



Varieties of childhood maltreatment as predictors of adult paranormality and New Age Orientation



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the degree to which varieties of childhood maltreatment (in)directly predict adult paranormal and New Age worldviews. Mediation analyses were performed with maltreatment types serving as potential predictors, facets of fantasy proneness as potential mediators and aspects of adult paranormality (anomalous experiences, beliefs, abilities and fears) plus a general New Age Orientation as five separate criteria measures. Several hypotheses were (partially) supported. First, child sexual abuse directly predicted more self-reported anomalous experiences, with parental threats of rejection directly predicting fewer anomalous fears in adulthood. Second, indirect relationships between childhood neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and instrumental parentification emerged for all criteria except anomalous fears, with these relationships mediated by at least one facet of fantasy proneness; either vivid/realistic and/or make-believe fantasising. These findings are consistent with Irwin's (2009) *Psychodynamic Functions Hypothesis*; the notion that adult paranormality offers an adaptive, needs-serving mechanism for coping with sense of diminished control often stemming from childhood trauma. Contrary to Irwin's model, childhood physical abuse, emotional parentification and parental threats of both abandonment and punishment failed to predict any outcome measure either directly or via more pronounced fantasising. Theoretical implications, methodological issues and ideas for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

According to Irwin's (2009) *Psychodynamic Functions Hypothesis* (PFH) scientifically unaccepted beliefs (SUBs)¹ develop as a means of coping with a diminished sense of control often stemming from childhood trauma. Endorsement of, say, extrasensory perception engenders an illusory sense of control over people, objects and/or events. Such beliefs are seen as an unconsciously motivated, needs-serving, adaptive mechanism for alleviating feelings of vulnerability. Similar claims have been made about a general New Age Orientation (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001).

There is reasonable support for Irwin's PFH with self-reported paranormal experiences and/or beliefs linked to global measures of childhood trauma (e.g., Rogers, Qualter, & Phelps, 2007) as well as intrafamilial physical abuse (Irwin, 1992; Lawrence, Edwards, Barraclough, & Church, 1995; Perkins & Allen, 2006), sexual abuse

(Berkowski & MacDonald, 2014; Ross & Joshi, 1992), emotional abuse (Berkowski & MacDonald, 2014; Rabeyron & Watt, 2010), being raised by alcoholic (Irwin, 1994) or overly-authoritarian (Watt, Watson, & Wilson, 2007) parents and domestic instability (Lawrence et al., 1995).

Evidence for the PFH is however mixed. Lawrence et al. (1995) found no relationship between child sexual abuse and adult paranormal belief or experiences. Berkowski and MacDonald (2014) report a similar lack of correlation between physical abuse and all seven dimensions of Tobacyk's (2004) *Revised Paranormal Belief Scale*. Thus, the extent to which varieties of childhood trauma are associated with adult paranormality remains unclear. Other types of child maltreatment such as parentification and parental threats also need testing within the PFH framework. The present study addresses these issues.

1.1. Parentification

Parentification represents a role-reversal in the child–parent relationship of which two types exist. Instrumental parentification manifests as the child taking care of everyday household duties (e.g., cooking, cleaning) as an adaptive response to temporary parental absence or incapacity. In contrast, emotional parentification manifests as the child being coerced or manipulated into being responsible for the physical, psychosocial and emotional well-being of his/her parent(s), sibling(s) or family dynamics (e.g., being the peace-maker in

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¹ For current purposes the term “scientifically unaccepted beliefs” refers to an individual's paranormality (i.e. belief in, reported experiences of, claimed abilities for and/or fears of anomalous phenomena; cf. Gallagher et al., 1994) plus New Age orientation (i.e. endorsement of non-theistic spirituality, Eastern philosophy, humanistic psychology, alternative medicine, esotericism and metaphysics; cf. Farias & Granqvist, 2007).

times of family crisis). Only emotional parentification is harmful to children (Hooper, 2007).

Emotional parentification is not uncommon and has its own unique aetiology and noticeably, encompasses three of the four defining characteristics of trauma, namely a perceived loss of control, feelings of being overwhelmed and long-term negative consequences. Whilst not always unexpected (the fourth defining characteristic of trauma) parentification can occur following, say, the sudden death of a parent (Byng-Hall, 2008; Hooper, 2007). Given Irwin's PFH it would be reasonable to expect emotional (but not instrumental) parentification to predict SUBs. Consistent with this view is evidence that New Age followers reported more child–parent role-reversal than non-New Agers (Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg, & Hagekull, 2007).

1.2. Parental threat

By undermining a child's sense of domestic security parental threat is another potential predictor of adult paranormality. Indirect support for this claim comes from evidence that New-Agers also report more parental rejection (Granqvist et al., 2007) with paranormal believers having more authoritarian parents (Watt et al., 2007).

1.3. Fantasy proneness

Several studies suggest fantasy proneness is a key mediating variable in the childhood trauma–adult paranormality relationship (e.g. Berkowski & MacDonald, 2014, Lawrence et al., 1995, Rogers et al., 2007). In line with the PFH it seems prolonged and/or excessive fantasising is employed as a way of distracting from (avoidantly coping with) the aftermath of childhood maltreatment.

To date, no studies have examined the extent to which different facets of fantasy proneness serve as mediators in the PFH. Instead commonly used measures of fantasy such as the *Creative Experiences Questionnaire* (CEQ; Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Muris, 2001) are treated as unidimensional (e.g. Berkowski & MacDonald, 2014, Rogers et al., 2007). According to Sánchez-Bernardos and Avia (2004) the CEQ comprises three distinct dimensions namely (a) vivid/realistic, (b) escapist and (c) make-believe fantasising. Given previous links between paranormal belief and avoidant coping (Callaghan & Irwin, 2003; Rogers, Qualter, Phelps, & Gardner, 2006) it is reasonable to expect escapist fantasising to be the strongest predictor of SUBs. However, given the content of the three CEQ subscales vivid/realistic and make-believe fantasising seem more applicable to the PFH².

1.4. Study overview & hypotheses

The current study extends previous work by examining the extent to which recalled experiences of childhood maltreatment (i.e. parental neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, parentification and threats of rejection, abandonment and punishment) predict SUBs (i.e. reported anomalous experiences, beliefs, abilities and fears plus a general New Age Orientation). In line with Irwin's PFH, the extent to which these predictive relationships are mediated by separate facets of fantasy proneness (i.e. vivid/realistic, escapist and make-believe fantasising) is also investigated. The following general hypotheses are forwarded.

H1. all forms of childhood maltreatment will be direct predictors of more pronounced SUBs (all aspects).

H2. more severe forms of child maltreatment (e.g., emotional over-instrumental parentification; abusive acts rather than threats) will be stronger predictors of SUBs than arguably “lesser” forms of maltreatment.

H3. all forms of childhood maltreatment will predict stronger SUBs indirectly via the mediating impact of heightened fantasy proneness.

H4. vivid/realistic and make-believe fantasising will be stronger mediators of all predictor–criteria relationships than will escapist fantasising.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Of 250 individuals sampled 226 returned usable questionnaires, a response rate of 90.4%. The sample had an equal gender split (50.9% female) with respondents aged 19 to 92 years ($M = 39.0$ years; $SD = 16.3$ years). Most were of Caucasian ethnicity (82.4%) and either employed (55.8%), in full-time education (18.0%) or retired (12.9%). Around a quarter were qualified to at least undergraduate degree or equivalent (22.2%).

2.2. Materials

The following psychometrically sound measures were included in the order presented here or, for counterbalancing purposes, in reversed order (except for demographics). All (sub)scales were rated from 1 ‘never/strongly disagree’ to 5 ‘always/strongly agree’.

The *Child Abuse & Trauma Scale* (CATS; Kent & Waller, 1998) is a 38 item scale assessing recalled experiences of parental neglect plus physical, sexual and emotional abuse in childhood.

The *Parental Threat Inventory—Revised* (PTI—R; Scher, Stein, Ingram, Malcarne, & McQuaid, 2002) is a 17 item retrospective measure of maternal/paternal threats of rejection, abandonment and physical punishment. For cross-measure comparability maternal and paternal scores were combined to form three “parental” threat subscales.

The *Parentification Questionnaire* (PQ; Hooper & Wallace, 2009) is a 21 item retrospective measure assessing emotional and instrumental parentification plus the perceived fairness of parentification in childhood.

Fantasy proneness was examined via the *Creative Experiences Questionnaire* (CEQ; Merckelbach et al., 2001), a 25 item measure of vivid/realistic, escapist and make-believe fantasising (Sánchez-Bernardos & Avia, 2004). Four CEQ items that referenced paranormal or religious phenomena were removed to avoid cross-scale contamination.

Adult paranormality was examined via the *Anomalous Experiences Inventory* (AEI; Gallagher, Kumar, & Pekula, 1994), a 63 item measure assessing reported experiences of, belief in, claimed abilities for and fears about various paranormal phenomena. A fifth AEI subscale exploring drug and alcohol use was omitted.

This was investigated using the *New Age Orientation Scale* (NAOS; Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001), a 22 item unidimensional measure of people's endorsement of various New Age concepts as outlined in footnote 1.

Finally, respondents indicated their gender, age, ethnicity (16 categories), occupational status (12 categories) and general level of qualification (from 1 ‘none’ to 5 ‘postgraduate degree/professional’).

2.3. Procedure

Members of the UK public were recruited opportunistically from businesses (e.g. corporate coffee shops) in various towns/cities (e.g., Accrington, Blackburn, Preston) within North-West England during the Autumn of 2013. Volunteers were handed a questionnaire and asked to answer all questions as quickly and honestly as possible without conferring. No time limit or financial incentives were given. A detachable debrief sheet was supplied with completed questionnaires handed back to the researcher else returned via the post. British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines were adhered to.

² Items within the CEQ's escapist subscale focus on daydreaming.

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