

To the Editor #3:

When I first read Houran et al.'s response to my Letter-to-Editor (Solfvin, 2020), I thought, "OMG, what did I put into that letter that so upset and offended them?" It's been a year since I composed it. I recall the general ideas I put in and that I took great pains to be clear, simple, direct, and to avoid any statements which might be perceived as provocative. I read it over several times and got pre-submission feedback from knowledgeable colleagues. They liked, even praised it. I never imagined that Houran et al. would be "...dismayed that Solfvin mischaracterized or misunderstood our outlook and aims as dismissing or minimizing ghostly episodes as 'delusions' — along with an associated charge of implicit 'bias' on this point."

I rushed immediately to re-read my original letter and then relaxed because it was – IMHO - carefully written and free of barbs and negative tone. So let me say that I am truly grateful for their response because it calls attention to the issues raised by my letter, as well as to the important work contained in their paper(s) that triggered it. The first mystery here for me is why were Houran et al. so defensive? The next mystery is why did they think I "mischaracterized or misunderstood" their outlook as being dismissive of "ghostly experiences" as delusions and that I charged them with implicit bias? OK, I plead guilty to the latter. I did, but only to *possible* bias. I have no idea whether or not their results and conclusions are biased, only that they have not convinced me – a skeptical audience – that it is unbiased.

On misunderstanding them, to which I plead innocent, my letter included specific quotes from their published works, precisely to avoid such misunderstandings. I do not know how else one should interpret, "...our research suggests that hauntings and poltergeists are delusional in nature" (Lange & Houran, 2001, p. 305). I did not – *would not* - criticize them for that opinion – I simply make the point that holding this characterization (or any other!) increases the likelihood of bias in one's work. Also, I did not – *would not* – say or imply Houran et al. dismiss or minimize so-called ghostly experiences. Their long and productive years of commitment to this fascinating topic speaks for itself. I do not know to what "many unfounded generalizations" they refer, so I look forward to reading the *Mindfield* article they are preparing (*Mindfield Bulletin* (13.2 issue)).

My letter-to-editor was aimed at anyone with serious interest in spontaneous cases of the poltergeist type. The Houran et al. articles provided an interesting example. It seemed quite clear to me that Houran et al.'s choice to pool all forms of ghostly experiences into a single pot, and to focus upon the similarities, would cloak some viable alternatives, especially the veridicality issue. I can see how Houran et al.'s work would interest those who make the same assumption – "... hauntings and poltergeists are delusional in nature." But what does it say to those of us who do not make the same assumption? Houran et al. are studying something quite different from what I'm studying. Houran et al. adhere to the Anomalistic Psychology tradition (Zusne & Jones) while I'm of the Hans Bender, ARG Owen, and Bill Roll

lineage. I believe Houran et al. share my primary concern with methodology in spontaneous case studies. We are also similar in having an eye for patterns, consistencies, and structure in data that facilitates scientific investigation. However, the target of my scientific curiosity differs from Houran et al. Specifically, my interest is the possible existence of a “jewel” for science associated with the actual physical events people report. These phenomena are not currently operationalizable, since we do not know what they are or how they occur.

I believe there’s an alternative which may open a methodological door to investigating the poltergeist type of anomalous experience (AE). It is suggested by the curiosity that some cases are distinctly *paradoxical*, displaying two equally interesting but quite different types of phenomena: 1) clusters of complex, chaotic physical AE; and 2) a psychosocial (group) context or setting, remarkably consistent across cases, time, and cultures. I argue that a definable subset of reports of anomalous experience (AE) display this paradox. Further, I suggest that this special type of case may offer special benefits for scientific investigation. For one, we can develop an operational definition for this type of case, which will facilitate identifying, collecting, cataloguing and building a purified database which can be queried, and they contain potentially measurable kinetic AE. I call this special type of case “AECKO” (pronounced echo).

Working at the Psychical Research Foundation with Bill Roll, I personally investigated 40+ reports of spontaneous AE. Of those, only 2 or 3 were “good” cases. AECKO is an attempt to isolate and capture those. Because Houran et al. chose to collapse their data pool on the premature (IMHO) assumption that all “ghostly experiences” are the same and focus on the similarities, their results are of little interest or use for my goals. I do not see a way that Houran et al.’s work could facilitate the finding of “good” cases for scientific investigation.

AECKO is not a theory or operational definition of AE. AECKO is the acronym for an operational definition of this type of case. It stands for a set of necessary and sufficient features of a special type of case report: the letters stand for Anomalous Episodic Communal Kinetic Occurrence which will be described in detail in another publication.

AECKO offers two distinct equally important phenomena for investigation: the cluster of kinetic anomalous events (AE) and the psychosocial backdrop with which the AE shares the stage, the actors, and timeframe. AECKO is a tool for identifying and collecting these “good” cases. It can also be conceptualized as a perspective (not a theory) for investigating AE, including dual phenomenal foci, scientific measurability, unbiased observation, and a broad systems-theoretic lens honoring a wide range of theoretical stances. The psychosocial backdrop has clinical implications and may be the most urgent part of an AE case with which to deal.

I believe I understand the perspective of Houran et al. I hope this brief rejoinder explains why there’s little in their work that speaks to me. This is NOT due to the quality or potential importance of their studies but because they address different questions than I do. Unfortunately, my primary research interest - understanding the nature of the physical anomaly itself - is excluded from their studies.

References

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