

A question of belief: An analysis of item content in paranormal belief questionnaires

ABSTRACT:

Aims

This study examined the degree to which paranormal believers, who profess ‘strong’ belief in the popular expression of a topic known as the *primary item* (e.g., *There is such a thing as extrasensory perception*), disagree with related items and/or the putative ‘cause’ of the topic, known as **secondary items** (e.g., *Some people have an unexplained ability to predict the future*). It was theorised that scoring differences between primary and secondary items might identify certain kinds of paranormal believer.

Method

The Paranormal Belief Informedness Scale (PBIS) was constructed from extant PB scales – it consists of 10 primary items, & 10 secondary items. PBIS subscale scores were used to identify three major PB types in the sample ($N = 343$): ‘primary believers’ (who believe in *all* 10 primary items), ‘primary non-believers’ (who believe in none of the 10 primary items), and ‘mixed believers’ (who believe in only some primary items).

Results

We found significant response-rate differences between primary and secondary items across believer types, and across psi categories (i.e., ESP, PK, and life after death). For the full sample, it was shown that there is a significant relationship between PB and reality testing deficits (IPO-RT; Lenzenweger et al., 2001), but this relationship tended not to be significant across believer types. There was no evidence in the full sample, or in any believer type, that PB was correlated with depression as measured on the BDI-II (Beck et al., 1996).

Conclusions

We suggest that such relationships are not necessarily linear but may only be monotonic, possibly involving ‘ceiling effects’; linear trends should not be assumed when dealing with predictors of paranormal belief.

Keywords

Depression, Informed belief, Paranormal belief, Primary belief, Quasi-belief, Reality testing, Sheep-goat effect

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Researcher's Contacts:

Dr. Lance Storm
Brain and Cognition Centre
School of Psychology
University of Adelaide
South Australia 5005
AUSTRALIA

Ph (W): +61 8 8313 5230
Ph (H): +61 8 8443 5059
Ph (Fax): +61 8 8313 3770
E-mail: lance.storm@adelaide.edu.au

Kenneth Drinkwater
Department of Psychology
Faculty of Health, Psychology and Social Care
Manchester Metropolitan University
Manchester M15 6GX
UK
Email: k.drinkwater@mmu.ac.uk

Dr. Anthony Jinks
School of Social Sciences and Psychology
University of Western Sydney
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751
AUSTRALIA
Email: a.jinks@westernsydney.edu.au