A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF SOURCE MONITORING IN THE CONTEXT OF SUBJECTIVE PARANORMAL EXPERIENCES

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INTRODUCTION

One of the conclusions of Prospero Lambertini, who was charged with the task of investigating psychic events in the mid 18th Century was that it is difficult for a prophet to distinguish his own thoughts from extrasensory messages. (Jahn, 2002). With that said, the ability to separate memory and imagination from paranormal inputs was described as essential in the context of the remote viewing experiments (Puthoff & Targ, 2002). This ability would seem to be an important process for understanding many other paranormal experiences, and of potential relevance for heightening ESP performance in the laboratory. ‘Source-monitoring’ is the process whereby one discriminates between the sources of a memory or a perception (e.g., Johnson, Hashroudi & Lindsay, 1991). This may be deciding whether imagery is internal in source compared to what is external, deciding on the source of one external stimulus compared with another, or distinguishing between different sources of one’s own mental imagery. Source monitoring in the context of parapsychology, would also stretch to a source decision of ‘self’ versus ‘paranormal’. If it is difficult to distinguish source, what sort of cues are employed to make the choice that imagery is from a psi source or from the self?

The usual mechanisms for deriving the source of an impression should be explored before considering what happens in a paranormal context. It is true that people remember and experience the world from two different sources, those derived from the external world, perceptions, and those generated from the internal world of imaginary, reasoning and thought processes (Johnson & Raye, 1981). Both sources produce memories, which in some manner may be considered to be as ‘real’ as one another; as a record is laid down for both (Johnson & Raye, 1981). There are several cues to the normal process of distinguishing whether an experience derives from a real, perceptual source or an imaginal source summarized in Table 1.

Table 1  Cues employed to distinguish the source of mental imagery (summarized from several authors in Simmonds, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CUES TO PERCEPTION</th>
<th>CUES TO IMAGINATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More decision making</td>
<td>Less focused cognitive activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to concrete reality</td>
<td>Internal subjective space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External objective space</td>
<td>Derived from the self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defined and full of detail</td>
<td>Diffuse, incomplete and vague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several sensory modalities</td>
<td>Fewer sensory modalities involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Constant’ quality</td>
<td>Fleeting and inconsistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involuntary</td>
<td>Under voluntary control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Private</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lindsay and Johnson (2000) suggest that source is inferred from a variety of aspects of an experience; perceptual, semantic, and affective content of the thoughts, images and feelings that come into ones mind. They suggest that similar processes are executed for source of memories and perceptions.

Roll (1966) suggested that where ESP is identified from normal memory and imagery processes, it may be because the ESP impression, or impression judged to be from an ESP source lacks the obvious stimulus that
ordinary memory traces have associated with them. Therefore, something may be labeled as deriving from a psi source because it is inconsistent with the previous mental or actual activities; it breaks the normal rules. He describes for example how realistic cases of ESP which seem to have a large correspondence with a real event, usually occur in dreams rather than the waking state.

Several authors have noted that at least subjective and possibly objective ESP may occur at the boundary between reality and imagination (e.g., Blackmore & Rose, 1997; Williams, 1997; Simmonds, 2003). In other words, psi is experienced where the usual rules for allocating source are disrupted. ‘Psi’ is noticed because experiences are unfamiliar, and qualitatively different from the norm. For example, dream imagery that is subjectively realistic may be more likely to be consciously noticed as dreams are usually associated with bizarre symbolic imagery. Likewise, waking thought that is subjectively bizarre may be more noticed as this state is usually associated with logical thinking. Some support for this was demonstrated in a ganzfeld experiment, where there were non-significant trends toward a relationship between subjective mental imagery being judged more ‘external’ rather than internal in source and both subjective psi and psi performance.

Woofitt’s (1992) work on paranormal experiences applied discourse analysis to peoples’ narratives of paranormal experiences. This indicated that mundane experiences are often described as preceding the unexpected experience, in a similar manner to the description of traumatic events. As such, a paranormal experience is inconsistent with what just preceded it, and it ‘stands out’. It is clear however that both experiencing and explaining tendencies are necessary in a psychic experience. This is supported in Wolfradt’s et al. (1999) finding that a combination of analytic and experiential thinking styles, relate to psi experiences, beliefs and perceived abilities.

To date, there have been few systematic and in-depth studies on source monitoring in the context of subjective paranormal experiences1. This study explores the phenomena from a qualitative perspective with a range of participants who have differing levels of personal psychic experiences.

**METHODS**

**Design**

This research takes a qualitative approach and seeks to explore subjective paranormal experiences with a specific focus on source monitoring of imagery.

**Participants**

Recruitment was undertaken by word of mouth and advertisement via the Rhine Research Center for people who have had psychic experiences and were willing to be interviewed about them. Participants were mostly recruited from the Rhine Research Center’s monthly Paranormal Experiences Group (PEG) and by word of mouth. The PEG is a discussion group of people who have had or who regularly have psychic experiences. Participants with a variety of different forms of experiences were recruited. Between ten and twenty interviews were planned to be carried out for this study.

**Data collection**

Data collection will take place by means of face-to-face interview at locations and times mutually arranged by the participant and researcher. Interviews will take place in the Rhine Research Center in Durham, North Carolina, or at participants’ homes. Interviews will be semi-structured (see appendix for the questions) which allows for consistency across interviews (in terms of set questions) but also for flexibility and for relevant areas of interest and focus to develop according to individual experiences and beliefs. Each interviews will be tape-recorded and transcribed.

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1 Although Boerenkamp (e.g., 1987) for example, has explored paranormal impressions of psychics from a number of perspectives.
PLANNED ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis

The overall approach taken will be phenomenological. As the subject matter concerns subjective paranormal experiences which often encompass spiritual facets, it is considered that a combination of grounded theory (e.g., Glaser, 1992) and transpersonal methods (see Braud & Anderson, 1998) should be utilized to extract themes. Grounded theory allows theory to emerge from the data, rather than taking a hypothesis-testing approach. As such, data will generate greater understanding of the subjective process of distinguishing sources of mental imagery. Interviews will be analyzed by listening intuitively on different levels, paying attention to the emotional reaction of the researcher, the emotional tone of voice of those describing paranormal experiences and to recurring words and themes at the level of content. As a result, themes associated with cues and aspects of experiences for distinguishing what is psi-related to what is not psi related will be generated and written into a report of source monitoring. Transcripts and the analysis will be made available to participants as a check for validity and to allow interviewees to add their perspective into the analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author would like to thank the PA reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of this research brief.

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

Interview questions.

- What does ‘psychic’ mean to you?
- Can you describe the types of experiences that you have?
- For you, what is it like to have an experience?
- What sort of conditions, state of consciousness, etc. are associated with your having an experience? E.g., Can you choose to have an experience?
- Can you describe how your psychic experiences differ from your normal thoughts/feelings/sense of self?
- How is your sense of self maintained during a psychic experience?
- Do you know in the moment that you are having a psi-influenced image or is the realization after the event?
- Is there anything about the “imagery” that makes it stand out from your normal imagery? If so, how is it different?
- Have you ever had an experience that was unwelcome or that intruded upon you? If so, how did it feel?
- Do you practice any means of protecting yourself from unwanted psi?
- Have you ever felt that a psychic influence became part of you? What was that like? Did it persist after the event?
- How do you realize that something is not coming from you?