

# Negative Experiences in Childhood, Parental Style, and Resilience Among People Reporting Paranormal Experiences

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**Abstract:** There are relatively few studies examining the parental style, childhood trauma, and paranormal experiences/beliefs; therefore, the aim of this study is to measure the dominant parental style of those who have experienced paranormal events and their correlation with negative events in childhood and resilience. Four questionnaires were administered to 644 participants. The results showed high frequency of experiences such as sense of presence, premonitory dreams, telepathy, mystical experiences, apparitions, and out-of-body experiences, among others. The results confirmed three hypotheses that predict a positive and significant correlation between the paranormal experiences in adult life and negative experiences in childhood, such as abuse and neglect. One possible interpretation is that “flexible” parental style is the more permissive ones (greater openness and sensitivity to capture alternative realities), in contrast to “rigid” parental style (whose perspectives generate restrictions to capitalize on the unconventional experiences of their children).

**Key Words:** Childhood trauma, parental styles, resilience, paranormal experiences/beliefs

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Why do some individuals become mediums, healers, and psychics while others doubt that psychic powers even exist or even they are skeptics of such things? In cultures where shamanism is recognized, the role of shaman is often hereditary, most typically passed from father to son (Eliade, 1964). Negative attitudes toward paranormal or esoteric/new age topics often related to rigidly materialistic values may lead highly intuitive youngsters to repress their psychic powers (Hart Wright, 2007). The Irish-born and American medium Eileen Garrett described such a connection between her own childhood trauma, accompanied by positive input regarding the paranormal, and the development of her remarkable mediumistic experiences (Garrett, 1949/2002). From earliest childhood, she endured virtually daily abuse from the aunt who raised her. Although most of the people in Garrett's environment disparaged what she sensed, an old gypsy woman took the little girl under her wing and led her to respect her own psychic gifts. Childhood neglect and emotional abuse are two plausible, but as yet unexplored, predictors of adult paranormality (Kent and Waller, 1998). Irwin (1994) found adults who had been raised by (presumably neglectful; *e.g.*, Hindman, 1977) alcoholic parents were more inclined to believe in witchcraft, superstitions, and precognition than those raised by nonalcoholic parents.

According to Irwin's (2009) psychodynamic functions hypothesis (PFH), scientifically unaccepted beliefs develop as a means of coping with a diminished sense of control often stemming from childhood trauma. Endorsement of extrasensory perception engenders an illusory sense of control over people, objects, and/or events. Such beliefs are seen as an unconsciously motivated, needs-serving, adaptive mechanism for

alleviating feelings of vulnerability (Farias and Granqvist, 2007). There is reasonable support for Irwin's PFH with self-reported paranormal experiences and/or beliefs linked to global measures of childhood trauma (*e.g.*, Rogers et al., 2007) as well as intrafamilial physical abuse (Irwin, 1992; Lawrence et al., 1995; Perkins and Allen, 2006), sexual abuse (Berkowski and MacDonald, 2014; Ross and Joshi, 1992), emotional abuse (Berkowski and MacDonald, 2014; Rabeyron and Watt, 2010), being raised by alcoholic (Irwin, 1994) or overly authoritarian (Watt et al., 2007) parents, and domestic instability (Hooper, 2007; Lawrence et al., 1995).

Given Irwin's PFH, it would be reasonable to expect emotional (but not instrumental) parentification to predict anomalous experiences. Consistent with this view is evidence that new age followers reported more child-parent role reversal than non-new agers (Farias and Granqvist, 2007). By undermining a child's sense of domestic security, parental threat is another potential predictor of adult paranormality. Indirect support for this claim comes from evidence that new agers also report more parental rejection (Granqvist and Hagekull, 2001) with paranormal believers having more authoritarian parents (Watt et al. 2007).

Rogers and Lowrie (2016) also examined the degree to which varieties of childhood maltreatment directly predict adult paranormal and new age world views, and they found that child sexual abuse directly predicted more self-reported anomalous experiences, with parental threats of rejection directly predicting fewer anomalous fears in adulthood. Indirect relationships between childhood neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and instrumental parentification emerged for all criteria except anomalous fears, with these relationships mediated by at least one facet of fantasy proneness, either vivid/realistic and/or make-believe fantasizing. Meta-analysis of the literature on resilience and trauma led to the development of a model that includes personality characteristics, affective regulation, coping strategies, defensiveness, and use and protection factors and resources for coping (Agaibi and Wilson, 2005; Manning and Stickley, 2009). Possibly, resilience could be negatively related to paranormal beliefs because resilient people will tend to trust less such beliefs as a defense mechanism (*i.e.*, see Méndez et al., 2015).

The aim of this study is to evaluate the parenting style of those who have experienced paranormal events, along with the relationship of traumatic events in childhood to resilience. It is hypothesized (H1) that a positive and significant relationship will be found between negative experiences in childhood and the frequency of paranormal experiences in adult life, and (H2) that people who report a higher frequency of paranormal experiences will tend to show a history of a more flexible parenting mode. In comparison with individuals who report a lower frequency of paranormal experiences (H3), people who report a higher frequency of paranormal experiences are expected to be more resilient.

## METHODS

### Participants

Participants consisted of 644 individuals, 185 (28%) males and 459 (72%) females, whose age ranged from 18 to 65 years (mean  $\pm$  SD, 28.13  $\pm$  10.45). A nonprobabilistic technique through chain-referral sampling was applied. Undergraduate students contacted at least five

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**TABLE 1.** Frequency and Percentage of Paranormal Experiences

Paranormal Experiences	No F (%)		Yes F (%)	
1. Premonitory dreams	278	43.2	366	56.8
2. Telepathy	377	58.5	267	41.5
3. Seeing aura	537	83.4	107	16.6
4. OOBÉ	478	74.2	166	25.8
5. Mystical experiences	381	59.2	263	40.8
6. Sense of presence	265	41.1	379	58.9
7. Psychic healing	505	78.4	139	21.6
8. Apparitions	397	61.6	247	38.4

relatives and friends. Although participants received information about the general aim of the study, the participants were not informed about the hypotheses of the study. A simple random sampling was used from the general community, which ensured that they had an equal probability of being chosen as the sample mainly from Buenos Aires, Argentina.

**Instruments**

The Survey of Paranormal Experiences (Gómez Montanelli and Parra, 2005) is a self-administered questionnaire designed to ascertain the type and frequency of 18 forms of anomalous/paranormal experiences. Seven of these were selected for analysis. Participants answered on a four-point Likert scale, from 0 (never) to 3 (multiple times), with the highest score indicating the highest frequency of paranormal experiences. Based on previous studies, it was decided to select eight paranormal experiences, such as premonitory dreams, telepathy, seeing auras, out-of-body experiences (OOBEs), mystical experiences, sense of presence, psychic healing (as healer), and apparitions, which are frequently reported by some authors in other studies (for review, see Cardéna et al., 2014). Also, an index was constructed (a sum of frequency from 0 to 24) based on affirmative responses. The reliability value was Cronbach's alpha = 0.90 (Parra, 2006).

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein et al., 1994, 1997; Fink et al., 1995) self-report includes a 28-item test that measures two types of maltreatment: abuse (emotional, physical, and sexual) and neglect (emotional and physical). A five-point Likert scale is used for the responses that range from never true (1) to very often true (5). The reliability for the CTQ is good with high internal consistency scores (Bernstein et al., 1997), and the reliability value for Spanish-Argentine version is a Cronbach's alpha = 0.93 (Parra and Ugarte, 2018).

The Perceived Parenting Styles (De la Iglesia et al., 2010; Maccoby, 1994; Maccoby and Martin, 1983; Schaefer, 1997) is a self-administered inventory for the evaluation of parenting styles and perceived parental inconsistency directed at young adults. The scale consists of 24 items that evaluate both maternal and paternal behavior. The cutoff points are high scores (<80%) and low scores (>20%). It has good internal consistency and high reliability for the Argentine sample where the Cronbach's alpha = 0.91 (De la Iglesia et al., 2010).

The Hardiness Scale (Khoshaba and Maddi, 1999; Maddi and Khoshaba, 1994; Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2012) is a self-administered instrument designed to evaluate the resilience personality construct (hardiness). The instrument contains 21 items scored on a Likert scale of 1 to 4 (from 1, strongly disagree, to 4, strongly agree), indicating that a high score shows a greater degree of hardiness. It is composed of three subscales: 1) commitment; 2) control; and 3) challenge. The scale showed good internal consistency and reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88) for the Argentine sample (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2012).

**Procedure and Analysis**

The data were processed using the statistical package SPSS 20, and all comparisons were one-tailed. An evaluation of the normality

of the sample was also carried out. From the values obtained through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, an asymmetric distribution was assumed for the scores of the three instruments. Consequently, nonparametric statistics were used to carry out the analysis, that is, z or chi-squared tests using the Mann-Whitney U or the Kruskal-Wallis H analysis to compare, as appropriate, and Spearman rho coefficient to correlate.

Logistic multiple regressions were conducted. Bonferroni corrections were made to counteract the problem of multiple analysis (Bonferroni being considered the simplest and most conservative method to control the family-wise error rate of these analyses).

**RESULTS**

The results showed that the most common paranormal experiences were sense of presence (58%), premonitory dreams (56%), telepathy (41%), mystical experiences (40%), apparitional experiences (38%), and out-of-body experiences (25%; see Table 1).

For cutoff points recommended by the authors (De la Iglesia et al., 2010), high scores (<80%) and low scores (>20%) of responsiveness and demandingness for mother and father were divided separately, so that four styles could be created: negligent or uninvolved parents (low demand/low response) who encompass both rejecting-neglecting and neglectful parents, although most parents of this type fall within the reference range; overprotective or authoritative parents (high demand/high response) who monitor and impart clear standards for their children's conduct and they are assertive but not intrusive and restrictive; authoritarian parents (high demand/low response) who are highly demanding and directive but not responsive, they are obedience- and status-oriented, and expect their orders to be obeyed without explanation; and permissive or nondirective (low demand/high response) who are very involved with their children but place few demands or controls on them and are responsive to the child's needs and wishes (Baumrind, 1991; see Table 2).

The H1 predicted that a positive and significant relationship would be found between negative experiences in childhood and the frequency of paranormal experiences in adult life, which was confirmed ( $r_s = 0.27, p < 0.001$ ), with correlations for experiences such as sensation of presence ( $r_s = 0.23$ ) and apparitions ( $r_s = 0.19$ ). After Bonferroni correction ( $p = 0.003$ ), the index of the experiences still correlated significantly with childhood trauma, and still correlated significantly with abuse and neglect (see Table 3).

The frequency of paranormal experiences (index) was compared among the four parenting styles, separately for father and mother. For father, it was found that the permissive style led to a significantly higher frequency of paranormal experiences ( $\chi^2 = 18.24; p < 0.001$ ), featuring three (37%) of the eight experiences (telepathy, sense of presence, and apparitions). After Bonferroni correction ( $p = 0.003$ ), just sense of

**TABLE 2.** Frequency and Percentage of Parenting Style for Father and Mother

Parenting Style	Father		Mother	
	n	%	n	%
1. Negligent	64	9.9	53	8.2
2. Overprotective	54	8.4	94	14.6
3. Authoritarian	15	2.3	35	5.4
4. Permissive	5	0.8	54	8.4
Total	138	21.4	236	36.6
Not categorized <sup>a</sup>	506	78.6	408	63.4

<sup>a</sup>Sample that did not fit within the aforementioned parental styles for mother and father groups.

**TABLE 3.** Correlations Between the Frequency of Paranormal Experiences and the Degree of Negative Experiences in Childhood

Paranormal Experiences <sup>a</sup>	Physical Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Physical Neglect	Emotional Neglect	F1. Abuse	F2. Neglect	Childhood Trauma
1. Premonitory dreams	0.13***	0.13***	0.02	0.16***	0.14**	0.15**	0.19***	0.17***
2. Telepathy	0.11**	0.15**	0.06*	0.14**	0.17**	0.16**	0.17***	0.17***
3. Seeing aura	0.08*	0.08*	0.12**	0.10**	0.08*	0.10**	0.09**	0.10***
4. OOB	0.11**	0.12**	0.08*	0.09*	0.10**	0.13**	0.10***	0.13***
5. Mystical experiences	0.08*	0.08*	0.06*	0.11**	0.08*	0.10**	0.12***	0.11***
6. Sense of presence	0.17**	0.21**	0.19**	0.16**	0.13**	0.23***	0.17***	0.23***
7. Psychic healing	0.11**	0.10**	0.13**	0.09**	0.08*	0.13**	0.10**	0.12***
8. Apparitions	0.11**	0.17**	0.13**	0.18**	0.10**	0.18***	0.18***	0.19***
Index	0.20***	0.23***	0.14***	0.22***	0.18***	0.25***	0.24***	0.27***

<sup>a</sup>Paranormal experiences: range = 0 (never) to 3 (multiple times).

Spearman rho coefficient of correlation, \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  and Bonferroni correction  $p = 0.003$ ;  $df = 643$ .

presence and the index of the experiences tended to score higher than nonexperiencers. For mother, it was found that the overprotective style showed significantly lower frequency of paranormal experiences ( $\chi^2 = 13.18$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), specifically for four (50%) of the eight experiences (aura, mystical experiences, sense of presence, and apparitions). After Bonferroni correction ( $p = 0.003$ ), just sense of presence and the index of the experiences also tended to score higher than nonexperiencers (see Table 4).

Second, it was decided to regroup the parenting styles score to create two parenting “modes”; that is, the negligent + permissive styles

score to form the “flexible” mode and the superprotective + authoritarian styles score to form the “rigid mode” (see Table 5).

The H2 predicted that individuals who report a higher frequency of paranormal experiences will tend to have had a more flexible parenting mode compared with individuals who report a lower frequency of paranormal experiences, which were confirmed.

For father, it was found that the flexible mode showed a significantly higher frequency of paranormal experiences compared with the rigid mode ( $z = 2.58$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), with one (12%) of the eight experiences (sense of presence) with a difference in favor of the flexible mode. For

**TABLE 4.** Comparison of the Frequency of Paranormal Experiences With the Four Parenting Styles

Parenting Style (Father)	Negligent ( $n = 64$ )	Overprotective ( $n = 54$ )	Authoritarian ( $n = 15$ )	Permissive ( $n = 5$ )	$\chi^2$ <sup>b</sup>	$p$	$E_s$
Paranormal Experiences <sup>a</sup>	Mean (DT)	Mean (DT)	Mean (DT)	Mean (DT)			
1. Premonitory dreams	1.05 (1.03)	0.78 (1.12)	1.40 (1.24)	1.60 (1.57)	5.52	NS	0.09
2. Telepathy	0.98 (1.25)	0.56 (0.96)	1.33 (1.29)	2.00 (1.22)	11.04	0.01	0.10
3. Seeing aura	0.45 (0.97)	0.33 (0.84)	0.53 (1.12)	0.80 (1.30)	2.01	NS	0.06
4. OOB	0.55 (0.97)	0.39 (0.94)	0.73 (1.03)	0.20 (0.44)	3.54	NS	0.05
5. Mystical experiences	0.78 (1.00)	0.50 (1.06)	0.93 (1.16)	0.80 (1.30)	5.97	NS	0.09
6. Sense of presence	1.50 (1.22)	0.80 (1.18)	1.87 (1.24)	2.40 (1.34)	16.38	0.001	0.11
7. Psychic healing	0.36 (0.89)	0.37 (0.91)	0.40 (1.05)	1.20 (1.64)	2.52	NS	0.04
8. Apparitions	0.81 (1.16)	0.50 (0.94)	1.40 (1.40)	2.00 (1.25)	11.90	0.008	0.08
Index	6.48 (4.86)	4.22 (6.252)	8.60 (5.792)	11.00 (6.74)	18.24	<0.001	0.40
Parenting Style (Mother)	Negligent ( $n = 53$ )	Overprotective ( $n = 94$ )	Authoritarian ( $n = 54$ )	Permissive ( $n = 35$ )	$\chi^2$ <sup>b</sup>	$p$	$E_s$
Paranormal Experiences <sup>a</sup>	Mean (DT)	Mean (DT)	Mean (DT)	Mean (DT)			
1. Premonitory dreams	1.09 (1.14)	0.77 (0.99)	1.54 (1.19)	1.50 (1.22)	2.91	NS	0.19
2. Telepathy	1.00 (1.30)	0.62 (1.04)	1.40 (1.26)	1.20 (1.30)	3.04	NS	0.17
3. Seeing aura	0.47 (0.91)	0.26 (0.76)	0.63 (1.11)	0.54 (1.04)	3.69	0.04	0.07
4. OOB	0.64 (1.05)	0.40 (0.83)	0.60 (1.00)	0.50 (0.94)	1.92	NS	0.10
5. Mystical experiences	1.04 (1.24)	0.60 (0.98)	0.94 (1.21)	0.76 (1.09)	5.12	0.02	0.06
6. Sense of presence	1.75 (1.20)	0.93 (1.23)	1.40 (1.35)	1.56 (1.22)	14.65	<0.001	0.08
7. Psychic healing	0.70 (1.15)	0.38 (0.86)	0.66 (1.23)	0.57 (1.05)	2.60	NS	0.02
8. Apparitions	0.98 (1.23)	0.56 (0.95)	0.94 (1.16)	1.11 (1.36)	4.99	0.02	0.23
Index	7.68 (5.97)	4.51 (5.39)	8.11 (7.40)	7.74 (6.10)	13.18	<0.001	0.45

<sup>a</sup>Paranormal experiences: range = 0 (never) to 3 (multiple times).

<sup>b</sup>Kruskal-Wallis  $H$  ( $df = 3$ ) was used. Bonferroni correction  $p = 0.004$ ;  $df = 643$ .

**TABLE 5.** Frequency and Percentages of the Rigid/Flexible Parenting Mode for Father and Mother

	Father		Mother	
	n	%	n	%
Rigid mode	69	10.7	129	20.0
Flexible mode	69	10.7	107	16.6
Uncategorized	506	78.6	408	63.4

the mother, it was found that the flexible mode showed a significantly higher frequency of paranormal experiences compared with the rigid mode ( $z = 3.56; p < 0.001$ ), with three (37%) of the eight experiences (premonitory dreams, sensation of presence, and apparitions) in favor of the flexible mode. After Bonferroni correction ( $p = 0.004$ ), for father, no comparison was significant; however, for mother, just sense of presence and the index of the experiences tended to score higher for flexibility (see Table 6).

The median of the total score of the CTQ (Mn = 6) was used to split the sample into two groups: the low scores of CTQ (rank 0–6 = low scores) and the high scores (rank 7–46 = high scores); a cutoff point was created between the percentiles less than 20 and greater than 80 to generate two groups: low hardiness (rank = 24–58) and high hardiness (rank = 71–84). Then, people who scored higher on childhood trauma + higher hardiness were clustered to create the group “hardiness” ( $n = 100$ ), and then, people who scored lower on childhood trauma + lower on hardiness were clustered to create the group “nonhardiness” ( $n = 16$ ).

The H3 predicted that individuals who report the highest frequency of paranormal experiences will tend to score higher on hardiness compared with individuals who report a lower frequency of experiences,

which was confirmed. A significant difference was found between the two groups, where the hardiness group scored significantly higher in the index of paranormal experiences compared with the nonhardiness group ( $z = 2.67, p = 0.007$ ), specifically for experiences such as sense of presence and apparitions (both  $p = 0.03$ ). After Bonferroni correction ( $p = 0.004$ ), no comparison was significant (see Table 7).

A third post hoc analysis was carried out to compare rigid/flexible parenting modes (for father and mother separately) for childhood trauma and hardiness. For father, no difference was found between the “rigid” and “flexible” parenting modes for childhood trauma; however, hardiness scored significantly higher for the rigid parenting mode compared with flexible one ( $z = 3.20; p < 0.001$ ), including implication, challenge, and control (hardiness subscales). For mother, on the other hand, it was found that the flexible mode correlated with higher scores of childhood trauma (abuse and neglect;  $p < 0.001$ ) compared with the “rigid” mode, and yet it was found that higher hardiness score was significantly higher for the rigid parenting mode compared with flexible one ( $z = 2.00; p = 0.03$ ).

The regression was significant ( $\chi^2[1, n = 643] = 6.83, p = 0.009$ ; log of likelihood function = 183.10). The group predicted in the regression was composed of respondents with paranormal experiences, and the specific predictors used in the regression were childhood trauma, parenting styles, and hardiness. The only variable that significantly predicted group membership was childhood trauma (Wald = 6.18;  $p = 0.013$ ).

**CONCLUSIONS**

The results indicated that the sample reported a number of paranormal experiences such as sense of presence, premonitory dreams, telepathy, mystical experiences, apparitions, and out-of-body experiences, after our own previous findings (for review, see Gómez Montanelli and Parra, 2004; Parra, 2006, 2011, 2012).

**TABLE 6.** Comparison of the Frequency of Paranormal Experiences Between the Rigid and Flexible Parenting Modes in Father and Mother

Father	Rigidity (n = 69)		Flexibility (n = 69)		z <sup>b</sup>	p	E <sub>s</sub>
	Mean	DT	Mean	DT			
Paranormal Experiences <sup>a</sup>							
1. Premonitory dreams	0.91	1.17	1.09	1.06	1.14	NS	0.16
2. Telepathy	0.72	1.08	1.06	1.27	1.62	NS	0.11
3. Seeing aura	0.38	0.90	0.48	0.99	0.81	NS	0.09
4. OOB	0.46	0.96	0.52	0.94	0.64	NS	0.08
5. Mystical experiences	0.59	1.08	0.78	1.01	1.74	NS	0.09
6. Sense of presence	1.03	1.27	1.57	1.24	2.50	0.01	0.43
7. Psychic healing	0.38	0.94	0.42	0.97	0.22	NS	0.12
8. Apparitions	0.70	1.11	0.90	1.20	1.26	NS	0.11
Index	5.17	6.37	6.81	5.09	2.58	0.01	0.28
Mother	Rigidity (n = 129)		Flexibility (n = 107)				
Paranormal Experiences <sup>a</sup>	Mean	DT	Mean	DT	z <sup>b</sup>	p	E <sub>s</sub>
1. Premonitory dreams	0.98	1.10	1.30	1.19	2.07	0.03	0.27
2. Telepathy	0.83	1.16	1.10	1.33	1.52	NS	0.09
3. Seeing aura	0.36	0.88	0.50	0.95	1.57	NS	0.11
4. OOB	0.46	0.88	0.57	1.00	0.89	NS	0.10
5. Mystical experiences	0.69	1.05	0.90	1.17	1.40	NS	0.09
6. Sense of presence	1.05	1.28	1.65	1.21	3.57	<0.001	0.48
7. Psychic healing	0.46	0.98	0.64	1.10	1.37	NS	0.10
8. Apparitions	0.67	1.02	1.05	1.29	2.24	0.02	0.32
Index	5.49	6.18	7.71	6.01	3.56	<0.001	0.36

<sup>a</sup>Paranormal experiences: range = 0 (never) to 3 (multiple times).

<sup>b</sup>Mann-Whitney U-test was used. Bonferroni correction  $p = 0.004$  (mother  $df = 137$ ; father  $df = 235$ ).

**TABLE 7.** Comparison Between Hardiness and Nonhardiness on Frequency of Paranormal Experiences

Paranormal Experiences <sup>a</sup>	Nonhardiness ( <i>n</i> = 16)	Hardiness ( <i>n</i> = 100)	<i>z</i> <sup>b</sup>	<i>p</i>	<i>E<sub>s</sub></i>
	Mean (DT)	Mean (DT)			
1. Premonitory dreams	1.06 (1.12)	1.52 (1.21)	1.41	NS	0.39
2. Telepathy	1.06 (1.23)	1.22 (1.22)	0.43	NS	0.33
3. See auras	0.13 (0.50)	0.43 (0.90)	1.38	NS	0.32
4. OOBE	0.25 (0.77)	0.63 (1.05)	1.49	NS	0.31
5. Mystical experiences	0.44 (0.89)	0.91 (1.14)	1.61	NS	0.45
6. Sense of presence	0.81 (1.16)	1.46 (1.25)	1.94	0.03	0.53
7. Psychic healing	0	0.52 (1.03)	0	—	—
8. Apparitions	0.38 (0.88)	0.91 (1.12)	1.98	0.03	0.52
Index	4.13 (5.23)	7.60 (5.38)	2.67	0.007	0.65

<sup>a</sup>Rank: 0 = never to 3 = multiple times.

<sup>b</sup>Mann-Whitney *U*-test. Bonferroni correction *p* = 0.004; *df* = 115.

### Traumatic Childhood and Paranormal Experiences

In the first place, many people in their adults lives (and also in their childhood, for a nonupdated review, see Drewes and Drucker, 1991) report paranormal experiences, sometimes associated with disturbing childhood (such as abuse and/or neglect), with emphasis on specific experiences such as the entity encounter experiences (sense of presence and apparitional experiences, for review, see Houran and Thalbourne, 2001a, 2001b; Parra, 2018). These findings are in agreement with Irwin (2009), which suggests that the paranormal experience can serve as an adaptive mechanism, based on the need to face a loss or the sense of lack of control in childhood (see Irwin, 1992; Perkins and Allen, 2006).

The results here support, in part, the idea that adult paranormality is an adaptive mechanism that helps individuals cope with an absence of control in childhood. For example, when the parents do not meet the physical, psychological, and/or emotional needs of the child, who ends up being explicitly insulted, ridiculed, shouted at, emotionally manipulated, or unfairly blamed by parents (Kent and Waller, 1998), or is exposed to considerable negligent behavior, the child is left feeling unloved and of little importance to family members (Sanders and Becker-Lausen, 1995; Sanders and Giolas, 1991).

Irwin (1994) found that adults who had been brought up by alcoholic parents (presumably negligent, see Hindman, 1977) were more inclined to believe in witchcraft, superstitions, and precognition than those raised by nonalcoholic parents, confirming previous studies (Bierman, 2005; Brewer-Smyth and Koenig, 2014). In fact, it seems that the need for control and concomitant paranormal beliefs can be sustained by the occurrence of unpredictable events even after childhood.

This is not to claim that all traumatized people have paranormal experiences, or even that only traumatized people become paranormal believers. The trauma could simply be one of a series of factors that can evoke the need for a sense of control and, therefore, produce a paranormal belief. Therefore, even without a direct encounter with trauma, the insecurity of some people living in a seemingly hostile world can continually trigger a need for control. Paranormal experiences can contribute to what Jeff Greenberg (Greenberg et al., 1997; Greenberg and Kosloff, 2008) called the “terror management theory,” the creation of a cushion against an anxiety that evokes being aware of one's own vulnerability and proximity to death.

### Parenting Styles and Paranormal Experiences

The results of this study indicate that the index (frequency) of paranormal experiences clearly shows differences based on the

parenting styles of both parents. For example, when parents showed a more permissive parenting style, characterized by greater receptivity than demand, that is, parents are more lenient and tended to give in to the demands of their children and give them support, this parenting style significantly favored such paranormal experiences as sense of presence and “seeing” ghosts. In terms of examining this effect, the flexible parenting mode (negligent + permissive styles) showed a higher adult paranormality experiences compared with a more “rigid” mode (overprotective + authoritarian styles) for both parents, even when taking into consideration a flexible parenting mode that may have specifically facilitated anomalous events such as premonitory dreams and apparitions.

One possible interpretation is that flexible parents are generally more permissive—sufficiently receptive but not demanding—thereby allowing greater openness and receptivity to capturing alternative realities, in contrast to rigid parents whose perspectives generate greater restrictions on the unconventional experiences of their children. A flexible parenting mode avoids confrontation and “prohibitions”; indeed, these parents often have little or no response to their children, remaining oblivious to their activities, allowing them to take care of their own lives, or letting their children feel that they have permission to engage in tasks for which they do not have parental support or in which they participate in secret (*cf.* Mischo, 1991).

These parenting modes respond to the absorption process of the parents' perspectives on life events, known as “parental internalization” (Hoffman, 1984), often a passive process by which children absorb the beliefs of their parents. Consequently, the behavior of the parents is an easily available model that children imitate involuntarily. The parental bond in childhood and throughout life can also function as a modulator of the occurrence of paranormal experiences and, to some extent, its cognitive adaptation. In this way, internalization can be a much more active process by which parents strive to inculcate their own beliefs in their children, which may involve an explicit program of instruction and positive encouragement but sometimes a degree of coercion and punishment for their breach as well. Therefore, through the process of internalization, the parents' beliefs can be assimilated into the children's own frame of reference and their anomalous experiences.

At the same time, in line with the findings of Irwin (1992, 1994), this suggests that parental stimulation of childhood imagination (Lynn and Rhue, 1988) not only tends to encourage the “propensity to fantasy” trait, but it also grants greater cognitive plasticity that could modulate an anomalous experience. In other words, a parent, grandparent, or teacher can facilitate children's participation in fantasy by reading stories to them or by interacting with dolls as if they were animated, which, in turn, can reinforce the children's imagination and encourage

imaginative participation by engagement in various arts such as music, dance, or acting. Given the great similarity between the propensity to fantasy and some dissociative processes (French and Kerman, 1996), it could be expected that such flexibility might also function as a stimulus of the imagination that plays a role in the ability to adapt better to paranormal experiences in adult life. In fact, the results showed a greater likelihood for children to describe paranormal experiences if they had been exposed to a parenting style predominantly more positive than negative.

It is not clear in what way or at what stage of the individual's life such a cognitive modulator related to paranormal experiences occurs—be it in early childhood or in adolescence—or if the parenting style affects the cognitive framework in the context of a specific paranormal experience. For example, individuals may have had several types of apparitional experiences during their lives (sensing presences or seeing spirits), which occurred in a childhood characterized by parental abuse. It is possible that these experiences produce greater cognitive and emotional “permeability” than if the parenting style was characterized by more liberal behaviors, where parents paid little or no attention to the child's experiences, belittled them, or interpreted them as mere fantasies with no value.

Another potential interpretation, associated with a “dissociative model,” is that a negative childhood is not the only source of the emergence of paranormal experiences; it is possible that a permissive or negligent parenting style contributes to reinforcing the way in which such experiences are processed—cognitively and emotionally. For example, there are people whose childhoods were characterized by abusive parenting behavior and neglect, and who developed skills as mediums or psychics thanks to his/her hardness; otherwise, others developed skills as cult leaders with underlying psychopathological traits and poor hardness (Argyle, 2000; Harary, 1989). One respondent of our study replied that, when he was a child, his parents repressed an experience he had of the “visit” of his grandmother at the same time that she died at home, miles away; that night, he awakened his parents and related this experience, which his parents confirmed by a telephone call minutes later. At the opposite pole, another respondent observed that, as a child, she was often encouraged by her parents because they believed she had a gift.

Rogers and Lowrie (2016) also concluded that paranormal experiences in adult life, through participation in vivid fantasies and imagination, compensated for the pain that left children feeling unwanted and rejected (Sanders and Becker-Lausen 1995). That is, adults who were threatened with parental rejection in their childhood are less frightened of “taking risks,” and perhaps more prepared to do so, including actions like consulting fortune-tellers or mediums, as a way to compensate for their fears of rejection.

## Resilience and Paranormal Experience

Not only hardness correlated with anomalous experiences but a combination of negative experiences in childhood showed that resilient adults whose childhood had been traumatic tended to report more paranormal experiences (again, with emphasis on apparitional experiences) compared with those who had not had traumatic childhoods. One possible interpretation of this result is that those who spent a difficult childhood are more likely to experience paranormal phenomena as “change” events or an opportunity to increase their own competencies in situations cognitively subversive to conventional order but not necessarily as a threat situation. Those who have had anomalous experiences may have greater openness to such events, along with a tolerance for abuse and maltreatment that induces them to consider change as a feature of their life history (see Locke, 2013). In other words, a spiritual encounter can be either fearfully traumatic or merely an anomalistic variation of the individual's concept of reality (Everist, 2016).

## DISCUSSION

Following Irwin's (2004) rationale, paranormal experiences can be the preferred “buffers” in the face of undesirable realities, by offering relief for events that largely occur outside the control of the individual. Perhaps early perception of a threatening environment causes a greater need for individuals to feel that they have control over that chaotic environment, along with a lower propensity to remain connected to reality (Cermak and Rosenfeld, 1987), which can encourage the development of paranormal beliefs that serve as domain tools to control incomprehensible or threatening events. In fact, childhood trauma is an antecedent of the dissociative experience that can trigger an anomalous experience because they help mitigate impotence in the face of a threatening event and confer an increased sense of control (Hemmings and Irwin, 1993).

Future studies may be useful to continue this line of inquiry. It would be worthwhile 1) to administer a more qualitative design based on in-depth interviews with people who have reported such experiences to confirm at least some of these conclusions; 2) to conduct international replications with similar samples, or even larger ones to find common patterns to confirm these interpretations; and, finally, 3) to compare specific groups of individuals who indicate having paranormal abilities with samples from the general population, that is, a qualitative instead of a quantitative approach, also to develop a theory with potential clinical implications.

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## DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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