Understanding the Unknown: A Thematic Analysis of Subjective Paranormal Experiences

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Abstract: This study investigated personal accounts of subjective paranormal experiences (SPEs). Ten UK-based participants took part in semi-structured interviews, where they discussed how alleged paranormal experiences made them feel, whether the narrated event(s) was unusual/strange, and what they believed caused the occurrence(s). Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis; a qualitative method that identifies patterns within data. Five central themes emerged (sensory experiences, you are not alone, distortion of reality, personal growth, and socio-cultural factors). Consideration of themes revealed an intricate, inextricable link between perception, interpretation and belief. Generally, SPEs were associated with the desire to comprehend the unknown and a reluctance to accept the uncertain. Findings provided important insights into the phenomenology of paranormal experience, suggested avenues for future research and were consistent with previous findings.

Keywords: subjective paranormal experiences, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, socio-cultural factors, reality distortion,

INTRODUCTION

This paper examined personal accounts of subjective paranormal experiences (SPEs). SPEs are exceptional, special/extraordinary experiences that individuals label as paranormal and consider beyond the comprehension of conventional science (Neppe, 1984; Palmer & Neppe, 2004; Persinger & Vaillant, 1985; Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005; Schouten, 1983, 1986; Simmonds-Moore, 2016). Irwin and Watt (2007) elucidate further, identifying paranormal experiences as "apparent

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anomalies of behaviour and experience that exist apart from currently known explanatory mechanisms that account for organism-environment and organism-organism information and influence flow" (Parapsychological Association, 1989, pp. 394-395; cited in Irwin & Watt, 2007, p. 1). Typically, SPEs are unusual experiences, which deviate from accepted explanations of reality (Cardeña, Lynn & Krippner, 2000; Irwin & Watt, 2007). Essentially, SPEs represent an individual's attribution of paranormal explanations to unusual or ambiguous events/phenomena (Lange & Houran, 1998, 2001).

In modern Western societies, the reporting of paranormal experiences is commonplace. Indeed, the typical incidence (derived from relevant studies) is around 50% of the population sampled. For example, Ross and Joshi (1992) (within a Canadian sample) found more than half of their participants reported at least one paranormal (extrasensory) experience. Studies across a range of populations, and at various times, have produced comparable results (e.g., America: McCready & Greeley, 1976; Britain: Blackmore, 1984; Latin American: Montanelli & Parra, 2008; multicultural: Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991). The Haraldsson and Houtkooper (1991) study is of particular interest because of its size and scope; they surveyed 18,607 participants from Europe and the United States. Pertinently, a high percentage of respondents (Europe, 46%; United States, 60%) reported at least one paranormal experience.

In both Europe and the United States, more women (vs. men) reported telepathy and contact with the dead; only a slight non-significant difference was evident for clairvoyance. Of those participants reporting paranormal related phenomena, a substantial percentage (Europe, 49%; United States, 47%) claimed just one experience type (only 8% and 11% respectively, reported all three categories of experience). Level of education and age were not associated with reporting of paranormal experiences.

Other studies have produced similar findings. Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005) at the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene (IGPP; Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health) conducted a survey of the German population (1,510 people) assessing paranormal attitudes and experiences. A high proportion of interviewees (three quarters) declared at least one paranormal experience. Of the incidents reported, half involved typical paranormal phenomena (prophetic dreams, apparitions, etc.). Younger people considered these more credible and noted more instances.

In the second phase of the project, telephone interviews (220 in total) were analysed thematically. The authors found that exceptional experiences were common. However, from the individual's perspective, occurrences were rare and profound (exceptional). Although experiences shared common characteristics, experients interpreted them differently. For

example, whilst déjà vu and apparitional experiences contained homogenous content, narratives were varied and diverse. Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005) explain this difference in terms of the range of potential explanations available to experients (i.e., religious, parapsychological, scientific and popular/lay beliefs).

Similarly, they observed that an individual's worldview (mental model of reality) might define their subjective interpretation of an experience. This could explain why orthodox accounts prevailed over transcendent explanations. Considering traditional and parapsychological understandings of psi experiences, paranormal denouements were rarer than expected. Overall, (within the IGPP study) when interviewees used every-day and pragmatic considerations to structure their interpretations, reference to supernatural powers or psychic abilities was infrequent. Interviews contained typically, the following important features: predominance of rational explanations for experience; seamless integration of the exceptional experience into personal biography; and aspects relevant to counselling/or clinical practice almost never an issue. The majority of interviewees classified experiences as anecdotal abnormal-normal incidents. For this reason, Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005) defined them as every-day miracles.

Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005) noted that communication of exceptional experiences shared a structural similarity. Specifically, communication usually occurred within a specific, secure mode of speech (shielded communication). This signalled that the narrator had entered into an area of privileged knowledge, involving the use of precautionary communications to reinforce the fact that experiences were veridical and authentic. Strategies involved identifying witnesses and experts, emphasizing personal credibility (rational attitude), and the consideration/elimination of alternative possibilities. The latter narrative device indicated that the adoption of a paranormal explanation arose only after discounting natural/conventional explanations. On this basis, Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005) concluded that personal convictions about the existence and effects of paranormal phenomena are an integral part of modern belief systems.

In this context, building on the work of Irwin, Dagnall and Drinkwater (2013), Lange and Houran (2001), reasoned that perception of paranormal experience is a complex process involving personal rationalising of perceptions via subjective interpretation. When experiencers define a paranormal event, they engage in two distinct processes, noting an inexplicable episode and labelling it as paranormal. Peculiarity/unusualness is not the determining factor because individuals often draw on mundane, conventional explanations when elucidating 'odd' occurrences. Additionally, instances arise where faulty attributional processes result in

the assigning of 'paranormality' to naturally occurring (non-paranormal) happenings. Indeed, Lange and Houran (1997) demonstrated that demand characteristics, the suggestion a theatre was haunted, could stimulate paranormal-type experiences.

Furthermore, once attached, labels can sustain paranormal experiences by initiating a reactive process, which effects subsequent perception/interpretation of additional ambiguous phenomena. In the case of paranormal attributions, this manifests as a self-reinforcing attentional bias, which facilitates the perception of flurries of further paranormal observations (Houran & Lange, 1996). Individual differences may also influence subjective interpretation of ambiguous stimuli. Houran and Lange (2001) outline a model where hauntings and poltergeist-type phenomena are explained in terms of a confluence involving fear of the paranormal, tolerance of ambiguity, and paranormal belief.

The Present Study

The present study extended the work of Drinkwater, Dagnall and Bate (2013), which used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to investigate comprehension of paranormal experiences. IPA is a qualitative methodological approach employed to understand participants' subjective realities, particularly their personal interpretation of lived experiences in relation to social, cultural and theoretical contexts (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008; Smith, 2004, 2011). The Drinkwater et al. (2013) study utilised IPA because the method emphasised participants' understanding of the nature, importance and personal impact of paranormal experiences (McLeod, 2001). The present study utilised Thematic Analysis (TA): a method for identifying, examining, and reporting themes/configurations within data sets. TA was employed because it allowed clear description, organisation and detailed interpretation of data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006), while emphasising modelling/patterning of meaning across participants, rather than dual focus methodology derived from unique characteristics of individual participants (the idiographic focus) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Exploration of four interviews produced three themes: distortion of reality (physical and mental fantasy of experience), you are not alone (third party sensory presence), and personal growth (effect on self). The emergent themes suggested an inseparable link between belief, behaviour and perception. Paranormal event comprehension and rationalization profoundly affected individuals; was accompanied by fear of the unknown, and an unwillingness to accept the uncertain. Accordingly, paranormal

labels/classifications contextualised experiences and reduced ontological insecurity (resolved ambiguity/uncertainty) (Houran & Lange, 2004).

Since IPA draws on individual, subjective reports and self-reflections, researcher preconceptions may influence analytical outcomes (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Chapman & Smith, 2002). Different analysts working with the same data often reach divergent conclusions. In some instances, this raises concerns about validity and reliability. To control for bias Smith and Osborn (2003) recommend that researchers distinguish between the participant's original account and the analyst's interpretation. In addition, researchers can seek validation from peers/colleagues. To address these issues, each of the four authors individually analysed the transcripts. Final themes emerged after discussion of potential themes and reflected research team consensus.

Whilst, IPA facilitates understanding at an individual (idiographic) level, it provides few insights into general features of paranormal experiences. These are important because experients may encounter similar feelings, perceptions and cognitions. Looking for common aspects of experiences provides a richer understanding of paranormal phenomena at a social human level. The present paper broadened consideration of paranormal experiences beyond individual characteristics found from IPA to the identification of common patterns or themes between experients. Hence, TA was the preferred method of analysis.

Paranormal experiences are examinable from different epistemological perspectives. Quantitative methods count, categorise (hauntings, telepathy, etc.) and explain paranormal phenomena with the intention of assessing the validity/authenticity of experiences (Cardeña, Lynn & Krippner, 2000). Qualitative researchers consider the personal significance of paranormal occurrences (psychological, social and cultural) and their impact on the individual (Murray & Wooffitt, 2010). Consequently, qualitative research provides useful insights into key psychological areas, such as the nature of consciousness, the self and personal wellbeing.

Qualitative analysis can also identify general features of paranormal experience. For example, Rhine (1953a) observed common elements (i.e., intuitive impressions, hallucination, and realistic/unrealistic dreams) within case reports of contemporaneous, precognitive and retrocognitive experiences. Consideration of elements revealed universal phenomenological features (e.g., incidence, completeness of content, and level of personal significance). As Schouten (1983) notes, coherence within cases lessens the likelihood of interpretative/analytical error. For instance, systematic analysis of collected experiences of children, revealed several recurrent characteristics, which remain stable over time (Schouten & Stevenson, 1998).

This approach has also proved productive for quantitative researchers. For example, consideration of hauntings and poltergeists reports revealed that they shared common features with other phenomena, such as entity encounters (Lange & Houran, 2001). Appreciation of dynamic shared characteristics provides useful insights into the way in which individuals assign meaning to perceived paranormal phenomena. This in turn, facilitates better understanding of personal paranormal experiences and enables the advancement of testable models and hypotheses.

Whilst, quantitative self-report measures examine this dual process (cf. Irwin et al., 2013; Lange & Houran, 1998, 2001), the qualitative/person-centred approach considers interpretative aspects of paranormal experience. Considering general attributes of personal experience in this way helps to establish a phenomenon as distinguishable and legitimate. Similarly, using multiple independent judges to code individual transcripts reduces subjective bias. Correspondingly, the present paper extended previous work by comparing general rather than specific paranormal experiences and used multiple autonomous coders.

METHOD

Participants

Interviewees comprised ten people from the UK, who had initially participated in a self-report study assessing the frequency and nature of paranormal and anomalous experiences (see Dagnall, Drinkwater, Parker & Clough, 2016). Initially, there were 1,215 respondents, 920 females (76%) and 295 males (24%). Ages ranged from 16 to 70 years ($M = 25$ years; $SD = 9$ years). Female ages ranged from 16 to 67 years ($M = 24$ years; $SD = 9$ years); male ages from 17 to 70 years ($M = 27$ years, $SD = 11$ years). Respondent recruitment occurred via psychology classes, other undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), contacts at local colleges and the general population.

Interviewees responded to the final survey question asking whether they wished to tell the researchers about any paranormal experience(s). Willing experients left email contact details and were subsequently invited to interview. Fifty-six respondents provided contact details and thirty-three attended interviews. From these, the researchers randomly selected ten interviews for inclusion in the present study (seven women and three men). This number concurred with that recommended by Kuzel (1992) and Morse (1994).

It is worth noting that there is disparity regarding the sample size required for a study using thematic analysis (TA). Nielsen and Landauer (1993) produced a mathematical model based on six different projects and found that six participants reveal approximately 80% of pertinent material, whilst a maximum of 12 leads to a plateauing effect at 90% of pertinent material captured.

Interviewee accounts encompassed a range of subjective paranormal experiences. Interviewees' age ranged from 19 to 78 years. Interviews with the following experients took place (real names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect interviewee identity):

- 'Sarah': 19-year-old, student. Paranormal experiences centred on events following her grandfather's death.

- 'Mary': 42-years-old, bank employee. Reported several significant paranormal experiences spread across a number of years.

- 'Abigail': 48-years-old, mother of one. Professed experience of predicting the future (e.g., premonitions and readings) and declared an interest in the paranormal and new age philosophies (i.e., paganism and witchcraft).

- 'Tracy': 20-year-old, psychology student. Experiences centred on third party presence and God/religion.

- 'Michelle': 37-year-old. Experiences focussed on important bereavements (death of a close friend and passing of her grandmother).

- 'Amanda': 27-year-old. Outlined several psychic dreams, sense of presence and odd feelings associated with an intense energy.

- 'Elizabeth': 44-year-old, mother of three. Recounted an out of body experience.

- 'Mark': 25-year-old. Outlined an encounter with a shadow figure and declared a keen interested in the paranormal (regularly read paranormal-related books).

- 'Trevor': 25-year-old. Paranormal interests originated from his upbringing; family practised pagan rituals and engaged in spiritualism.

- 'Neil': 78-year-old. Reported myriad paranormal experiences spanning several decades.

The Interviewer

The first author (a man aged 46) conducted the interviews. The interviewer possesses an academic interest in parapsychological experiences and is currently undertaking a PhD in the area of paranormal belief.

Materials

Based on pilot work and a previous study (Drinkwater et al., 2013) the researchers prepared an interview schedule. The interviewer asked experients to outline their subjective paranormal experience(s); how alleged paranormal experiences made them feel, whether the narrated event(s) was unusual/strange, and what they believed caused the occurrence(s).

Procedure

Interviews took place in a private research room within the Psychology Department of the host university (MMU), at a time convenient for both the interviewee and the interviewer. The area provided a quiet, secure environment, where interviews could occur without interruption. The setting acted as a formal, friendly and safe environment.

At the beginning of each interview session, interviewees read the information sheet (containing a study overview), listened to the brief and signed the consent form (assenting to the digital recording of interviews). The interviewer explained that: procedures ensured secure storage of anonymised data (interview recordings and transcripts), transcription of data was required in order to facilitate analysis; and text extracts/quotations would feature within research papers. Before commencement of recording, the interviewer reminded interviewees of their right to discontinue at any point. These procedures established interview-interviewee rapport.

Semi-structured interviewing facilitated the exploration of material without disrupting interviewee narratives; provided opportunities to respond to and develop issues as they arose (Willig, 2013). The interviewer avoided directive and leading questions. Interviews lasted between 20 and 35 minutes (mean length 27 minutes).

At the end of the interview, interviewees confirmed contact details for follow-up enquiries (i.e., interview copies, progress updates, and copies of final reports). Prior to analysis, interviews were transcribed (including interviewer speech), indicating all spoken words and speech sounds, as well as any notable events occurring during the interview.

The analysis followed the TA procedure described by Braun and Clark (2006). TA involves several stages (Hayes, 2000), and has the

advantage of being theoretically flexible, and possesses the potential to provide rich accounts of experient SPEs (see Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Specifically, TA enables the identification of shared aspects of experiences, whilst retaining sufficient flexibility to accommodate additional unexpected themes (Braun & Clark, 2006).

After transcription, researchers read/re-read transcripts in order to identify meaningful units of text and generate preliminary codes to capture key concepts relevant to the research topic. Subsequent collation of quotations relating to each theme allowed relevant patterns to emerge. This process facilitated theme development, naming and refinement. Finally, systematic review of data ensured that category names and definitions were apposite to the emergent themes (Frith & Gleeson, 2004).

RESULTS

Analysis

Interviewee speech was examined using TA and adopting a broadly realist perspective (Willig, 2013) to enable the researchers to identify shared experiences in accounts. To ensure themes possessed authenticity, validity and reliability, each of the four authors produced a set of potential themes. Discussion of themes and associated quotes in face-to-face meetings and via email produced final agreed themes. Consideration of the initial themes revealed little disparity between authors.

Themes

TA produced five meaningful and coherent themes: (i) sensory experiences; (ii) you are not alone; (iii) distortion of reality; (iv) personal growth; and (v) socio-cultural factors (influence of families/friends and cultural expectations).

Sensory Experiences

Experients outlined an array of unusual perceptions and feelings across the range of sensory modalities. Several were visual in nature. Experients reported observing imperceptible images (e.g., Mark: "wavy figure"; Abigail: "dark shadow") and the unexplained movement of objects:

> Tracy: "it started spinning, not like a little move in the wind, but span round one way and then back the other way."

Auditory experiences included a variety of perceived phenomena, such as music (Neil), noises and voices (Neil). Illustratively, Abigail reported hearing children's footsteps:

> Abigail: "And I could hear them running /duh duh duh duh duh duh duh/ and a bump as they hit the landings. It sounded like they were running down the stairs."

Elizabeth, for example, sensed someone stroking her back. Michelle and Mary reported other instances.

> Michelle: "all of a sudden, I just felt … a tap on my shoulder and instantly thought of my Nan."

Intermittently, experiences included olfactory perceptions. These centred on relatable, redolent odours. For instance, Mary recalled her young daughter detecting the aroma of her deceased mother's perfume:

> Mary: "my daughter came running in and said Mum, Grandma is here, I could just smell her."

As well as perceptions, experients also experienced intense emotions. Particularly, a sense of apprehension and a feeling of presence bridged accounts. Illustratively, Abigail reported:

> Abigail: "I just really, really sensed that something bad was going to happen."

Experiences extended beyond perceptions to include attendant physical reactions (e.g., Mark felt the hairs stand up on his neck "like it was static"). Experients considered that sensory experiences were indicative of the existence of a presence. Hence, sensory experiences, whilst not mutually inclusive often overlapped with the next theme 'you are not alone'.

You Are Not Alone (Third Party Presence)

Experients frequently reported the 'sensed' presence of a third party. This manifested as the belief that someone or something was watching, or shadowing them. For example, Mark described a presence following him:

> Mark: "I was coming home one night and it must have been about 10pm, it was pretty quiet and as I was walking home I could feel something, footsteps walking behind me quite loud, so I turned around and there was no one there."

The perception of third party sense presence was often intense and palpable:

> Sarah: "I felt a very strong presence of someone leaning over my shoulder, like they were looking over to see what I was writing, and when I looked up to see who was there, there was no one."

> Amanda: "I was asleep one night, and my friend mike was staying with us at the time. we were in the bed (he was dead asleep), and I was asleep and something woke me up, and I looked over at Mike and I saw something looming over him, and it wasn't like a human being, it was like a bad … energy, if you understand what I mean? I have never been that frightened. I was like immobilised with fear, you could feel the bad energies coming of it and it was directed at him."

Experients also reported that the presence interacted with the physical environment—e.g., produced footsteps, moved and relocated objects/furniture. Trevor experienced loud, threatening noises, "like an axe murderer was trying to get into the door":

> Trevor: "That's what it sounded like (an axe murderer trying to get into the door) and when we went downstairs in the morning when it stopped … the oak bookcase, and it does sound weird, but promise you it was real. The bookcase had gone across the landing and down the stairs, so like it was blocking the stairs."

Not all perceptions of sensed presence proved intense. Michelle, for instance reported only a vague "presence".

Reporting of third party sensory presence linked frequently to feelings of apprehension when the perceived presence was unknown.

> Sarah: "I was driving when I found myself having this really strong sense of unease when looking over my shoulder, or when looking in the wing mirror. To the point where I found myself trying to drive [laughs] and trying to use the wing mirrors and not looking."

However, when experients believed the presence represented a departed friend/relative, the experience produced affirmative emotions (typically, comfort and reassurance). In this context, Michelle felt encouraged by the belief that the "strong presence" she sensed represented her departed grandmother; she believed her grandmother wanted her to know that she was there and with God.

Within this theme, experients gave meaning to perceptions/sensations via the process of personification. Unusual perceptions and sensations were

embodied—i.e., attributed or assigned a human characteristic (e.g., intelligence and intention).

Distortion of Reality (Physical and Mental Fantasy of Experience)

Experient accounts typically designated everyday experiences, such as erratically functioning appliances and dreams as unusual (strange). Typically, attempts to rationalise experiences produced uncertainty, and experients were unsure whether their experience(s) originated from natural cognitions/perceptions, or genuine paranormal forces. Hence, whilst experients described experiences as peculiar/anomalous, they were averse to labelling them as overtly paranormal. This hesitance (hedging) may arise from individual doubt, or reflect experient anxieties, particularly the concern that the interviewer would challenge the authenticity of their recounted experience(s).

The perception of alleged paranormal experiences differed phenomenologically from reports of ordinary situations. Experients reported qualitative dissimilarities; particularly they considered their experiences surreal, metaphysical or bizarre (odd) in comparison to conventional happenings. Michelle for example, detailed a childhood encounter with her deceased grandmother:

> Michelle: "Like, I can't even say a ghost of her, but it was very physical and it made me think about how like. It just made me question, like completely question being so rational about things erm … it was just really odd like I can't describe it, it just made me feel like outside of myself."

Other experients (i.e., Amanda and Sarah) reported similar perceptions associated with dreams. Amanda for instance, dreamed that her grandfather was in her room, and she was confused as to whether the experience was real; he was actually in the room and misperceived or merely 'imaginary', a product of reverie:

> Amanda: "yeah like when I woke up, there was nothing there, but it felt really real and it was really weird, but I don't know if, if it actually happened or … cos it was in the dream."

Distortions of reality sometimes extended to direct perceptions (visual and auditory) and sensations (feelings and emotions). For example, Mark described a strange encounter whilst walking home late at night.

> Mark: "The wavy figure was in the middle of the road about 20 yards away, I could make out the legs and hands, but the face was blocked out."

Personal Growth (Effect on Self)

Generally, experients viewed experiences as important and were satisfied they had encountered something unusual. In this context, whilst experients often reported feeling uneasy at the time of the experience (i.e., apprehension), retrospectively the experience become intriguing, and on occasion even fulfilling. For instance, Mary presented herself as 'gifted'. She referred to a friend with knowledge of the paranormal ("has studied parapsychology and he's been on "Most Haunted"), who because of her experiences allowed only her to read his tarot cards.

Experients frequently identified and sought others with similar experiences. Peers and relatives provided positive social reinforcement and account sharing helped to validate and legitimise experiences. For example, Elizabeth outlined that her sister had reported a similar sensed presence experience:

> Elizabeth: "that was the first thing that had happened to me and I told my sister, and she said, "That's the one that happened to me as well!" However, I didn't know what it was … I can't explain what that was."

Experiences frequently empowered experients, providing them with confidence and a sense of self-efficacy; experients felt their experience(s) demonstrated they were resilient and able to cope with situations others may find difficult/challenging. For instance, Amanda referring to her paranormal dreams:

> Amanda: "I have … the weirdest … violent horrible dreams, like I've got used to it now, I'm not bothered by them. I quite [quietly and said with ease] like them [laughs]. I don't mind as long as you're dreaming something vivid and interesting, I'm not bothered."

Within this theme, experients viewed themselves as a 'special' group, believing they were sensitive to paranormal events. This notion ran contrary to the first theme (distortion of reality) by implying the existence of genuinely paranormal phenomena.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Influence of families and friends. Experients tended to have backgrounds with a history of paranormal experiences, or to belong to friendship groups where paranormal experiences were central and openly discussed. For instance, Mary's grandmother "did tea leaves", her great grandmother was a medium, and Trevor's grandmother was "very spiritual".

Illustratively, Elizabeth possessed strong traditional associations with the paranormal:

> Elizabeth: "actually, I grew up in an environment where my mother and sister were always going to psychic evenings and telling me about the paranormal."

Similarly, the beliefs and practices of his grandmother influenced Trevor's worldview:

> Trevor: "I've always sort of been interested, my gran was Wiccan, so erm I sort of grew up not forced on me but I suppose if you grow up with any other religion."

Family links with the paranormal proved reinforcing and comforting; they made experients feel safe and secure when reflecting upon their experience(s). Knowing significant/important others had paranormal experiences helped to normalise and legitimise unusual encounters and provided a framework for reference, interpretation and comprehension. For example, Sarah was reassured that her mother "had had several similar experiences".

Cultural expectations of paranormal phenomena. Sociocultural expectations helped to shape experients interpretations of their experiences. Particularly, experiences were frequently linked with prevalent media depictions of the paranormal (i.e., Neil: "cackling laugh"; Tracy: "witch doctor"; Amanda: "zombies"). Tracy's account of a ghostly encounter is typical and conventional (e.g., old, chilly disused building, strange noises, etc.)

> Tracy: "it was an old terrace house and in the kitchen, it was really really cold, abnormally cold. We didn't think anything of it, and um, we'd had builders helping us out and a couple of Tom's friends. Two of them said they kept hearing things, as if somebody was coming up the stairs and one of them refused to work there on his own, because he said he kept hearing somebody coming up the stairs."

In addition, experiences often centred on everyday objects behaving erratically, particularly electrical equipment:

> Tracy: "a few months later I was just sitting in the living room on my own and the TV turned itself off [Interviewer: Right] and I just went like this, oh I

must have sat on the remote control, but the remote control was on the arm of the chair."

Similarly, Trevor reported experiences where the video cassette recorder (VCR) and oven would seemingly act unpredictably:

> Trevor: "I remember my mum was going mad [laughs] for a good few weeks because she set the VCR and it switched off. She would go, oh I don't know, and she would preheat the oven and it would go off, or I would put something down on the table and go upstairs and come back and go, oh I thought it was there and little things like that."

Experiences within this sub-theme reflected the participant's tendency to understand experiences in terms of existing knowledge and expectations. Particularly, experients life histories structured and assisted the comprehension of personal anomalous experiences. This manifested itself in ways consistent with other themes. Principally, experiences embodied representations of departed relatives (third party presence), and were seen to be consistent with family and peer norms (influence of family and friends).

Making sense of unusual experiences (rationalisation and humour). Experients made sense of their experiences in a number of ways. Experients within their accounts represented themselves as coherent, rounded, well-balanced individuals. Particularly, experients often explained that they had not believed in paranormal phenomena prior to their critical experience. Additionally, they affirmed that they had been thinking lucidly at the time of the experience. To support this point, experients referred to supporting witnesses (sister of Amanda; partner of Trevor) and depicted the experience as a shared event.

Narratives followed a characteristic pattern. Initially, experients tried to elucidate experiences by considering conventional (mundane) possibilities:

> Mark: "No, no I've never had that before and I thought there was someone behind me trying to mug me when I heard the steps."

Participants became more receptive to labelling their experiences as paranormal only after conventional explanations (e.g., drug-taking, dreaming, hallucinations, etc.) had been discounted. Even at this final stage, experients expressed caution (uncertainty and doubt):

> Amanda: "and I still don't think … that it was my mum trying to contact me or because I can't, I can't get my head around that. I honestly think that when

you are dead, you are dead, but I can't explain these things that have happened to me."

Several experients used humour when outlining their experience:

Tracy: "I reached behind this kitchen cupboard, and picked [laughs] this 20p piece up and just put it in my pocket and carried on, and I carried on working and then the next minute it had gone really cold all of a sudden."

Experients were aware that they were recounting and contextualising personal paranormal experiences in an interview setting. Humour in this context may reflect the unconventional (unusual) nature of the subject matter. It allows the experient to cope with their anxieties (arising from the narrative and/or the interview situation). The use of humour also indicates that the experient has reached a level of acceptance.

The RESULTS section identified and described emergent themes in order to depict them as general characteristics of SPEs. To indicate individual respondent experiences, a table summarising experiences within themes appears below (see Table 1). The small sample size prohibits statistical analysis; however, tabulation facilitates judgments of the "universality" of the themes across parapsychological experiences as a whole.

DISCUSSION

The principal aim of the present study was to examine narrative accounts of subjective paranormal experiences (SPEs). Particularly, to explore whether individual experiences shared common themes and patterns (see Drinkwater et al., 2013). Thematic analysis of interview transcripts revealed five meaningful and coherent themes: (i) sensory experiences; (ii) you are not alone (third party presence); (iii) distortion of reality (physical and mental fantasy of experience): (iv) personal growth (effect on self); and (v) socio-cultural factors (influence of families/friends & cultural expectations of paranormal phenomena).

Themes mirrored those reported in previous research (Drinkwater et al., 2013; Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005). Specifically, Drinkwater et al. (2013) identified distortion of reality (physical and mental fantasy of experience), you are not alone (third party sensory presence), and personal growth (effect on self). The emergence of two additional themes (sensory experiences and socio-cultural factors) within the current study may reflect

Table 1
Participant Data: Themes and Types of Experiences Reported

Participant	Experience Type	Theme 1 (Sensory Experiences)	Theme 2 (Sense of Presence)	Theme 3 (Distortions of Reality)	Theme 4 (Personal Growth)	Theme 5 (Socio-Cultural Factors)
Abigail	Dark Figure/Auditory Phenomena/Presence	3	1			
Amanda	Dreams/Entity and Presence		2	2	3	2
Elizabeth	Sensory/Presence	1	1		2	1
Mark	Shadowman/Physical Sensation	3	2	1		3
Mary	Olfactory Sensation	1	3		2	
Michelle	Physical Sensation/Ghostly Encounter/Deceased Presence/Out Of Body Experience	1	2	1		1
Neil	Auditory Phenomena	2	1	1		
Sarah	Dreams/Entity and Presence	1	2	1		
Tracy	Ghostly Encounter/Object movement/Sense of Presence	3	3		2	5
Trevor	Physical Presence/Object Movement		2			4

the analytical approach employed (thematic analysis, TA). In comparison, the Drinkwater et al. (2013) study used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Consideration of a larger number of transcripts (ten vs. four) produced a more diverse array of sensations, perceptions, and cultural references. Overall, results revealed an inextricable link between perception, belief, and interpretation.

Narratives indicated that whilst SPEs had significant effects on experients, they rarely reported them to be emotionally intense. This may reflect the analytical emphasis of TA. Essentially, TA is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes a data set in (rich) detail. Frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Generally, SPEs were associated with an unwillingness to accept the uncertain and a desire to comprehend the unknown.

Interviews followed a typical format. Initially, experients outlined their specific SPE(s)—i.e., feelings, sensations, and perceptions. They then proffered and discounted conventional explanations. Deliberation was typically brief, and presumably functioned to convey the notion that the experient was rational and had previously evaluated conventional explanations. Consistent with Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005), experients rarely viewed SPEs as arising from abnormal psychological processes (hallucinations, delusions, etc.). Finally, experients established, justified and legitimised the nature of the paranormal experience. This involved citing other paranormal occurrences, self-authentication of credibility, and the provision of supporting evidence (denoting family and friends, who had previously encountered paranormal phenomena).

Experients used the secure mode of speech (shielded communication) outlined by Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche (2005). Shielded communication denotes that the experient is sharing 'privileged knowledge', and employs devices that emphasize the veridical and real nature of experiences (i.e., identification of witnesses and experts, accentuating of personal credibility, and overt consideration and elimination of alternative possibilities). Throughout interviews, experients reflected on the importance and impact of their SPEs, and contextualised them within their personal life histories. As with transpersonal experiences, SPEs allow the experient to express a sense of identity or enable the individual to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

The comprehension of experiences was personal, highly subjective and informed by the individuals background (c.f., Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005). Thus, whilst SPEs shared common content and characters, experients perceived and interpreted them differently. For

example, the notion of presence, the belief that the sensations, perceptions and happenings were directly attributable to a third party (i.e., departed relative/friend or unknown person/entity) featured in several narratives, but affected experients differently. This notion is consistent with (Irwin et al., 2013; Lange & Houran, 1998, 2001), who reason that the perception of paranormal experiences is a complex process based upon subjective interpretation. Experiencers must first encounter an unusual event, and then label it as paranormal. In the case of experients within this study, not only did they attribute paranormal causation to events, but also they (via life history) attempted to explain the event. Personal nuances served to make externally similar experiences appear superficially different. For example, despite possessing phenomenologically comparable characteristics, personal interpretations of sensed presence produced different forms of embodiment (i.e., wavy figure, dark shadow and deceased relative).

Experients often narrated more than one experience. Typically, they centred on a highly significant personal paranormal event, and then proceeded to reference other more peripheral/tangential experiences. These, included additional personal accounts and narratives involving family and friends. The generation of other paranormal experiences indicated that SPEs were regarded as unusual/strange, rather than profound or exceptional (cf. Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005). This finding requires careful consideration because of the sample employed. Within the current study, experients volunteered to share their experience with the key researcher. Hence, participants were self-selecting and typically possessed paranormal interests/links (i.e., family and peers). In this context, paranormal experiences, whilst individually significant, were not unique. SPEs within the sample interviewed were atypical, but more frequent than unusual.

In line with TA requirements, in-depth interviews with people willing to discuss their paranormal experiences produced a rich meaningful data set (Kuzel, 1992; Morse, 1994; Nielsen & Landauer, 1993). Fluency of accounts and degree of disclosure suggested that the interviewer was successful in creating a secure context, where participants felt able to discuss experiences safely. The formal, yet friendly environment enabled the interviewer to establish a good level of rapport and encouraged frank and open discussion. Investigation using TA, of the type devised by Braun and Clarke (2006), effectively identified coherent and meaningful patterns in accounts. When analysing transcripts, each of the four authors undertook separate preliminary analysis. Potential themes were discussed via email and face-to-face. All authors agreed on the final set of themes. This process ensured that the concluding analysis emerged from procedures that were transparent, credible, and coherent. The researchers recommend that future studies implement similar rigorous techniques.

Subsequent studies could extend the present work by continuing to focus on general SPEs. This approach is novel because previous studies have tended to centre on single paranormal experiences. For example, Wilde and Murray (2010) focused on out-of-body and near-death experiences; Lange and Houran (1998, 2001) on hauntings and poltergeists. Further work could also extend consideration of SPEs to include exceptional experiences (Simmonds-Moore, 2016). This would illuminate further the interpretative processes associated with the labelling of events as paranormal, anomalous, and exceptional. In the context of specific experiences, future research could concentrate on prevalent paranormal experiences, such as ghost sightings in order to determine the extent to which identified themes can be generalised across specific experiences (Lange & Houran, 1998, 2001).

Another development would be to compare narrative accounts of experients with single SPEs with those recounting multiple experiences. In the present study, experients had varying numbers of SPEs. Previous paranormal experience(s) and frequency are factors that are likely to affect experients' interpretation and comprehension of experiences (Schouten, 1986).

A recent improvement involves Latent Semantic Analysis (Lange, Greyson, & Houran, 2015). This is an automatic technique, designed to reduce errors/bias, arising from human-based analyses. The programme could greatly assist analysis of SPEs because individual analyst subjectivity may effect interpretation. This was less of a concern in the present paper because multiple judges assessed transcripts and generated meaningful themes.

Overall, this paper provides a useful, but relatively limited insight into processes associated with the determination and comprehension of paranormal experiences, and points the way to future research in this interesting area.

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