predictable amazement, surprise, curiosity and puzzlement, and fear. Tart (1975) has included a change in emotional response to stimuli (over-reacting, under-reacting, not reacting, or reacting in a completely different way) and/or extreme intensity of emotion as some of the criteria by which a person can detect whether he or she is experiencing an altered state of consciousness. It is sometimes suggested that a person was in an altered state during an anomalous experience; for instance, people who see apparitions at night when they claim to be awake are often told that they were dreaming but didn't realise it. Asking experients other questions may tell us useful things in future about what is going on in various types of experiences which seem to be paranormal, in terms of clarifying the nature of some experiences, in identifying factors that may cause or accompany genuine paranormal events, and even perhaps in suggesting why some people have these experiences while others do not (Milton, 1992). Also, religious practices, meditation, yoga, mental control, or other techniques or strategies and many topics involved into new age thinking of many people

(also students) influence decreasing the anxiety level and functioning with a reference frame that serves both for a cognitive and emotional processing as well as belief in the paranormal.

Do cultural and social variables exist that respond because the population consults or looks for orientation for their psi experiences and those related to psi? It is difficult to respond using only the data reported here as support. This line of research also has implications for understanding those who volunteer to participate in psi experiments and thus for better understanding the results of those experiments. The fact that anomalous experiences apparently induce negative reactions in some people provides a strong impetus for additional research.

The Spanish term used for disturbance was “conflicto” and “trauma” in order to indicate the degree of emotional impact of the anomalous/paranormal experience. In our culture, the use of the term such as above mentioned must be understood, not in the sense usually employed in psychology and abnormal psychology, but as a way to communicate to our subjects polled a familiar term which express with more confidence the stressing character carried by the paranormal experience, so that it can be interpreted that the instrument tends to slant some information. In spite of this, we expect to contribute with these results towards the negative aspect of the paranormal experience more than towards a positive one.

It is our hope that this report will serve to stimulate further investigation of these uncommon experiences from a non-pathological perspective and in so doing, reduce a portion of the mystery and confusion frequently associated with paranormal events and experiences, and that new studies would help to answer these and other questions, such as would be interesting to report whether some experiences are most likely to lead to disturbing than others, to use a group of control (people who have not paranormal experiences), and to study deeply the interactions of variables or the interrelationship between the different experiences (precognitive dreams, waking ESP, OBE, etc.) like Palmer (1979) and Khor (1980) have done, and put emphasis in the emotional impact which—in greater or lesser degree—this seems to generate.

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Abstract

Often people have strong reactions when they think they have had a psychic or “psi” experience. A survey of anomalous/paranormal experiences which was designed by us was administered to a undergraduated university students (N = 392). More than half say to have experienced—at the least several times—phenomena such as telepathy (66.3%) and ESP dreams (50.7%), past lives recalls (32.1%) and RSPK (42.8%). Four anomalous/paranormal experiences revealed a high tendency to disturb, such as mediumship, possession, RSPK, and spiritual contact (almost two thirds). The third part also indicated not to have consulted actually for counseling about their experiences. Ninety four percent were not looking for orientation. Relatives, friends and acquaintances were the more consulted.