

The therapeutic nature of anomalous events: a union of positive psychology and parapsychology

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Abstract

Aside from exploring the ontology of anomalous abilities and experiences through the study of parapsychology, the recent re-emergence of clinical parapsychology has allowed researchers to explore the impact of anomalous events on those who encounter them, through spontaneous cases investigation methods, or via the counselling and therapy setting. From this new avenue of research outlook, and reflecting on laboratory experiments of psychic phenomena, links can clearly be made to positive psychology with how people face and perceive anomalous events. Various positive gains have been identified as being fostered as a result of anomalous experiences, which help with personal growth, resilience and coping, especially in the case of bereavement and related phenomena encountered in such stages of life. This paper will briefly consider the findings of such studies and the increasing relationship between parapsychology and positive psychology.

Introduction

Parapsychology has typically been defined as an area of research which explores experiences and/or abilities which supposedly cannot be explained via current scientific paradigms. Parapsychological experiences, when spontaneously occurring in day to day settings, are more commonly referred to as anomalous experiences, which Smith (2010) describes as “anomalous in the sense that it may appear as unusual to the person having the experience in the sense that processes involved in the experience appear to be non-ordinary” (p.1). It has been found that *some* spontaneous anomalous events can be scary for individuals to encounter (Sannwald, 1963) such as seeing an apparition in a purportedly haunted location, a precognitive vision of a disaster, or even a near-death experience which does not depict a pleasant state of survival for human consciousness beyond death (Irwin & Watt, 2007, pp. 164-165). However, there are many instances in which people have derived positive gains from anomalous experiences, which we shall briefly consider throughout this paper.

During the work of the Rhines from the 1930s onwards at Duke University (Horn, 2009; Rhine, 1934), it was evident in early instances of laboratory testing for psychic processes that the tasks people were given could be faced with varying levels of competitiveness and motivation from participants. Equally, positive emotional and motivational support could be seen coming from the experimenters, which quickly led to debates on the ‘experimenter effect’, a topic still of leading discussion in social sciences (Broughton, 2015).

Turning to another side of parapsychology, with the re-immersion of clinical parapsychology (e.g. Kramer, Bauer & Hövelmann, 2012) within the last decade – an area involving counselling

and therapy for people who claim to have encountered anomalous events – the links between anomalous experiences and positive psychology are becoming increasingly stronger and widely recognised within mainstream research (Steffen, Wilde & Cooper, in press). This is happening twofold, (1) through the professional therapy setting, showing applied positive psychological techniques and outcomes for those who encounter anomalous phenomena, and (2) naturally occurring positive emotions and resilience developed following spontaneous events – typically involving anomalous events during bereavement (Cooper, Roe & Mitchell, 2015a).

To explore these links between parapsychology and positive psychology further, let us *briefly* consider these three settings, in which overlaps between the two fields have come evident. Emphasis shall be given to the final section on spontaneous experiences, which has been the author's main research focus.

Laboratory Experiments

Laboratory experiments within parapsychology typically explore anomalous abilities and cognitive functions within the general population. Many early studies would involve simple experiments to test for extra-sensory perception (ESP) or psychokinesis (PK). This would involve ESP experiments with participants trying to perceive symbols on the back of what are known as Zener cards (being the five symbols of circle, cross, wavy lines, square and a star), and PK experiments of dice rolling, for example, in an attempt to will the dice and what number they land on (Randall, n.d.). In many of these early experiments, and indeed more advanced modern studies (Irwin & Watt, 2007, pp. 48-82), participants are made aware of the tasks they are given and typically wish to do well.

Taking these experimental designs into account, Krippner (1980) provides a detailed discussion of the links between humanistic psychology and parapsychology, arguing that humanistic psychologists will always encounter overlaps into the field of parapsychology when adopting a holistic approach and considering issues of motivation, goal-setting, integration, and creativity, especially within parapsychology's approaches to laboratory experiments, education, and psychotherapy. In many respects, we can clearly see some of these positive psychological components at work when considering the experimenter effect within laboratory experiments of psychic phenomena.

Parapsychology considered the experimenter and participant interactions to be of great importance in their influence on the study outcomes, long before other areas of social science took note, and some have considered psychology to finally be catching up with parapsychology (Broughton, 2015). Even so, the rapport that is displayed between experimenter and participant appears to be highly influential on the participant and the data they produce. Certainly within parapsychological experiments, Krippner (1980) notes that goal-setting and personal motivation to 'want to do well' has demonstrated positive outcomes (e.g. Rhine, 1964).

Double-blind procedures are often in place in parapsychological experiments, so that neither participant nor experimenter are aware of the targets until after the experiments are completed – sometimes adopting a precognitive design with the experimental target selected via a random number generator. Yet, it has still been found that by simply developing good rapport with participants and sending them through engaging experiments in which they feel safe and relaxed with the experimenters when in strange settings of the laboratory, it can have a

significant impact on the data produced suggestive of psychic processes (e.g. Roe & Hickinbotham, 2015; Wiseman & Schlitz, 1997).

There is wide scope for the investigation of positive psychology within the setting of parapsychology's laboratory studies, looking at experimenter and participant interaction and study outcomes suggestive of anomalous cognitive functioning. Understanding the experimenter effect is the first step in taking such studies forward, and merging the two fields.

Sought Experiences

When referring to sought experiences, we typically mean experiences in which people want to obtain something they perceive to be paranormal (though we are not concerned with the ontology of such experience in this particular discussion), and therefore seek out the experience. This could involve experiences perceived to be communication from the dead, such as anomalous voice recordings known as electronic voice phenomena, aka EVP (Cooper & Parsons, 2015; Winsper, 2015) or communication with the dead through a living person known as a psychic medium (Beischel, 2015; Gauld, 1982).

Certainly it is a popular concept for people to visit a medium, especially after suffering a recent loss of someone close. In many ways we could look on this as an alternative form of bereavement counselling, and as such, what impact do such encounters have on those who attend a sitting?

Research by Evenden, Cooper and Mitchell (2013) investigated the role of mediums as a form of bereavement counselling, and the impact they had on those who sought out their purported ability to communicate with the dead. Semi-structured interviews were carried out on those who sought out mediumship following bereavement, with the data sent through a thematic analysis. Positive character strengths such as wisdom and gratitude were found to produce a high sense of agency, resulting in adaptive coping following bereavement and sitting with a medium. Various positive emotions were also identified from the sittings, including a sense of hope from the continued spiritual bonds developed between the bereaved and the deceased, which has also been noted and discussed in a related study by Bains (2014). As an additional finding, it was noted by Evenden *et al.* (2013) that the sooner the bereaved visited a medium following loss, the more positive gains were highlighted by the bereaved in recalling what impact the sitting had on them.

Beischel, Mosher and Boccuzzi (2014-15) also investigated the impact of sittings with mediums for the bereaved, along with other forms of induced experiences of perceived communication with the dead. By reviewing this material, they found that such experiences appear to repeatedly demonstrate diminished or even entirely alleviate grief, than compared to traditional methods of bereavement counselling. By conducting a pilot study on the impact of individual sittings with a medium of good reputation, relief was clearly noted as an instantaneous response from the bereaved. As part of their suggestions for future research, Beischel *et al.* (2014-15) noted that they intend to work on forming links between mediums and health care professionals, and create discussion and understanding on acute grief experiences of the bereaved and who may benefit most from sittings with mediums as an alternative form of therapy.

These issues of clinical parapsychology and more, were recently relayed at a symposium regarding parapsychology, mental health and clinical practice (Roxburgh 2014). Findings of

on-going research on counselling for anomalous experiences were discussed, concerning a study of the range and incidence of anomalous experiences amongst clients seeking support from a secular counselling service in the UK over a one-year period. A mixed-method design was adopted for this study in order to better understand how anomalous experiences are perceived, interpreted and managed in the therapeutic setting. Course leaders of counselling and clinical psychology programmes have also been contacted to investigate whether students receive any training in addressing anomalous experiences of clients. This has now led to increasing awareness and debate of anomalous experiences relayed in the counselling setting (Roxburgh & Evenden, 2016). Additionally, following counselling and developing an understanding about the anomalous events encountered, through discussion with therapists knowledgeable in parapsychological research findings, clients report clear positive gains from this procedure than from therapy sessions in which mentions of their experiences have suppressed by the therapist, or simply not understood. This has created further overlaps in research for parapsychology, health care, and positive psychology.

Spontaneous Experiences

Spontaneous experiences typically involve anomalous events which people are generally not expecting to happen; this could involve a precognitive vision, a telepathic event, through to the witnessing of apparitions. In this section, we shall give specific focus on the latter, particularly in relation to bereavement and the therapeutic impact of such events.

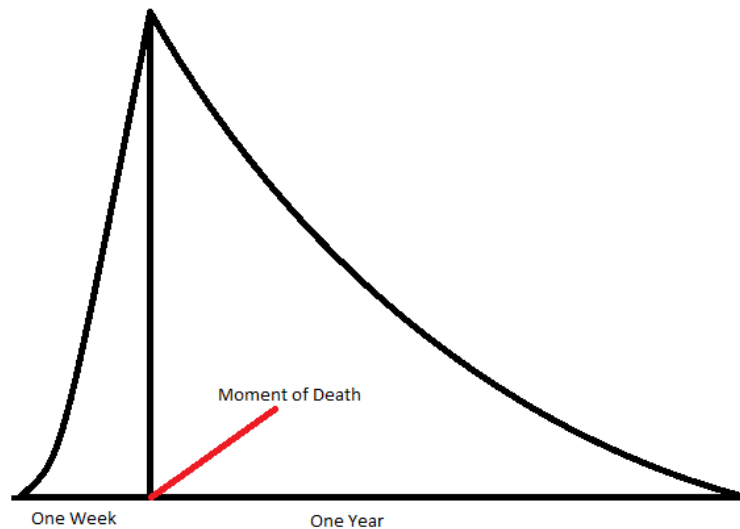
Gurney (with Myers, 1889) published an extensive study on “apparitions occurring soon after death” in the *Proceeding of the Society for Psychological Research*. Both Gurney and Myers were aware that the experience of encountering sensory stimuli associated with that of deceased friends and relatives was common, while also being aware of the common ill-informed explanations for such experiences such as “the person was drunk or delusional at the time” or “emotionally excited, and perhaps misinterpreted sights or sounds of an objective kind”. They rightly noted that:

“A very little careful study of the subject will, however, show that all these hypotheses must be rejected; that the witness may be in good health, and in no exceptional state of nervousness or excitement, and that what he sees or hears may still be of purely subjective origin – the projection of his own brain.”

(pp.403-404)

It was believed that there is argument for the hallucination to not be purely subjective if, for example 1) if additional people present also saw the apparition, and 2) the apparition conveyed information only known by the deceased and not by the percipient, but later confirmed to be correct. Their study set out to investigate how common apparitional experiences of the dead were and at what point after the death they are generally reported. The study took the form of a content analysis investigating the common themes of such experiences gathered from 211 personal accounts taken from cases analysed and discussed in *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore, 1886).

Diagram 1.1: (Gurney with Myers, 1889, p.427) Frequency of Apparitions Experienced Before and Following Death.



Of these cases, 134 spontaneous experiences were reported to have occurred within the hour of death, and 29 between 1 and 12 hours after death. (Post-mortem apparitions beyond this time were excluded from *Phantasms of the Living*.) The researchers commented:

“the recognised apparitions decrease rapidly in the few days after death, then more slowly; and after about a year’s time they become so sporadic that we can no longer include them in a steadily descending line”

(p.427)

From this very early study by Gurney and Myers (1889), very little if any attention was given to anomalous experiences during bereavement. Many books on bereavement throughout this time simply passed such experiences off as a pure side effects of grief, and in the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (25 volumes) such experiences were simply dismissed in three lines as ‘psychotic hallucinations’ (see Rees, 2000, p.83).

It wasn’t until the publication of a longitudinal study conducted as part of a medical doctorate by Rees (1971) that such experiences began to be taken seriously in the ‘main steam’. The study was entitled ‘The hallucinations of widowhood’ and appeared in the *British Medical Journal*. The term ‘hallucination’ was used very loosely, referring to anomalous sensory experiences ranging from a sense of presence, through to: smells, touch, voices, and full visual apparitions of the dead. The participant sample was collected in an area of mid-Wales (N = 293), including widows ($n = 227$) and widowers ($n = 66$), all of whom were interviewed to determine the extent of their experiences during widowhood/bereavement. Upon analysing the data, it was found that the sense of presence of the dead was amongst the most common of experiences occurring in around 39.2 per cent of cases, while around 13 to 14 per cent of cases reported visual and auditory hallucinations. In 11 per cent of cases, the bereaved claimed to have not only experienced the presence of the dead, but also conversed with them and interacted.

The Rees (1971) study led to further doctoral research being conducted surrounding the same topic, focusing on the commonality of such experiences, their purpose, and their impact on individuals. For example, Burton (1980) explored the commonality of spontaneous post-death events by sending out questionnaires on such experiences to psychology students at three different colleges in the USA. Such experiences were reported by 50% of the participants, with

84.5 % of participants between the ages of 31 and 60 reporting contact with the dead following loss. Among other quantitative findings, Burton (1980) identified that many people found these experiences to be extremely meaningful, with 60% stating that such experiences had changed their views on life and death. Other extensive pieces of research have found anomalous post-death experiences to be a perfectly natural part of the grieving processes and *therapeutic* (Conant, 1992; Devers, 1994; Hayes, 2011; Knight, 2011; Parker, 2004; Steffen, 2011).

Drewry (2002) interviewed seven research participants who collectively claimed to have had 40 spontaneous post-death events. Eight themes to the experiences were produced using phenomenological reduction methods. Some of these themes included: authenticity of the experience being established due to it not being expected (spontaneous); the deceased presented clear cues making them recognisable to the bereaved adding to the authenticity of the experience; participants considered themselves to be deluded before realising the experience to be objective and valid. A number of positive emotional gains were reported as a result of having such experiences, which included: relief, comfort, encouragement, forgiveness, love, joy, and most notably, hope. On reviewing the conclusions of several studies regarding anomalous experiences during the bereavement process, hope has presented itself as an important humanistic mechanism and bi-product of such events (Bains, 2014; Devers, 1994; Drewry, 2002; Evenden, Cooper & Mitchell, 2013; Knight, 2011).

Snyder (1994, 2000) presented a cognitive theory for hope as a positive thinking style which involves three key elements – goals, agency and pathway. Our goals are our hopes, from which we must then form cognitive agency (aka, will power) which is essentially planting that flag of hope in our mind and setting the goal of what we need to move toward, while our thought pathway (aka, way power) allows us to develop plans of action, in terms of how we must act in order to move toward this goal and achieve it. Hope appears to be fostered as a result of anomalous experiences, as for the bereaved it suggests not a finality at the point of death, but a transition and continuation from which continued spiritual bonds with the deceased are established (Beischel, Mosher & Boccuzzi, 2014-15; Cooper, 2013; Evenden, Cooper & Mitchell, 2013; Klass, Silverman & Nickman 1996). One way of looking at the impact of anomalous experiences for the bereaved, which suggest communication with the dead, is that they present personal evidence of personality being immortal (Badham 1993). If our conscious minds enter a transition at the point of death, then there is *hope* for being reunited with deceased love ones (Rose 1999), and therefore, the experiences support this notion for those who encounter them – especially when conventional explanations cannot account for the experiences or communication received. Within parapsychology, such phenomena are investigated under the umbrella of the ‘survival hypothesis’ where cases may demonstrate specific information only known to the deceased being delivered to the bereaved, therefore suggesting the possibility of survival for personality beyond death (e.g. Doore, 1990; Myers 1903, Storm & Thalbourne, 2006).

Through an investigation of what role hope plays in the aftermath of spontaneous post-death events, Cooper, Roe, and Mitchell (2015b), adopted a mixed methods approach. Firstly, a sample of one hundred individuals were recruited who were comfortable with recalling a significant bereavement in their lives, and were split into two groups: fifty who had had spontaneous post-death events, and fifty who had never experienced such phenomena. All participants were asked to take part in a questionnaire which included a number of items measuring paranormal belief, religious belief, afterlife belief, death anxiety and hope. With hope, the Nowotny (1989) Hope Scale (NHS) was used to measure personal levels of hope before the loss of someone close through death and then after, or after the spontaneous

anomalous events encountered. Although there was no significant difference between the two groups in their levels of hope, it was noted that the group who had had such experiences were overall higher in hope than those who had not had spontaneous post-death experiences. However, with both groups there were drops in levels of hope following loss. For the group who had experiences, the drop was only marginal ($p = .125$), while the group who did not report such experiences presented a statistically significant drop in hope ($p = .008$). It was concluded that for those who had anomalous experiences during bereavement, hope was indeed fostered as a result and facilitated the gap of loss, and led to an immediate coping mechanism. For the other group, a void – demonstrated by the significant drop in hope levels – was still present from the loss encountered which needed to be filled by new goals in life to re-establish hope and move on from grief (see Nikolaichuk and Jevne, 2002; Snyder, 1996).

Cooper, Roe and Mitchell (2015b) continue their research through a content analysis and thematic analysis of written accounts of the experiences ($n = 50$), and through in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants ($n = 9$), to understand the process and variety of experiences of loss leading to anomalous encounters, and individuals' understanding and interpretation of *hope* and how they believe it played a role in their life following anomalous events.

Conclusion

From briefly considering the social interactions of laboratory experiments in parapsychology, through to anomalous experiences people may seek, or spontaneously encounter, links can clearly be identified between parapsychology and positive psychology – as has been previously proposed, but seldom considered (Krippner, 1980). It is also evident that much of the research suggesting such interactions of the two fields is limited, due to only having been recently identified, where research focuses on positive psychological attributes and on therapeutic values of anomalous experiences. This is perhaps thanks to the re-emergence of clinical parapsychology, which offers an alternative route to parapsychological research with broader applications. Research and practical applications of the findings is steadily increasing as researchers spread awareness for anomalous experiences and their place in the therapy setting (Roxburgh & Evenden, 2016). Given the positive impact such experiences appear to have on people, especially for the bereaved (Cooper, Roe & Mitchell, 2015b) – regardless of the ontology of such experiences – anomalous events should be taken seriously and given wider research consideration. In doing so, this could only be seen as strengthening the links between parapsychology and positive psychology.

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