

Extraordinary experiences in its cultural and theoretical context

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Abstract

The growing complexity, opaqueness and specialization of many areas of life and – above all – a booming psychological and esoteric market create the necessity for counselling and advice for individuals who encounter so-called ‘paranormal’ experiences. These experiences are often interpreted as ‘transpersonal’ or ‘spiritual’, depending on the cultural background and religious traditions. The term ‘spiritual crisis’ has become a fashionable diagnosis with some transpersonal psychotherapists. Paranormal experiences, regardless of their acceptance of academic psychology and psychiatry, are still a taboo subject in society. The Parapsychological Counselling Office in Freiburg is a professional unit with governmental support, which helps individuals to cope with such experiences adequately. The work and responsibilities of the counselling centre are presented. A large collection of cases in the form of letters, which were sent in by individuals wanting to communicate their unusual or extraordinary experiences have been analysed. Some of the results are reported here. Finally, we discuss a special form of ‘inexplicable experiences’ based on a theoretical model. Its recommendations seem counter-intuitive but are ultimately successful. The model starts from a system-theoretical viewpoint and uses concepts such as complementarity and entanglement of generalized quantum theory (GQT) and the model of pragmatic information (MPI). Since it turned out that individuals who contact the counselling centre also offer their own interpretations and ‘explanation’, the question arises, how these resources can be used to help clients.

Introduction

In their daily work, psychotherapists are often confronted with experiences of patients which cannot be clearly classified. In most cases, patients do not dare to report such experiences. They refer to those experiences as ‘paranormal’, ‘really inexplicable’ or even as ‘supernatural’. Therefore, the Parapsychological Counselling Office (PCO) in Freiburg receives hundreds of inquiries each year from individuals who found that their reports on such experiences are not accepted by usual healthcare organizations. It is obvious that paranormal experiences can be meaningfully implemented in the therapeutic process, if one knows how to distinguish them from psychotic experiences.

The phenomenological similarity of exceptional and spiritual experiences and psychotic states is well known (Lukoff, 1985, 1988, 1990; Lukoff & Lu, 1999). Often they have been interpreted as acts of ego regression, borderline psychosis or psychotic episode and have been associated with temporal lobe dysfunction (Lukoff et al., 1998). At the very least the authors acknowledge that the clinical perspective covers only a rather small part of the variance in common between mysticism and clinical conditions

(Thalbourne, 1991). The model given here is in some contrast to Thalbourne’s model of ‘transliminality’ (Thalbourne, 1991), because transliminality includes a causal signal transfer from subconscious structures. The NT-axiom, however, often has an inhibitory character leading to decline and displacement effects. Here, however, we adopt a somewhat different approach (see Fig. 1). The ‘genuine’ cases are assumed to have the same ‘ontological status’ as ‘normal’ experiences. This means that they are not reducible to neuronal dysfunctions or mental disorders. The reason is not only theoretical (see the section Theoretical models – GQT and MPI below) but also empirical.

Zhradnik (2007) was able to show that complementary categories play an important role in reports of paranormal experiences, therewith the study can be considered as a first step to test and to compare theoretical models such as generalized quantum theory (GQT) and the model of pragmatic information (MPI) in the realm of sociological structures. The (complementary) ‘global observables’: ‘authenticity’ and ‘resonance’ may serve as an example. They are used to find out ‘genuine cases’. They can be rated by different evaluators of the reports in a reliable way,

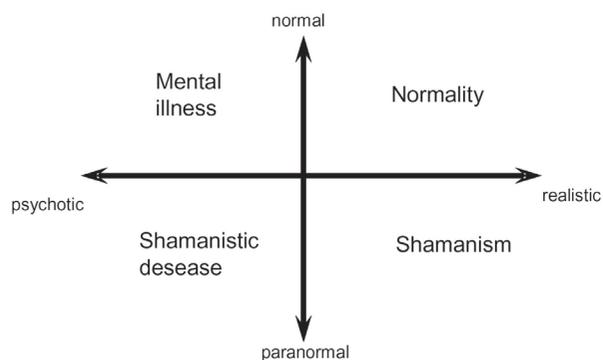


Fig. 1. Paranormality and psychoticity are orthogonal factors.

without ‘deriving’ them from the categories of the text. They seem to be completely subjective impressions of the evaluator, but fulfil all requirements of a measurement in terms of GQT.

From this point of view the development of the DSM-IV to DSM-V is not relevant here (Lukoff et al., 1992, 1998; Turner et al., 1995). The crucial issue of our approach is the interrelationship between the theoretical model and its practical application in the daily work of the PCO and vice versa.

The Parapsychological Counselling Office

In 1989, the Parapsychologische Beratungsstelle (PCO) was founded in Freiburg, Breisgau, Germany. It is financially supported – a unique case in Germany – by the State of Baden-Württemberg. The PCO was founded and continues to be officially funded by the Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Parapsychologie (the German Society for Psychical Research, WGFP). Its membership consists of some 50 natural and social scientists, scholars in the humanities as well as physicians. This counselling office offers information and advice concerning parapsychology in the form of a social service that works toward a professionally and scientifically well-grounded education in the ever-expanding esoteric market, the ‘life aid’ scene, and the alternative healing methods offered there.

The education of young people, who often deal uncritically with occultisms and practices of magic, is an additional focal point of the work of the PCO. It is open not only to concerned individuals, but also schools, educational and other psychosocial advisory boards. The PCO cooperates with clinical psychologists, physicians, psychotherapists, psychiatric institutions and psychosomatic hospitals, but also with schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutions throughout Germany.

Currently, about 4,000 requests for advice and information are handled and answered each year. In

addition, more than 100 lectures and other events per year are organized to disseminate public information. All this has long been straining, and actually exceeding, the available personal capacities (of two full-time and two part-time positions). But it also demonstrates the enormous demand and the relevance of this kind of public service.

The variety of offers available on the ‘psycho market’ pertaining to ‘borderline sciences’, ‘parapsychology’, ‘esotericism/New Age’, and ‘spirituality’ has not failed to influence and affect everyday life. However, both the mass media and various websites on the worldwide web convey superficial, inadequate and often false information regarding these subjects. This creates both unfounded anxieties and exaggerated hopes in many individuals with exceptional experiences. Although often denied, magical and mythical ideas can have a considerable practical impact on everyday life.

The term ‘parapsychology’ (Bauer & Lucadou, 1988) was introduced by philosopher-psychologist Max Dessoir (1889) as a scientifically neutral term and dedicated to the exploration of unusual and extraordinary phenomena (generally known as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and hauntings or poltergeist phenomena – recurrent spontaneous psycho-kinesis (RSPK)). ‘Poltergeist phenomena’ is a folkloristic term which is used by people concerned to describe their experiences. The term RSPK is a concept which was developed in parapsychology to designate poltergeist phenomena. Meanwhile, the term ‘parapsychology’ has been largely devalued by all sorts of quacks and charlatans who claim to be ‘parapsychologists’.

At the same time a recent representative survey verified that 75% of Germans have already had extraordinary personal experiences (Schetsche & Schmied-Knittel, 2003), classified as paranormal, once or several times, and therefore believe that such anomalies are likely to be real. This makes plausible the increasing economic trend for self-styled ‘consultants’, ‘magicians’ and ‘clairvoyants’.

While the specialized knowledge of the PCO is sometimes difficult to access, the public is inundated by an unwieldy mass of uncritical popular literature that claims to be giving all the relevant answers. In this respect, inquiries regarding life aid and alternative healing methods, ‘New Age therapies’ and so-called ‘spiritual healing’ are very prominent in our counselling practice. With increasing frequency, people turning to us complain about unforeseen side effects of such alternative methods (Bender, 1979, Lucadou, 1992, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2010a).

Based on the results of the latest field work, an advice-giving and counselling concept has been developed that strives to be ‘ideologically invariant’

and therefore can positively integrate the clients' personal belief systems into the treatment related to paranormal experiences. (Thus, for example, it would not make any sense to assure a convinced spiritualist that 'his ghosts' are supposed to be merely inner-psychological representations of cognitive structures. To avoid infelicitous developments the counsellor may well argue in 'spiritualistic' terms and tell a concerned individual that 'ghosts' presumably don't like being spied on all the time).

In view of the increasingly critical attitude in many social classes towards the blessings of science on the one hand and the excesses of alternative world views and life styles in the course of trendy New Age orientations on the other, a 'flexible response' seems to be much more recommendable and successful than intervention strategies that only strive to re-install ruling paradigms.

One major task of the advice-giving strategies of the PCO is the translation of the 'system-theoretical structure' and (the associated) normal psychological processes into the language of the person concerned. This enables the latter to understand otherwise seemingly inexplicable occurrences in their own terms and from their own point of view and, eventually, to help themselves. At the same time, it is quite possible to provide some practical advice, e.g. on how to make apparitions disappear or how to handle spiritualistic messages.

Clear statements can also be made, for instance, with regard to the claims of specific dealers on the esoteric market who suggest they are offering reliable techniques for prophesying or extrasensory perception. Scientific research has demonstrated the inherent spontaneity and the dynamic character of such experiences. Despite the bad image the term 'parapsychology' has acquired, the name 'Parapsychological Counselling Office' was deliberately chosen for the services. Since exceptional personal experiences are usually associated with parapsychology, the PCO is often approached with greater trust than other psycho-social counselling offices. The experiences of recent years show this very clearly. This 'trust in advance' is often expressed in personal dialogues as well as in the opening sections of many letters received. Thus, in 2003, a female client wrote: 'You surely will have heard about so many unusual things, that I can describe frankly my own strange experiences.'

The PCO is considered a scientific service unit. In that capacity it compares well with the established consumer consulting institutions that critically compare positive effects and risks associated with offers on the psycho-religious and ideological markets. If possible, the effects, efficiency, risks and side effects of such offers are analysed and the resulting scientific knowledge evaluated.

Between 1989 and 2003, some 2,500 written inquiries, requests and reports were received by the PCO. They were categorized and filed. In addition, there are about 3,000 inquiries per year that are made in person or by phone. The entire case collection was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively by Frauke Zahradnik. The analysis shows that reports of paranormal experiences follow certain narrative structures (Zahradnik, 2007, Zahradnik & Lucadou, 2008, 2012).

The main difference between the PCO collection and other comparable collections of unusual experiences is in the fact that individuals approaching the PCO are sending their reports and material spontaneously and are not specifically asked to do so, as is the case with many other case collections. Since, in the public perception, the concept of parapsychology is not clearly defined, the letters received essentially mirror a great variety of different ideas, wishes, interest, concerns and expectations that are to be found in the population at large. These reports also mirror many ideas that the mass media present as unusual as well as various traditional ideas (also of other cultural backgrounds) and beliefs prevalent in the general population.

Paranormal experiences

Most reporters do not use the parapsychological concepts such as telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, psychokinesis or telekinesis. In spite of the fact that these notions are generally in use, those who use them, however, are not aware of the fact that these terms have no explaining character; they are merely preliminary categorizations which have been invented as working hypotheses for psychological research. They all contain the underlying model that a kind of signal or information or energy can be transported from one person to another person or object by an unknown mechanism. The experimental results of recent research in parapsychology show indeed that these concepts are questionable. Zahradnik showed in her study that the reports can be categorized by 17 clusters, which is far more than the four parapsychological concepts. In a recent study of about 300 e-mails (Wald, 2010, 2011), 12 different main subjects could be discerned. Fig. 2 shows the frequency of these subjects.

The scope of this paper is not to repeat all these different categories in detail, but to reflect the embedding of these experiences or reports in their particular cultural context, which can be demonstrated in the following examples.

Example 1:

[...] since the age of 6 (today, I'm 25) I have constantly precognitive dreams and *déjà vu*.

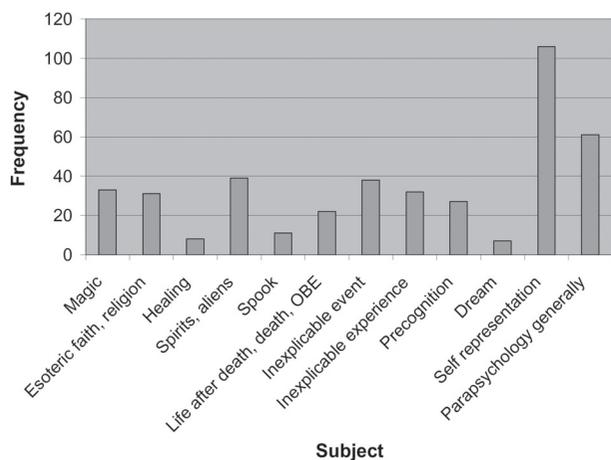


Fig. 2. Frequency of subjects in the sample (N = 297). OBE: Out of Body Experience.

It even goes as far as I can tell someone, who has a close relationship to me, how he or she is sitting in the room while simply talking to them on the phone. Furthermore I saw ghosts 'appearing' which were warning me several times (mould behind the cot) [...] My question is: what do you think could I do? Should I talk about my experiences with my fellow men or should I prefer to keep silent?

Example 2:

Recently, I had an experience which frightened me a lot. I saw a ghost. He was standing in the hallway, looking like a lumberjack. He had red eyes and carrying an axe in his right hand. He was standing there for about 20 minutes and then disappeared again. After I lit some sacred candles.

Should I have fear?

However, there are also reports which do not show a specific cultural context. They can be regarded as experiences which reflect a so-called anthropological constant: near-death experiences (regarded by most researchers as culturally independent, see Knoblauch, 1999; Knoblauch & Soeffner, 1999), 'old-hag' syndrome (sleep paralysis) (Hufford, 1982), apparitions of the deceased, hallucinations, hearing voices, lucid dreaming, out-of-body experiences, altered states of consciousness, poltergeist activity (RSPK), telepathy, premonition, and clairvoyance. The interpretation of these experiences, however, can depend on the cultural context. Culturally independent experiences are mostly spontaneous and unexpected.

Externally induced experiences form a second category. They show a strong interrelationship between the experience and the cultural context.

The main experiences are reported as bewitchment and malediction. In these cases one gets the impression that the structure and the dynamics reflect an anthropological constant whereas the specific manifestation depends strongly on the cultural context.

Example 3:

About 6 years ago I broke up with my ex-wife, because I started a new relationship with another woman. My ex-wife made several scenes caused by jealousy, but didn't accomplish anything. The problem is that she always occupied herself with spiritualistic séances. A friend of mine then told me that she had fabricated two voodoo dolls and buried them in the cemetery. But I cannot confess whether that's really true or not. But I cannot exclude it completely because she always dealt with such things. It started with my leg. I twisted my ankle in a way that ruined it, so that I had to pass a couple of months in the hospital. Until now I am incapacitated for work and bearing up against pain, even though the accident happened already four years ago. And no doctor can find any explanation. Thus I'm suffering financially. In the past I worked as a successful freelancer but now I live on social security with no prospects of amelioration. Furthermore we perceive a permanent knocking in our apartment and doors open automatically even though no one is there. One evening I suddenly felt a terrible pain in my leg. The other day I had a femoral fissure, so my leg was damaged once again. I have a little 3-year-old son, with whom we just have bad luck. We went to the psychologist with him because of his aggressive behaviour and we cannot cope with this. I could tell you many other stories, apparently endless [...] As wretched as now I never felt before.

A third category can be seen in culturally dependent experiences that are provoked most by certain exercises such as praying, meditation, psychomotoric automatism, mediumship, channelling, precognition, professional paragnostes, healers and shamans. It is generally assumed that these individuals can use spontaneous paranormal experiences deliberately to reach certain aims. To obtain these aims certain techniques are necessary and these techniques are of course strongly culture dependent, e.g. catholic mass, shamanistic ritual or mediumistic reading. Since the vast expansion of different religious and esoteric cults in western society during the last 40 years, individuals have to cope with certain problems stimulated by these experiences, which traditionally were described as mental disturbances or even psychiatric illnesses, but which are now called spiritual crisis.

Example 4:

Approximately at the age of 16 I started to meditate now and then, while listening to music or just anywhere outside, but without really being aware of it. One night, I was really exhausted and wanted to sleep. It was full moon and I lay on my back in my bed, in front of my window. Via headphones I listened to a song that suited me very well. I was deeply relaxed, meditated and tried to transmigrate with my soul out of my body. I just imagined seeing myself from above. And I got exactly what I visualized. I saw myself from above, flashing out in short pictures, without any consciousness of my body. Then I looked towards the window, I saw my body lying in the bed. I flew with my soul through the window, locating the moon. At the peak of the song the melody seemed to melt together with a kind of angel melody and I was like pressed through a tunnel in the direction to the full moon. It felt as if I would be pressed together and then released again as soon as I reached the moon. I saw a bright, yellow light in the centre of the moon and as I was really close to it, it felt as if I was about to die. I couldn't bear it because the feeling was so overwhelming and I was afraid that I could really fly away from this earth, be dead or whatever would wait there. So I agitated and the hallucination ended. For a couple of minutes I still felt kind of lost to the world [...] Since then, my own perception changed completely. I have the impression that things in nature, like plants or trees, can talk to me or look at me. I dream a lot of different things and got very sensitive. I can realize how others are feeling immediately by looking at them or talking to them. I can identify this by listening to their voice. Even the way of thinking has changed completely. There are less thoughts coming up into my mind and I can influence them in a different way.

Spiritual crisis

From the point of view of the present reductionistic neurochemical paradigm it seems plausible to regard religious and spiritual experiences as a special kind of psychopathology. And indeed the classificational schemes such as the World Health Organization's ICD-10 and American Psychiatric Association's DSM-IV (2000) contain such disorders as ICD-10F 44.3 (trance and possession disorders). In contrast, individuals affected by such experiences have the impression that they are misunderstood and psychiatrized. And in fact the usual treatment with neuroleptics is ineffective (Neppe, 1989). Earlier categorizations such as mediumistic psychosis or

hysteria on the other hand seem to be too specific and seem also to overestimate the psychiatric aspect and to underestimate the cultural context. A special form of spiritual crises consists in conversion experiences, which are mainly considered as a mental disorder by the social group, but not by the affected individuals themselves. Unfortunately the loss of insight into the illness is one of the main criteria for schizophrenia, which is why there is a high risk of misdiagnosis in such cases.

Until a short time ago even the characteristic change in philosophy (and attitude) of life after a near-death experience has been regarded as mental disturbance. It is clear that conversion experiences indicate a change from one cultural context to another. One might think that this is a purely intellectual matter. In most cases, however, these experiences are accompanied by extremely strong physical experiences and sensations and not vice versa. This is a strong indication that top-down processes play an important role which again is in contrast to the reductionist neurochemical paradigm, which may fit in the case of near-death experiences (in the sense of a bottom-up process). Here it is argued that neurophysiological processes and cognitive and religious belief systems are not only independent dimensions and continua in which all possible combinations can occur, but are complementary observables in the sense of generalized quantum theory (GQT, see below). Therefore it is possible that healthy individuals can suffer from spiritual crisis as well as schizophrenic individuals.

It is also true that individuals suffering from paranoia can actually experience real synchronistic events in the sense of Jung, but with increasing paranoia such events become rarer due to the increasing rigidity of the paranoid disturbance. From many cases the impression emerges that paranoid individuals lose the ability to dissociate, which seems to be one of the prerequisites of paranormal and creative experiences.

Galuska (2003) describes spiritual crises in detail. Spiritual crises are often associated with so-called energetic phenomena. The individuals feel external or internal energies flowing through their body, often called kundalini phenomena. Another form of spiritual crisis resembles very strong depression. This is described as the 'dark night of the soul' (Kreuz [John of the Cross], 1995). Very often spiritual crises are accompanied by paranormal phenomena such as RSPK, but they are not in the focus of interest and occur more or less sporadically.

Theoretical models – GQT and MPI

Due to the fact that paranormal experiences and spiritual crisis are still not accepted in mainstream

psychology and psychiatry, most reports on these subjects remain at a phenomenological level and try to make it clear that these experiences are genuine experiences and should not be mixed up with pathological disorders as we have discussed above. One should be aware, however, that any categorization already contains implicit theoretical assumptions or models which may be inadequate and therefore distort future investigation. For instance, the use of the term 'energy' or 'energetic phenomena' is just such a problem, or the term 'transpersonal' in the sense that 'a higher spiritual level' or 'entity' could be 'contacted'. In both cases it is assumed that a causal or quasi-causal 'influence', from an entity or person or 'state', on an individual can be established. From the recent results of parapsychological research, however, this assumption is highly questionable. Therefore it seems to be useful to make those implicit assumptions explicit and to search for theoretical models which fit with the phenomenology of this type of experience.

There are at least two candidates of theoretical models which start from a very fundamental level and which can also be applied in normal psychology. They are the model of pragmatic information (MPI) and generalized quantum theory (GQT). Neither model is completely independent and can be united, and describe somewhat different aspects of the matter.

The initial idea of GQT was published by one of the authors of this paper in 1974 (Lucadou, 1974, 1991a). A mathematical formulation of GQT was given by Hartmann Römer, Harald Atmanspacher and Harald Walach in 2002 (Atmanspacher et al., 2002; Filk & Römer, 2010; Walach & Römer, 2000). The most important aspect of the MPI (Lucadou, 1984, 1987, 1995a,b, 1998, 2001; Kornwachs & Lucadou, 1985) is the so-called Non-Transmission (NT) axiom (Lucadou et al., 2007). It assumes that the origin of psi-phenomena are not signals, but entanglement correlations which are created by the 'meaning' (pragmatic information) of the situation. Further MPI and GQT assume that these entanglement correlations cannot be used as signal transfers or causal influences. This axiom leads to a naturalistic explanation of the decline effect and the displacement effect (Lucadou, 1983, 1989, 2000b, 2001) and to the temporal development of RSPK phenomena (Lucadou & Zahradnik, 2004). In a recent paper (Lucadou et al., 2007) it is argued that the MPI is a subclass of GQT.

The very basic assumption of this model says that any description of nature must have a structure, which is isomorphic to the axiomatic structure of quantum theory. However, this does not necessarily imply that we can transpose without further assumptions the detailed structure of a special quantum physical system to another field as is done in some reductionistic

models (Hameroff, 1994; Walker, 1975, 1979). But even from the reductionistic point of view there are several arguments for GQT. The simplest would be that QT is the most successful basic description language of natural systems and hitherto no indications were found that the axioms of QT have failed. Further, they hold from microscopic to macroscopic and even cosmological dimensions, and also to any sort of physical observables regardless of whatever specialist field is considered (e.g. electromagnetism, elementary particles, solid state physics). Furthermore it can be shown that these axioms describe in a very general way how information under the categories of space and time can be obtained from any system when the interaction of the 'measurement process' cannot be neglected.

The basic assumption of GQT is that pairs of observables of a system may show incompatibility or 'complementarity', for example the MPI assumes that structure, S, and function, F, of a system are complementary observables. Complementarity means that we cannot measure S and F simultaneously. To any biologist who wants to investigate the behaviour (function) or the anatomy (structure) of an animal, this statement sounds trivial.

The main concepts of the MPI can be formulated into two main laws

First law of the MPI: Paranormal phenomena reflect entanglement correlations in psychophysical, self-organizing, organizationally closed systems, which are induced by the pragmatic information, which creates the system.

The concept of pragmatic information has been developed to quantify the meaning of given information. It is assumed that the (potential) action that meaningful information exerts on a system can be used for such quantification. von Weizsäcker (1974) proposed that pragmatic information could be written as a product of two observables which he called 'Erstmaligkeit', E (novelty), and 'Bestätigung', B (confirmation):

$$I = E \times B \quad (1)$$

This approach takes into account that each piece of meaningful information must contain a certain pre-structure (confirmation) – for instance, one's native language – in order to be understood by the (receiving) system but also something new in order to produce a change in the receiving system. For instance, a joke in a foreign language which you do not understand would not cause you to laugh (no confirmation), and a joke you heard before would not do so either (no novelty).

The model further assumes that there exists a minimum amount of pragmatic information (or action)

which has to be exchanged if an informational exchange (measurement) with another system takes place. This is simply another formulation of the inevitable interaction in a measurement or the complementarity of E and B. E and B describe primarily the output of the system or its ‘user surface’. To describe internal aspects of the system the observables autonomy, A, and reliability, R, are used.

$$I = A \times R \quad (2)$$

Thus it becomes necessary to specify the boundaries of a system.

The exo- endo- distinction: It is important to consider whether a paranormal phenomenon is described from the point of view of the experiencing person or the external observers (the NT axiom is only valid for the latter, see below). Further important new concepts along these lines are the terms ‘pseudo-signal’ (Lucadou, 1998) and ‘pseudo-machine’ (Lucadou, 2002).

For this purpose the concept of ‘organizational closure’ was introduced by Maturana and Varela. Varela (1981) states: ‘An organizationally closed unity is defined as a composite unity by a network of interactions of components that (i) through their interactions recursively generate the network of interactions that produce them, and (ii) realize the network as a unity in the space in which the components exist by constituting and specifying the unity’s boundaries as a cleavage from the background.’ It is interesting to remark that the concept of organizational closure makes no sense from inside the (sub-)system. A necessary condition of organizational closure is the self-organization of the system.

Anomalous phenomena contain mainly novelty E. In this case, we have to start with Equation 1, which describes the system from ‘outside’. The complementary concepts ‘autonomy’ A and ‘reliability’ R describe the system ‘from inside’. Thus, the dynamics of the phenomena are described as the dynamics of pragmatic information within a hierarchically nested system, which is created by the experiencing individuals involved and by the reaction of the surrounding society. This leads to Equation 3:

$$I = R \times A = B \times E \quad (3)$$

In the next section it will be shown how Equation 3 can be applied in practice.

The second law of the MPI: Any attempt to use a non-local correlation as a signal transfer makes the non-local correlation vanish or change or the effect changes to other variables. This limiting principle is a result of the non-transmission (NT) axiom (Lucadou et al., 2007). Novelty and confirmation of paranormal effects are limited by the pragmatic

information involved. Effect size and quality of documentation of the phenomena are limited by the entanglement which produces them.

This means that natural systems themselves may produce larger fluctuations if they are not observed. (In quantum physics this is known as the quantum Zeno effect: ‘A watched pot never boils.’) It is a fundamental assumption of the model of pragmatic information that observation and also non-observation are different aspects of the system. This idea can also be found in folkloristic reports that spooky events seem to happen in unobserved places, for instance, abandoned houses crumble more rapidly than inhabited ones.

The question, however, remains why spontaneous paranormal experiences seem to be much more impressive and larger than the very small (yet highly significant) deviations which can be obtained in experiments (Lucadou, 2010b).

The concept of the Hausdorff dimension of paranormal events and developments: This concept (Lucadou, 2000a) explains why macro-phenomena in parapsychology are so large in comparison with experimental effect-sizes (micro-PK), which are extremely small. It takes into account that paranormal experiences are embedded in ‘live events’, which have their ‘history’, whereas experimental trials do not show temporal correlations to previous and later events – simply due to the fact that pure random events are used as targets.

Spiritual relevance of paranormal experiences

In the everyday practice of the PCO we can use these theoretical models with great success to help individuals with spontaneous paranormal experiences. At the PCO we developed a number of strategies to cope with disturbing paranormal experiences, such as ‘possession’ or ‘bewitchment’, ‘precognitive dreams’, and ‘poltergeist phenomena’ (RSPK) (Bender, 1974; Lucadou, 1991b, 2003b, 2010a; Lucadou & Zahradnik, 2005, 2012).

Thus the model of pragmatic information (MPI) leads to several predictions concerning RSPK phenomena (Lucadou & Zahradnik, 2004). The first prediction is that RSPK phenomena show two clusters of phenomena, which can be considered as structural and functional anomalous RSPK phenomena. The second prediction is that the development of RSPK cases contains four phases (surprise, displacement, decline and suppression). The third prediction is that observers can control the RSPK activity by their observation or documentation. This is the result of a kind of ‘uncertainty relation’ of the MPI, which says that the effect-size of phenomena is limited by the quality of their documentation. This

also holds for so-called sitter-group experiments. In a single case it was possible to demonstrate that the system theoretical approach of the MPI leads to different predictions than the usual psychological interpretation of the elusiveness of PK phenomena. The fourth prediction is that we have to expect two types of RSPK cases, which we called active and passive. The concepts describe how the individuals involved cope with the RSPK phenomena.

Since RSPK phenomena thrive on the attention given to them, the first step out of this dilemma is to have the afflicted person learn to look more objectively or dispassionately at the phenomena; not to ignore or fight against the RSPK but not to react with fear. We call this method 'starving out'. Take note of the facts, but even more important, stay indifferent. This is certainly more easily said than done. A change of one's inner attitude is helpful.

Of course, coping strategies include system control. System control describes how an organizational closed system controls itself by interaction with the environment. An active-focus person may even be over-controlling his or her environment, which leads to macroscopic random fluctuations i.e. RSPK phenomena. From this point of view it could be assumed that in a case of depression the person loses more and more control of the organizational closed environment, which shows up in fluctuations within this environment. This means that the integrative power, which holds the whole system together, cannot suppress individual fluctuations within the system which may destroy the system. In this case it is expected that RSPK occurs only in a certain period before the whole phenomenon dies out.

In clinical terms, active RSPK can be considered as a phenomenon of dissociation whilst passive RSPK phenomena show the phenomena of depression.

The standard advice for those concerned is to regard the phenomena as an interested scientist would, as an unusual phenomenon of nature which is to be documented as thoroughly as possible. This can be done by means of a so-called 'RSPK phenomena diary'. Each time an unusual phenomenon occurs the person has to write down: (i) the date and time, (ii) the situation, locality and witnesses, (iii) a description of the phenomenon, and (iv) the first thing the observer thought of while observing or experiencing the phenomenon – 'free association'. The strangest or absurdest thought could be important.

Since RSPK usually indicates problems or grievances not noticed by people at the time, it is necessary to think of a few helpful constructions to find out something about the 'message'. Here the diary is immensely helpful. Both time structures and thoughts connected with occurrences can be important indicators for the mental and psychological conditions which may be revealed by RSPK.

Unexpected or unusual and apparently unclassifiable experiences often cause an affective shock. They leave those affected with arising doubts about their mental health. It is obvious that individuals who rely too much on familiar reality constructs and describe themselves as 'realistic' and do not have the slightest doubt about their own perception, often respond with extreme fear. Individuals who are open to the unexpected and possess a healthy self-criticism may seem able to deal more adequately with such situations.

For many individuals, the experienced collapse of reality creates a barely tolerable fear of losing control. This means that at any time unthinkable events could happen without their being able to react appropriately. In extreme cases it can lead to a loss of basic trust. They may fall into a kind of lethargy, depression, or dissociation. But even less extreme reactions usually result in an 'occult reorientation' that is often mistaken by outsiders as a loss of reality. In this case the individual tries to design a completely new reality construct which coincides with his or her experiences. For instance it is assumed that ghosts actually exist and that 'behind the reality' there might exist a second 'subtle world' (Prince, 1975). Since the alternative reality constructs offered usually have fundamental character, there occurs a 'generalization' of the problem. Not only is the situation experienced abnormal, but all areas of life and even the past are re-interpreted and re-evaluated.

When the reality concepts used are inadequate, there is a danger of misunderstanding the actual causal relationships. This is called the 'masking effect' (Lucadou, 1994). In RSPK cases, it is very often assumed that a neighbour is causing the phenomena by means of 'electronic devices', but – depending on the system – 'demons' or 'devils' could also have a hand in it.

However, it is possible that the masking of the underlying cause may also have a relieving and even therapeutic effect. Some people seem to prefer 'the devil' to be behind it, which in some way represents an appreciation rather than to have to grapple with everyday and often mundane life problems. In clinical psychology such 'covering' methods are well known. The method becomes problematic, however, if the masking creates new problems, for example if a feeling of 'externality' is created ('locus of control', Rotter, 1966). Externality is often associated with the feeling of powerlessness, oppression and depression. One's own destiny is regarded as unalterable; each personal initiative gives way to an oppressive sense of futility.

It is obvious that a clear assignment of subjective experience that seems to contradict the presently accepted natural sciences, scientific paradigms to the field of parapsychology or to psychosocial pathology, can be very difficult in individual cases and requires

long professional experience. Categories that are included in the DSM-IV classification listed are of little use in this regard. Nevertheless, one can say that paranormal phenomena occur spontaneously and rarely; psychopathological experiences, in contrast, are characterized by their peculiar persistence.

Example 5:

After the death of my husband in May [...] some strange or weird things happened to me that I could not explain until now [...] My husband passed away on the [...] at [...] At this time, the clock stopped, although it was wound up. In the evening, the door to the living room opened on its own. And there was no ventilation. At night it clattered as if a drinking glass had fallen down. But as I went there to have a look, everything seemed ok.

From this description it is clear that the idea of a ghost is something like a 'user surface' or a 'garment'. The poltergeist as an autonomous self-organizing system appears to the 'victim' as the work of a person, a 'spirit' or 'ghost'. So this is basically an anthropomorphism and tangibility of complex autonomous self-organizing processes.

In this context 'complexity reduction' plays an important role. It is certainly not by chance that occult practices, for example, the use of divination pendulums or Ouija-boards are so attractive to young people because it only takes a pendulum to know whether something is good or bad, or you just need an overturned glass to deal with 'the highest powers of the universe' or to get in contact with the spirits of deceased authorities.

In a reasonable intervention process it is important to 'translate' the system-theoretical structure of paranormal and (related) normal psychological processes into the language of those concerned in order to give them the opportunity to understand the events from their own point of view and finally to help themselves. It may well involve practical advice, for example how poltergeist phenomena can be made to disappear or how to deal with 'spiritualistic messages'. It is not absolutely necessary to dissuade individuals from their 'ghost' idea, because in most cases they may get the impression that one is trying to remove their experience. But it is absolutely necessary to know the characteristics of the 'ghosts' (of self-organizing psycho-physical systems), if one really wants to help people.

Fear of ghosts is thus the first step to a therapeutic intervention, because it contains the approach of naming and therefore the description of treatment in the core. The nameless overwhelming fear of the numinous does not offer this approach; it is structureless and offers no 'user interface'.

Declaration of interest: The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

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