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The paranormal is (still) normal: the sociological implications of a survey of paranormal experiences in Great Britain by Madeleine Castro, Roger Burrows and Robin Wooffitt

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Abstract

Historically, there has been limited sociological interest in the paranormal and no systematic study of reported paranormal experiences. There are also few medium-to-large-scale survey results with nationally representative populations focusing on paranormal *experiences*. This paper provides details of an exploratory survey conducted in 2009 with a nationally representative sample of 4,096 adults aged 16 years and over across Great Britain¹. Our findings show that 37 per cent of British adults report at least one paranormal experience and that women, those who are middle-aged or individuals resident in the South West are more likely to report such experiences. These results establish incidence levels of reported paranormal experiences in contemporary Britain. We argue also that they merit a more sustained sociological consideration of the paranormal. In this respect we renew and update the robust justification and call for serious research positioning the paranormal as a social phenomenon, originally proposed well over thirty years ago by Greeley (1975).

Keywords (max 10): Paranormal experiences, anomalous experiences, sociology of the paranormal, Parapsychology, geodemographics, MOSAIC

Introduction

In this paper we discuss the results of a survey on paranormal experiences in Britain.

Experiences included *telepathy* (mind-to-mind communication with another living person), *extrasensory perception* or ESP (knowledge of concurrent events or information without the use of the known senses), *precognition* (knowledge of events that have yet to transpire), *mystical² experiences* (often involving a sense of oneness with the universe, awareness of a numinous presence and vastly altered perceptions of self, time and space), and *contact with the dead* (such as visual, olfactory or auditory encounters with the deceased, or the overwhelming sense of their presence). Our findings are broadly in line with previous studies, in that they suggest that these experiences are far from uncommon amongst the general public. We argue that this finding mandates a more sustained sociological inquiry, and the analysis of the survey results allows us to sketch some possibilities for further quantitative and qualitative research.

Sociologists have not really been concerned with paranormal experiences, with some notable exceptions. For example, sociologists of scientific knowledge have studied the ways in which parapsychologists and critics debated the scientific status of parapsychological knowledge (Collins and Pinch 1979; Pinch 1979); there have been studies of the discourse of the paranormal (Castro 2009; Hess 1993; Wooffitt 1992, 2000, 2006); and there have been some studies exploring the characteristics of people who claim paranormal or occult experiences (Greeley 1975; Wuthnow 1976; Fox 1992; Moody 1974a, b; Nelson 1975). But, as far as we can ascertain, there has been no systematic sociological study of reported paranormal experiences.

This may be due to a number of factors. The sociological community may not be aware of just how common these experiences are. It may be assumed that, as these experiences imply psychological or parapsychological processes, they lay outside the scope of sociological inquiry; there is certainly a substantial literature on the *psychology of belief* in the paranormal (for example, Irwin 2009). Sceptics and debunkers of the paranormal are a substantial, vocal and well organised group: the organisation called the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry publishes a monthly journal (*The Skeptical Inquirer*) which purports to offer scientific assessments of reported paranormal claims or events, but which routinely lapses into mockery and ridicule; consequently sociologists may be wary of engaging with the paranormal for fear of damaging their professional standing. It may be assumed that paranormal experiences do not merit sociological attention because people who report them are delusional, attention seeking, fraudulent, or liable to misinterpret everyday events and experiences so as to imbue them with a magical character, or are engaging in wish fulfilment, or suffer from psychological impairments, and so on. Finally, it may be argued that paranormal experiences raise profound philosophical questions about the nature of human existence to which the systematic study of social order can make no contribution.

Many of these objections have been dealt with by the sociologist, Andrew Greeley, in his 1975 monograph based on a survey of paranormal experiences amongst a nationwide sample of adults in the United States, and in a later paper written for a parapsychological audience (Greeley 1991, the title of which we have adapted for our own paper). For example, with respect to the argument that paranormal experiences are esoteric and therefore marginal to sociology's core concerns, he argued that

‘The paranormal is normal. Psychic and mystic experiences are frequent even in modern urban industrial society. The majority of the population has had some such experience, a substantial

minority has had more than just an occasional experience, and a respectable proportion of the population has such experiences frequently. Any phenomenon with incidence as widespread as the paranormal deserves more careful and intensive research than it has received up to now.'

(Greeley 1975: 7)

Greeley also rejected the argument that psychologists or parapsychologists should exclusively study paranormal experiences because of the extraordinary *cognitive* mechanisms they imply. He argued that sociologists should adopt a position of agnosticism with respect to the ontological status of the experiences being reported, and examine sociological variables that seem to constrain or facilitate exceptional experiences. This echoes a long standing intellectual position, articulated most notably in James' ([1901-2] 1982) study of religious experience and rehearsed in more contemporary literature by Swatos (1982) and Yamané (2000), in their arguments for the sociological study of, respectively, prayer and religious experience.

It is perhaps a default position in the social sciences that paranormal experiences can be explained away by reference to wider cultural or socio structural variables. However, under close scrutiny these perspectives offer unsatisfactory accounts of the emergence and form of paranormal experiences. For example, the cultural source hypothesis suggests that paranormal experiences 'are subject to sociocultural influence' (MacDonald 1995: 366), and that they may be no more than 'the fictitious products of tradition' (Hufford 1982: 15), in that they merely reflect the myths, traditions and folktales that prevail in a particular society. So, it is argued, in a culture where particular paranormal or occult belief is powerful, people will misinterpret ordinary events in terms of the prevailing paranormal beliefs and traditions, and that these beliefs and traditions will in turn be reflected in the content of psychotic episodes, and so on. However, empirical

research has shown that paranormal experiences associated with a particular culture may be reported by people who have had no contact with that culture. The folklorist David Hufford studied a tradition of supernatural assault known as the 'Old Hag',³ an experience associated with the relatively isolated culture of the province of Newfoundland, Canada. He subsequently discovered that people reported the same experience even though they had not been exposed to the tradition of supernatural assault associated with Newfoundland (Hufford 1982). A subsequent empirical test of the cultural source hypothesis suggested that a range of paranormal experiences could not be explained by reference to cultural tradition (McClenon 1994).

Another dominant assumption in the social sciences is that paranormal experiences (and beliefs) are more likely to be reported by the socially marginal: people who have had limited educational opportunity, receive low incomes, have low social status, are members of ethnic minorities, and who are perceived to have failed to attain culturally proscribed goals, such as stable sexual relationships and friendships. This perspective suggests that the paranormal, like religious beliefs, provide a form of compensation for the cumulative social and interpersonal pressures arising from structured social marginality. There is some empirical evidence for this position (Bainbridge 1978; Connor 1984; Warren 1970; Wuthnow 1976), and some more recent work has argued that the marginality hypothesis is relevant in understanding the adoption of religious belief that exhibit a paranormal character, such as the existence of heaven and hell, the devil, and creationism (for example Goode 2000; Rice 2003).

There are, however, a number of compelling arguments to reject structural compensation explanations for paranormal experiences. First, there is a substantial literature that suggests there is little correlation between indices of social marginality and paranormal experience (Campbell and McIver 1987; Emmons and Sobal 1981a, b; Fox 1992; Gillen 1987; Greeley 1975, 1991; Haraldsson 1985; Haraldsson and Houtkooper 1991; Hartman 1976; Hay 1982; Hay and Morisy

1978; Hufford 1982; 1995; Irwin 1991; Lynch 1979; Marty 1970; McClenon 1990, 1994, 2000; Nelson 1975; Rice 2003; Zimmer 1984, 1985). Moreover, there is little evidence that people who report paranormal experiences are maladjusted, emotionally unbalanced or cognitively impaired. Greeley's assessment of the evidence leads him to conclude that

‘People who have paranormal experiences, even frequent such experiences, are not kooks. They are not sick, they are not deviants, they are not social misfits, they are not schizophrenics. In fact they may be more emotionally healthy than those who do not have such experiences.’

(Greeley 1975: 7)

In addition, there are a range of significant conceptual and methodological problems with the marginality hypothesis, and related compensation approaches.

‘[T]he causal logic of these theories is faulty; they suffer from a bias for a particular form of rationality; they have neglected the ‘insiders’ perspective; they employ a much contested philosophy of science; and, whether or not these theories are falsifiable or testable on independent grounds is highly questionable.’

(Jørgensen 1984: 147, fn. 2)

Perhaps the most compelling argument for a serious sociological analysis of paranormal experiences is the high incidence revealed by survey research. Nearly forty years ago, Greeley (1975) reported that nearly a fifth of the adult population of the United States reported frequent paranormal experiences. Comparative cross-cultural studies using the measures employed by

Greeley confirmed his results, suggesting that paranormal experiences are commonly reported, although the type of experience and the frequency with which they are reported will vary across cultures (Fox 1992; McClenon 1990). For example, Hay and Morisy's (1978) survey of exceptional and transcendent experiences suggested that 36 per cent of the UK population had experienced some kind of paranormal phenomenon. Haraldsson (1985) compared various surveys of paranormal belief and experience across Western Europe and the United States between 1974 and 1984. From the British data, 64 per cent of respondents reported at least one paranormal experience. His overall results for Western Europe were that telepathy was reported by 32 per cent of respondents, contact with the dead by 23 per cent, and personal experience of clairvoyance was reported by 20 per cent (Haraldsson 1985: 155). In a later study, Haraldsson and Hootkooper reported combined survey results from the 1981 -1984 European Human Values Study. Results showed that 44 per cent of the British population reported clairvoyance, telepathy or contact with the dead. In the United States, 60 per cent of those surveyed reported one or more of these experiences (Haraldsson and Hootkooper 1991). However, it is perhaps symptomatic of the dearth of sustained sociological study that comparable⁴ and contemporary survey results regarding paranormal experiences are very limited. The most recent comparable data comes from a survey among British adults aged 16 years and over, conducted by MORI on behalf of the BBC's Heaven and Earth Show (MORI 2003). This found that 17 per cent had personally experienced telepathy, 26 per cent had experienced premonitions or extra sensory perception, 12 per cent reported a near death experience, and 14 per cent reported precognitive dreams (MORI 2003).

These surveys are suggestive of the incidence of paranormal experiences, but there is little up to date research and the picture is muddled by various factors. For example, many surveys conflate belief and experience, and there is substantial evidence demonstrating that there is no necessary correlation between the two (Irwin 2009). In addition, what counts as paranormal can vary

between surveys: this is especially relevant to psychological surveys of belief in the paranormal, which routinely contain questions about UFOs, life on other worlds, the devil, the Loch Ness Monster, assorted superstitions, as well as more conventional parapsychological phenomena such as precognition and telepathy. Finally, while psychological surveys have identified the kinds of personality variables associated with paranormal experience, and sociological surveys have identified the social characteristics of people who report experiences, there has been little investigation of their geographical distribution.

This is surprising, for a number of reasons. First, extant research strongly suggests national variation in the incidence of paranormal experiences, and there is no reason to assume that this may not extend also to regional variation. Second, there is empirical scientific evidence that some kinds of paranormal phenomena may be related to the effects of recognised forces, the occurrence of which are crucially connected to particular locations. For example, Persinger's work on the relationship between electrical distortions to the temporal lobe and anomalous or mystical experiences suggests that energies locally displaced by tectonic movement may influence the consciousness of people in that location (Cook and Persinger 2001; Persinger and Healey 2002; Persinger et al 2001). Finally, there are numerous anecdotal accounts indicating that particular geographical locations are associated with a range of paranormal phenomena.

Anthropological studies have identified that shamanic ceremonies and experiences often cluster around traditionally sacred sites; and in contemporary western societies also, particular kinds of experiences are often linked to spatial phenomena, such as ley lines. Whilst these observations are anecdotal, or have their origins in folklore, it is reasonable to explore the root of stories that so consistently link paranormal experiences with particular spaces or locations. Rigorous exploration of geographical variables may explicate the scientific relationships that underpin folklore and anecdote, thereby suggesting new lines of inquiry for research.

The research we conducted aimed to: provide levels of reported paranormal experiences among adults across Great Britain; survey a representative sample of adults in Britain aged 16 years and over; define paranormal experiences in clear terms with accessibility for the population and usefulness for social scientists and psychologists; investigate and explore social determinants including geographic and geodemographic data as statistical probability tools (to indicate the typical profile of those more likely to report these experiences); and generate new areas for further empirical investigation.

Methods

Face-to-face interviews were carried out by Ipsos MORI in two waves, in January (22nd – 28th) and February (19th – 24th) 2009, as part of routine omnibus surveys.⁵ A nationally representative quota sample of 4,096 adults aged 16+yrs in Great Britain was interviewed. The resulting data was then weighted to match the profile of the British adult (16+) population. Five experience types were covered by the survey: telepathy, precognition, ESP, contact with the dead and mystical or transcendental experience. Results were analysed by the authors, at the time all based at the University of York,⁶ in order to discern correlations and associations between different characteristics of the respondents, including sociodemographic, geodemographic and geographic information. This has enabled us to form an interesting contemporary picture of reporting levels across Britain, including which individuals are more likely to report particular experiences.

Results and discussion

Individual experiences

In exploring the reported incidence of individual experiences there are some marked differences between the experiences. Table 1 shows the different number and per cent of people reporting each experience. The highest response is for precognition, reported by 24.1 per cent of respondents. Following this, 12.8 per cent report extra-sensory perception (ESP), 12.4 per cent

mystical experiences, 11.5 per cent telepathy and 10.4 per cent after death communication (ADC).

Table 1: Number and per cent reporting different experiences

Experience type	Number of people ⁷	per cent of Yes responses
Precognition	1,007	24.1
Extra-Sensory Perception (ESP)	541	12.8
Mystical Experiences	531	12.4
Telepathy	511	11.5
After-death communication (ADC)	447	10.4

Source: Ipsos MORI: 4,096 GB adults 16+

There are various points to consider in light of these results. Firstly, the surprisingly high levels of respondents reporting precognition and secondly, the similarity of these results to other surveys (with awareness of the limited extent to which these figures can be directly compared). Focusing initially on the high levels of precognition, we can see that the percentage of respondents is almost twice as many as the next highest reported experience (ESP). A more detailed exploration of why this might be potentially merits more extensive consideration in a separate paper but it is worth briefly elaborating on here.

We suggest that this high result can be understood by reference to concepts that are highly socially acceptable and in some cases, highly desirable in contemporary British society. Precognition could be seen as semantically similar to déjà vu (the feeling of having lived a particular moment before), which is a common and accepted experience (and one which is explicable in terms of routine neurological processes). This is a well-known and widely reported experience in Britain, as our research shows. However, despite this experience being subject to study by psychologists interested in memory or cognitive function (e.g. Brown 2004; O'Connor and Moulin 2013), sociologists have had very little to say about it. Furthermore, in business, managerial or organizational contexts, the ability to 'predict the future' or 'read' people or

situations might be considered a truly advantageous skill to possess. Recent work (Silver 2012) suggests that the art of prediction - albeit a more 'model-based' form of prediction - is a vital skill in many contexts (e.g. financial forecasting, epidemiology and so on) in order to avert potential disasters.⁸ Research also suggests that what might be called intuitive anticipation is a core skill of nursing (Benner and Tanner, 1987). Whilst reporting precognitive dreams in an institutional context is likely to be viewed suspiciously, being seen to possess a keen sense of intuition or a shrewd 'gut instinct' regarding risks, investments and new ventures or key decisions in managerial and organizational contexts are often highly regarded and trusted (Gigerenzer 2007). There is clearly potential for further exploration here and it is intriguing that more sociologists have not subjected these experiences to rigorous investigation.

Secondly, while this result is *similar* to other survey results, precognition has often been incorporated into ESP, which makes like-for-like comparisons impossible. Another survey carried out by MORI found that 17 per cent of British adults (16+ years) reported telepathy and 26 per cent reported ESP – which included the concept of premonitions (MORI 2003). Other results suggested as high as 29 per cent (Haraldsson 1985) and 36 per cent of the UK population reporting telepathy (Haraldsson and Houtkooper 1991) and 29 per cent reporting ESP (Houtkooper 1985). Our results for telepathy and ESP are notably lower than these surveys but it is important to note that survey populations have often been garnered in different ways, providing different statistical samples and that there are results from both across the UK in some surveys, and from Great Britain in others, further complicating the picture. Additionally, as mentioned above, survey items often combine forms of ESP, telepathy and precognition and it is likely that these are thought of as similar, if not the same, by the majority of the general public.

Telepathy (11.5 per cent) is less commonly reported than mystical experience (12.4 per cent) in our survey, which might seem surprising as telepathy, along with other experiences which

suggest the anomalous communication or transfer of information, appear to be the most commonly reported paranormal experiences (according to the surveys cited here, for instance). Mystical experience is not usually as commonly cited an experience. However, perhaps unusually, our survey appears to demonstrate marginally more people reporting this experience type (12.4 per cent). Comparative surveys considering mystical experiences alone are virtually non-existent as there are issues concerning definition and labelling, and experience deemed 'religious' (whether transcendent or not) tends to be combined. Estimates contend that between a third and half the population report religious experience (Argyle 2000), but results from the UK and US are not always distinguished and surveys are mostly not representative. Consequently, it is difficult to form a complete picture. Further investigation into individual experience types would be required in order to reveal additional patterns and associations.

After Death Communication has the lowest reported incidence of the five types (10.4 per cent). This rate of incidence is substantially lower than suggested by older surveys. For instance, Greeley (1975) reported that 27 per cent of Americans surveyed felt that they had been in contact with someone who had died, whilst Haraldsson and Hootkooper (1991) found that the rate for contact with the dead was 41 per cent in Iceland and 26 per cent for Great Britain. This is considerably higher than the figure in our survey, which is interesting. It may be that this merely reflects the kind of changes in belief in the afterlife over time, though survey figures regarding religion and belief should be approached with some caution (see Woodhead 2012). Also, reported belief in the afterlife does not equate to after death communication. Whilst the recently bereaved may be more likely to report this experience, this was not asked on the survey and there may be more complex factors at work, including differing spiritual practices and/or cultural consumption e.g. being a Spiritualist, or visits to mediums. These were aspects that the survey was unable to cover. Nonetheless, overall our results from the 2009 Ipsos MORI survey

effectively demonstrate that there are small but notable proportions of the respondents reporting the five different experience types.

If we consider the experiences together (as paranormal experiences generically) a different pattern emerges. Table 2 shows how many experiences the respondents reported (between none and all five) and then combines this total to explore the levels of people reporting one or more paranormal experience.

Table 2: Number and per cent reporting between none and all five experiences

Number of experiences	Number of people	Percentage of people
None	2,543	63.2
One type only	730	17.5
Two different types	412	10
Three different types	221	5.1
Four different types	130	3
All five types	60	1.3
Total	4,096	100.0
One or more experience	1,553	36.8

Source: Ipsos MORI 4,096 GB adults 16+

Most people report no experience (63.2 per cent) and there are a small percentage of people that report all five experiences (1.3 per cent). This confirms what we might expect; a tiny proportion of respondents report experience of all five types - telepathy, precognition, ESP, ADC, and mystical experience. In terms of reporting different experience types, the level increases as the number of different experience types decreases, with more respondents reporting one experience type only (17.5 per cent), as opposed to two (10 per cent) or three (5.1 per cent). So, just over a sixth of British adults are likely to report having had only one of the different five types of experiences in the survey.

Perhaps more significantly, Table 2 also shows the levels of respondents reporting one or more of the five different paranormal experience types. Here we can see that 36.8 per cent (almost two fifths) report **at least one** of the experiences. Whilst this figure is lower than other existing

results (e.g. Haraldsson 1985 – 64 per cent; Haraldsson and Hootkooper 1991 – 44 per cent), it is in the middle of *estimates* suggesting that between 25-45 per cent of the population is likely to report having had a paranormal experience. Effectively what such figures demonstrate is that is a sizeable minority of British adults are likely to report having had at least one paranormal experience. This is significant as it establishes a contemporary reported level of incidence in Great Britain, with a nationally representative sample, which has not been available before now. As such, these figures will also potentially allow future direct comparisons to be made. It also illustrates just how common reported paranormal experiences are in Great Britain today. The social significance of these results is further probed as we investigate the potential relationships between these reported paranormal experiences and differing social variables in the next section.

Three key sociological variables

In order to explore aspects of further sociological interest we conducted analyses which reviewed the associations between reporting a paranormal experience and certain social demographics. We considered the experiences in relation to different variables such as, age, social grade, ethnic group, gender, marital status, employment status, and Mosaic geodemographic group.⁹ Table 3 shows crosstabulations¹⁰ for each experience by these characteristics and highlights the characteristics that appear to have a statistical association with the reporting of each experience. Notably, for each experience there appears to be a statistically significant¹¹ association with gender, age and region.¹² Indeed one of our main findings is that women, those living in the South West and those aged between 35 and 64 yrs are more likely to report paranormal experiences overall. Further statistical analysis using logistic regression and CHAID,¹³ enabled us to determine that the associations between reported paranormal experiences, gender, region and age could not be explained via other variables. For the remainder of the discussion we will focus on these three main findings and begin to try and understand these sociologically.

Table 3: Crosstabulations for each experience by characteristic

Characteristics	N	Precognition	ESP	Mystical	Telepathy	ADC
		24.1	12.8	12.4	11.5	10.4
Gender						
Male	1986	21.3***	10.6***	10.7**	8.3***	7.9***
Female	2110	26.6***	14.8***	14**	14.5***	12.6***
Ethnicity						
White	3755	24.7	13.1	12.9***	11.8**	10.7
Mixed	47	20.4	8.2	14.3	8.2	6.1
Asian	175	12	6.2	4.2***	2.1**	4.7
Black	88	26.2	11	8.4	18.1	10.7
Chinese	5	33.3	33.3	33.3	33.3	33.3
Other	22	19.2	7.7	3.8	7.7	0
Marital Status						
Married or Cohabiting	2438	22.9**	12.9	12.4	11.7	10.1
Single	938	25.5	11.3	11.6	8.7***	8.6***
Widowed	374	23.5	11.4	11.2	15***	9.7
Divorced or Separated	344	29.2**	18.4***	16	15***	19***
Age Group						
16-24	500	26.1	8.8***	9***	7***	8.3
25-34	607	18.7***	10.3***	7.4***	6.8***	7.1***
35-44	741	28.4***	16.1***	14.8***	9.5	12.3
45-54	624	27.3***	16.7***	14.9***	15.2***	13.5***
55-64	650	24.2	13	16.5***	14.1***	13.1***
65-74	577	22.7	14.2	14.7	19.3***	9.9
75+	397	17***	8.1***	8.6***	11.9	6.3***
Social Grade						
A Upper Middle Class	105	27.2	9.6	12.6	12.5	8.3
B Middle Class	826	24.4	14	16.5***	12.1	7.7*
C1 Lower Middle Class	1252	25.5	13.1	13.6	10.9	11.1
C2 Skilled Working Class	845	21.6	11.8	9.5***	11.9	10
D Working Class	545	23.3	11.4	8.2***	9.3	11.4
E Non-Working	523	24.2	14.8	12.1	14.2	15.2*

Table 3: Crosstabulations for each experience by characteristic cont...

Characteristics	N	Precognition	ESP	Mystical	Telepathy	ADC
		24.1	12.8	12.4	11.5	10.4
Employment Status						
Working full time	1643	24.8	12.9	11.8	9.4***	10.1
Working part time	377	30**	17.1	19.2*	13.5	12.9
Housewife	299	24.6	14.6	14.6	14.8***	14.6***
Retired	1141	19.3**	11.1	11.4	14.7***	8.2***
Unemployed	240	28.1	17	11.3	14.4	16.3***
Student	233	24.9	6.8***	9.1	4.5	6.5***
Other (incl. disabled)	163	26.4	15.9	15.1	16.6	15.2
Government Office Region						
London	482	20***	12.5	9.4***	10.4	6.9***
South East	522	31.4***	16.1**	16.8***	15.3***	13.8***
South West	415	37.6***	16.4**	19.2***	17***	12.3
Eastern	389	27.8	15.5	12.9	13.4	11.6
East Midlands	285	14.7***	10.4	7.5***	12.4	11.7
West Midlands	339	26.3	10.6	13.3	9.5	10.1
Yorkshire and Humberside	353	20.8	11.8	8.7***	10.1	11.8
North East	205	27.1	13.9	14.4	9.9	11.1
North West	487	17.5***	9.3	9.7	7.4***	6.7***
Wales	230	19.1	12.2	9.8	7.8	10.2
Scotland	389	19.2***	11.1	13.1	10.8	9.2
Housing Tenure						
Own home (mortgage or outright)	2878	23.6	12.7	12.4	11.4	9.6***
Rented (private)	459	24.4	11.2	13.2	11.6	8.6
Rented (public)	742	25.4	14.3	11.8	11.9	15.4***
Other	17	38.9	10.5	16.7	11.1	5.6
Total Household Income						
Up to £9,499	629	19.6***	11.2	10.8	12.4	11.8
£9,500 - £17,499	671	23.4	11.5	11.4	13.3	12.1
£17,500 - £29,999	540	24.4	13.4	11.9	11	10
£30,000 - £49,999	475	26.5	14.4	17.8***	11.8	10.4
£50,000 +	384	28.8***	12.5	13.6	8.7*	6.8**

Table 3: Crosstabulations for each experience by characteristic cont...

Characteristics	N	Precognition	ESP	Mystical	Telepathy	ADC
		24.1	12.8	12.4	11.5	10.4
Mosaic Groups						
Symbols of Success	374	20.9	10.2	13.1	11.4	8.2
Happy Families	389	28.9*	15.6	15.1	12.6	12.1
Suburban Comfort	594	25.2	13.3	12.5	12.5	8.7
Ties of Community	764	24.4	14.2	11.4	11.9	12.5
Urban Intelligence	253	21.1	9.2	13.3	11	5.9
Welfare Borderline	234	24.9	11.5	8.3	11.5	9.3
Municipal Dependency	250	20	11.1	11.2	8.1	12.1
Blue Collar Enterprise	589	23	13.3	8.8*	8.8**	12.5
Twilight Subsistence	71	24.6	9.2	16.7	10.6	13.6
Grey Perspectives	259	29	12.9	16.9*	17.3**	9.7
Rural Isolation	113	27.8	17.6	17.6	16.8	9.3

Source: Ipsos MORI 4,096 GB adults 16+

Gender

Whilst there are differences between experiences as to how these associations manifest, for gender there is a consistent finding; women appear to be significantly more likely than men to report precognition, ESP, mystical experiences, telepathy and ADC. This is a significant, if expected, finding, as it confirms previous reports and survey results – though these are mostly concerned with belief, not experience (e.g. Rice 2003). Traditional explanations for this result tend to rely on the notion of women being more intuitive or ‘person-oriented’ (Haraldsson 1985). However, this kind of essentialism has mostly been eschewed by the social sciences. Nonetheless, forms of the marginality hypothesis are still in circulation as a way of understanding why women appear more likely to report particular beliefs – e.g. fairly recent work considering ‘parascientific phenomena’ (Boy 2004) and superstition (Torgler 2007). However, this perspective makes two flawed and overly simplistic assumptions: firstly that women’s status is straightforwardly ‘lesser’ than men’s and secondly that this universal positioning contributes to an increased likelihood to report paranormal experiences and beliefs. It is an unsophisticated and crude causal hypothesis that does not stand up to real scrutiny, exhibiting many of the conceptual and methodological problems associated with broadly structural determinist explanations for paranormal experiences identified in the quote from Jørgensen (1984) cited earlier.

Women are also associated with reported beliefs, experiences and practices sometimes seen as related to the paranormal. For instance, studies have found that women are both more likely to be active in religious communities and be ‘churchgoers’ (e.g. Brierly 2006; Woolever et al 2006). There are also more women that report being interested in and involved with so-called ‘New Age’ practices, spiritual practices, and spirituality generally (e.g. Farias *et al* 2005; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Houtman and Auper 2008). Other work reports that women are also more

likely to use forms of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and have a holistic approach towards health (e.g. Adams *et al* 2003).

Some researchers (e.g. Saher and Lindeman 2005) have identified that these differences in reported beliefs, practices and experiences are often ascribed to perceived differences on the basis of gender itself. However, when Saher and Lindeman's (2005) research revealed a relationship between beliefs in CAM, paranormal belief, magical beliefs about food and health and intuitive information-processing styles they considered the issue of gender in a different way. They suggested that intuitive thinking styles are more likely to be *associated* with women, but that these differences cannot be explained by gender alone. Further to this, research considering the social correlates of new age consumption (Mears and Ellison 2000) concluded the most important factor was the extent to which an individual was embedded within interpersonal networks that consumed or endorsed new age beliefs and practices. In other words, there is no simplistic, essential or causal line of reasoning between being female and the likelihood of reporting paranormal experience. Instead the picture is likely to be a more nuanced one including a variety of cultural factors, including lifestyle and spiritual choices, consumption and practice. These indications, that there are more complex explanations, require a programme of much more in-depth research which takes a closer look at interpersonal networks and other lifestyle factors. We will return to this in the conclusion, but in the meantime continue to explore another characteristic displaying a strong statistical association with reporting paranormal experience not explained by other variables: age.

Age

Initial observations relating to age across the experiences show a similar pattern with an increased likelihood of reporting most of the experiences occurring in the middle age groups, for most experiences between 35-64yrs (although telepathy differs slightly and shows a statistically

significant increased likelihood between the ages of 45-74 yrs). Conversely there is a decreased likelihood for reporting all experiences (again bar telepathy) in older age (75yrs and over) and a significant dip in likelihood in younger age groups (16-34 yrs) apart from ADC (which dips, but not significantly) and precognition (which has increased proportions reporting but is not statistically significant).

If we break these general patterns down into specifics for each experience, we can see how there are certain groups that appear to be significantly more likely to report particular experiences. Firstly, 28.4 per cent of 35-44yr olds and 27.3 per cent of 45-54yr olds report precognition. These levels are (statistically) significantly higher when compared to the result for the population as a whole (24.1 per cent). Similarly, compared to the entire sample (12.8 per cent), 16.1 per cent of 35-44yr olds and 16.7 per cent of 45-54yr olds report ESP. The crosstabulation for mystical experience and age shows a slightly different peak in that 16.5 per cent of 55-64yr olds report this experience compared to 12.4 per cent overall. This age group has the highest reporting level compared to the other groups. The highest proportion of those reporting telepathy in relation to age is 19.3 per cent of 65-74yr olds (compared to 11.5 per cent overall). ADC shows highest reporting levels in groups aged between 45-54yrs (13.5 per cent) and 55-64yrs (13.1 per cent) compared to 10.4 per cent overall.

In terms of age groups least likely to report particular experiences, there are similar patterns across the experiences also. For precognition the lowest levels are found in age groups with those 75yrs and over (17 per cent) and those between 25-34yrs (18.7 per cent) compared to 24.1 per cent nationally. For ESP, it is those 75yrs and over (8.1 per cent), those aged 16-24yrs (8.8 per cent) and 25-34yrs (10.3 per cent) that are the least likely to report. The results for mystical experiences show 25-34yr olds (7.4 per cent) to be the least likely group to report, followed by the 75yrs old and over (8.6 per cent) and the 16-24yr olds (9 per cent). ADC again shows a

similar pattern with the 75yr olds and over (6.3 per cent) being the least likely to report and 25-34yr olds (7.1 per cent) second least likely to report. Finally, whilst the over 75yr olds do not appear as a least likely group for telepathy, the younger age groups do. Only 6.8 per cent of 25-34yr olds and 7 per cent of 16-24yr olds report telepathy compared to 11.5 per cent nationally.

These results are perhaps somewhat surprising because we might imagine that reporting experiences normally increases with age; the longer someone has lived the greater the opportunity (in terms of time) they would have had for such experiences. However, further statistical analysis reveals that it is those in the mid-aged groups who appear to have a significantly greater likelihood of reporting such experiences. There are some similarities here with Greeley's (1975) findings, though he found that it was specifically people in their 50s (in the US) who reported the most experiences.

In order to begin to articulate these results it would be informative to explore what characterises mid-life. This will provide some further insights into the kinds of events shaping the lives of those most likely to report paranormal experiences. It is important to clarify here that respondents were not asked at what age their experience occurred so actual statistical correlations about age and paranormal experiences are limited. However, it is statistically significant that those in mid-life are the ones more likely to be reporting these experiences so it worth considering how we might understand this.

Mid-life is often a story of complexity and fairly recent territory for scrutiny compared to other life periods e.g. infancy and adolescence. Perceptions of middle-age vary from between 40 and 60 years to anywhere from 30 to 75 years (Lachman 2001). Researchers of aging, the life course and mid-life agree that this period of life is diverse and variable but that there are some common and broad themes, events, issues and challenges that can be identified (Lachman 2004).

‘Mid-life is often partially characterised by the death of parents and other older relatives, children reaching adulthood and leaving the familial home and can also be signified by changes in seniority and respect in the workplace.’

(Morgan 2009: 1)

It is certainly plausible that these kinds of life events *can* provoke increased reflection about mortality, the ageing process and existential issues, but also contemplation regarding meaning, purpose and direction in life. One interesting observation from the aging research concerns the finding that those in mid-life often report an increased feeling of mastery (Lachman and Betrand 2001). However, upon closer inspection there is some variation by gender and generation here.

‘Women in both the baby bust [1965-1970] and the baby boom [1946-1964] cohorts had lower levels of environmental mastery than women from the silent generation [1931-1943] perhaps because of the increased pressures of balancing work opportunities and family obligations’

(Lachman 2004: 309)

Nonetheless, forging direct connections between these reported feelings of ‘environmental mastery’ and reporting paranormal experience is not possible here. Instead what we might begin to see is that midlife is perhaps characterised by an ‘impetus for change but not necessarily a crisis [as is widely assumed]’ (Lachman 2004: 310) and that this impetus can be driven by perceived ‘wake-up calls’ or dramatic life events such as chronic illness in self or close others, deaths and relationship shifts. In a sense then, mid-life can also be characterised by ‘loss and

readjustment' (Morgan 2009: 8) and changes that *can* be very significant. However, numeric survey results do not allow us to discern the extent to which qualitative factors associated with this period of life (such as loss, readjustment, wake-up calls, reflections regarding mortality and so on) might or might not contribute to the likelihood of reporting paranormal experiences. Instead though, the figures point to some interesting threads that would benefit from further explication.

It is notable, for instance, that other research looking at age, reported paranormal beliefs and CAM in the Flemish population found a correlation between these variables (Van de Bulck and Custers 2010). Additionally, levels of support for CAM increased with age, and belief in the paranormal and support for CAM were also very strongly associated. There is thus a potentially interesting parallel which would benefit from more direct scrutiny regarding gender, age, paranormal experiences and CAM. Furthermore, this link also reiterates the need for more research looking at culture and lifestyle practices/choices and the extent to which these might be linked with reported paranormal experience. It is conceivable that some of these aspects also have resonance with the final main association: across regions.

Region

Table 3 shows that there is also a fairly consistent effect in terms of region across the experiences. Repeatedly it is the South West that appears as the region with the highest statistically significant proportion of respondents (apart from ADC, where the highest levels are in the South East and the South West is the second highest). So, for example, 37.6 per cent of people in the South West report precognition, compared to 24.1 per cent nationally. For ESP, this is 16.4 per cent in the South West compared to 12.8 per cent nationally. For mystical experiences it is 19.2 per cent compared to 12.4 per cent and for telepathy it is 17 per cent compared to 11.5 per cent. Interestingly, the South East is the second highest on all other

experiences. It is also notable that this increased likelihood to report these experiences in the South East is not also shared by London as a region, indicating that reporting levels may be further nuanced in a geographical and spatial sense.

At the other end of the spectrum, reporting levels are at their lowest geographically in places such as the North West - 6.7 per cent for ADC, compared to 10.4 per cent nationally; 7.4 per cent for telepathy; 17.5 per cent for precognition; East Midlands – 14.7 per cent for precognition; 7.5 per cent for mystical experiences; London – 6.9 per cent for ADC and Yorkshire and Humberside – 8.7 per cent for mystical experience.

It may be that individuals more open to the possibility of anomalous phenomena are drawn to the West country because of the influence of a range of broader cultural and historical factors (traditional Arthurian myths, new age literature that identifies the 'magical' or mystic properties of the South West, the proximity of Stonehenge and Glastonbury, and so on). There is certainly evidence to suggest that many younger professionals and significant proportions of retirees are attracted to this region of Britain in increasing numbers (Seager 2007).

On the subject of the implications of geographic findings it is vital to explicitly acknowledge that these results are British findings only. For instance, in previous work there are often much higher reported levels of belief and experience in the US than Britain (e.g. Haraldsson 1985; Haraldsson and Houtkooper 1991; Moore 2005). What this also points to is the distinct possibility that variation in reported paranormal experiences have some relationship with nationality and region but also culture, tradition and custom.

Geographically, on a national level, Haraldsson and Houtkooper (1991) found 'nationality' to be an important factor in terms of reporting experiences. However, they did not explore this

geographical element any further. Hay's (1992: 123-4) exploration of mystical experience did look at geographical distribution across the UK, but this was to a limited degree and then only for 'spiritual' experience.

Conclusion

As we have demonstrated there are some interesting and significant findings emanating from this research, a necessarily limited number of which have been discussed in this paper. Namely, that almost two fifths of the population of British adults (16+) report at least one paranormal experience and that women, those in mid-life and those living in the South West are more likely to report such an experience. We have also put forward some tentative ways in which we might begin to understand these findings sociologically. The most prominent of which appears to suggest that there may well be additional lifestyle and consumption choices which also impact upon an individual's likelihood of reporting a paranormal experience. However, establishing these more in-depth links requires further research.

We were unable to explore some of the questions that it would have been interesting and useful to pose. For instance, we did not ask at what age the paranormal experiences occurred, which might have allowed us to make more concrete associations between age and paranormal experience. There are some potentially interesting questions here regarding paranormal experiences, willingness to report and the life course. For instance, considering whether early experiences are later re-interpreted by the experiencers? Elsewhere, it has been suggested that individuals are likely to fall upon a spectrum of explanations for their experiences, drawing to a greater or lesser extent upon rationalising strategies (Castro, 2005), but the extent to which this differs or fluctuates with age or life experience is not known.

Neither did we enquire as to where the paranormal experiences occurred, meaning that we were unable to form any solid connections between place and paranormal experiences. As we laid out in the introduction, anecdotally there are places which have significance and reputations as sacred sites where these experiences might be more likely to occur. Future research could address this omission, whilst also delving further into the regional patterning that we have begun to uncover here. For instance, what exactly is it about the South West which makes for a region more inclined to report paranormal experience? And what is it about the urban experience of the capital that results in fewer reports?

Considering the way in which place, consumptive practices, age, gender, community and lifestyle choices interact would be a natural qualitative follow up to this work. Given the potential links identified in the discussion between these aspects, particularly in relation to an individual's interpersonal networks and their support for or engagement with CAM, there is certainly more work to do in researching these aspects. What relationship is there between age, gender, region, interpersonal networks and CAM for example?

We began this paper with reference to the work of Andrew Greeley, nearly forty years ago; more specifically his suggestion that the paranormal is 'normal'. In light of the results presented here, we would certainly argue that this is the case for several reasons. Firstly, we revealed that a significant minority of the British population reports paranormal experience and that there are some sociological variables that appear to facilitate these experiences (region, age, gender). Secondly, however, there is no evidence of social marginality; that is people who report paranormal experiences are 'normal' (in that there is very limited socio-structural variation between those who do and those who do not report paranormal experience). However, we have not been able to get a sense of how is the paranormal perceived by British culture at large. And whether there has there been a normalising of the paranormal to the British public. It is likely

that the paranormal is more acceptable to certain groups and individuals within contemporary society. Other research suggests for instance, that there are those for whom these experiences are more commonplace and 'everyday' (MacKian, 2012). As for Greeley's suggestion that individuals who report these kinds of experiences may be have greater mental wellbeing, this is not something our research addressed. Getting a sense of how 'normal' the paranormal is for individuals and exploring more qualitatively their subjective assessments of wellbeing is certainly one possible route.

Nonetheless, the results of the survey offer distinct avenues for further investigation and a clear justification for more social scientific work in this field. We conclude by emphasising the three most important aspects of our work for the social sciences and further research:

- Firstly, we have established statistical evidence that there is a considerable minority of people who report paranormal experiences in Britain today
- Secondly, our work confirms the prevalence, commonality and normality of reported paranormal experiences as charted by Greeley nearly forty years ago
- Thirdly, we have demonstrated how this contemporary and tangible evidence of reported paranormal experiences is of clear interest and import to the social sciences as *social phenomena*.

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¹ Ipsos MORI was commissioned by us to survey a quota sample of adults aged 16+ years. Questions were asked in two separate waves of Ipsos MORI's Omnibus survey, the first between 22nd and 28th January (2,070 respondents) and the second between 19th and 24th February (2,026 respondents), 2009. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in respondent's homes and the data were weighted to match the profile of the British adult population aged 16 years and over. If further technical details are required please email caroline.callahan@ipsos.com.

² In the survey they were referred to as 'mystical or transcendental experiences' but they are referred to as 'mystical experiences' throughout this paper.

³ Also termed sleep paralysis, this phenomenon refers to a form of paralysis, seemingly between sleep and wakefulness, whereby the individual reports being unable to move their body, often reports a pressure on the chest (hence the old hag) and sometimes a malevolent or unwelcome presence (Hufford 2005).

⁴ There are some other surveys, conducted by Ipsos MORI for instance, concerning the paranormal. However, these are either solely concerning belief ([MORI](#), 2007) or they provide data that is not comparable with surveys of reported experience because only those who report belief are then asked about their experiences ([MORI](#), 1998).

⁵ The questions asked whether the respondents had any personal paranormal experiences (as defined in the introduction) and how many times they had had such experiences. For a copy of the exact survey wording please email m.a.castro@leedsmet.ac.uk

⁶ Currently the academic researchers who carried out the research and analysis are at Leeds Metropolitan University, Goldsmiths, University of London and York respectively.

⁷ The base figures (e.g. number of respondents) are unweighted but all results have been weighted to match the profile of the British population of adults aged 16 and over.

⁸ Silver (2012) argues in fact that it is a failure in human prediction ability and the inability to calculate risk effectively that was the main contributor to the recent financial crisis.

⁹ Mosaic UK groups and Mosaic UK types form a geodemographic classification system based on postcodes, combined with a whole host of other social data (e.g. census, electoral roll, lifestyle surveys, etc). Developed by Richard Webber and commercially exploited as a sophisticated marketing and business tool, the groups and types provide a nuanced typology of resident's "tastes, preferences and practices" (Burrows, 2008: 224) exemplifying geographic differentiation at a neighbourhood level.

¹⁰ Crosstabulations provide a way of exploring the possible relationships between variables. So, in this case it allows us to look at the possible relationships between the type of reported experience and different social characteristics (e.g. class, gender, etc.)

¹¹ Statistically significant results are indicated at differing levels by the following key:

- * Significant $p < 0.05$
- ** Significant $p < 0.01$
- *** Significant $p < 0.001$

¹² There are other associations which, though smaller, might also be of interest (e.g. marital and employment status and social grade, as defined by the Market Research Society (MRS) in the UK), however, due to limited space there is no room to discuss them in this paper.

¹³ CHAID stands for Chi-squared Interaction Detector and is a tree classification method that produces a model, using probability values to measure variability. In other words, CHAID analyses can help to determine the presence of interactions between variables and can be used in a similar way to a regression analysis – to see how different variables relate or impact upon each other (e.g. gender and likelihood of reporting a paranormal experience).