

## INTO THE UNKNOWN: USING INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS TO EXPLORE PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF PARANORMAL EXPERIENCES

BY KEN DRINKWATER, NEIL DAGNALL, AND LAUREN BATE

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**ABSTRACT:** Research exploring general subjective paranormal experience (GSPE) has traditionally used a quantitative approach. Resultant statistical analysis focuses upon categorization, validity and reliability, and fails to consider fully the impact of paranormal experiences at an intimate/personal level. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this paper explored how individual understanding of paranormal events was constructed. IPA focuses on personal experience and considers the meaning individuals attach to phenomena. Analysis of four interviews gave rise to three themes: distortion of reality (physical and mental fantasy of experience), you are not alone (third party sensory presence), and personal growth (effect on self). Emergent themes suggested an inextricable link between belief, behavior and perception. Paranormal event comprehension and rationalization profoundly affected individuals; was accompanied by fear of the unknown, and an unwillingness to accept the uncertain.

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The current paper focused on percipients' accounts of general subjective paranormal experiences (GSPE). Such narratives are of interest to wider society and academics because GSPEs are common (Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991) and experiences often affect individuals (Blackmore, 1988; Nelson, 1990; White, 1990). Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005) provide a commentary on the prosaic nature of exceptional/paranormal experiences.

GSPE refers specifically to an experience that a person believes is paranormal, that is an exceptional experience beyond the comprehension of conventional science (Neppe, 1990). Further, disambiguation is provided by Irwin (1999), who refers to paranormal experiences as "apparent anomalies of behavior and experience that exist apart from currently known explanatory mechanisms that account for organism–environment and organism–organism information and influence flow" (Irwin, 1999, p. 1).

Misleadingly, the term anomalous experience has been generalized to paranormal experiences (Wilde & Murray, 2010). These terms, in their intended sense, possess different meanings. Anomalistic refers to extraordinary phenomena (behavior and experience) without the supposition of paranormality, bizarre experience being explained in terms of known factors. Semantic confusion may arise because extraordinary phenomena may be labeled as paranormal (French, 2001).

Cardeña, Lynn and Krippner (2000) delineate usual experiences as encounters (experienced by a substantial amount of the population) that deviate from accepted explanations of reality. This definition is useful because it touches on an individual's perception of reality (considers personal experience), and raises important issues about the way in which society views anomalous experiences (Wilde & Murray, 2010).

Considering previous work on paranormal experience, several prominent studies have employed quantitative methods. The quantitative approach typically draws upon self-report measures, uses statistics and seeks to categorize data. A seminal example is John Palmer's Charlottesville (Virginia) survey, which explored the alleged incidence of subjective paranormal experience. Palmer (1979) developed a 46-item standardized questionnaire comprised of categories assessing: psychic experiences, psi-related experiences, psi-conducive altered states of consciousness, and psi-related activities. Surveys were posted to Charlottesville residents (300 students and 700 adults). Analysis of responses revealed two groups, respondents reporting no/few psi experiences vs. those reporting several. Despite limitations, Palmer's

(1979) survey produced valuable findings and informed several subsequent studies (e.g., Blackmore, 1984). For example, Kohr (1980), developed measures of the pervasiveness of paranormal and related effects by summing the types of reported experience in each of Palmer's categories.

The paranormal literature contains other important examples of quantitative experience measures. One frequently used example is The Survey of Anomalous Experiences (SAE) constructed by Gallagher, Kumar and Pekala (1994). The SAE comprises 29-items addressing anomalous/uncanny experiences. If the participant acknowledged an experience, they were asked to clarify whether they attributed their experience to a specified paranormal vs. non-paranormal process. Additionally, other researchers have developed measures assessing both subjective experience and general belief. For example, Glicksohn (1990) constructed a 10-item scale comprising five beliefs about subjective paranormal experience, and five general beliefs about the paranormal.

Overall, the quantitative approach has made a valuable contribution to paranormal experience research: large databases collated, data systematically appraised, and general trends identified. However, the reduction of data to numeric values results in the loss of valuable experiential data. For this reason, a qualitative/person centered approach is necessary because it considers all interpretive aspects of paranormal experience. Understanding the nature and perception of paranormal experience is a multifaceted/complex process involving perception and interpretation (self-negotiation and reconciliation). When a person reports a parapsychological experience, they may typically be asserting two occurrences: that of an anomalous or seemingly inexplicable event, and their interpretation of this event (Irwin, Dagnall & Drinkwater, 2013). Moreover, percipients may believe a paranormal experience is not real. Blackmore (1997) asserts that people frequently construe connected events as chance coincidences, thereby missing real connections. Alternatively, percipients may interpret chance events as connected. For these reasons, the present study adopted a phenomenological approach to understand better paranormal experiences.

Phenomenological methodology is widely used within psychological/ parapsychological research (Von Eckartsberg, 1998) because it describes the essential features (themes) that characterize human experience. Particularly, phenomenology attempts to explain the meaning of exceptional human performance experiences (c.f., in sports, Alessi, 1994, Murphy & White, 1995; and in trance mediumship, Barrett, 1996). For example, Heath (2000) used phenomenology to uncover process-oriented aspects of performing psi, and analyze spontaneous and intentional psychokinesis (PK) experiences. She concluded there was one core PK experience, composed of a number of discrete elements (constituents), which formed a fluid pattern (organic in quality). Her work provided important insights into qualitative aspects of PK and demonstrated that phenomenology was an effective tool for understanding paranormal phenomena.

In this context, the work of Aanstoos (1986) and Roll (1987) is of relevance. Drawing on an example from Native American Iroquois culture (the long body), Aanstoos and Roll argued that the human self is not restricted to the body studied by physiology and behavioral psychology; the experienced self is a larger self, a "long body" (Aanstoos, 1986). The long body is a function of the Iroquois' attunement to the world and suggests a holistic, interconnected, and integrative model for understanding paranormal experiences (Glazier, 2013). The metaphor describes the perception of the Iroquois that their bodies extended in time and space to other tribal members (significant other people, places, and objects) (Glazier, 2013; Roll, 1988). Their approach acknowledges an experiential view of psi and recognizes that the world of matter is interlinked with mind and meaning (Roll, 1987). Roll successfully applied this concept to his 1988 study of apparitional experiences.

Also, important to the present paper, is the work of Wilde and Murray (2009), who applied hermeneutics and idiographic analysis to out-of-body experiences (OBE's) and near death experiences (NDEs). Their methodology was based upon vicarious introspection (Ornstein & Ornstein, 1995) and subjected paranormal experiences to evocative examination. Particularly, the approach of Wilde and Murray (2009) provides a person-centered framework for developing a meaningful and interpretive self-conception for any given experience (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999).

To this end, the use of semi-structured interviews facilitates an understanding of personal attribu-

tions, the way in which people assign meaning to their experiences, social interactions and world (Grinstead, 2005). Thus, an active collaboration between interviewer and interviewee is essential. Suchman and Jordan (1992) suggest that the procedures surrounding interviewing are about how to generate sincere responses to questions and how to engage in common-sense inference. Validity requires a method that will make sure that the participants have a common understanding of what the questions mean and how the answers are to be understood/interpreted. Open-ended questions achieve this by structuring a collection of rich and detailed information.

Finally, the work conducted by the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health (IGPP) requires consideration. Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005) conducted a representative survey of the German population (1,510 people) about paranormal attitudes and experiences. Three quarters of interviewees reported at least one paranormal experience; 50% of experiences involved classic paranormal phenomena (prophetic dreams, apparitions etc.). Age influenced the frequency and incidence of reported paranormal experiences; younger people found supernatural phenomena (primarily psi) more plausible and reported more instances of it. In the second phase of the IGPP project, 220 telephone interviews were thematically analyzed. The results indicated that experiencers were affected in different (individual) ways and that phenomena (e.g., apparitions and déjà vu experiences) occurred rarely (they were by definition exceptional experiences). Experiences showed consistent similarities and characteristics. Additionally, experiencers frequently forwarded rational explanations for perceived phenomena (supernatural powers or the existence of psychic abilities) and seamlessly integrated their exceptional experiences into the individual biography (Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005).

Interviewees typically, classified experiences in the form of an anecdote, abnormal-normal incident, every-day miracle. Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005) concluded that while exceptional experiences could not be defined by one specific characteristic, communication/reporting typically involved a secure mode of (shielded) speech. To convince the listener that experiences were authentic (real) interviewees employed a number of specific strategies: naming witnesses and experts, emphasizing their rational attitude, while eliminating other logical possibilities. Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005) resolved that a process of normalization occurs, whereby percipients feel their experiences are unspectacular; even though experiences are remarkable and memorable, they seldom require special interpretations. This process of normalization makes it increasingly easy for the people to talk about their experiences.

### **Study Design**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Osborn, 1997) is a qualitative, phenomenological approach combining hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA has origins in phenomenology (Giorgi, 1995), provides an in-depth analysis of, and engagement with, subjective experiences; searches for objective truth and meaningful explanation/interpretation of the world, while producing an objectively rich data set providing a suitable qualitative means for analyzing subjective accounts (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). IPA seeks to honor recollections, observations and narratives of an individual's experience (Reid et al., 2005). Particularly, IPA focuses on how people construct meaning from their experiences and considers the way in which experiences affect individuals (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). IPA is especially useful when researchers are concerned with complexity, process, or novelty (Smith & Osborn, 2003). These qualities are inherent within paranormal experiences and mirror the central concerns of anomalistic experiential research as identified by Braud (2004); authenticity, underlying process, and phenomenology.

IPA has successfully been applied to the study of paranormal experiences (Wilde & Murray, 2009, 2010). IPA provides anomalistic psychological researchers with a unique approach for understanding how percipients find meaning in and make sense of their paranormal experiences. Importantly, IPA also provides insights into the effect anomalous experiences have on those who experience them (Braud, 1993, 2004). As a caveat, it is important to note that IPA does not attempt to validate experiences (construct objective truth about an experience); rather, IPA is concerned with the subjective nature of accounts and

the meaning of the experience (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

## **Method**

### **Participants and Sample**

The current study outlined the personal accounts and perceptions of four interviewed experiencers (two female and two male); interviewee names were changed to an alias to establish anonymity:

Sarah (white British, age 35) described how she was a child, in her hometown, when she first had an experience of what she terms “a paranormal event.” Later on, she explains that her first real anomalous experience was as a teenager (13 years), although many years later she recounts a more recent family bereavement as a particular event that changed her perception regarding belief in the paranormal. Several repeated experiences over a 16-year period led to her being more open to spiritual and religious perceptions. She describes how she felt when confronted by an apparition for the first time and then again many years later.

Leanne (white British, age 19) recalls a singular experience, which occurred after her grandfather’s death. The first time she stays at her grandmother’s house (following the death of her grandfather) she experiences a strange dream in which she sees her grandfather standing over her looking as he did before he died.

Neil (white British, age 35) discussed numerous anomalous experiences (e.g., UFO, apparitions). Neil is an avid believer in the paranormal and goes in search of paranormal phenomena.

Nick (white British, age 25) explained how he had his first anomalous experience (an encounter with a shadow figure/evil presence) one night coming home from a friend’s house. He also believes in the paranormal. Nick was very scared of his experience and it profoundly affected him afterwards. Nick has had paranormal experiences before, none of which has influenced him as much.

All participants had experienced at least one memorable anomalous event and wished to articulate their experience(s). Sample size was consistent with the idiographic approach, and with the work of Smith et al. (2009), who advocate small samples for IPA studies. Working with small, homogeneous samples enables the researcher to commit to producing detailed interpretative accounts and promotes analytical depth (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). Participants were recruited from a database of respondents who had participated in a UK research study assessing belief in the paranormal (1,217 respondents). The final section of the survey asked whether participants had experienced paranormal phenomena and whether they wished to outline an experience. From the sample, 56 participants agreed to be interviewed; 28 interviews were conducted and 4 were randomly selected for inclusion in the present study. The study followed the code of ethics of the British Psychology Society (BPS) (BPS, 2009).

### **Interview Procedure**

An interview schedule containing a list of main topics to be covered was prepared. This included an outline of the study (including procedure and ethics), biographical details, background, and circumstances of their GSPE. Interviews began with a standardized brief detailing: the research purpose, semi-structured nature of the interview, and approximate time scheduling. The first author then asked each participant, “Can you please tell me about your experience (s)?”

Consistent with the approach of Wilde and Murray (2009, 2010) the semi-structured interviews were participant led. To promote dialog, the researcher adopted an empathic approach, based on non-judgemental acceptance and openness, while retaining a critical distance (Smith & Eatough, 2006). Interviews, conducted by the first author, lasted approximately 30 minutes. Following interviews, participants

were debriefed and thanked for their contribution.

The first author and a postgraduate research assistant (undertaking a period of “work experience”), transcribed all interviews; in the US, the role would be similar to that of an intern. IPA focuses on text, accordingly full verbatim transcripts of interviews were produced (these included both interviewer questions and participant answers) (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Wilde & Murray, 2009, 2010). IPA is concerned with semantics, hence prosodic features were not transcribed.

Analysis followed four distinct stages outlined by Willig (2001). Stage one involves data immersion, in order to gain rich understanding of percipient experience. The second stage involves specific theme generation: using psychological language and terminology. In stage three, the researcher looks for common reference points between themes and theme grouping begins. Finally, a summary of clusters and themes emerge, providing a clear overview of how the clusters and themes fit together as a coherent analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). With IPA, predetermined hypotheses are not tested rather the area of interest is explored flexibly and in detail.

Themes were compiled for each interview, and comparisons were made across participants in order to identify common experiences. Transcripts were examined independently to ensure that themes accurately reflected each interview. Analytical comparisons enabled a check on the validity of the primary researcher’s analysis and interpretation of participants’ accounts.

## **Results**

Three master (major) themes emerged from the analysis: (a) distortion of reality (physical and mental fantasy of experience), (b) “you are not alone” (third party sensory presence), and (c) and personal growth (effect on self). All the themes were considered inter-textually; they were found to interact and influence what the participants extracted from their paranormal experience(s).

### **Distortion of Reality (Physical and Mental Fantasy of Experience)**

A dominant cultural perspective is that of positivist science. This theme highlights contradictions between aspects of culture, and what we as humans interpret as reality. Particularly, it describes unreal and unusual characteristics of the experience; particularly, those which lie outside the accepted norms of society. This theme manifested itself via internal and external distortions, reflecting the participants’ views of themselves and their perception of society and reality.

Leanne describes a mental distortion, where she is struggling to determine whether the anomalous event actually occurred, or whether it was merely a dream state: “I don’t know if it actually happened or I was just, cos it was in the dream, if I was dreaming and I thought about him before I went to sleep or something.”

Leanne attempted to describe the nature of her experience. In doing so, she struggled to place and categorize the experience within her internal reality. This was reflected by her uncertainty and lack of clarity. The experience was something she had not encountered previously and therefore she found it difficult to interpret (make sense of). Consequently, Leanne questions whether the experience was merely a dream.

Contrastingly, Sarah outlined a coherent interpretation of her experience; it was justified in terms of distorted perception (a perceptual abnormality). This definition was grounded in her personal experience of psychosis and hallucinations: “If I hadn’t had psychosis (...) I would have probably thought yeah that’s definite. A definite apparition whatever it is.”

Sarah’s perspective was that the mind is powerful and can distort what is seen. She freely described and comprehended her experiences, unlike Leanne, who encountered difficulties. Sarah rationalized and explained her experience in a straightforward manner; accepting that her mind/thoughts were producing the experience(s). This illustrates how past experiences can influence the interpretative process and inform attribution of causation. Sarah believed her experience(s) to be a mundane product of the mind; a normal spontaneous process.

But with having this psychosis I know that the mind can produce images (...) but I think because I have had that I realize that your mind is very powerful to what you're feeling. And that's why I think I could have produced that image myself.

Distortion also arose in the transcripts of Neil, Nick and Sarah. Nick and Neil congruently reported shadowy figures, whose features were not identifiable.

There was a wavy/shadow figure in the middle of the road about twenty yards away, could make out the legs and hands but the face was blacked out. [Nick].

There was a face at the window (...) but the corner of the eye type (...) so I went to the front door, opened the front door and no one was there. [Neil].

Sarah reported a heat source, which materialized into the shape of a figure near her bed. She described this as the kind that emanates from hot tarmac under the sun: "I saw this heat coming from nowhere (...) it was like heat, but you know what heat looks like."

Paranormal interpretations may reflect participants' desire to explain simply what was seen, i.e., rationalize a perceived paranormal experience in terms of existing societal and cultural beliefs. Perceiving meaning in randomness may be an important factor in the formation of paranormal beliefs (Dagnall, Parker, & Munley, 2007; Fyfe, Williams, Mason, & Pickup, 2008). Particularly, interpreting the unknown qualities of the experience by drawing on existing knowledge and understanding (i.e., "heat," "figure," and "face") in order to normalize the phenomena made them appear congruent and typical. Particularly, interviewees attempted to explain/rationalize experience(s) in the context of how (they believed) society interprets paranormal/anomalous experience(s).

### **You Are Not Alone (Third Party Sensory Presence)**

This theme focused upon the sensory nature of the experience (visions, smells and feelings). Ascribed sensual features gave experiences an acute intensity, which was attributed to an unknown, inexplicable presence. In some instances, the interviewee felt uncomfortable/anxious; the presence was perceived as menacing and malevolent.

He was kinda looking over me. [Leanne]

There was a feeling that someone was watching ya (...) rather than somebody actually being there (...) but it's a feeling that even though the rooms empty apart from two people, there was a feeling walking through that room. [Neil].

I could feel something, footsteps behind me (...) it felt like, slight static, like the hairs on the back of my neck, I felt them go up. [Nick]

It didn't feel good, it felt like it was evil and it was looking at me. [Nick].

Interviewees typically depicted the presence as a mysterious entity. Participant's experiences embodied the notion of powerlessness, positioning the experiencer as passive and lacking control. From the perspective of the interviewees, perceived experiences were intense and real. Even those experiences from ten years ago appeared vivid in detail.

Similar to the previous distortion theme, vividness reflects the impact of the experience upon the individual. Strong emotional content together with detail provide a sense of realness and lucidity, which helps to establish the experience(s) as authentic.

### **Personal Growth (Effect on Self)**

The experience(s) influenced the individuals at a personal and intimate level, in both positive and

negative ways.

Leanne described the pleasant experience of her Grandfather watching over her.

Erm my grandpa died in, erm I think it was 2009. I stayed at my grandma's house for the first time since he died. If I was just dreaming and I thought about him before I went to sleep or something. I don't know, but it was really weird. He said something and I can't remember now what he said. He was kinda looking over me.

This focus on her grandfather revealed a pronounced sense of personal loss. She remembered her grandfather fondly, showing concern for his passing. Leanne acknowledged that she may have been thinking about him prior to sleeping, and that this may have caused the phenomenon to occur. Leanne recalled vivid details and accounts of previous shared experiences with her grandfather, which relayed her belief that in both life and death her grandfather was/is there to protect and watch over her. This interpretation has helped Leanne to come to terms with the grieving process.

Similarly, despite the figure in her experience having no physical identifiable features, Sarah attributes the experience to her recently passed away friend.

Our best friend of the group (who was my best friend) got killed um... on a cross country run, by a tractor. Um... and a few months following my friends and I had a party at my house, and after my friends had gone, I saw what I think was an apparition. I wasn't scared or anything, I just accepted that it could have been her.

Sarah stated that she was no longer grieving, and that the party was one which her recently passed friend would have attended. Sarah assigned the experience to her friend. This interpretation allowed Sarah to perceive the experience without fear; Sarah believed her friend cared and hence would do her no harm. Thus for Sarah, the experience was a positive one; the association between her friend and the experience provided Sarah with comfort and reassurance.

Sarah possessed a different understanding of her paranormal experience than the other interviewees. She was aware that the mind can be powerful and may influence what we see and how we interpret information. Prior to interview, Sarah explained that several years before her friend's death she had suffered from psychosis (involving hallucinations). While recovered, Sarah felt that this experience had a bearing on her interpretation of her unusual event.

Sarah and Leanne described the passing of friends/relatives as a means of providing an explanation for their experiences. This is different from both Nick and Neil, who do not ascribe person specific features to their experience(s). For example, Nick's negative experience involved a potentially malevolent featureless figure/person.

When I came back in her exact words to me was you look like you've seen a ghost. And I went I think I just have and it was something that I didn't like it I picked up a bottle and I drank nearly three quarters of it in one go and I'm just not frightened that easily but that frightened me.

Nick reported his experiences to be frightening and unsettling, so much so that he consumed a large quantity of alcohol following the encounter. His experiences produced an alteration in behavior; Nick disliked walking home alone, changed his route, and now avoids paranormal material. Prior to the experience, Nick had a keen interest in ghostly and uncanny happenings and read paranormal books; he felt that his experiences were an indication of something sinister, a perception that encouraged him to discard his paranormal books.

I don't know what it is, but there was no other human there, that's my feeling anyway. I thought that's evil that, and I just ran (...) the next day I got rid of my books, I just had a weird feeling, I'm getting rid of these ghost books.

The words “evil” and “no other human” in Nick’s description are pertinent. “Evil” here refers to a malevolent, corrupt, destructive and wicked force. In this context, “no other human” suggested that Nick has been in contact with something that (he felt) was potentially supernatural: “I just had a bad feeling like I needed to get away you know hearing them footsteps and then seeing that figure, it really did scare me.”

Nick attributed the experience to a third party, a paranormal entity, as discussed in the previous paragraph. There is a lack of embodiment, indicative of a lack of control. In order to avoid these feelings and recurring thoughts, Nick avoids the passageway where the event took place and avoids the paranormal.

The notion of normality is inherent within this theme: individuals experience the events as unusual (i.e., beyond recognized social norms).

I turned that way cos it felt really real. Like when I woke up I could have turned to where he was stood in the dream and nothing was there. It was really weird. [Leanne].

Yeah it was very unusual to me definitely. [Sarah].

I haven’t told anyone about it until... my mum knows all about it because she was having a bit of a party that night when I came back in, her exact words to me was “you look like you’ve seen a ghost”. [Nick].

### **Three Themes Emerge**

The notion of culture and society is a superordinate theme; it is intrinsic within and overlaps the subordinate themes (outlined above). Particularly in this account, it refers to the prevailing societal norms and cultural expectations, which influence and color the perception and interpretation of unusual experiences. Any interpretation is constructed and viewed within the context of society, particularly the individual’s perception of the prevailing dominant view/perspective. Typically, paranormal experiences were normalized, adjusted to conform to the conventional and mundane.

Considering this with respect to the individual themes: distortion, the experience is viewed in relation to what the individual considers as normal and real; you are not alone, individuals attribute the experience to a third party (anthropomorphize); personal growth, where individuals personalize the experience in terms of their previous experience, knowledge and understanding.

### **Discussion**

In this section of the paper, we explore emergent themes from a theoretical standpoint. General subjective paranormal experiences (GSPEs) were characterized by a lack of embodiment (sense of one’s own body or bodily self-consciousness) (Legrand, 2006; Longo, Schüür, Kammers, Tsakiris, & Haggard, 2008). Embodiment is a central issue within phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and refers to the embedding of cognitive processes in brain circuitry, and the origin of sensory experience in relation to environment (Fuchs, 2009). The present study identified the complex social processes which influence and structure understanding of GSPEs and give meaning to anomalous/unusual phenomena (Wilde & Murray, 2010). Particularly when explaining GSPEs, interviewees looked outside (beyond) the self, comprehending their unusual experiences by referring to stereotypical, cultural beliefs. This process is similar to the long body metaphor (Aanstoos, 1986; Glazier, 2013; Roll, 1987, 1988) in which bodies extend in time and space to other people, places, and objects. It is also consistent with Bruner’s (1990) view of the body as a biological assemblage of restraints and possibilities; meanings derived via an individual’s immersion with his or her cultural world.

Within the present study, culture and society (super-ordinate theme) framed and shaped the interpretation of paranormal experiences (Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005). Culture/society provided participants with a safety net, served to normalize exceptional/anomalous events; gave them meaning



and context. Reification in this context may constrain individual growth because everyday explanations dominate perception and frame interpretation. For example, Sarah, Leanne, and Nick validate their GSPEs by referring to dreams (“I was just dreaming”), mental illness (“but with having psychosis I know that the mind can produce images”), and ghosts (“I opened the door and there was a figure moving into the kitchen area”). Collectively, there was a tendency to personify GSPEs, ascribing physical characteristics to perceived phenomena.

Complex interpretive processes were evident within the emergent subordinate themes: distortion of reality (physical and mental fantasy of experience), you are not alone (third party sensory presence), and personal growth (effect on self). Interviewees described their attempts to make sense of the unknown and establish a sense of control, distortion of reality (physical and mental fantasy of experience). For example, Leanne saw what she thinks was an apparition of her deceased friend in her bedroom. She explained that, “there could have been a rational explanation for it, such as it could be some kind of heat formation or something”; “I think because I have had that, I realize that your mind is very powerful to what you’re feeling, that’s why I think I could have produced that image myself.” Often, interviewees questioned the validity of their experience(s); there was (internal) dispute as to whether the experiences constituted a genuine paranormal event. Irrespective of this, experiences had a profound effect (psychologically/emotionally) on each individual (personal growth and the effect on self).

Interviewees, through the process of retelling, questioned the veracity and validity of their own accounts and were frequently presented with two contrasting choices, to accept their paranormal experience(s) as genuine, or to reappraise them using mundane and conventional explanations (e.g., Nick, who explained a shadow figure as “a trick of the light.”). In doing so, interviewees may perceive that adopting paranormal explanations can leave them open to criticism. Neil explains that, on several occasions, unusual sightings made him feel apprehensive: e.g., “got to the top of the stairs (obviously after seeing a figure) they thought what’s going on, she/it vanishes...there’s no way that a person, if it was a person, could have got out.” This is because interviewees are aware/conscious that experiences are unconventional and outside those of mainstream society; this may explain why the interviewees frequently rationalized their experience(s) using orthodox beliefs (Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005).

Apprehension/anxiety associated with the unknown and an unwillingness to accept the uncertain were common features of the experiences. Neil explained that, “Carers have said that they have heard things upstairs, erm... footsteps down the stairs, movement upstairs as well. Which is weird as my mum is in a wheel chair.” Particularly, interviewees frequently attributed their experiences to an unknown force/power and expressed feelings of helplessness; experiencers often positioned themselves as forlorn victims, with little or no control over the event, you are not alone (third party sensory presence) and personal growth (effect on self). Alternatively, if a sense of dread/foreboding was perceived, the desire to avoid/escape was articulated (e.g., Nick explained, “I felt the hair on the back of my neck go up looked a cross and the wavy figure in the middle of the road about twenty yards away could make out the legs and hand but the face was blocked out, it just scared me to death. I just turned round and just literally ran, I legged it.”). This took the form of an action. For one participant, this involved altering behavior. Nick stopped walking a particular way home and discarded all material associated with the paranormal. Other studies report similar findings: fear is a relatively common initial reaction to paranormal phenomena (Lange & Houran, 1999).

Contrastingly, interviewees frequently communicated positive affect(s) arising from paranormal/anomalous experiences (e.g., being watched over by a deceased relative); interviewees outlined feelings of enhanced wellbeing and spirituality (McClenon, 1994). Two interviewees, who attributed phenomena to important deceased people (dead relative/close friend), expressed feelings of closure, and the ability to emotionally progress (to move on). These positive affirmations suggest that some paranormal experiences were guided by motivations or needs (Broughton, 1988; Stanford, 1974a, 1974b; Weiner & Geller, 1984).

The interaction between affect and paranormal experiences can be dynamic and complex. Both positive and negative experiences can have a profound effect on the individual (e.g., some people expe-

rience feelings of grief, despair, and fear following a visit to a kind of hellish purgatory or void; Irwin & Bramwell, 1988). As such, fear is a relatively common initial reaction to paranormal phenomena, although the long-term effects can also be positive (e.g., a sensation of love, a feeling of joy, and feeling more peaceful). This is especially true when people have near-death or out-of-body (Ring, 1980, 1984) and religious experiences (Hay, 1979).

### **Conclusion: Cultural Influences and Social Process**

IPA has been successfully used across a number of psychological disciplines (i.e. health, clinical and social psychology) and increasingly in parapsychology. When considering the use of IPA as a tool for investigating anomalous/paranormal experience, it is important to consider how language reflects both internal and external representations and influences the construction of reality. Paranormal beliefs are engrained in our sense of what is real and normal. Interviewing provides a safe and comfortable forum, narrative medium through which experience and societal involvement can be expressed. Bruner (1990) described this as the stuff of human action and human intentionality, the mediation between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes. The interpretation of paranormal experiences was an intimate and person-specific affair. In the present study, it was more useful than a statistical model for understanding the personal nature and impact of paranormal experiences. Additional qualitative studies would add validity to the field of parapsychology. Moreover, the role of IPA is not to prove or disprove the existence of paranormal phenomena, but to examine what experiences mean for individuals (Cardeña et al., 2000; Mathijssen, 2009).

Using IPA, the current study explored the effect that general subjective paranormal experiences (GSPE) have on the individual. Previously, IPA has been instrumental in highlighting the subtle personal and social factors influencing a limited range of paranormal phenomena (e.g., NDE & OBE; Wilde & Murray, 2009, 2010). This approach could be extended to specific paranormal experiences, beyond those already examined (alien encounters, abduction experiences, demonic possession, etc.). In this context, IPA may prove to be an invaluable tool in the further development of theory and knowledge (epistemology) in parapsychology.

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*Manchester Metropolitan University  
Faculty of Health, Psychology & Social Care  
Hathersage Road, Manchester M13 0JA, UK  
k.drinkwater@mmu.ac.uk*

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### **Abstracts in Other Languages**

#### *Spanish*

#### **A LO DESCONOCIDO: USO DEL ANÁLISIS INTERPRETATIVO FENOMENOLÓGICO PARA EXPLORAR RECUENTOS PERSONALES DE EXPERIENCIAS PARANORMALES**

**RESUMEN:** La investigación que explora la experiencia paranormal subjetiva general ha utilizado tradicionalmente un enfoque cuantitativo. Los análisis estadístico resultante se centran en la categorización, validez, y fiabilidad, y no toman en cuenta plenamente el impacto de las experiencias paranormales en un nivel íntimo/personal. Usando un Análisis Interpretativo Fenomenológico (IPA), este trabajo explora cómo se construye la comprensión individual de los acontecimientos paranormales. El IPA se centra en la experiencia personal y considera el significado que los individuos atribuyen a los fenómenos. El análisis de cuatro entrevistas dio lugar a tres temas: la distorsión de la realidad (fantasía física y mental de la experiencia), que uno no está solo (presencia sensorial de un tercero), y el crecimiento personal (efecto sobre uno mismo). Los temas emergentes sugieren un vínculo indisoluble que existe entre la creencia, la conducta y la percepción. La comprensión y racionalización del evento paranormal afectó profundamente a los afectados y estuvo acompañada por el miedo a lo desconocido y el no querer aceptar lo incierto.

#### *French*

#### **DANS L'INCONNU : UTILISER L'ANALYSE PHÉNOMÉNOLOGIQUE INTERPRÉTATIVE POUR EXPLORER LES TÉMOIGNAGES PERSONNELS D'EXPÉRIENCES PARANORMALES**

**RESUME :** La recherche explorant les expériences paranormales subjectives générales (GSPE) a

traditionnellement employée une approche quantitative. Les analyses statistiques qui en résultaient se focalisaient sur la catégorisation, la validité et la fiabilité, et échouait à considérer pleinement l'impact des expériences paranormales à un niveau intime/personnel. En utilisant l'analyse phénoménologique interprétative (IPA), cet article explore comment la compréhension individuelle des événements paranormaux est construite. L'IPA se focalise sur le vécu personnel et considère la signification que les individus associent au phénomène. L'analyse de quatre entretiens fait émerger trois thèmes : la distorsion de la réalité (l'imaginaire physique et mental associé au vécu), vous n'êtes pas seul (la présence sensorielle d'un tiers), et la croissance personnelle (effet sur le soi). Les thèmes émergents suggèrent un lien inextricable entre la croyance, le comportement et la perception. La compréhension et la rationalisation des événements paranormaux affectent profondément les individus ; elles sont accompagnées par la peur de l'inconnu et un refus d'accepter l'incertain.

*German*

#### HINEIN INS UNBEKANNTE: DIE VERWENDUNG EINER INTERPRETATIVEN PHÄNOMENOLOGISCHEN ANALYSE, UM PERSÖNLICHE BERICHTE ÜBER PARANORMALE ERFAHRUNGEN ZU UNTERSUCHEN

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG:** Die bisherige Forschung zur Untersuchung allgemeiner subjektiver paranormaler Erfahrungen (ASPE) war traditionellerweise quantitativ orientiert. Bei der daraus resultierenden statistischen Analyse steht die Kategorisierung, Validität und Reliabilität im Vordergrund und vernachlässigt den Einfluss paranormaler Erfahrungen auf einer privaten/persönlichen Ebene. Unter Verwendung der Interpretativen Phänomenologischen Analyse (IPA) untersucht dieser Artikel, wie ein individuelles Verständnis paranormaler Vorgänge zustande kommt. Im Mittelpunkt der IPA steht die persönliche Erfahrung und die Bedeutung, die Individuen den Phänomenen zusprechen. Bei der Analyse von vier Interviews ergaben sich drei Themen: Realitätsverzerrung (physische und mentale Fantasieerfahrung), Du bist nicht allein (die sensorische Präsenz eines Dritten) und persönliche Entwicklung (Auswirkung auf das Selbst). Die sich daraus ergebenden Themen legten eine unauflösbare Verbindung zwischen Einstellung, Verhalten und Wahrnehmung nahe. Das Verständnis und die Rationalisierung paranormaler Vorgänge übten auf Individuen einen tiefgreifenden Einfluss aus und war begleitet von der Furcht vor dem Unbekannten und der mangelnden Bereitschaft, das Ungewisse zu akzeptieren.