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Contacting the spirits of the dead: paranormal belief and the teenage worldview

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SUMMARY

A number of previous studies have examined both the overall level of belief expressed by young people in the paranormal and the major demographic predictors of such belief. Building on this research tradition, the present study examines how one specific paranormal belief concerning contact with the spirits of the dead integrates with the wider teenage worldview. Data provided by 33,982 13- to 15-year-old pupils throughout England and Wales demonstrated that almost one in three young people (31%) believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead. Compared with young people who did not share this belief, the young people who believed in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead displayed lower psychological wellbeing, higher anxiety, greater isolation, greater alienation, less positive social attitudes, and less socially conforming lifestyles. Overall, paranormal beliefs seem to be associated with a less healthy worldview, in both personal and social terms.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies conducted since the early 1990s in a range of national and cultural contexts have drawn attention to the persistence among young people of a wide range of beliefs concerned with the supernatural, with the paranormal, and with the transcendent. For example, Francis and Kay (1995) in their study of nearly 13,000 year-nine and year-ten pupils (13- to 15-year-olds) included a battery of questions concerning supernatural beliefs. Their data demonstrated that 19% of the sample believed in the devil, 18% believed in black magic, 31% believed it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead and 37% believed in ghosts. In terms of divination, 35% believed in their horoscope and 19% believed that fortune-tellers can tell the future.

Boyd (1996) characterised his study in terms of occult beliefs and included belief in ouija boards, horoscopes and spiritualism. In a questionnaire survey conducted among 509 14- to 15-year-old pupils in England, Boyd found that 41% believed it was possible to contact the spirits of the dead and 28% disagreed that it was wrong to contact the spirits of the dead using an ouija board. In terms of divination, nearly one-third (31%) read their horoscope on a daily basis, while a further 25% read it on a weekly basis. Nearly two-fifths (38%) stated that they believed in their horoscope, and 21% believed in black magic.

Quesnell (2000) in his study of the religious beliefs and values of 3,432 13- to 15-year-old Czech adolescents also included questions concerning belief in the supernatural. The data demonstrated high levels of belief in different areas of the supernatural: 36% believed it was possible to contact the spirits of the dead, 34% believed in their horoscopes, 24% believed in black magic, 28% believed that people can be healed physically by supernatural means, and 14% believed that fortune-tellers can tell the future.

Canadian youth also hold similar beliefs. Bibby (2001) in his study of 3,501 15- to 19-year-old adolescents in Canada found a wide array of paranormal beliefs. The data demonstrated that 76% believed in near-death experiences, 63% believed that miraculous healing sometimes occurs, and 63% believed they had experienced precognition. Moreover, 59% believed in ESP, 55% believed some people have psychic powers, and 43% believed that contact with the spirit world was possible.

Sjödín (2002) in his analysis of 1,488 16- to 19-year-old Swedish adolescents found varying levels of paranormal belief. For example, 77% of the sample believed in premonitory signs, and over 50% believed in such phenomena as UFOs and telepathy. Among a second sample of 511 adults (with an age range of 16 to 74 years), Sjödín found that 30% believed in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead, 56% believed in premonitory signs, and a quarter (25%) believed in UFOs.

Smith's (2002) study of 3,418 13- to 15-year-old pupils in Walsall (in the West Midlands of England) found similar results to the previous studies. Nearly half (48%) believed in ghosts, 40% believed in their horoscopes, 33% believed it was possible to contact the spirits of the dead, 27% believed in the devil, 25% believed in black magic, and 24% believed that fortune-tellers can tell the future.

Thompson (2004) in his study of young people's beliefs informed by the new age movement surveyed 802 13- to 15-year-olds in South Wales. The data demonstrated that 30% believed in the spirit world, 15% would frequently contact a spirit guide, 33% believed it was possible to contact spirits, 26% believed it was possible to contact dead people, and 24% believed that spirits can speak through the living.

Smith (2005) in his study assessing the religious beliefs of 3,290 13- to 17-year-old English- and Spanish-speaking teenagers found that 9% believed it was possible to communicate with the dead, 41% believed in the existence of demons or evil spirits, 63% believed in the existence of angels, and 6% believed in psychics and fortune-tellers.

Kinnaman (2006) writing about the supernatural beliefs of 3,728 13- to 19-year-old adolescents in the USA found that 19% strongly agreed that people can communicate with the dead, 35% had used a ouija board, 10% had participated in a séance, 79% had read or looked at their horoscope, 30% had experimented with palm reading, and 9% had called or seen a psychic.

Francis, Robbins and Williams (2006) in their analysis of 995 13- to 15-year-old girls in Wales found high levels of belief in the transcendent, paranormal or supernatural, with 67% believing that the soul makes a journey after death, 23% believing that the dead can harm the living, 36% believing in ghosts, and 32% believing in evil spirits. Moreover, 28% had used charms to protect themselves from evil.

Some of the studies concerned with the level of belief in the supernatural, the paranormal, and the transcendent have also charted some of the key demographic and social factors which predict individual differences in such beliefs. In their review of this literature, Francis and Williams (2007) identified the particular influences of sex, age, television and religion. The level of paranormal belief tends to be higher among females than among males, among year-ten pupils than among year-nine pupils, among pupils of lower academic expectations, among pupils who had experienced the death of a parent or whose parents had separated or divorced, among pupils from lower social class backgrounds, and among those who watched more than

four hours television in a day. The level of belief tends to be higher among pupils who have had a religious experience, but lower among pupils who attended church most weeks.

A somewhat different strand of research has examined the relationship between beliefs in the paranormal and individual differences in personality, using the three dimensional model of personality defined by Eysenck and Eysenck (1991). Two main conclusions emerge from this strand of research. On the one hand, it is clear that there is no significant relationship between paranormal beliefs and Eysenck's dimension of psychoticism, either in a positive or negative direction (Lester, 1993; Willging and Lester, 1997; Wiseman and Watt, 2004; Williams, Francis and Robbins, 2007). On the other hand, evidence is divided regarding the relationship between paranormal beliefs and Eysenck's dimension of neuroticism. While a significant positive association between paranormal beliefs and neuroticism was reported by Wiseman and Watt (2004) and by Williams, Francis and Robbins (2007), no such relationship was reported by Lester (1993) and by Willging and Lester (1997).

What is not known from previous research, however, is the way in which beliefs in the paranormal, the supernatural and the transcendent interrelate with the wider worldview espoused by these young people. The aim of the present study, therefore, is to identify one key indicator of paranormal belief and to interrogate a database provided by nearly 34,000 13- to 15-year-old adolescents in England and Wales in order to examine the significance of this key indicator within their overall worldview. This key indicator is operationalised through the questionnaire item, 'I believe that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead'. The item is important because it contains and expresses a notion which both goes to the heart of paranormal belief and distinguishes paranormal belief from conventional Christian theistic belief. Both paranormal belief systems and Christian theistic belief systems support the

persistence of human existence and identity beyond death. Paranormal belief systems also support the notion of channels of communication between the world beyond the grave and the present world before the grave. Christian theistic belief systems, on the other hand, generally strenuously deny belief in contacting the spirits of the dead. The paranormal as defined in the present study has to do not merely with the continuance of human life beyond the grave but with the accessibility to that continuing life beyond the grave by men and women living in the day-to-day world. In principle a belief of this nature (if really taken seriously) should have profound implications for the whole of an individual's worldview.

METHOD

Sample

The Religion and Values Today Survey, described in detail by Francis (2001), was completed by 33,982 pupils attending year-nine and year-ten classes throughout England and Wales. This database was constructed to be thoroughly representative of young people in this age group (13- to 15-year-olds) being educated within both the state-maintained schools sector and the independent schools sector. Data were provided from 163 schools, stretching from Pembrokeshire in the west to Norfolk in the east, from Cornwall in the south to Northumberland in the north. A proper mix of rural and urban schools was included, as was a proper mix of independent and state-maintained schools. Since the state-maintained sector in England and Wales includes church-related schools proper attention was given to the balance between Roman Catholic voluntary schools, Church of England voluntary schools, and non-denominational schools. Of the total respondents, 51% were male and 49% were female; 53% were in year nine and 47% were in year ten. Of those educated within the state-maintained sector, 86% were in non-denominational schools, 9% in Roman Catholic schools, and 5% in Church of England schools. Of the total sample of pupils, 10% were being

educated outside the state-maintained sector in a variety of independent schools, including some with a religious foundation.

Procedure

Participating schools were asked to follow a standard procedure. The questionnaires were administered in normal class groups to all year-nine and year-ten pupils (13- to 15-year-olds) throughout the school. Pupils were asked not to write their name on the booklet and to complete the inventory under examination-like conditions. Although pupils were given the choice not to participate, very few decided not to take part in the survey. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. They were informed that their responses would not be read by anyone in the school, and that the questionnaires would be despatched to the University of Wales for analysis.

Measures

The present analysis draws on the following key components included in the questionnaire administered to all the pupils.

Paranormal belief was measured by the single item ‘I believe that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead’ rated on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from ‘agree strongly’, through ‘agree’, ‘not certain’ and ‘disagree’ to ‘disagree strongly’.

Socio-psychological correlates were measured by a series of Likert-type items rated on a five-point scale, ranging from ‘agree strongly’, through ‘agree’, ‘not certain’ and ‘disagree’ to ‘disagree strongly’. In the present analysis 10 five-item groupings are organised to define supernatural beliefs, views about the Church, personal wellbeing, personal anxiety, personal

support, personal alienation, attitude towards school, views on sexual morality, views on substance use, and views on law and order.

RESULTS

Overview

Within this overall sample of 33,982 pupils, almost one-third (31%) believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead, just over one-third (36%) believed that it is not possible to contact the spirits of the dead, and the remaining one-third (33%) had not made up their minds what to believe about the idea. Within the overall sample there were small but statistically significant differences between the two sexes and between the two age groups. A significantly higher proportion of female pupils (33%) believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead, compared with 29% of the male pupils ($\chi^2 = 69.9, p < .001$). A significantly higher proportion of year-ten pupils (32%) believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead, compared with 30% of the year-nine pupils ($\chi^2 = 4.9, p < .05$).

Tables 1 through 10 now examine the relationship between belief in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead and each of the ten aspects of the teenage worldview included in this survey. The comparison is made between those who accept the belief that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead and those who do not accept this belief. In these tables the 'agree strongly' and the 'agree' responses have been aggregated. The statistical significance of differences between groups has been tested by comparing two cells: the aggregation of those who agreed or who agreed strongly against the aggregation of those who disagreed strongly, disagreed or expressed uncertainty.

Supernatural Belief in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead correlated very

highly with all five of the items designed to assess belief in the supernatural. The data presented in table 1 demonstrate that young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were also more inclined to believe in ghosts (73% compared with 26%), to believe in black magic (44% compared with 9%), to believe that fortune-tellers can tell the future (39% compared with 11%), to believe in the devil (38% compared with 14%), and to believe in their horoscope (50% compared with 28%). Such statistics confirm the way in which belief in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead is part of a wider and distinctive worldview which embraces a number of beliefs about the supernatural. Such statistics also demonstrate the extent to which two different worldviews exist side-by-side within contemporary teenage culture. Young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead also held a wide range of beliefs about the nature of the world in which they live which separated them out from the worldview held by some of their peers.

Church Although the previous section has suggested that belief in paranormal phenomena does not detract from more conventional religious beliefs, the data presented in table 2 demonstrate that paranormal belief tends to be associated with a more negative attitude toward the church. The young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were more likely to dismiss the church as being boring (57% compared with 49%), were more likely to regard the church as irrelevant to life today (32% compared with 25%), and were more likely to regard the bible as irrelevant to life today (35% compared with 29%). The young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were more likely to take the view that it is possible to be a Christian without going to church (51% compared with 42%). They were also slightly less likely to argue that religious education should be taught in schools (36% compared with 38%). Such statistics point to the development of a worldview which embraces belief in a transcendence constructed outside

the confines of religious institutions.

Wellbeing The data presented in table 3 suggest that young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead generally experienced a lower level of psychological wellbeing. Although the overall levels of having a sense of purpose in life did not differ between the two groups, young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were significantly less likely to find life really worth living (64% compared with 71%). Young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were more likely to feel that they were not worth much as a person (18% compared with 11%), were more likely to often feel depressed (58% compared with 49%) and were more likely to have sometimes considered taking their own life (38% compared with 22%). Such statistics suggest that paranormal beliefs may be associated with less psychologically healthy responses to life.

Anxiety The data presented in table 4 adds further support to the view that young people who hold paranormal beliefs may exhibit a somewhat less positive approach to life. According to these data young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead exhibited greater levels of anxiety regarding a range of issues. They were more likely to be worried about their sex life (20% compared with 16%), about their attractiveness to the opposite sex (38% compared with 33%), about getting AIDS (62% compared with 57%), about how they get on with other people (54% compared with 51%), and even about being attacked by pupils from other schools (20% compared with 19%). Such statistics draw a profile of a somewhat more anxious group of young people.

Support In line with the view that young people who hold paranormal beliefs enjoy lower

levels of psychological wellbeing (table 3) and experience higher levels of personal anxiety (table 4), the data presented in table 5 profile these young people as more likely to desire support from others, but less likely to access such support. Thus, a higher proportion of young people who believed it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead said that they often long for someone to turn to for advice (39% compared with 32%). At the same time young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were less likely to find it helpful to talk about their problems either with their mother (47% compared with 51%) or with their father (30% compared with 33%). They were also more likely to be reluctant to discuss their problems with a school teacher (49% compared with 45%) or with a doctor (36% compared with 31%). These statistics suggest that such young people may feel somewhat more isolated and somewhat more vulnerable.

Alienation The suggestion that young people who hold paranormal beliefs feel somewhat more isolated and more vulnerable (table 5) is consistent with the data presented in table 6 showing that they feel more alienated from their locality. Young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were less likely to like living in their area (70% compared with 76%), and more likely to feel that social problems are on the increase in their area. Young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were more likely to feel that problems are growing in their area in connection with vandalism (49% compared with 43%), drug taking (37% compared with 29%), violence (36% compared with 30%) and drunks (29% compared with 22%). Such statistics suggest that there is a real connection between what young people anticipate beyond the grave and how they interpret what they experience this side of the grave.

School The suggestion that young people who hold paranormal beliefs feel somewhat more

alienated from their locality (table 6) is consistent with the data presented in table 7 showing that they also feel somewhat more alienated from their school. Young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were more likely to criticise their school as boring (44% compared with 33%) and less likely to feel that teachers do a good job (39% compared with 47%). They were less likely to be happy in their school (66% compared with 74%) and less likely to like the people with whom they go to school (88% compared with 90%). They were less likely to feel that school is preparing them for life (65% compared with 69%). Such statistics suggest that paranormal beliefs are associated with a less positive set of personal and social values.

Substances The data presented in table 8 demonstrate that young people who hold paranormal beliefs tend to hold less conventional attitudes towards the use and abuse of substances. Thus young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were less likely to consider that it is wrong to become drunk (14% compared with 21%), wrong to smoke cigarettes (35% compared with 45%), wrong to use marijuana (44% compared with 53%), wrong to use heroin (66% compared with 74%), or wrong to sniff glue (73% compared with 80%). Such statistics generate a profile of young people who are more likely to espouse alternative lifestyles.

Sexual morality The suggestion that young people who hold paranormal beliefs are somewhat more likely to espouse non-conventional social values (table 8) is consistent with the data presented in table 9 showing that they are in some ways also less constrained by more conventional views on sexual morality. Thus young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were less likely to agree that it is wrong to have sexual intercourse outside marriage (11% compared with 15%) or under the legal age (17%

compared with 26%). They were also (marginally) less likely to agree that homosexuality is wrong (36% compared with 37%) or that divorce is wrong (18% compared with 19%). On the other hand, young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were (marginally) more likely to argue that abortion is wrong (37% compared with 35%). Overall such statistics support the image of a group of young people more likely to espouse alternative lifestyles.

Law and order The suggestion that young people who hold paranormal beliefs are less concerned about conventional social expectations (tables 8 and 9) is given further support by the data presented in table 10. Young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were more likely to argue that there is nothing wrong with travelling without a ticket (28% compared with 16%), in playing truant from school (24% compared with 13%), in buying cigarettes under the legal age (40% compared with 25%), or in buying alcoholic drinks under the legal age (52% compared with 37%). Consistent with this more cavalier attitude toward the law, there is also less respect for the police. Young people who believed that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead were less likely to agree that the police do a good job (48% compared with 57%). Such statistics support the image of a group of young people more likely to challenge authorities.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the individual differences tradition within social psychology, this paper set out to examine the worldview of young people who believe that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead. Taking this single question as an indicator of paranormal belief has generated a full, complex and intriguing profile of the part played by such beliefs in the lives of young people in England and Wales today. In particular two key conclusions drawn from these data

deserve further discussion and commentary.

The first key conclusion concerns the level of belief in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead. The fact that nearly one in three young people (31%) hold this belief provides clear evidence that young people today are far from growing up in a world from which the supernatural, the paranormal and the transcendent have been exiled. In a society in which such beliefs remain prevalent, it is also important for the education system to provide space for young people to discuss and to reflect upon such beliefs and to develop a coherent worldview capable of distinguishing between the positive and the harmful implications of any belief system.

The second key conclusion concerns the clear pattern of relationships between belief in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead and a wide range of personal and social attitudes and values. In other words, whether a young person expresses belief or unbelief in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead is by no means totally arbitrary and disconnected from other key aspects of their worldview. While the present data and model of analysis does not allow the causality or the directionality of the relationships to be tested and established, it is at least intriguing to speculate that belief in the paranormal is in some sense determinative of a distinctive view of the personal and social spheres in a way which may help to explain the observed relationship. According to the data, belief in the possibility of contacting the spirits of the dead is associated with lower psychological wellbeing, higher anxiety, greater isolation, greater alienation, less positive social values, and less socially conforming lifestyles.

Building on the secure foundations constructed by the present study, further research could

now develop greater insight into the prevalence and correlates of paranormal belief among teenagers, and the part played by such belief in shaping the teenage worldview.

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Table 1 Supernatural phenomena

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers %	Believers %		
I believe in ghosts	26	73	6648.98	.001
I believe in black magic	9	44	5529.75	.001
I believe that fortune-tellers can tell the future	11	39	3489.92	.001
I believe in the devil	14	38	2448.99	.001
I believe in my horoscope	28	50	1634.74	.001

Table 2 Church-related attitudes

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers %	Believers %		
Church is boring	49	57	160.07	.001
The church seems irrelevant to life today	25	32	157.68	.001
The bible seems irrelevant to life today	29	35	118.36	.001
I believe that I can be a Christian without going to church	42	51	209.66	.001
Religious education should be taught in school	38	36	8.12	.01

Table 3 Personal wellbeing

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers %	Believers %		
I feel my life has a sense of purpose	56	55	3.60	NS
I find life really worth living	71	64	117.89	.001
I feel I am not worth much as a person	11	18	263.47	.001
I often feel depressed	49	58	227.25	.001
I have sometimes considered taking my own life	22	38	901.62	.001

Table 4 Personal anxiety

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers %	Believers %		
I am worried about my sex life	16	20	90.18	.001
I am worried about my attractiveness to the opposite sex	33	38	64.61	.001
I am worried about getting AIDS	57	62	95.19	.001
I am worried about how I get on with other people	51	54	40.69	.001
I am worried about being attacked by pupils from other schools	19	20	17.53	.001

Table 5 Personal support

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers %	Believers %		
I often long for someone to turn to for advice	32	39	128.74	.001
I find it helpful to talk about my problems with my mother	51	47	53.99	.001
I find it helpful to talk about my problems with my father	33	30	30.73	.001
I would be reluctant to discuss my problems with a school teacher	45	49	49.26	.001
I would be reluctant to discuss my problems with a doctor	31	36	85.70	.001

Table 6 Personal alienation

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers %	Believers %		
I like living in my area	76	70	150.30	.001
Vandalism is a growing problem in my area	43	49	106.05	.001
Drug taking is a growing problem in my area	29	37	255.83	.001
Violence is a growing problem in my area	30	36	110.86	.001
Drunks are a growing problem in my area	22	29	171.18	.001

Table 7 School-related attitudes

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers %	Believers %		
School is boring	33	44	385.74	.001
Teachers do a good job	47	39	192.23	.001
I am happy in my school	74	66	214.77	.001
I like the people I go to school with	90	88	33.96	.001
My school is helping to prepare me for life	69	65	37.65	.001

Table 8 Substance use and abuse

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers %	Believers %		
It is wrong to become drunk	21	14	227.18	.001
It is wrong to smoke cigarettes	45	35	277.19	.001
It is wrong to use marijuana (hash or pot)	53	44	247.99	.001
It is wrong to use heroin	74	66	245.11	.001
It is wrong to sniff glue	80	73	210.91	.001

Table 9 Sexual morality

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers %	Believers %		
It is wrong to have sexual intercourse outside marriage	15	11	79.26	.001
It is wrong to have sexual intercourse under the legal age (16 years)	26	17	284.42	.001
Homosexuality is wrong	37	36	7.63	.01
Divorce is wrong	19	18	6.87	.01
Abortion is wrong	35	37	9.99	.01

Table 10 Law and order

	<u>Contact with spirits</u>		X^2	$p <$
	Non-believers	Believers		
	%	%		
There is nothing wrong in travelling without a ticket	16	28	578.67	.001
There is nothing wrong in playing truant (wagging) from school	13	24	585.40	.001
There is nothing wrong in buying cigarettes under the legal age (16 years)	25	40	885.32	.001
There is nothing wrong in buying alcoholic drinks under the legal age (18 years)	37	52	725.60	.001
The police do a good job	57	48	223.72	.001