Paranormal/Supernatural Experiences and Loss

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Abstract
Scientific literature seems to indicate that paranormal/supernatural experiences are more frequent after negative life events or, in any case, after important life changes. This chapter presents some relevant results of an exploratory study which aims to thoroughly analyse the complex relationship between paranormal/supernatural experiences and particularly challenging life events, like, for example, the loss of a loved one. Can we hypothesize that in these cases the paranormal/supernatural experience and/or the interest in the paranormal or in the supernatural are mere instruments that some people utilize as simple defence mechanisms in order to escape a bleak and hard reality? Or, alternatively, can we hypothesize that through a particular experience of loss (which may not necessarily coincide only with the physical death of a significant other) some people attain an expansion of their awareness, a condition of special non-separateness from other living things in a multiplicity of new and interconnected perspectives, and an enhancement of their consciousness so as to get in touch with other, so far unknown, realities? This study especially draws on qualitative data, namely on in-depth interviews with adults who are interested in, and/or are in various degrees familiar with, the paranormal and/or the supernatural.

Key Words: Defence mechanisms, expanded consciousness, in-depth interviews, loss, paranormal/supernatural experiences, qualitative data.

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1. Introduction
The considerations I will present in this chapter constitute the first stage of an exploratory study which aims to thoroughly analyse the complex relationship between paranormal/supernatural experiences and challenging life events especially connected with the experience of loss.

Paranormal experiences may be defined as experiences ‘that fall outside the realm of normative experience or violate scientific explanation or expectations of reality’.¹ Instead, supernatural experiences generally include profound mystical or spiritual experiences, like, for example, an ‘overwhelming feeling of peace and unity with the entire creation, or profound inner sense of divine presence’.²

In this phase, the primary aim of the research focuses on the paranormal/supernatural experiences, and not on the beliefs. Indeed, it is important to point out that most of the studies have so far dealt with paranormal/supernatural beliefs rather than with paranormal/supernatural experiences.³ It is unquestionable that in many cases both the experiences and the beliefs may be part of the life history of an
individual, but it is also unquestionable that the meaning of an experience and the meaning of a belief are per se specific and different. Besides, scientific research has indicated that there are significant relationships between paranormal/supernatural experiences (and not paranormal/supernatural beliefs) and, for example, specific cognitive processes, personological characteristics or components of an individual’s history. Instead, in other cases, other significant relationships only refer to the paranormal/supernatural beliefs and not to the experiences.4 It is generally assumed that paranormal/supernatural experiences are especially frequent after negative life events.5 Given that traumas may predispose a person to go through paranormal/supernatural experiences, can these experiences simply be regarded and dismissed as mere defence mechanisms, that is as processes that the mind unconsciously uses to manipulate reality and, through this, to reduce suffering? Or, instead, could these experiences be viewed as other forms of knowledge through which the mind can further enlarge its potentialities so that it can attain a finer and larger (including supernatural) comprehension of reality? I argue this is a question of the utmost relevance. If we decide to consider the second hypothesis, we should also try to identify and explain the psychological processes leading to this supposed finer and larger comprehension of reality.

Since reports of paranormal experiences are frequently correlated with reports of transcendent/supernatural experiences,6 in this chapter I will refer to both these experiences and to their possible relationship to challenging life events.

Finally, it is important to spend a few words in order to better explain the meaning I am here attaching to the word ‘loss’. In this chapter I am using this term in a broad sense. This means that it does not necessarily coincide with the loss (either physical or affective) of an individual (e.g., a person or an animal) or of an object (a significant property, like a home) but also with the loss of something that belonged to the characteristics of an individual’s personality and/or personal history, like for example her/his feelings of hope, trust, love, self-confidence, her/his good health or sense of identity.

2. Methodology

This preliminary study especially draws on qualitative data, namely on in-depth interviews with adults who are interested in, and/or are in various degrees familiar with, the paranormal and/or the supernatural. The in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 participants (14 females and 6 males), aged between 30-68. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The length of the interviews varies from 18 to 68 minutes. Participants were allowed to talk as long as they liked.

All participants were people that I knew and, most importantly, that were to my knowledge, in a way or other familiar with and/or interested in paranormal/supernatural experiences. The degree of my familiarity with these people was different according to cases. Some were relatives, others were close friends, others were just friends, and others were acquaintances.
In this research area the use of questionnaires is frequent. A very good example of this methodology is provided by the two questionnaires developed by Kennedy and Kanthamani, which focus on the effects of paranormal and spiritual experiences on people’s lives and well-being. These questionnaires are extremely useful. However, in this preliminary phase of the research, in-depth interviews were used—an approach that obviously has its advantages as well as its disadvantages—so as to permit participants to describe their experiences and views more freely. I was absolutely aware of the delicateness of the topic we were going to address, so I decided to leave each participant and myself all the time we needed to complete the task. At the beginning and during the whole course of our conversation I tried to create both in myself and in the person I had in front of me a ‘calm’, concentrated, and trustful disposition. I introduced the topic by using more or less these words: ‘I know you are interested in paranormal/supernatural experiences. I would like to know the story of this interest, how it started and developed. I am asking this question to some people I know and who share our interest in this field’. In a few cases I was even more clear and asked participants if there had been some kind of event that had particularly stimulated this interest. I knew that these people had had some kind of paranormal/supernatural experiences but I preferred to more generally refer to their ‘interest’ in this area. I also told them that the first person I had asked this question to was myself, thus providing a clearer idea of the aim of the research and, hopefully, also a deeper motivation to deal with their task as attentively and openly as they could.

I allowed participants to use their own conceptualizations regarding the terms ‘paranormal’ and ‘supernatural’. Some participants’ experiences leant more on the paranormal, while other participants’ experiences leant more on the supernatural.

Participants came from different backgrounds. They addressed the topic with different perspectives, different words, and different attitudes, according to their personal histories, including their educational background, and their personalities.

In this stage of the research, in order to obtain data characterized by a minimum number of variables, none of the participants were from foreign countries, but all were Italians, who lived in cities or towns in central and northern Italy. No participant lived in southern Italy, a geographical area where the contact with the paranormal/supernatural is traditionally and culturally particularly present.

Each interview is notable and unique in itself. And each interview would deserve at least a chapter of its own.

Besides, when I listened to the taped interviews, I realized how also the sound, the tone, and the rhythm of the voice are important components of each participant’s talk. So, also the nuances of the sound of the voice, the rhythm of the speech and other formal characteristics of participants’ interviews were considered and contributed to the interpretation of data.

On account of all these considerations I decided that in this very preliminary stage I would circumscribe my area of analysis to just a few aspects of participants’
interviews. For this reason, here I selected and analysed only a few fragments of a small number of interviews. As I said before, my approach is qualitative. Hence, I thought I would analyse these linguistic fragments as if they were literary texts.

3. Is It Possible to Relate Paranormal/Supernatural Experiences to a Significant, Often Negative, Life Event or Period? Some Extracts from Participants’ Interviews

In order to address this question, I will quote some extracts from a small number of the interviews I conducted.

The following are the words of a male participant, whom we will call Antonio. Antonio realized he had paranormal capacities and a special sensibility when he was 13.

I was emerging from a childhood that had been particularly difficult. I have now realized that, as far as I can see, in 90% of cases, people who are predisposed to these experiences have had some traumas. They are people who have gone through quite a lot of suffering. […] Some of them avoid talking about it, are closed in themselves…however, one day one finds out that they also have suffered a lot. […] In my opinion, the point is that this suffering strongly compels a person to get in touch with her/his inner self. A child that is obliged to suffer all the time is more inclined to listen to her/himself, to be closed in her/himself and this is an aspect that can facilitate this predisposition. 8

Antonio’s view is clear: negative and painful events predispose a person to these experiences and they do it through a precise process: by obliging this person to get to know her/himself more thoroughly and more deeply.

Another important point is made by Antonio: people sometimes prefer not to mention their suffering. I also hypothesized that some participants were reluctant to admit a link between their paranormal/supernatural experiences and their experiences of loss/suffering because they tend to deny their suffering.

And this is what another participant, Sabina, said when she directly addressed my question regarding the possible antecedents of her interest in the paranormal/supernatural:

This happened more continuously and thoroughly after my husband’s death, as I felt I needed to be connected with him in a way and so I also consulted a medium[…] However, I had been concretely attracted by and interested in the supernatural even before his death. […] Since I was an adolescent I have been interested in all the themes that are connected to spirituality, such
as religions and philosophy [...], also the artistic expressions, for example the symbolist painters of the early 20th century [...]. [...]

As an adolescent I was interested in religions and the world of dreams as well, also because my mother used to tell me her dreams; in a way she lived two parallel lives [...], it was almost as if she was more fascinated by her dreams than by real life, which on the whole was quite grey and repetitive, so I also approached this world and was fascinated by it. [...] I would like to understand the importance of spirit guides, [...] a possible supernatural world [...], which interests me because it is the world where, I think, the people I have loved have gone. [...] This has very much to do with my suffering and with having been abandoned when I was a child, having been separated from my parents and uprooted from my family, so that suffering generally prompts this question: ‘why do I have to suffer?’ [...] I wanted to know where he [her husband] had gone. I did not want to reach him and be closer to him, because …maybe I did not want to feel so lonely and, I don’t know, I wanted to know where he might have gone. [...] I like the spiritual experience also because [...] maybe I would like to get stronger.9

There are at least three important points in Sabina’s interview: 1) the connection with the loss of her husband, 2) the connection with two childhood experiences – one, the closeness to her mother’s world through her mother’s interest in the world of dreams, the other her early separation from her family, and 3) the idea that pursuing this interest might possibly make her feel stronger.

I will now quote an extract from another interview, given by a woman, whom we will call Franca:

[…] there was an event that opened me to the world […] I found out that he [her second husband] was not what I had seen. There was another world behind and I had started to see it and this was traumatic. After that, I fell in a deep depression. I found myself in an apartment, alone, with a child, the cold of solitude and depression. […] I had to search, to find […]. I started nourishing this spiritual faith, reading books on this spiritual part and I understood that I had a great sensibility and that many things arrived to me that I had not been aware of before. […] [This experience] helped me understand myself more deeply and […] acknowledge that I had to develop this spiritual part, like Joseph that was thrown naked into a pit by his brothers. Yes, sometimes we reach that level in the pit, where you can only climb up the pit
again, because you cannot go below that point. Yes, I saw the pit, the darkness of the pit.\textsuperscript{10}

Franca’s talk emotionally introduces the listener into her drama and slowly accompanies her/him in her journey to her rebirth. She speaks calmly, solemnly, and spontaneously, as if she were in front of a big audience who is silently listening to her.

Another participant, a woman we will call Teresa analysed her psychological and spiritual transformation with a strong emotional involvement and, at the same time, scientific accuracy.

She describes a period in her life in her twenties:

[…] I felt empty […] I felt that every time I got what I wanted I was not happy […] I began to realize the meaning of another dimension, which immediately filled me with a greater solidity and self-confidence, not as a specific person, with my qualities, my strong points, and my abilities, but as a part of a whole. It is a whole that has invaluable possibilities by itself. From this experience I got the feeling that nothing was impossible to me, but not as a specific body or a specific mind, but as a spiritual entity […]. At the same time […] I also experienced my smallness within this whole but I also felt I was a part of it and that I needed to embrace it more and more. […] My childhood was not particularly happy. Suffering can certainly sharpen our sensibility, and at the same time it can strengthen the use of defence mechanisms, […] it is difficult to distinguish on a case-by-case basis. Since I was a child I had strange feelings I cannot describe well. There were moments in which I was particularly aware of myself – I might call them kind of experiences of loss of identity – suddenly, without any warning, it was as if someone were tapping on my shoulder – a sort of call, so that I felt that I could be anything, the leaf that fell from the tree, the wind I felt on my cheek, that passer-by I met in the street; I lost the limits of my body and of my personality. In a way these were ambivalent feelings because they filled me with a sense of freedom and at the same time with a tremendous fear I might have lost my identity and so I fought against this feeling. […] Later on, these feelings were transfigured and produced less fear […]. I met a person, then others […] I became familiar with these teachings […] [Teresa is here referring to the principles connected to Hindu philosophy]. They gave me strength, serenity, and balance […] and produced an enormous difference […].\textsuperscript{11}
For reasons of space I will not comment on an interview given by a musician. It would especially deserve a chapter of its own as it connects the aesthetic and the spiritual/supernatural experiences. Suffice here to mention an experience she had at the age of three. She heard some music coming from a far window and felt she was ‘connected both with myself and with what was happening there […], a deep connection with myself and with everything […], a sort of matrix […], a cast of a basic experience of interconnection’. This experience had occurred in a period that had immediately followed a traumatic event, an experience of disruption, as she had been removed from her home. It almost seems that the experience of interconnection could counterbalance the experience of disruption.

This example is all the more notable because research findings indicate that paranormal and transcendent experiences are positively and significantly correlated with interest in artistic creativity.\textsuperscript{12}

Finally, it is important to point out that some participants were not able to clearly identify some kind of antecedents to their interest in paranormal/supernatural experiences. Most of them simply stated that this interest had always been part of themselves.

4. Conclusions

We have to acknowledge that in most cases it is difficult, and sometimes very difficult, especially for the interviewer, to identify and understand the events, both exterior and/or interior, that fostered the emergence of participants’ experiences, interests, and capacities in the paranormal/supernatural field. Some participants more easily referred to specific events of their personal histories, others were more reserved as to mentioning specific life events and preferred to mention only their inner – both cognitive and emotional – experiences.

This variety might also depend on participants’ personalities and on their degree of familiarity with the interviewer. However, in most cases, participants seemed to identify a specific event or situation when their interest in the paranormal/supernatural clearly developed, though at the same time they also reported that a predisposition for this kind of experiences had in a way been present in their lives even before. Participants referred to different kinds of experiences of loss: the death of a spouse, the betrayal on the part of a husband, the fear of losing one’s identity, their loss of hope, of meaning in their lives, or of their family.

Some participants also seemed to envisage the emotional and cognitive processes through which they recovered from their experiences of loss. In these cases, suffering becomes a synonym for awareness through a sort of experience of death and rebirth and a struggle for survival.

At this very early stage of our exploratory study we are not yet able to know whether these experiences can be simply defined as defence mechanisms. Further research is needed in order to better clarify this point. However, it is possible to hypothesize that in many cases these experiences may serve a consolatory function...
but that on the whole their meaning is not circumscribed to it. Indeed, it is highly conceivable that they contribute to expanding and intrinsically transforming the individual’s consciousness along new and still unexplored directions.

Notes

6 See, for example, Kennedy and Kanthamani, ‘An Exploratory Study of the Effects of Paranormal and Spiritual Experiences on Peoples’ Lives and Well-Being’.
8 Extract from the interview with Antonio.
9 Extract from the interview with Sabina.
10 Extract from the interview with Franca.
Extract from the interview with Teresa.


**Bibliography**


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