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Paranormal beliefs, schizotypy, and thinking styles among teachers and future teachers

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Abstract

This study examines the psychological correlates of paranormal beliefs among teachers and teachers in training. Teachers are a population of special interest because they may transmit paranormal beliefs to their students. Teacher paranormal beliefs were found to be correlated with cognitive perceptual and disorganized schizotypal thinking and intuitive thinking styles. The overall pattern of the correlations suggests that intuitive thinking style and schizotypal thinking contribute independently to paranormal belief. This study confirms the findings of [Wolfradt, Oubaid, Straube, Bischoff, and Mischo \(1999\)](#) of a statistically significant difference in paranormal belief between thinking style groups, although the effect size was small.

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1. Introduction

Is belief in paranormal phenomena linked to the psychological traits of the individual believer or is the widespread acceptance of these ideas the result of educational failure?

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There is clear evidence connecting paranormal belief to individual psychological differences (see, Irwin, 1993; Shermer, 2003; Vyse, 1997; Zusne & Jones, 1989; for useful reviews). Differences that have been associated with paranormal beliefs or experiences include, thinking style (Wolfradt et al., 1999), schizotypal traits (Wolfradt et al., 1999), probability misjudgment (Blackmore & Troscianko, 1985; Brugger & Taylor, 2003; Musch & Ehrenberg, 2002; but see Blackmore, 1997), willingness to make identification from noisy stimuli (Blackmore & Moore, 1994), extraversion (Thalbourne, 1981), fantasy proneness (Barholomew, Basterfield, & Howard, 1991), and locus of control (Groth-Marnat & Pegden, 1998).

The evidence for the educational effects on paranormal belief is more ambiguous. Despite the increasing availability of science education, popular belief in the paranormal remains high (Ede, 2000). In a recent examination of Southern Focus Poll data, Rice (2003) found only 10.1% of the population could be labeled as skeptics; individuals who tend not to believe in either classical paranormal phenomena or traditional religious phenomena. Walker, Hoekstra, and Vogl (2002) in a study of 207 undergraduates found “no relationship between the level of science knowledge and skepticism regarding paranormal claims” (p. 26). Zusne and Jones (1989) surveyed 92 college students and found that 64.1% endorsed at least 10% of items on a list of magical beliefs. It is possible, however, that studies limited to college undergraduates may suffer from range restriction and not reflect the actual effects of education. Otis and Alcock (1982) studied 113 university students, 352 university faculties, and 251 volunteers from the general public. They found that professors were more skeptical of paranormal claims than students and that students were more skeptical than the general public. In addition, they found that among university professors, academic discipline was significantly related to skepticism, with English professors being the least skeptical over several belief categories.

Most studies of the educational effects of paranormal beliefs mention the possibility of self-selection as a confounding factor (e.g. Losh, Tavani, Njoroge, Wilke, & McAuley, 2003). It could be that more skeptical individuals choose more science courses rather than science courses inducing skepticism.

While most studies have focused on the effects of higher education on paranormal belief, it seems appropriate to ask why kindergarten through secondary education has had such a small effect on the level of belief. One avenue that has been relatively unexplored is the extent of paranormal beliefs among kindergarten through secondary teachers. Eve and Dunn (1990) have suggested “the possibility that high school teachers might be an important source of pseudoscience belief in the general population” (p. 13). Using a national random sample of biology and life science teachers they found that many of these teachers did hold pseudoscientific beliefs. Among their findings:

Twenty-seven percent of the teachers in our sample agreed that ‘The Bible is an authoritative and reliable source of information with respect to such scientific issues as the age of the earth and the origin of life’ (p. 14).

Forty-five percent agreed that ‘Adam and Eve were the first human beings and were created by God’ (p. 14).

Twenty-nine percent agreed that people can predict future events via psychic power (p. 15).

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