

TECHNICAL NOTE: THE LEVEL OF PARANORMAL BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE AMONG PSYCHOTICS

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ABSTRACT: In a previous paper (Thalbourne & Delin, 1994) it was reported that the level of belief in, and alleged experience of, the paranormal was no different between a control group of university students and two psychotic groups (manic-depressives and schizophrenics). Doubts were raised even then in that report about the appropriateness of the student controls. Here an alternative control group is presented—support-givers of those suffering from panic attacks—and it is argued that they are considerably more representative of the general population and are therefore a more appropriate control group. Statistical comparison revealed that the manic-depressives and schizophrenics are, as originally expected, significantly higher on the sheep-goat variable than are the support-givers. An explanation is given in terms of transliminality.

In a survey of the correlates of belief in (and alleged experience of) the paranormal, Thalbourne and Delin (1994) examined, among other variables, the clinical status of their subjects. In addition to a comparison group of 241 university students, there were 86 persons with manic-depression and 38 with schizophrenia. The correlations between the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale (Thalbourne & Delin, 1993) and the Manic-Depressiveness Scale (Thalbourne, Delin, & Bassett, 1994) as well as the Magical Ideation Scale (Eckblad & Chapman, 1983, measuring proneness to psychosis) were positive and, for the most part, significant in all three groups. It was therefore expected, given that manic-depressives score higher on Manic-Depressiveness and schizophrenics score higher on Magical Ideation (Thalbourne & Delin, 1994, Table 1, p. 13), that the *mean* scores for the Sheep-Goat Scale would be higher in the clinical groups. But, as was evident (Thalbourne & Delin, 1994, Table 2, p. 14), this proved not to be the case: students scored (nonsignificantly) the highest of the three groups on the sheep-goat variable. This was something of an anomaly.

There are several fairly obvious respects in which, it might be argued, the students were inappropriate as a control group in this context. First, age: the students were considerably younger, on average, than the clinical groups—the mean age of students was 23, as opposed to 41 for the manic-depressives and 37 for the schizophrenics. Second, the students were also

very likely to be higher in level of education. Other possible differences include the different contexts in which the questionnaire instrument was presented to the clinical groups (e.g., as an illness-relevant survey rather than as a survey about belief in the paranormal per se).

Two years after this study, the same set of questionnaires (the Sheep-Goat Scale and other measures) plus a section on panic attacks and kundalini experiences was administered to a group of 62 persons (53 female, 9 male) suffering from panic attacks and 52 persons (23 female, 29 male) who were their support-givers (see Study V of Thalbourne, Bartemucci, Delin, Fox, & Nofi, 1997). Both groups had a mean age of just over 39 years. The support-givers are the closest to being a sample from the non-clinical general population yet surveyed by us. It was therefore of interest to examine the level of their scores on the Sheep-Goat Scale, and, in particular, to compare them retrospectively with those of the manic-depressives and schizophrenics, who were clinical subjects drawn from the general population, not from a university setting.

The mean Sheep-Goat Scale scores for these three groups—people with manic-depression, people with schizophrenia, and support-givers—are given in Table 1, along with statistics for a one-way analysis of variance. We also planned, in advance, to compare the scores of the *combined* psychotic group with those of the support-givers.

Table 1
MEAN SCORES (SDs IN PARENTHESES) ON
PARANORMAL BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE

	Manic- Depressives	Schizo- phrenics	Support- givers	<i>F</i> (2, 169)	<i>p</i>	<i>eta</i> ²
Paranormal Belief & Experience	16.5 (8.0)	16.8 (9.3)	13.4 (7.0)	2.94	.055	.03

As can be seen from the table, the mean Sheep-Goat Scale score for the support-givers was below that of the two clinical groups to a marginally significant degree. An a priori comparison of the two clinical groups combined versus the support-givers gave a significant *t* value: $t = 2.39$, $df = 169$, $p = .018$. The effect is quite small ($eta^2 = 3\%$), but does appear to be genuine. The mean Sheep-Goat Scale score of the group comprised of sufferers of panic attacks was 16.6 ($SD = 6.9$), which is comparable to that for the earlier two clinical groups.

Why do clinical groups score higher on belief in, and experience of,

the paranormal? These results are consistent with those reported in England by Jackson (1997) using what he called the Spiritual Experience Questionnaire (cf. the significant difference obtained between clinical and nonclinical groups—the former being higher—by Thalbourne and Delin [1994] on the Mystical Experience Scale [Thalbourne, 1991].) I would interpret these results in the framework of the theory of transliminality: high scores on paranormal belief (and, for that matter, on mystical experience) go along with elevated scores on psychopathology, all of which (and perhaps also ESP) are phenomena caused by a “leaky” mental threshold (Thalbourne & Delin, 1994). Why university students scored more in line with clinical groups on the Sheep-Goat Scale must remain a mystery for the present, unless it has the prosaic explanation that the student sample contains more people who volunteered for a survey about ESP, which would attract believers, thereby raising the mean Sheep-Goat Scale score to a level perhaps comparable to that of the clinical groups.

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