

## Social Scientific Paradigms for Investigating Anomalous Experience

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**Abstract**—The investigation of anomalous experience may be conducted within the realm of folklore, collective behavior, and the sociology of religion. Although these social scientific approaches lack the mathematical precision of the physical sciences, they allow theoretical development, the testing of hypotheses derived from these orientations, and the revision of theory in light of empirical observation. The use of social scientific paradigms grants the investigation of anomalous phenomena a cumulative quality, open to both skeptics and believers.

Alleged anomalous events can be investigated within the study of folklore, collective behavior, and religion. The use of these paradigms would reduce problems associated with skeptical attacks, low rates of replicability, lack of accepted theoretical orientations, and experimenter effects. Although the focus of the article will be on psychic experiences, the paradigms discussed could also be applied to investigations of unidentified flying objects, sightings of cryptozoological animals, and other sporadic anomalous phenomena. Although social scientific paradigms lack the mathematical precision of the physical sciences, they allow the testing of hypotheses derived from established theoretical orientations. This gives the research process a cumulative nature since theories can be modified in response to empirical findings.

Blackmore (1988) advocates a social scientific orientation in proposing a "new parapsychology," based on the study of psychic beliefs and experiences. Unfortunately, her advice offends many parapsychologists since she joins her argumentation with a skeptical demeanor (Blackmore, 1985). The present discussion presents theoretical orientations which are more in harmony with a belief in anomalous claims, offering adjuncts to the paradigms presently being used by parascientific investigators. The social scientific orientations described in this study should not be considered exhaustive; **alter-**

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nate pathways, beyond the scope of this paper, include studies within the fields of history, social psychology, anthropology, and popular culture.

Various researchers have sought to demonstrate the validity of anomalous claims within a social scientific context. Winkelman (1981) and Giesler (1984, 1985a,b; 1986) exemplify anthropological approaches. These studies directly confront the scientific ideology, leading skeptical scientists to demand higher rates of replication and greater scrutiny of exceptional claims. The goal of the present paper is to apply existing social scientific paradigms to anomalous phenomena in a manner that avoids direct confrontation with scientific ideologies. Social scientific investigation of anomalies can be designed for presentation to specific specialty groups, who accept the paradigms being used, rather than in a manner that confronts the dominant mechanistic worldview.

Anomalous experience can be regarded as a *social* phenomenon, derived from individual experiences. Psychic phenomena or "psi" can be viewed as a particular *interpretation* of unusual events, labeled as paranormal, rather than the more technical definitions commonly used by parapsychologists to identify extrasensory perception and psychokinesis. UFOs and cryptozoological sightings constitute parallel interpretations. Such anomalous observations need not be proven experimentally to be studied by social scientists since a large percentage of many different populations accept them as real (see Haraldsson, 1985, in reference to psychic experience). As sociologist W. I. Thomas (1928, p. 572) noted, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Like racial prejudice, sexual discrimination, social hierarchy, or self-esteem, anomalous claims are socially-defined variables having special qualities and measurable effects, which may, or may not, be derived from physical parameters. The ontological status of anomalous experience is not an issue.

### Anomalous Experience and Applied Folklore

Hufford (1982a) presents an "experience-centered" approach in his study of night paralysis (termed the "Old Hag" by his Newfoundland respondents). He found a surprisingly high incidence of "Old Hag" cases in a Newfoundland sample and an equivalent rate within an American sample. The Americans, isolated from Newfoundland's folk belief system regarding the "Old Hag," described equivalent events and imagery. Hufford hypothesizes that "primary elements" (impression of wakefulness, paralysis, real setting accurately perceived, and fear) are found in *all* cases and "secondary" features (for example: sensation of presence, difficulty breathing, apparitional sounds, odors, and appearances) exist in *many* cases. Using these data, Hufford refuted the "cultural source" hypothesis which suggests that "Old Hag" experiences are totally derived from the **experiencer's** cultural conditioning. His data supports an "experiential source" hypothesis which suggests that the primary and secondary features within these episodes transcend culture,

and that the "Old Hag" may be a source of, rather than totally caused by, belief.

Hufford (1982a) notes that many earlier theorists present distorted ideological notions regarding these episodes, attempting to fit them into previously conceived psychological and psychoanalytic theories. His approach, although unable to establish the causal source of "Old Hag" events, demonstrates that these episodes constitute genuine anomalies within the folklore paradigm. An objective of this research avenue is to delineate the degree to which an experience is shaped culturally and to determine which elements within a collection of memorates<sup>1</sup> are universal.

This methodology could be extended to many other forms of anomalous experience. Rojcewicz (1987) presents UFO-related evidence within a folklore framework. UFO sightings, *déjà vu*, night paralysis, ESP, clairvoyance, contact with the dead, out-of-body (OBE), and near-death experiences seemingly contain universal "primary elements." Such experiences may be instrumental in *causing* changes in belief, rather than being merely *caused* by belief. Using Hufford's (1982a) framework, social scientists might argue that: If the experiences of many respondents show details that are contrary to their expectations, but that are similar to the experiences of others with whom they do not share psycho-social factors that could account for those similarities, then the hypothesis that the anomalous experience is socially "real" is supported. Such experiences lead to convergences in folk belief. Verification of this hypothesis would transform presently accepted theories regarding the evolution of occult beliefs, establishing a new paradigm within folklore studies.

Psychical researchers, engaging in cross-cultural research, have already gathered evidence supporting the "experiential source" hypothesis. For example, Haraldsson (1985) compared national survey samples regarding frequency of reported paranormal experience. Although the incidence of reporting of ESP, clairvoyance, and contact with the dead varies a great deal from country to country in a manner that may reflect cultural conditioning, these experiences apparently have universal qualities since they are reported in all countries. The frequency of reports of such experiences among three Chinese college samples is equivalent to the frequency reported by an American national sample (McClenon, 1988). Chinese student narratives of *déjà vu*, night paralysis, ESP, contact with the dead, and out-of-body experiences reveal similarities in content with American student reports (McClenon, 1990). Sheils (1978) notes that OBE beliefs appear in about 95% of the world's cultures and are striking in their uniformity. He tested conventional explanations for these beliefs and found them inadequate. Irwin (1985) reviews surveys of OBEs and attempts to delineate elements which are universal. Osis and Haraldsson (1977) present cross-cultural data regarding near-

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<sup>1</sup> A memorate is a story told as a personal experience, believed to be true by the respondent.

death experiences which support belief in "primary elements" (feeling separate from one's body, sense of movement, encountering spiritual beings, and communicating with a powerful entity). Emmons (1982) conducted a survey of a random sample of Hong Kong residents and found evidence that apparitional experiences harbor universal elements (images had equivalent anomalous qualities). Stevenson's (1970) cross-cultural study of children's reincarnation memories indicates cultural influences within these memorates, as well as the probability that common features also exist.

Survey techniques, and analysis of cases, can reveal replicable patterns even when data is gathered from a single culture. Rhine's (1981) spontaneous psychic experience data supplies the largest body of evidence, suggesting that inherent patterns exist within these types of events. Palmer's (1979) study of psychic experience using a community sample presents an exemplar for future investigators. Further data, which reveals patterns in reports of anomalous experience and guidelines for a continuation of this research avenue, can be found in Bennett (1987), Gallup (1982), Gauld and Cornell (1979), Greyson and Flynn (1985), Haraldsson (1988-89), Lundahl (1982), Mitchell (1981), Ring (1980) and Rogo (1982). Case material can be found in Evans (1984, 1987) and Gooch (1984). Because the patterns associated with psychic experience seem somewhat stable (one of which is its "obscurity"), social scientists are not plagued with the lack of repeatable experiments, as are experimental parapsychologists.

### **Anomalous Experience as Collective Behavior**

The study of collective behavior entails examination of relatively unorganized patterns of group social interaction (Perry and Pugh, 1978). Collective behavior includes the analysis of crowds, riots, panics, fads, fashions, rumors, mass hysteria, and social movements. Collective behavior is typically viewed as an adaptive response to new or ambiguous situations and often is associated with emotional arousal and social strain (LeBon, 1969/1895; Park and Burgess, 1921; Perry and Pugh, 1978; Turner and Killian, 1972).

Because some types of psychic phenomena are sporadic, spontaneous, affiliated with emotional arousal, and related to group processes, these events may be evaluated within the domain of collective behavior. Examples of such forms include hauntings, poltergeists, and miracles. UFO phenomena have already been recognized as an appropriate topic within the study of collective behavior (Miller, 1985, devotes a chapter to UFOs, reviewing the data regarding witnesses, organizations, and public awareness.) Bennett (1987), Greeley (1975, 1987), and Truzzi (1972) contribute to a similar body of evidence regarding psychic experiences.

Theories predicting the patterns, form, and extent of the spread of rumors could be used in documenting the evolution of anomalous memorates into supernatural folklore. Shibutani (1966) presents an orientation which could

be useful for this purpose. Within Shibutani's framework, rumor is a recurrent form of communication through which people attempt to construct a meaningful or "working" interpretation of ambiguous situations by pooling their intellectual resources. Sociologists have long recognized that rumors are not always incorrect; people without adequate information regarding a topic generally attempt to gather information from as many sources as is convenient. The collective result is not necessarily inaccurate or implausible, but a substitute for news obtained through institutional channels. For Shibutani (1966, p. 57), rumor is "improvised news": "If the demand for news . . . exceeds the supply made available through institutional channels, rumor construction is likely to occur." We might hypothesize that the traditional scientific network's failure to address issues regarding the paranormal has created conditions in which "rumor-like" information is transmitted through uninstitutionalized processes, evolving into religious and folklore beliefs. Social scientists can trace the means by which people use reports of the paranormal to formulate "social knowledge" regarding anomalous claims.

Smelser's (1962) "value-added" theory hypothesizes that seemingly spontaneous collective behaviors are the result of a combination of causal factors, each of which must be present for the event to occur. The theory is presented as a chain in which the predicted behavior occurs only if all elements are present in a specific order. Smelser's approach, borrowed from the economics of manufacturing, hypothesizes six stages within collective events: (a) structural conduciveness, (b) structural strain, (c) generalized belief, (d) precipitating factors, (e) mobilization of participants for action, and (f) the operation of social control activities. This orientation has proven useful for the analysis of panics, riots, crazes, and other forms of collective behavior.

A value-added theory might be used to predict the social phenomena surrounding hauntings, poltergeists, miracles, UFOs, and paranormal healings. This approach would focus on sociological and psychological elements within the context of a developing social situation surrounding an allegedly paranormal event. For example, some houses may be more susceptible to poltergeist events (structural conduciveness). If unexpressed tensions exist within the resident family (structural strain), if they have proper psychological make-up and consider psi a possible explanation (generalized belief), if pre-adolescent children are present (precipitating factors), then poltergeist events are more likely to occur. If participants label these events as paranormal and inform others (mobilization for action), they will stimulate reaction on the part of authorities, psychical researchers, and skeptical groups (social control agencies), and the phenomena will be socially defined as paranormal.

Social scientific orientations place less emphasis on establishing the anomalous quality of an alleged experience. If some observers label a phenomenon as paranormal, for example, it gains that sociological attribute. A social scientific analysis requires careful distinction of phenomenological, epistemologi-

cal, and ontological levels of description and theory since believers and skeptics harbor different sets of rules regarding analysis of experience. The investigator must take into consideration how these rules affect the interpretation of events and how experiences modify observers' assumptions. The investigator should note the degree that social patterns fit previously formulated value-added theories and adjust these theories when they need revision. Value-added theories, as with all scientific models, must be reformulated when empirical evidence exposes their deficiencies.

Analysis of social data regarding a form of anomalous experience could have direct bearing on present parapsychological theories, allowing clearly testable hypotheses. For example, if poltergeist activity occurs more frequently around prepubescent adolescents, we would predict that the mean age of such agents would be less in societies whose youth reach maturity at an earlier age.

Although social scientists in the past have tended to attribute reports of unusual experiences to collective delusion (for examples, see Johnson, 1952; Medalia and Larsen, 1958, Miller, 1985), more recent researchers have used alternate approaches to study anomalous events. Miller (1985, p. 111) concludes that "Generally . . . the data from these studies show only minimal support for the mass hysteria image and explanation of collective behavior." Miller's (1985) interactionist perspective and Smelser's (1962) value-added theory do not reject the possibility that *real* anomalous events may contribute to unusual experiences.

Social scientists might also analyze the patterns within social movements related to anomalous experience. The behavioral/interactionist perspective adopts Mead's (1934) framework for explaining the interpretations, or instructions for response, of crowd and movement participants (Miller, 1985; McPhail and Wohlstein, 1983). When participants interpret what they witness, they begin the "rumor-like" process by which public "knowledge" regarding the paranormal is produced, often leading to assembling behavior. Social scientific investigators may find patterns within group processes unique to anomalous experiences. For example, researchers may find that the forms of miracles described by observers during the earliest phases of a psychic practitioner's career differs from the apparently psychosomatic experiences reported by observers during later stages. During an ethnographic study of spiritual healers in the Philippines, the author noted that extremely anomalous events were related as occurring during the original phase of various folk healers' careers. These reports attracted crowds which required management. Psychic practitioners then orchestrated ritualized performances, attempting to meet the needs of mass audiences. Practitioners who lacked competent advisors, business acumen, charismatic personalities, or suitable ideologies failed to maintain the public interest required to establish an ongoing enterprise. During later stages of successful practitioners' development, public acclaim may contribute to pathological personality patterns; many practitioners are caught cheating even though detection could easily

have been avoided (Eusapia Palladino, and various Filipino psychic surgeons, are example cases). Ironically, the exposing of fraud, and the **disconfirmation** of belief, may contribute to increased proselytizing (Festinger, Riecken, & Schacter, 1956).

### **Anomalous Experience and the Sociology of Religion**

Both the study of folklore and collective behavior are applicable to the sociology of religion. Tiryakian (1974, p. 273) proposes that "esoteric culture," a concept closely associated with the occult milieu, is a major inspirational source of cultural and social innovation, one which could be highly significant in shaping religions of the future. The notion that religious evolution reflects social needs has been supported by such a preponderance of evidence that it constitutes a dominant paradigm within the sociology of religion (Durkheim, 1965/1912). Hufford's (1982a) experiential approach harbors the potential for developing an innovative orientation. Psychic experiences may constitute a *source* for religious belief, rather than being totally *caused* by religious socialization.

The study of recruitment into religious movements, cults, and sects is an area ripe for innovation. A major theory, the "deprivation/ideological appeal" orientation, places emphasis on the tendency for potential recruits to have needs which fit the movement's ideology (Glock and Stark, 1965). An alternate paradigm notes the importance of social networks in religious recruitment (Stark and Bainbridge, 1980). People tend to be attracted to a group because their friends or relatives are members. The potential convert's "structural availability," i.e., freedom from previous temporal and ideological commitments, is also deemed a component (Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980). Although modern sociologists pay little attention to the possible importance of psychic experience within the sociology of religion, psychical researchers might demonstrate the social importance of paranormal experiences. These social effects include modifications in theories of religious recruitment, psychological therapies, and philosophical orientations. This list should not be considered exhaustive but merely exemplifies possible areas of utility for the social scientific paradigm.

Those feeling the need to explain psychic experiences may join innovative religious movements which place emphasis on anomalous events. Ellwood (1977) presents a history of innovative religious movements in America, from Swedenborg's doctrines to Zen Buddhism; in all probability, psychic experiences were a factor in the recruitment of members to many of these groups. The history of religious innovation is filled with individuals who receive divinely inspired messages, "verified" paranormally. Participants undoubtedly are motivated by psychic experiences as well as deprivations, social networks, and structural availability. The evidence gathered so far does not indicate that those reporting anomalous experience suffer from

"deprivation" to any greater extent than those lacking such experiences (Greeley, 1975).

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss theories of healing and psychotherapy, the social "reality" of paranormal experience has implications for medical treatment strategies. For example, Wickramasekera (1988) notes that allowing clients to discuss the paranormal episodes they have experienced can be highly therapeutic. Throughout history, psychic events have been intertwined with psychosomatic and allegedly miraculous healing.

Alleged paranormal episodes affect folk philosophy. The decline in explanatory power of religious institutions, coupled with scientific neglect of psychic experience, may contribute to the increasing acceptance of the paranormal as "folk knowledge." Cerullo (1982) argues that the British Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, was responding to people's need for belief in a nonmaterial, eternal, yet scientifically verifiable, component of the human personality, "a secular soul." Emmons and Sobal (1981a) hypothesize that modern belief in the paranormal constitutes a functional equivalent for religious faith. Paranormal belief may be an aspect of the secularization of Western society. In their national survey data, Emmons and Sobal (1981a) found that those with "no religion" or who state that religion is "not at all important," were more likely to believe in ESP than religious respondents. Within Greeley's (1975) national survey data, those scoring high on an index based on self-reports of *déjà vu*, extrasensory perception (ESP), and clairvoyance, were slightly less likely to go to church than average Americans but more likely to believe in human survival after death, to have certainty about fundamental religious beliefs, to be religious optimists, and to consider themselves religious agnostics (Greeley, 1975; McCready and Greeley, 1976).

Although belief in the paranormal may fulfill a form of religious need in those who lack traditional faith, Tobacyk (1983) found that such beliefs correlated significantly and positively with a "Death Concern Scale." However, data from a random sample of University of Maryland dormitory residents indicated that psychic experience and self-reported religiosity were not significantly related (McClenon, 1990). Further research is required to clarify the interactions between belief in, and experience of, the paranormal and religious belief.

Although the research findings regarding the correlates to belief in ESP are mixed (Zusne and Jones, 1982), the data tends to indicate that belief is not related to negative personality attributes (Thalbourne, 1981) and that mystical experience is related to psychological well-being (Greeley, 1975). Emmons and Sobal (1981b) found that those accepting paranormal claims suffered from less deprivations than those rejecting them. Believers tended to be better educated and more wealthy than skeptics in their national American sample. Psychic experience may function more as a positive support for religious sentiment than a pathological aspect of it.

The social scientific study of anomalous experience's ideological effects could lead to a new paradigm within religious studies, one originally suggested by Lang (1968/1898). Lowie (1924) and Tylor (1920) hypothesize that the misinterpretation of physiological or physical phenomena may be responsible for religious sentiment. Otto (1953) attributes the religious impulse to a nebulous universal force. Psychical researchers might hypothesize that anomalous experiences, a more clearly defined construct, are an important element in religious history (Clark, 1977). Ward (1982) documents the role that the miraculous played in medieval Christianity; Zurcher (1959) notes the use of miraculous events by monks spreading Buddhism in China. The eighth century Monk Kyokai was the first of various Japanese writers who aided the propagation of Buddhism in Japan through collecting, transcribing, and disseminating miracle stories (Nakamura, 1973). One form of report, the near-death experience, played an important role in the evolution of religious ideology in China, Japan, and Europe, shaping Buddhist and Christian doctrines in a similar direction (McClenon, in press).

Broughton (1988) suggests, "If you want to know how [psi] works, first find out what it's for." He hypothesizes that psi contributes to individual human survival, but is obscured because too much of this ability is dysfunctional. A sociological hypothesis, congruous with his speculation, suggests that psychic experiences function more to produce collective belief, than in aiding individual survival. Seeing an apparitional figure or having an out-of-body experience is unrelated to reproduction and contributes to survival only on infrequent occasions. Yet psychic experiences frequently contribute to increased belief in life after death and in the "interconnectedness" of the universe. Like Skinner's (1948) pigeons, who came to believe that their unusual dancing and cooing brought the random pellets they received, psychic experiences occur sporadically, leading to "superstitious" behavior. Although the incidence of anomalous experiences are inappropriate for scientifically *proving* their existence, they are well-suited for inspiring religious faith. The ambiguity of psychic events contributes to the rumor-like process which leads to the development of religious "knowledge."

A social scientific/parapsychological paradigm might portray anomalous experience as functional for entire societies or species, rather than mainly an ability serving individuals. Although religious belief is valuable for individual survival, it is also functional for the survival of societies, since it inspires selfless action and collective emotion. Anomalous experience may have evolved with an "obscured" nature due to its special role in contributing to belief in life after death and social "interconnectedness." If individuals were *certain* of survival after death, human struggle would be pointless and the evolutionary process would be thwarted. Individuals would commit suicide rather than undergo the tribulations associated with bettering their physical environment. If we wish to know what "psi is for," we should search within the sociology of folk belief, collective behavior, and religion for theories explaining the empirical data gathered by psychical researchers.

### Social Scientific Theory and the Investigation of Anomalous Experience

Hufford (1982b, 1983, 1985) notes that academic research is not "culture-free," but actually reflects a "culture of disbelief" with regard to the supernatural. Parapsychology and UFO research reveal the latent ideological boundaries of science, since investigations are often rejected on ideological grounds without concern for methodological validity (McClenon, 1984). Sociologists note that many theoretical and technological innovations are impossible without a sufficient "cultural base," supporting their adaptation. Various inventive ideas, such as Leonardo da Vinci's helicopter, designed in the fifteenth century, stagnated for centuries until supporting gaps in knowledge and technique were discovered (Ogburn, 1950). Some modern investigations into anomalous claims may be ideological equivalents to da Vinci's invention; they exceed what can be supported by the present cultural base and will probably be ignored during the current era. Yet social scientific theories would allow psychic experiences to be investigated within present scientific paradigms. Rather than presenting radically innovative concepts, researchers can build on the existing scientific base in a socially useful manner. Theories produced by social scientists about psychic experience, for example, could fulfill social needs for new explanations within the fields of death education, psychosomatic healing, and transcendent consciousness. This would grant such theorizing social utility, contributing to its acceptance.

### Conclusions

Although the modern scientific "culture of disbelief" lessens the probability that modern investigators of anomalous claims will produce scientific revolutions, social scientific paradigms supply methods by which researchers might contribute to more gradual advance in a cumulative fashion. Methods which demonstrate the universality of elements within anomalous experiences, deal with anomalous experience as a **form** of collective behavior, and reveal the religious importance of some types of anomalous experience, could create a form of cumulative scientific endeavor which harbors increasing ability to predict events within the social domain.

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