

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence** edited by Etzel Cardeña, Steven Jay Lynn and Stanley Krippner. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000. xi + 476 pp. \$39.95 (c). ISBN 1-55798-625-8.

This is a good book that should be on the bookshelf of every psychologist. In fact, not only should psychologists read it, but it should be widely read by mental health professionals and by scholars interested in the nature of reality. It is a carefully written and readable book that makes it also suitable for use by undergraduate students and the educated public. And, given that it deals explicitly with anomalies, it would be of interest to members of the Society for Scientific Exploration.

The book consists of thirteen chapters written by twenty-one contributors. It begins with an introduction in which, along with the scope and purpose of the book, anomalous experiences are defined as experiences that are uncommon or that are “believed to deviate from ordinary experience or from the usually accepted explanations of reality” (p. 4). The introduction is followed by a chapter in which distinctions are made between anomalous, peculiar and pathological experiences, and a chapter concerning methodological issues. These three are followed by ten chapters that provide overviews of anomalous experiences: “Hallucinatory Experiences,” “Synesthesia,” “Lucid Dreaming,” “Out-of-Body Experiences,” “Psi-Related Experiences,” “Alien Abduction Experiences,” “Past-Life Experiences,” “Near-Death Experiences,” “Anomalous Healing Experiences” and “Mystical Experience.” In each of these last ten chapters, the authors have explicitly addressed key points such as definitions, phenomenology and aftereffects of anomalous experiences, individual differences between people that are associated with these experiences, psychopathology and clinical issues, theories and methodological issues. Each chapter is followed by a substantial list of references, and the book includes both subject and author indexes. The uniform structure of the chapters about anomalous experiences gives coherence to the entire book that is usually lacking in edited volumes.

The goals of this book include the presentation of overviews of research concerning anomalous experiences, the provision of useful information to clinicians and the evaluation of the empirical support for various theories. As can be gathered from the prevalence of the word “experience” in the chapter titles, “the focus of this book is on experiences” (p. 4). The editors wanted to “do justice to the experiences themselves” (p. 15) with the intention, in part, of demonstrating that, by and large, anomalous experiences are variations of human experience and not mental disorders. The idea is that a broad range of experiences is possible for us and that there are individual differences that de-

termine who will or will not have which of those experiences, to what degree they will occur and whether they occur in such a manner as to be associated with psychopathology. Thus, for example, from the chapter about hallucinatory experiences by Bentall, it can be seen that most people don't experience hallucinations, at least about 11% of people do at some point in their lives, and 1% have schizophrenia, a mental disorder for which hallucinations are a characteristic symptom. "For every person who receives a diagnosis of schizophrenia, therefore, it would appear that there are approximately 10 who experience hallucinations without receiving the diagnosis" (p. 95). For most people who have them, hallucinations are a part of their experience with which they can cope, and for some people, furthermore, whether classified as mentally ill or not, their hallucinations appear to be a source of comfort to them.

One of the aims of the book is to provide information to clinicians who must "distinguish between what is merely anomalous and what is pathological or abnormal" (p. 16). In addition to the chapter by Berenbaum, Kerns and Raghavan devoted to laying out the relationships between anomalous experiences and psychopathology, this is done in some of the chapters discussing anomalous experiences by showing that most people who have these experiences do not meet the diagnostic criteria for mental disorders given in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. In some cases, however, conflation is inevitable. Targ, Schlitz and Irwin in their chapter about psi-related experiences have noted the similarity of such experiences to the symptoms of schizotypal personality disorder. For example, believing that one has had extra-sensory perceptions is both a healthy response to an anomalous experience and a criterion for being diagnosed with schizotypal personality disorder. While pointing out such problems, as well as the interplay of the anomalous and pathological, throughout the book, the authors have been respectful of accepted diagnostic categories and have refrained from becoming mired in the kind of controversy precipitated by anti-psychiatrists and humanistic psychologists in the 1960s who challenged the diagnostic categories in their effort to increase our acknowledgment of the varieties of human experience.

While in most cases people's anomalous experiences have nothing to do with psychopathology, such experiences may nonetheless be associated with specific psychological characteristics. Indeed, as indicated by the authors of this book, some anomalous experiences tend to occur to people who have the ability to become absorbed in imaginal activity, who are highly hypnotizable, who are fantasy prone and who have dissociative tendencies. Each of these psychological constructs has been operationalized in psychological research, and some have been shown to be associated with some anomalous experiences. For example, as Alvarado has pointed out in his chapter about out-of-body experiences, all four of these characteristics are correlated with reports of having had out-of-body experiences. In other words, it could be argued that some people with vivid imaginations lose themselves in their fantasies and can no longer distinguish that which is real from that which is imaginary. Bentall has

presented a cognitive model in terms of source monitoring that is helpful in this regard. “[D]iscriminating between self-generated (internal, ‘imaginary’) events and externally generated (‘real’) events is best thought of as a skill and, like all skills, is likely to fail under certain circumstances” (p. 102).

Is that it then? Are all anomalous experiences simply imaginary events? Variations on that theme recur throughout the book as one of the theories for explaining anomalous experiences. In their chapter concerning alien abduction experiences, Appelle, Lynn and Newman have reviewed efforts to find correlations between fantasy proneness and alien abduction experiences as well as between hypnotizability and alien abduction experiences. They have concluded that thus far, such correlations have not been found. And while those who have had alien abduction experiences have been found to have some characteristics that differ from the general population, such as the greater likelihood to report having attempted suicide that was found in one study, in most cases, “assessment by both clinical examination and standardized tests has shown that, as a group, abduction experiences are not different from the general population in terms of psychopathology prevalence” (p. 268). Are, then, people actually being abducted by aliens? In spite of their rich imaginations, can some people travel outside their bodies? Do people with near-death experiences really find out what happens when we die? Are mystics really enlightened? These are the obvious questions that readers are likely to have on their minds when they pick up the book. Indeed, the ambiguous subtitle *Examining the Scientific Evidence* suggests that such questions could be the book’s focus of attention.

But, as stated before, we learn right away from the introduction that “the focus of this book is on experiences, not on testing the consensual validity of such experiences” (p. 4). This has not precluded a balanced presentation of unconventional theories alongside the more conventional ones nor has it precluded, in some cases, a frank discussion of the possibility of the veridical nature of the content of anomalous experiences, such as that found in the chapter concerning psi-related experiences. Indeed, it is not difficult to surmise from reading the book that the answer to questions about the veridical nature of anomalous experiences is “perhaps.” The problem is that, in most cases, the information necessary to reach that conclusion is tucked away here and there in various sections of each chapter.

I realize that the possibly veridical nature of anomalous phenomena is a sensitive matter with which members of the Society for Scientific Exploration are all too familiar. And I think that it was wise for the authors of this book to get away from the old trenches from which ontological battles were fought in the last century. Nonetheless, given the salience of questions about the veridical nature of some of these anomalous experiences, just as other critical points have been uniformly addressed in all of the chapters, the authors could have explicitly discussed the extent to which these various experiences are what they appear to be in the same laudatory even-handed manner in which they have discussed this implicitly. In that case, while the answers to the ontologi-

cal questions would still be the same “perhaps,” there would be a better match between readers’ expectations and the course of the book.

In a sense, ontological questions do get brought to a crux in the final chapter about mystical experiences by Wulff who has clearly portrayed the problem that mystical experiences pose for our everyday understanding of reality. If, not withstanding neurophysiological and cognitive correlates, the “deep, authoritative knowledge or insight unknown to the discursive intellect” (p. 400) that characterizes such experiences has the noetic value that it appears to have, then reality is much more interesting than we ordinarily think it is.

While they are barely noticeable within the strong fabric of the book, there are a few other lacunae from my point of view. Although the editors have stated their reasons for excluding it, for the sake of completeness, I would like to have seen a chapter about dissociative experiences, particularly given the instructive nature of phenomena associated with dissociative identity disorder. While there appear to have been mystical experiences in the context of psychedelic drug use, such as in the case of the Good Friday experiment mentioned by Wulff, and while Wulff has discussed differences between psychedelic and mystical experiences, I would rather that he not have been quite so liberal in counting psychedelic experiences in with mystical experiences given that some people, such as Allan Smith and John Wren-Lewis, have stressed the differences between the two based on their own experiences with both. Indeed, a chapter concerning psychedelic drug experiences would not have been out of place in this book given that anomalous experiences sometimes arise in the context of their use. While children’s spontaneous past-life experiences are carefully covered in the chapter about past-life experiences, it would have been instructive to have had an equally careful overview of adult past-life experiences, particularly those, such as the experiences of Gerald Glaskin or Jenny Cockell, for which the details of the lives of the past-life personalities purportedly match historical events that the person could not have known about. Finally, given the deliberate parallel of the title with William James’s 1901–1902 Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and the references to James in the introduction to the book, it would have been fitting to have mentioned James’s 1896 Lowell lectures reconstructed by Eugene Taylor which perhaps more closely coincide with the efforts of the current authors than do the *Varieties* in that James’s Lowell lectures were about exceptional mental states such as dreams, hypnosis, hysteria and multiple personality. But all of this is just quibbling. This is a fine book—thorough, balanced, well-written, carefully edited and produced—whose authors deserve our accolades for a job well done.

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