

To the Editor:

In 2019, The Journal of Parapsychology published a two-part paper by Houran and colleagues (Houran et al., 2019a; 2019b) in which they highlight a persistent problem in parapsychological field studies: "...ongoing research has been stifled by the lack of a specific and standard operationalization". I could not agree more! However, after reading the articles, I have serious qualms not only about the results but also about the approach taken, which I suspect could stifle any real advancement in this potentially fascinating area of study. I am aware that Houran & Lange (2001, p. 305), have already taken a stand on a central mystery which, for other researchers, drives interest in these cases – that is, whether or not there is an anomaly to investigate. They wrote, "...our research suggests that hauntings and poltergeists are delusional in nature...a delusion is...a mistaken belief that is created and sustained in an attempt to serve an adaptive function of regulating anxiety associated with ambiguous stimuli." I have no problem with that predisposition. However, it is still a predisposition.

Holding *any* belief or disposition, for any reason, necessarily closes one's mind to a greater or lesser extent, and allows bias to slip in to feelings, cognitions, attitudes, and behavior, consciously and unconsciously. The current paper reads as if driven more by a disposition than by solid skeptical scientific inquiry. For example, they have argued elsewhere that all *entity-encounter experiences* are similar, and therefore they pool them, tossing them all into a single pot that includes, "...religious and celestial visions, fairies or little folk, demons, shamanic power animals, witches, UFOs and extraterrestrials..." and other phenomena that are not usually considered parapsychological (Lange & Houran, 2001). However, there is substantial evidence that there is at least one sub-type of such experiences that stands out from the rest as being different, that this sub-type shows impressive historical consistency (Gauld & Cornell, 1979; Roll, 1972; Williams, 2020), and lends itself to objective measurability and scientific study more than other types. I refer to so-called *poltergeist* or *recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis* (RSPK) type cases, which W.G. Roll and others rarely had difficulty in identifying from among the many forms of "ghostly encounters," despite the well-known similarities. This type of case could be odds-on-favorite to yield a scientific breakthrough, appears amenable to quasi-experimental intervention (Roll & Pratt, 1971), may be our best shot at addressing the veridicality issue, as well as potentially providing valuable health and clinical clues for identifying possible triggers, diagnostic criteria, and therapeutic possibilities (Roll, 2007).

The potential benefits of collapsing diverse types of "entity encounters" into one category comes at a rather high cost - *it hides the differences*. It is the observation of differences, uniqueness, individual cases, and idiosyncratic features that triggers breakthroughs in science. It is therefore unlikely that the approach of pooling these experiences will foster breakthroughs regarding anomalous phenomena: it will more likely prevent them.

In addition to the above, I have grave concerns about collecting survey data online, and the description of the sampling plan utilized in Part II of this paper does little to convince me that the respond-

ent sample is representative of any identifiable population of “ghostly encounter” experiencers. Thus, the results may not be generalizable. Coupled with this concern, the 32-item SSE questionnaire used here does not meet my subjective standard for face validity due to: its abundance of tabloid terminology (such as “strange” and “mysterious”); the near total emphasis on *externals*, things done to (or believed to be done to) the respondent or surroundings, which are unbalanced by internal, cognitive, evaluative, attitudinal change items; and the paucity of items about respondent’s physical, mental, emotional condition before, during, and after, or seeking or receiving coping assistance. For these reasons I cannot trust that these data are unbiased.

On the other hand, this article highlights a real need in parapsychological field studies – **operational definitions**. An operational definition specifies: 1) the characteristics or traits of a phenomenon under study; 2) how these are measured; 3) how to distinguish this phenomena from others. And it does this in such a way that anyone (with appropriate training and equipment) can reproduce it (Feest, 2005). Unfortunately, Houran et al. (2019b) only describe an attempt to operationalize the intensity of delusional experiences in a self-selected online sample of strange event reports, without regard for type of event.

Operational definitions have been problematic for other researchers as well, especially those interested in field studies of anomalous occurrences. In contrast, experimental parapsychology has operational definitions written into the procedures section: the dependent variable. This is not the case in field studies so operational definitions are easily ignored or overlooked. Attempts to operationalize reports of ghosts, poltergeists, and hauntings, have tended to rely on dictionary definitions that, in turn, fall back on Spiritualist definitions due to the etymological origins of those words. Thus, disembodied entities are built into the terminology. And with no objective measure of ghost or poltergeist, operational definitions are incomplete or nonexistent.

Instead, field studies in parapsychology rest on shaky ground, an anti-measure, really: the observation of any event that defies normal explanation is mistakenly taken as evidence of a ghostly presence (Solfvin, 2016). Pratt & Roll (1958) proposed a way out of the trap of spirit causality by coining RSPK, recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis, but this simply replaced the spiritual causation with human psychokinesis although it did connect field studies more closely with experimental parapsychology. All efforts at operationalization have been tied to some hypothetical (and unmeasurable) causation. This is not helpful for a researcher trying to investigate causation!

Is it possible to develop an operational definition that does not presuppose causality?

Possibly so. We have sufficient backlog of well documented cases to begin developing a true science capable of delving more deeply into this intriguing mystery of nature. First, we must abandon forever the troglodytic terminology of *ghosts*, *hauntings*, and *poltergeist* (and even RSPK), which carry unnecessary baggage. Second, we must begin identifying and categorizing the possible types and subtypes of these seemingly chaotic phenomena. There is at least one type, suggested above, that is ripe for isolating from the pack. Third, we must develop a more consistent system of collecting and sharing data from cases. Fourth, we must begin developing operational definitions for types and subtypes. These must be based on specific measurable characteristics that we can all – regardless of belief or predisposition – agree on.

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