



Anomalous Post-Death Encounters and their Positive Impact on Experiencers



Callum E. Cooper, PhD, Chris A. Roe, PhD, & Graham Mitchell, PhD

Centre for the Study of Anomalous Psychological Processes, University of Northampton

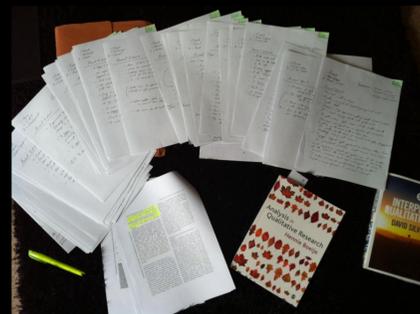
Background

During the bereavement process, people often report anomalous experiences that may be interpreted as evidence of the survival of the deceased's 'spirit', 'soul', or 'personality'. For example, Rees (1971) and Castelnovo et al. (2015) found that between 50-60% of bereaved individuals reported spontaneous anomalous experiences – most notably, 'sensing the presence' of the deceased. The experiences typically take the form of dreaming of the dead (Barrett, 1991-92) and sensing the presence of the deceased (Steffen & Coyle, 2011), but also include the seeing of apparitions and physical effects that are characteristic of the deceased (see Cooper, Roe, & Mitchell, 2015). Experiencers report that they find such experiences comforting and serve to help them come to terms with their loss (see Krippner, 2006). The present study was intended to explore these experiences in much greater depth, focusing on how they might engender 'hope' (Snyder, 1994), as suggested by several previous researchers (e.g., Devers, 1997; Drewry, 2003; Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1995).

Methods and Analyses

Mixed Methodological Approach

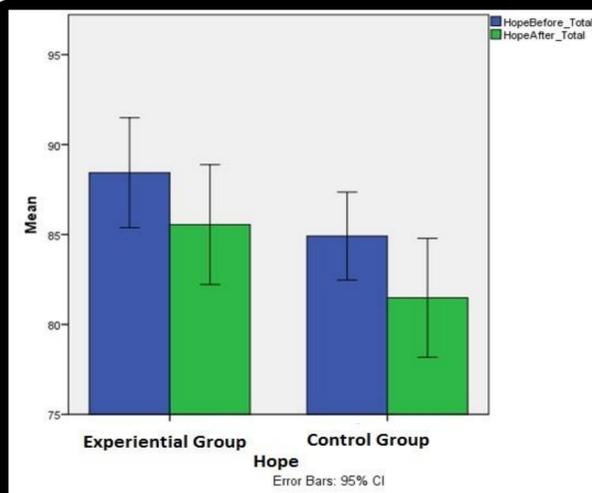
1. A questionnaire battery, including scales on personal beliefs and hope was distributed to 100 people comfortable and willing to recall a significant bereavement in their life. From that, 50 people reported having experienced spontaneous anomalous phenomena (experiencers), and 50 claimed no experiences (control).¹ Within the questionnaire (for the experiencers) short answer questions² and a free response section to write about experiences were provided.³
2. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out on selected experiencers, based on their varying hope scores.⁴



Methods of Data Analysis

1. Questionnaire analysis (N = 100)¹
2. Content Analysis – CA (N = 50)²
3. Thematic Analysis – TA (N = 50)³
4. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis – IPA (N = 9)⁴

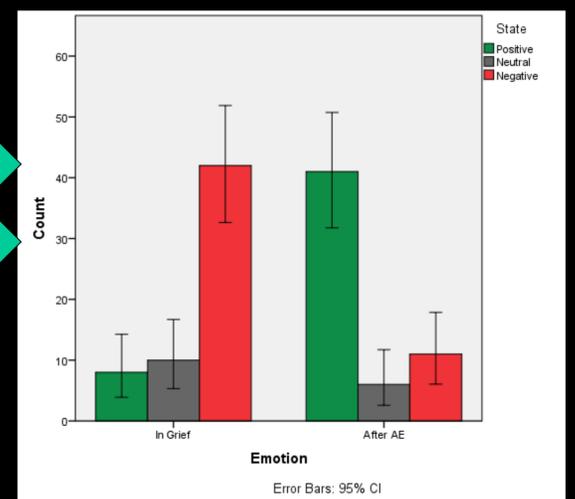
Results



Study 1: The results from the questionnaire demonstrated a significant difference in scores for hope between the bereaved who did have experiences and those who did not ($p = .04$, two-tailed). Those who *did* reported a marginal drop in hope following loss ($p = .125$), those who *did not* reported a significant drop in hope following loss ($p = .008$).

Study 2: The CA identified many characteristics of the experiences. The most common of experiences were sensing a presence, voices/sounds, apparitions, dream encounters and psychokinetic events. The majority found these experiences to be instantly helpful (86%), with some uncertain (12%) and one person being initially shocked/scared (2%). Comparing 'states of mind' expressed from the point of loss, to then following the first anomalous experience, a significant shift in negative to positive emotional states was identified ($p < .001$).

Study 3: The TA of written accounts identified four superordinate themes (with sub-themes) to post-death experiences including: how the experiences challenge or confirm existing beliefs; continued bonds; hope (for more experiences to occur, the deceased watching over the living and offering guidance, and for an afterlife); and therapeutic gains.



Study 4: An IPA carried out on the interview data identified five superordinate themes (with sub-themes). These included: grief reactions; how the experiences challenged personal beliefs; attitudes on telling others about the experiences; expressions of hope; and evidence of recovery from grief aided by the experiences.

Discussion

The mixed-method approach allowed for the therapeutic impact of spontaneous anomalous experiences to be understood from several angles, especially in terms of the *presence* and *purpose* of hope. In the questionnaire phase – for the first time in such research – hope's perceived presence following post-death experiences was measured. Significant shifts in emotional responses and states of mind were also identified. Hope appears to fill the gap of loss, when anomalous experiences suggest to the experiencer that there is something more beyond death and a potential reunion to be had beyond death. Hope was expressed for: guidance (the on-going feeling that the deceased is watching over the bereaved and guiding life choices); more experiences to occur (50% of participants had multiple experiences, 50% only had one); and for an afterlife (the experiences gave personal evidence of this being a distinct possibility). Post-death experiences were reported by a wide variety of people, regardless of personal and religious beliefs in anomalous phenomena. Where experiences contradicted beliefs, personal transitions of 'outlook on life' were expressed. Anomalous experiences during bereavement present a natural aid to coping and recovery, which must be understood and integrated into the work of relevant therapists and professionals within thanatology, palliative care, and bereavement counselling – to support the bereaved.