



Hauntings and Apparitions



In some ways, contact with the dead has served as one of the driving cultural beliefs and experiences that founded parapsychology. Much of the Society for Psychical Research's investigative work from the 19th century up until the mid-20th century focused on both mental and physical mediumship as a means to contact the dead. It was also the case that apparitions and hauntings were viewed as a sign of survival. As early as 1889, Henry Sidgwick, former president of the SPR, conducted a five-year survey of apparitional experiences. In sum, 10% of the sample reported some type of ghostly encounter.

Parapsychology has spent much of the last several decades focusing predominantly on PSI research in the laboratory. However, the occasional study on haunting activity and apparitions still occurs. In the last decade (perhaps due to the popularity and utterly unscientific nature of ghost-hunting television shows), there has been a small revival of haunting research (the current Author being one example). Let's examine what has been found.

Features of Haunting and Apparitional Experiences



Before moving to the debate of whether apparitions and hauntings are proof of the survival hypothesis, it is worthwhile to examine haunting and apparitions as a type of experience. Regardless of the actual origin of its nature, a haunting experience, simply treated as an experience, is not uncommon. Approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the population will report belief in ghosts (Rice, 2003), and $\frac{2}{3}$ of midwest samples have reported what they describe as a haunting experience (Laythe & Owen, 2012).

A more recent survey of apparitional experiences conducted by Watt, Wiseman, and Reuter (2009) asked over 3,000 participants to report their haunting experiences. The following characteristics were found on the nature of such experiences:

1. Visual experiences such as seeing faces in mist (59% of reported cases)
2. Feeling watched by an unseen presence (47% of reported cases)
3. Hearing unaccountable noises or footsteps (35% of reported cases)
4. Seeing objects move on their own macro PK (25% of reported cases)
5. Feeling touched (24% of reported cases)
6. Smelling something unexpected (17% of reported cases)
7. Electronic malfunctions and oddities (16% of reported cases)



Ghosts: Cultural Suggestion or Cultural Interpretation?



There is a great deal of research on paranormal belief and paranormal experience both within parapsychology and in mainstream psychology. One of the most common explanations for haunting or paranormal experiences is referred to as the Cultural Source Hypothesis (Merton, 1968). Essentially, this theory claims that paranormal experience can be explained by cultural suggestion. For example, if a person watches a show about ghosts or reads a book about ghosts and later has an abnormal experience, he or she may interpret it as paranormal, even if other explanations are available. As explained earlier, belief can play a powerful role in how we perceive the world around us.

The Cultural Source Hypothesis is a valid explanation for some haunting and paranormal reports. As we will show you, there are several common cognitive errors that can lead even the best of us to belief-driven conclusions. Yet, a growing body of research suggests more than cultural influence is behind paranormal experiences such as hauntings. In fact, when it comes to haunting experiences, more evidence has supported what is known as the Experiential Source Hypothesis.

The Experiential Source Hypothesis (ESH) was coined by Hufford (1982). It suggests that there are core experiential features (i.e., core stimulus or observed phenomena) that appear to be constant across many forms of paranormal experience, regardless of whether a person has had cultural exposure to such phenomena. Put another way, researchers such as Hufford (1982) and McClennon (1994; 2002) have demonstrated that people will report and describe paranormal experiences in a similar way, even when they had no previous knowledge of others' cultural beliefs and experiences. This line of research suggests that, regardless of what the scientific explanations for haunting and paranormal phenomena are, there are universal features of these events that people readily identify as paranormal, without the intrusion or contamination of culture.



Hauntings and Apparitions: Psychology before Paranormal Conclusions

Haunting phenomena that relies on eyewitness or personal accounts is fraught with problems in terms of scientifically verifying hauntings or paranormal experience. We believe that it is very useful to separate haunting experiences into two categories:

1. Events that happen to a person or involve eyewitness accounts (subjective paranormal experience (SPE))



Introduction to Parapsychology

2. Events that are captured on digital media such as recorders or video cameras (evidence-based paranormal experience (EPE))



Very separate conditions exist in attempting to validate SPE compared to EPE. In fact, SPEs are almost impossible to categorize as paranormal, conclusively because of the myriad of potential psychological explanations for the experience, not to mention cultural influence. EPEs, such as distinct video of apparitions, videos of Psychokinesis, or electronic voice phenomena (EVP), are easier to evaluate based on the following conditions:

1. EPEs cannot be due to hallucination or other psychological factors. In addition, they may not be paranormal. Whatever is captured has physical, verbal, or visual factuality to it.
2. EPEs scientific quality are a function of the procedures used to eliminate potential causes for the phenomena. As a condition of the scientific method, the more you can effectively rule out alternative causes, the more likely EPE becomes evidence of anomalous or paranormal activity.
3. Pareidolia (explained below) can be controlled with EPE by not accepting unclear or mist/distance based footage of haunting activity. Standards with EVP can be set to minimize the influence of pareidolia.



When dealing with haunting and paranormal activity, an important take away message is that science, in its pure form, rarely makes absolute claims. From a scientific perspective, appropriate evidence either contributes to the likelihood of phenomena or decreases the possibility of phenomena. There is no such thing as foolproof evidence in any field of science. Rather, there are very likely only phenomena and laws based on a preponderance of evidence demonstrating the claim.

From this perspective, research is ongoing with haunting and apparition phenomena, and some research suggests that psychology alone is not sufficient to explain away findings as not paranormal.