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Why I study...

anomalistic psychology

A FEW months ago I received an e-mail from a mature student wondering if I could explain various terrifying experiences that she had endured repeatedly for almost 20 years. On exchanging a few e-mails, it became apparent to me that she was suffering from occasional bouts of sleep paralysis. This is a temporary state where an individual who is either drifting off to sleep or emerging from sleep suddenly realises that their muscles are totally paralysed. This is frightening enough, but the state is sometimes associated with bizarre and terrifying imagery of demons, monsters, hags or aliens, and a strong sense of a malign presence.

Although there is need for a lot more research into this fascinating phenomenon, we know enough about sleep paralysis for me to be able to offer reassurance to this sufferer that neither was she going mad nor was she the victim of nocturnal supernatural assaults. Sleep paralysis is a common symptom of narcolepsy, but many non-narcoleptics suffer from sleep paralysis at least once in their lives. A recent survey at Goldsmiths College, for example, showed that about 40 per cent of first-year students had had the experience.

In this particular case the student involved was immensely relieved to know that she was not alone in having the experience and that it had no long-term implications for her mental health. She confessed that she had always been afraid to discuss the matter with others through fear of ridicule and rejection. Poignantly, she felt that she 'had lost so many years' through not having understood the phenomenon earlier in her life.

Not everyone welcomes such explanations for their unusual experiences; many cling to the idea that their similar episodes are the result of alien abduction or poltergeist attacks. Given that people are generally much more likely to be exposed to such paranormal notions than the idea of sleep paralysis, this is perhaps not surprising. People need to

make sense of anomalous experiences, and a paranormal explanation is probably seen as preferable to the notion that they are losing their sanity. Once a paranormal explanation has been accepted, it provides various secondary gains (such as a sense of being special) even though the sufferer may be genuinely afraid of further 'attacks'.

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Sleep paralysis is one of the phenomena dealt with within the subdiscipline of anomalistic psychology. This area of study attempts to explain paranormal and related beliefs and ostensibly paranormal experiences in terms of known (or knowable) psychological and physical factors. It is directed at understanding bizarre experiences that many people have, without assuming that there is anything paranormal involved. While psychology, neurology and other scientific disciplines are rich with explanatory models for human experiences of many kinds, these models are rarely extrapolated to attempt to explain strange and unusual experiences. Anomalistic psychology attempts to do just that.

The paranormal may be defined as 'alleged phenomena that cannot be accounted for in terms of conventional scientific theories'. The definition adopted by those working in this area typically goes beyond the core phenomena of extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, and life after death; it includes such topics as belief in astrology, UFOs, dowsing, the Bermuda Triangle, and so on. It should be noted that the aims of anomalistic psychology would still be valid even if the existence of paranormal forces were to be established beyond doubt, because there is little question that most paranormal claims

can be plausibly explained in non-paranormal terms.

As with most other researchers, my main motivation for working in my chosen field is simply that I find it fascinating. I can think of no other area of study within psychology that covers such a broad range of inherently interesting (and controversial) topics. At one extreme the issues raised in anomalistic psychology are the most profound known to humanity. Are there really paranormal forces at work in the universe? Does consciousness survive the death of the physical body? At the other extreme are more trivial, but highly entertaining, topics such as the methods used by con artists to fool people that they have genuine psychic powers.

This range and variety makes anomalistic psychology an excellent tool for the teaching of critical thinking skills. Students opting for my final-year option on psychology, parapsychology and pseudoscience are obviously interested in the topics even before the course begins. For most of them, however, their prior exposure to information on such topics will have been via the media. Such coverage has a strong pro-paranormal bias, for obvious reasons, but for most people it is a major source of information.

One of the aims of my course is to address the issue of why some sources of evidence should be treated as more reliable than others. Students are offered alternative explanations for paranormal experiences: a variety of psychological factors, most notably the limitations and biases of human cognition, can lead to the drawing of faulty conclusions.

Although anomalistic psychology adopts the working hypothesis that paranormal forces do not exist, it allows for the possibility that this assumption might just be wrong. Most self-professed sceptics are not very well-informed about (or even interested in) parapsychology. They assume that all apparently positive evidence in favour of psi (i.e. paranormal influences) must be the result of delusion,

deception or incompetence. The history of parapsychology does provide many examples of all three (as does the history of psychology).

However, the techniques used by experimental parapsychologists have certainly become much more refined and sophisticated in the light of previous criticism. It is simply not the case that parapsychologists are all amateurs when it comes to experimental design. Many of the most sophisticated experimental designs within parapsychology are easily on a par with the best psychological studies.

Furthermore, some parapsychologists appear to produce evidence in support of the existence of paranormal forces even from such apparently well-controlled experiments. Either such findings should be accepted at face value, or critics should attempt to specify the subtle methodological flaws that are producing the misleading results. This is not an easy task, and any lessons learned in this way will certainly benefit both parapsychology and psychology.

Opinion polls repeatedly show that the majority of the general population do endorse paranormal claims, and a sizeable minority claim to have had direct experience of the paranormal. There are only two possibilities. One is that at least some of these anomalous experiences really do reflect the operation of paranormal forces in our universe. If this is the case, the sooner this truth is accepted by the wider scientific community, the better. Such acceptance would have profound implications for our scientific world view and for our understanding of our place in the universe. On the other hand, it may be the case that we can explain all aspects of anomalous experience in terms of knowable psychological and physical factors.

At first glance, the fact that all known societies, both geographically and historically, have embraced paranormal beliefs of various kinds might be taken as evidence for the reality of the paranormal. Upon reflection, however, it may be that this exemplifies the simple truth that we are all psychologically and biologically more similar than we are different. A full understanding of the psychology of anomalous experiences may tell us a great deal about more typical human experience

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Explanations for sleep paralysis have changed throughout history, but maybe anomalistic psychology can explain it more scientifically

in the same way that understanding the processes underlying visual illusions can tell us a great deal about normal visual perception.

So paranormal beliefs have real implications for the behaviour of the majority of the world's population. The media devote a huge amount of time and effort to presenting the case for the paranormal. Millions of dollars are spent every year by those who feel that their spiritual quest can be satisfied by embracing paranormal claims. But to date,

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many psychologists have adopted a narrow-minded view that such topics do not merit serious study and have had nothing to say on them (with a few notable exceptions, such as Susan Blackmore, Richard Wiseman, and Bob Morris and his team in the UK, and Nicholas Spanos, Elizabeth Loftus, and Steven Jay Lynn in the USA).

Fortunately, there are signs that this is beginning to change. The number of papers in respected peer-reviewed journals on these topics has shown a steady increase over recent years, as has the number of books. The American Psychological Association recently published an excellent

edited collection of reviews in this area (Cardena *et al.*, 2000). Symposia on these issues are no longer a rarity at international conferences. Courses on such topics are finding their way into more and more psychology degree programmes.

It is for all these reasons that I have recently established the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit here at Goldsmiths College. The Unit provides a focus for the considerable amount of relevant research already taking place in the department, as well as facilitating further expansion and international collaborative research.

Those who attempt to explain away the paranormal are often criticised by believers for being closed-minded. For me, being closed-minded equates to an unwillingness to consider the evidence relating to a particular claim. Attempting to consider all the possible alternative explanations for a particular phenomenon and accepting the need to produce empirical evidence for one's favoured hypothesis is not being closed-minded. If non-paranormal explanations for some allegedly paranormal phenomenon cannot be found, this implicitly supports the case for its reality. But non-paranormal explanations will only be found if one looks for them. If such explanations are found, we will have learned important truths about human nature in the process. Either way, we cannot lose.

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Reference

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WEBLINKS

Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, Goldsmiths College: www.gold.ac.uk/apru
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