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Paranormal Belief and the Avowal of Prior Scepticism

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ABSTRACT. A common way in which people warrant their belief in the paranormal is by employing an avowal of prior scepticism. That such avowals are used so often, and cited by others as relevant, suggest they are an effective means of warranting not only the facticity of ostensibly paranormal events but also a belief about the paranormal nature of the event. Their function, it is argued, is to head off potential accusations of gullibility or wishful thinking, and they are analogous to avowals of prior belief by 'sceptics', which head off potential accusations of narrow-mindedness. However, such avowals also point up key theoretical and methodological problems in current paranormal belief research. Problems of representation and constitution are discussed, and greater stress upon functional aspects of expressions of paranormal belief is suggested.

KEY WORDS: belief, discursive psychology, history, mind-reading, paranormal, psychokinesis, rhetoric, scepticism

One of the less controversial areas of research within parapsychology is that which is concerned with paranormal belief. Regardless of whether genuine paranormal events take place, around half of people in Western Europe and America report belief in some sort of paranormal phenomena (Blackmore, 1997; Haraldsson, 1985; Newport & Stausberg, 2001). Not surprisingly, there has been a considerable amount of research carried out in an attempt to understand such beliefs and, given widespread scepticism about the existence of the paranormal among psychologists, a psychology of error has dominated. For example, there has been the so-called 'cognitive deficits hypothesis'—which associates paranormal belief with relatively low cognitive abilities, such as low IQ (e.g. Smith, Foster, & Stovin, 1998), a poor understanding of probability (e.g. Blackmore, 1997), a lack of scientific education (e.g. Otis & Alcock, 1982), and so on—and the so-called 'social marginality hypothesis'—which has associated paranormal

belief with socially marginal groups such as the poor (e.g. Wuthnow, 1976), the elderly (e.g. Emmons & Sobal, 1981), ethnic minorities (e.g. Tobacyk, Miller, Murphy, & Mitchell, 1988) and women (e.g. Randall, 1990). Other research has associated paranormal belief with personality traits (e.g. Auton, Pope, & Seeger, 2003; Thalbourne, 1995) and other psychological attributes such as fantasy proneness (e.g. Irwin, 1990, 1991), a propensity to find correspondences in distantly related material (e.g. Blackmore & Moore, 1994; Brugger et al., 1993), and a need for control (e.g. Irwin, 1992; Lawrence, Edwards, Barraclough, Churchy, & Hetherington, 1995). Despite the large body of research into paranormal belief, which has been overwhelmingly concerned with identifying individual differences between 'sceptics' and 'believers', findings have been far from conclusive (Irwin, 1993; Wiseman & Watt, 2006).

One reason for this may be the methods that psychologists have used. Invariably, questionnaires, such as the Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (Tobacyk, 1988), have been used to measure the beliefs of participants, and even those who have used these scales have questioned their worth (Lawrence, 1995; Lawrence, Roe, & Williams, 1998). Indeed, the most recent survey of the research has explicitly called for a new measure of paranormal belief (Wiseman & Watt, 2006). Whether such questionnaires 'measure' belief is, of course, a more fundamental question. In relation to attitude questionnaires, Potter and Wetherell (1987) have pointed to problems of variability (individuals often express varying attitudes in different contexts), of constitution (categories employed in questionnaires may not reflect participants' 'object of thought') and of representation (an expression of an attitude may not represent an internal mental state). Such criticisms have led some psychologists to take a different approach to avowals of attitude, and to examine their interactional function rather than rely upon their descriptive properties.

This paper is concerned with particular avowals of belief, namely avowals of belief in the paranormal that are accompanied by avowals of prior scepticism. These typically take the form of an avowal of prior scepticism (e.g. 'I was a sceptic'), often with a description of an ostensibly paranormal event (e.g. 'but I met a psychic who told me things she could not have known'), accompanied by an avowal of subsequent belief (e.g. 'and I realized that the paranormal exists after all'). To anyone who has worked in parapsychology, such accounts are extremely familiar, and countless examples can be found by a simple Google search. Indeed, as James Alcock, a well-known psychologist within this area, pointed out years ago: 'Even the strongest proponents of paranormal claims often preface their remarks by reference to their initial scepticism about the reality of the phenomena' (Alcock, 1981, p. 48). Nevertheless, while the ubiquity of such avowals is well known, to date they have been regarded as insignificant. This paper argues that they point up key theoretical and methodological problems in how we understand paranormal belief, and suggest a greater need to examine the functional aspects of expressions of belief.

The Function of Avowals of Prior Scepticism

The first question one might ask about accounts that employ an avowal of prior scepticism is whether they can be regarded as accurate descriptions of internal mental states. After all, they do not pose the same sort of problem of variability identified, for example, in the case of racist discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). It is perfectly plausible that an individual might hold a position of disbelief about the paranormal, then simply change his or her mind following an ostensibly paranormal event. Nevertheless, even cognitive psychologists have questioned such accounts as accurate descriptions. In one sense, this may not seem surprising since such avowals are often accompanied by a description of an ostensibly paranormal event. Certainly, that part of the account is rarely treated as an unproblematic description, and is typically treated as the product of malobservation, misremembering or some other cognitive error. However, the descriptive properties of the avowals of belief themselves have also been questioned. When James Alcock pointed out the ubiquity of such accounts in the quote cited above, he questioned whether the individuals themselves were really sceptical. Here is the context in which the quote appeared:

In our society, individuals are expected to act in a critical manner when evaluating evidence for a claim. Even the strongest proponents of paranormal claims often preface their remarks by reference to their initial scepticism about the reality of the phenomena, scepticism which supposedly was overcome by the weight of confirming empirical evidence. (Alcock, 1981, p. 48)

By the use of ‘supposedly’, Alcock questioned whether ‘the initial scepticism about the reality of the phenomena’ had actually been overcome, and since he refers to ‘the strongest proponents of paranormal claims’, we can only assume that he was questioning their initial scepticism rather than their subsequent belief. The clear implication seems to be that, by referring to their initial scepticism, individuals can present themselves as having acted ‘in a critical manner’. Given that psychologists such as Alcock have typically treated avowals of belief as straightforward representations of actual beliefs, this stress upon the functional rather than descriptive nature of such avowals is noteworthy. At the very least, it illustrates the point that the problem of treating at least some avowals of belief as descriptive has been recognized by psychologists other than those who take a discursive approach, and suggests that the functional properties of such avowals may be relevant to a wider audience.

Conversation analysts have already carried out relevant research. By examining accounts of extraordinary (albeit not paranormal) events, Jefferson (1984) identified the ‘At first I thought ... but then I realized’ format, and argued that such a device allowed speakers to present themselves as reacting normally to an extraordinary event. Wooffitt (1992), in his examination of accounts of ostensibly paranormal events, identified the ‘I was just doing *x* ... when *y*’ format, and argued that this allowed speakers to demonstrate social

competence to a potentially sceptical hearer. In both cases, we can see how speakers describe events in ways that construct the reported events as factual.

However, while 'At first I thought ... but then I realized' might itself be described as an avowal of prior scepticism, and while Wooffitt's work focused upon accounts of the paranormal, the argument here is different. First, it is not based upon the detailed analysis of spontaneous talk associated with conversation analysis, nor does it seek to identify a previously unnoticed discursive format, but rather it is a broader argument about a common and already known form of belief avowal that can be found in written discourse (though it could be found in spoken discourse as well). Second, we are concerned here not only with descriptions of personal experience but also with described positions in relation to that experience, and with positions relating to indirect evidence such as the experience of others. This is an important distinction since Potter (1996) has already noted that a claim to initial scepticism, albeit in a quite different context, can be seen as an example of stake inoculation. By countering potential criticisms of motivation or expectation, the speaker can present his or her claim as the product of the facts themselves, facts so strong that they overcame his or her scepticism (Potter, 1996, p. 126). In the context of the paranormal, however, the claim to being sceptical has a particular relevance, referring not merely to doubt about the existence of paranormal phenomena but rather to disbelief. Indeed, the most ardent debunkers of the paranormal are typically described as 'sceptics' (e.g. Irwin, 1989). Far from being a position that suggests a lack of stake or interest, 'sceptic' typically implies a position of no less stake or interest than that of the believer. Furthermore, as we shall see, avowals of prior scepticism are used in descriptions of experience that are unlikely to be disputed, but where the reporter's interpretation of such experience is likely to provoke disagreement. Thus, it will be argued, such avowals warrant not only the facts as independent of the speaker, but also the position taken by the speaker regarding these events: that is, that these events not only happened but were genuinely paranormal. In short, we are concerned less with matters of experience than with matters of belief and identity.

To understand the function of the avowal of prior scepticism, it is useful to bear in mind that, in relation to the paranormal, belief (in the form of scepticism, i.e. disbelief in the paranormal) and identity (sceptic) are normatively associated with certain cognitive and motivational traits such as critical thinking and a reluctance to believe too easily. Belief in the paranormal, by contrast, is typically associated with gullibility and wishful thinking (Coelho, 2005; Lamont, 2006). However, to describe oneself as a sceptic in relation to the paranormal is also to open oneself up in many situations to the accusation of narrow-mindedness. Hence, the ubiquity of individuals who describe themselves as 'sceptical but open-minded' about the paranormal (in contrast with the complete absence of those who describe themselves as gullible and narrow-minded). As we shall see, those who employ such avowals orient to such 'category entitlements' (Potter, 1996).

It is also worth remembering that only some reports of ostensibly paranormal phenomena are likely to be disputed in terms of whether the events really happened. Paranormal experiences can be attributed not only to self-deception on the part of the observer, but also to deception by a pseudo-psychic. In such cases, a sceptical audience is concerned less with the theory that the reported events actually happened than with the theory that what happened was genuinely paranormal. The matter in dispute is not that the reported facts were independent of the speaker, but that there nevertheless exists a non-paranormal interpretation of the reported facts. Thus, such an account becomes contestable when it implies an attribution to a paranormal cause: that is, when it takes the form not of 'it really happened' but rather 'what happened was real'.

An obvious example of this is the ostensibly paranormal metal-bending associated with Uri Geller. There can be few people who would dispute that Geller has caused forks and spoons to bend by rubbing them; it has been observed by countless witnesses and shown on television on numerous occasions. Geller's many detractors have never questioned that this has happened, or that it was caused by Geller, but dispute that it was the result of paranormal abilities (e.g. Couttie, 1988; Randi, 1975). There is no reason for any witness describing such a feat to expect even the most sceptical audience to dispute that it took place. If a witness were to imply a paranormal attribution to the feat, however, s/he would no doubt anticipate potential accusations of gullibility or wishful thinking, since many people would assume that s/he had been deceived not only into failing to see how it was done, but also into concluding that it was genuine. Such an account of ostensibly paranormal phenomena is problematic not because it might be dismissed as untrue (in the sense that it did not happen) but because it amounts to an expression of belief in the paranormal cause of the event.

This can be seen more clearly by looking at the most recent biography of Geller, by the journalist Jonathan Margolis (1998), in which there are several examples of the avowal of prior scepticism. The initial example comes from the introduction, and is the first reference to the author in a book that employs the first person throughout. Margolis writes: 'Readers are entitled, of course, to know from what position I started my voyage around Uri Geller. The answer is: considerable skepticism' (p. 5). Margolis then goes on to list a number of examples of previous articles of his that expressed a sceptical view about paranormal phenomena, and concludes the section by stating: 'I hope I make the point that I have a decently jaundiced eye' (p. 5).

The first question we might ask is why 'readers are entitled, of course, to know' his position at the start, and the most obvious answer would seem to be that they might suspect he has an agenda: that is, he would seem to be orienting to potential accusations of stake or interest. The second point worth noting is that he uses the word 'jaundiced'. He admits to being not merely sceptical about the paranormal but prejudiced on the subject. This is not a

disclaimer of stake but rather an admission of one, and one that opens him up to potential accusations of narrow-mindedness. Such an accusation is not likely, however, since the conclusion of the book, which becomes increasingly clear to the reader as the book proceeds, is that: 'The evidence for Uri Geller, I submit, is utterly compelling' (p. 288). Had the conclusion been different, it is difficult to imagine that Margolis would have begun by stressing such prejudice against the paranormal. Whether this avowal of prior scepticism is accurate or not, therefore, it is only rhetorically useful when accompanied by an avowal of subsequent belief.

In making the case for Geller's abilities, Margolis also cites others who employ a similar rhetorical strategy. When asked what he thinks about Geller's powers, a witness states:

I used to think he was just an old magician but I totally believe in telepathy and in people having a psychic affinity for certain people, and I think he is genuine, yes. He made my key bend right here on my hand while I was holding it, and there is *no* way on earth he could have done that by trickery. (p. 53)

After employing the avowal of prior scepticism, the witness warrants his conversion by referring to an experience in which his key bent on his hand, and explicitly rules out trickery as an explanation. There is no explicit attempt to head off potential accusations that this did not happen, only the possibility that what happened was trickery. This is not a description designed to present the facts as independent of the speaker so much as one designed to warrant the speaker's attribution of the facts to a paranormal cause, to justify his belief that 'he [Geller] is genuine'. That such a strategy is an effective warrant of a position of belief in Geller's powers can be seen from the comments of book reviewers, who cite it as significant. For example, from the *Sunday Mercury* and *Sunday Telegraph*, respectively, both of which appear on Geller's own website:

Jonathan Margolis started out as a sceptic and was gradually overwhelmed by the evidence as he researched and wrote *Uri Geller—Magician or Mystic?* (Orion £6.99). He is not alone because this book seems to be littered with scoffing conjurers and sneering scientists who have gradually changed their tune. ('Review of *Uri Geller*', 1999b)

Jonathan Margolis started his Uri Geller biography from a position of considerable scepticism, but discovered what he regards as compelling evidence that Geller may indeed be what his supporters claim. This reviewer approached Margolis's marvellously readable volume from a position of extreme scepticism but is now a convert—well, almost. ('Review of *Uri Geller*', 1999a)

The latter extract shows not only that these readers of the book regard the avowal of prior scepticism as a citable warrant of belief in Geller's powers, but also that it can be used to warrant a sympathetic reading of the book. The reviewer has no extraordinary event to describe, one that might be dismissed

as unreal; he has merely read a book. It is his claim that, having done so, he is 'a convert—well, almost', that is warranted by an avowal of 'extreme scepticism'. The extremity of the avowal, when compared to the hedged claim, orients to the contestable nature of such a position. That we are concerned here with matters of belief rather than experience can further be seen from another reviewer from the *Jewish Chronicle*, which also appears on Geller's website:

I came to this book a rationalist and a skeptic. Yet, open-mindedness requires me to report that Jonathan Margolis' carefully researched, scrupulously detailed and even-handed exploration of Uri Geller's paranormal capacities suggests some of our current scientific understandings will need radical revision in the next century. ('Review of Uri Geller', 1998, italics added)

Once again, the reviewer is not describing a controversial experience, only providing a sympathetic review of the book. The avowal of prior scepticism is explicitly accompanied by an appeal to open-mindedness as a warrant for his position. The section in italics could easily be removed without any loss of coherence to the review. That it has been included only makes sense in the context of the subsequent claim that 'some of our current scientific understandings will need radical revision in the next century'. Despite the claim being hedged—'suggests'—and attributed by the reviewer to the author's 'carefully researched, scrupulously detailed and even-handed exploration', the position is nevertheless prefaced by an explicit avowal of scepticism and an appeal to open-mindedness. Such an avowal may indeed be an accurate description of a prior position, but its unnecessary use in such an account suggests a purpose, and its inclusion would make little sense in the context of a sceptical conclusion, while its achievement is that it warrants the potentially contestable claim.

It is notable that the extracts of book reviews cited above all appear on Geller's own website, and many other psychics' websites also cite comments from clients such as 'I was sceptical about psychics until I spoke with ...'. At one level, this can be seen as further evidence that the efficacy of such avowals in warranting belief is recognized. Their function, in this context, is to imply the authenticity of the psychic's powers by warranting the belief of his or her clients. In this sense, they are similar to avowals of prior scepticism that can be found elsewhere, from promotions of pyramid selling to endorsements of domestic cleaning products. In such cases, they work to warrant the facticity of the claim (e.g. that you can make money, that it really cleans) rather than the belief of the client. It is the former, rather than the latter, which matters in this context. However, it is harder to imagine either a client having a particular stake or interest in, or else someone disputing the client's belief in, say, the efficacy of a cleaning fluid. Avowals of a client's prior scepticism about the paranormal may be used to imply the authenticity of a psychic by warranting the belief of the client, but such a belief is in more need of warranting than others.

Finally, there is nothing new about this (Lamont, 2004). Victorian spiritualists, for example, regularly used avowals of prior scepticism to warrant not only the objective reality of the phenomena they had witnessed in the séance room but also their own belief that such phenomena were the work of spirits. 'I have been forced to the conclusion that we are surrounded by intelligent beings who once existed in material bodies like our own,' claimed a prominent spiritualist in 1877; 'I have been, in spite of a bitterly opposed state of mind, compelled to believe in Spiritualism' (Beattie, 1877, p. 552). When the London Dialectical Society interviewed spiritualists in 1869, many employed avowals of prior scepticism in both first-hand and second-hand accounts in order to warrant both the facticity of the reported events and the subsequent conversion of the witnesses (London Dialectical Society, 1873, pp. 129, 134, 136, 139, 142, 145, 157), as did others elsewhere in this period (e.g. Burns, 1869; D.D. Home, 1863, p. 174; Mme. Home, 1921, p. 87; 'J.J.S.', 1860; Jones, 1869; Webster, 1865, p. 3). Even Victorian mediums themselves cited the prior scepticism of subsequent converts as a warrant of their own powers (e.g. D.D. Home, 1863; Mme. Home, 1921). The employment of such avowals in relation to paranormal experiences and beliefs is therefore not only widespread but also long-standing.

The Avowal of Prior Belief

If an avowal of prior scepticism can be used to warrant an avowal of subsequent belief, one might expect the reverse to be true: that is, that an avowal of prior belief would be used to warrant an avowal of subsequent scepticism. After all, despite a position of scepticism being considered normal by most psychologists, it is not necessarily the norm. As pointed out above, around half the population express a belief in some sort of paranormal phenomena, and so far as that reflects popular perceptions, one might expect any individual expressing disbelief to be as likely to anticipate potential accusations of narrow-mindedness as a believer might be to anticipate accusations of gullibility or wishful thinking. While psychologists might have largely treated disbelief as a lack of belief, and not worthy of the same level of investigation, disbelief nevertheless remains a position in need of justification in many real-world contexts.

One way of presenting a position of disbelief while avoiding an accusation of narrow-mindedness is to employ an avowal of prior belief. Consider the following introduction to a book that argues throughout against the reality of paranormal phenomena. The introduction is entitled 'The Reluctant Sceptic', and begins as follows:

My own research into the paranormal began in my early teens. In those days it seemed that the evidence was incontrovertible. ... But skeptics scoffed at the whole idea. ... I looked forward to gathering together hard, bomb-proof evidence, nailing it to the wall and saying to the scoffers 'Go on, pick the bones out of that.' (Couttie, 1988, p. 1)

As with the avowal of prior scepticism, this is not an attempt to deny stake or interest but is an admission of having had an agenda, and only makes rhetorical sense in the context of this agenda having been subsequently overcome by the (lack of) evidence. The avowal of prior belief is strong, being warranted by the seemingly ‘incontrovertible’ facts. It is accompanied by a dismissal of sceptics as narrow-minded ‘scoffers’, in contrast to the author’s eager anticipation of proving them wrong. That this did not happen demonstrates not only the lack of evidence for the paranormal but also the author’s open-mindedness. There is no description of any ostensibly paranormal experience, only a general reference to the evidence, but there is no attempt to warrant that it was incontrovertible as it is unnecessary in this context. This is also the case in the following example, where personal experience is cited:

It was just over thirty years ago that I had the dramatic out-of-body experience that convinced me of the reality of psychic phenomena and launched me on a crusade to show those closed-minded scientists that consciousness could reach beyond the body and that death was not the end. Just a few years of careful experiments changed all that. I found no psychic phenomena—only wishful thinking, self-deception, experimental error and, occasionally, fraud. I became a sceptic. (Blackmore, 2000, p. 55)

It is hardly surprising that there are no details given of the paranormal experience with, for example, accompanying descriptions of mundane activity prior to its occurrence (cf. Wooffitt, 1992), since there is no attempt here to convince that it was real in any sense. Its purpose seems to be simply to warrant a prior belief in the paranormal, which is then once again juxtaposed with the narrow-mindedness of sceptics (‘closed-minded scientists’), and used to imply a stake in converting them. The reported experience alone would be of little rhetorical use without the avowal of belief that it was paranormal. It is this avowal of belief, not the reported experience itself, which works to warrant the subsequent sceptical position—in which the paranormal is attributed to ‘wishful thinking, self-deception, experimental error and, occasionally, fraud’—by heading off accusations of narrow-mindedness that such a position could otherwise easily provoke. A final example shows how a similarly provocative position, in which belief in the paranormal is attributed to cognitive deficits, is warranted by an avowal of prior belief:

I believed that it was probable that people could transmit thought waves to one another. I believed in religious mysticism and I thought therefore, that as an extension of transmitting thought waves, telekenesis [sic] might be possible. I used to sit for hours trying to move a ping-pong ball across a table. It was only when I could afford a wider range of books that I became a lot more logical, and a lot more observant. (Hutchison, 1991, p. 7)

Again, the avowal of prior belief is accompanied by an admission of interest—‘I used to sit for hours trying to move a ping-pong ball across a table’—but is

then attributed to a lack of education (itself attributed to lack of money), inadequate logic and poor observation. Such a negative presentation of one's own abilities would be difficult to find from any believer in the paranormal, but in the context of someone who no longer suffers from such cognitive deficits, and therefore no longer believes in the paranormal, the attribution is warranted on the basis of personal experience that is difficult to dismiss. Thus, potential accusations of narrow-mindedness are avoided and admissions of prior cognitive deficits are made palatable by juxtaposing them with subsequent cognitive improvement.

Discussion

Avowals of prior scepticism are common, and have been around for a long time. They have been used to warrant not only the facticity of ostensibly paranormal events but also avowals of belief that such events are paranormal. An avowal of paranormal belief leaves the speaker open to accusations of incompetence (e.g. gullibility) and stake (e.g. wishful thinking), and an avowal of prior scepticism not only heads off such imputations but also aligns oneself with the 'positive' traits of scepticism (e.g. critical thinking). This works to warrant the accompanying expression of current belief, which itself lays claim to the equally 'positive' trait of open-mindedness. The widespread use of such avowals, not only by 'believers' but also by book reviewers and psychics, suggests that their functional worth is widely recognized. This is not to say that they are not accurate descriptions of a change in belief, but their unnecessary inclusion alongside avowals of belief suggests a functional role, whether they are accurate descriptions or not.

From a discursive perspective, of course, whether such avowals are accurate descriptions is not the topic of interest. What is interesting is that, from a cognitive perspective, to treat such avowals as descriptive would problematize existing theories of paranormal belief. After all, how does one understand such a belief change in terms of social marginality, cognitive deficits or personality? Did the individual's social marginality increase? Did their cognitive abilities decline? Did their personality change? Furthermore, it has been argued many times, and continues to be argued, that believers are significantly more likely than sceptics to misinterpret a normal event as paranormal, and even that belief in the paranormal *causes* such misinterpretations (Gilovich, 1991; Hergovich, 2004; Singer & Benassi, 1981; Wiseman & Morris, 1995). Yet if sceptics and believers are different types of people, if believers are more credulous or more likely to misinterpret normal events, how do we understand all these people who began as sceptics then became believers?

So far as changes in paranormal belief have been studied, it has been argued that believers are more likely than sceptics to discount disconfirming evidence (Alcock, 1981, p. 48; Alcock & Otis, 1980; Lange & Houran, 2000),

though it has also been argued that education can lead to greater scepticism about the paranormal (Banziger, 1983; Gray, 1984). These two arguments may not be incompatible, but they do not help in explaining the ubiquity of avowals of prior scepticism. If we wish to reconcile these with current theories of paranormal belief, it might be best to argue that those who make such avowals were not really sceptical. This, perhaps, is why James Alcock implied that such avowals were simply rhetoric, but that does not entirely solve the problem.

After all, one might reconcile such descriptions of scepticism with a lack of actual scepticism by arguing that individuals' use of the term referred to doubt rather than disbelief about the paranormal. Perhaps such individuals were pseudo-sceptics, that is, essentially believers whose belief lay dormant until the opportunity arose to misattribute an experience. This might indeed remove the problem in terms of existing theories, but not in terms of existing methods. For what does this tell us about the worth of questionnaire research, upon which almost all of the research rests, and which uses a one-off list of responses to classify an individual in terms of belief or scepticism, and then normally allocates the individual to one of two categories? How do such measures tell the difference between a genuine sceptic and a believer-in-waiting (or, for that matter, a genuine believer and a sceptic-in-waiting)? And if such avowals are not descriptive in any sense, then are they to be understood as the product of deception or self-deception? Perhaps more importantly, if these avowals of belief are purely rhetorical, then this begs the question of whether others are reliable descriptors of what people really believe. The problem may not be that such expressions of belief are 'simply rhetoric', but whether there are other expressions of belief that are 'simply beliefs'.

If avowals of prior scepticism point up a problem of representation in paranormal belief research, there remains a problem of constitution. It is not simply that individuals might not express their actual ongoing beliefs, but that what they say or believe in relation to the paranormal is not necessarily covered by paranormal belief categories. After all, the assumption of such scales is that scepticism and belief are opposite positions along a continuum, yet this only makes sense if there is an 'object of thought' upon which everyone agrees, and towards which participants can express a position of belief/disbelief. Statements in existing belief scales, however, do not distinguish clearly between the existence of a phenomenon and its paranormal nature. For example, the Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (Tobacyk, 1988) includes statements such as 'Witches do exist', 'Black magic really exists', 'Astrology is a way to accurately predict the future' and 'Mind reading is not possible'. Not only do witches and black magic exist, regardless of whether any paranormal forces are involved (Lawrence, 1995), but astrology has often accurately predicted future events, albeit with insufficient reliability to convince most people, and psychologists themselves discuss mind-reading.

Furthermore, many people have not only seen feats of mind-reading that are more akin to ostensible extrasensory perception, but also attribute them to processes that are ambiguous in terms of paranormality. In recent years, mentalists (magicians who have traditionally specialized in the simulation of the paranormal) have increasingly attributed their feats to psychological, rather than psychic, abilities. For example, British television 'psychological illusionist' Derren Brown explicitly rejects the existence of paranormal abilities, yet claims to be able to influence behaviour in extraordinary ways via suggestion and linguistic techniques, and to read body language reliably. Many people who share Brown's scepticism about the paranormal nevertheless accept his claim to abilities that are, as one scientist has pointed out, 'beyond current scientific knowledge' (Singh, 2003). Are such people sceptics or believers in the paranormal? How might anyone who has seen Brown (or many other mentalists elsewhere, who employ similar disclaimers) 'read minds' on television respond to the statement 'Mind reading is not possible', and which of the various causal explanations would qualify as paranormal? The juxtaposition between sceptic and believer, upon which paranormal belief measures depend, only makes sense if participants (and experimenters) are clear upon what constitutes paranormal (as opposed to, say, mysterious or unexplained) phenomena, and even parapsychologists do not agree upon that (Coelho, 2005).

Such questions may be addressed in the future, but the inherently ambiguous nature of the category 'paranormal' suggests this will not be easy. Given the lack of consistent findings from, and admitted problems of, paranormal belief measures, perhaps another approach would be useful. After all, the primary reason given for belief in the paranormal is experience (Clarke, 1995), and conversation analysis has identified ways in which such experiences are commonly described (Wooffitt, 1992). Similarly, a discursive approach to paranormal belief could identify patterns in how such beliefs are expressed. Rather than impose upon participants what amounts to a binary choice of attributions (real versus not real) for abstract categories of phenomena, we can examine to what causal processes specific events are attributed, and how such attributions are warranted. Indeed, a better understanding of how individuals attribute a variety of ostensibly paranormal events might be a step towards addressing the problem of constitution.

It remains the case that many people express a belief both in the paranormal generally, and in various constructed categories of phenomena, whatever they might have in mind when responding. But to explain such expressions in terms of individual differences, whether social or cognitive, is to ignore the interactional nature of expressions of belief and identity (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). Avowals of prior scepticism are one common way in which individuals orient to the interactional consequences of expressing belief. If we accept that expressions of belief are designed to address particular contextual needs, we must question a methodology that assumes certain expressions can be taken to

represent ongoing internal mental states. This is not to say that such expressions do not reflect internal thoughts in some way, of course, but simply that the contextual implications of expressing a position on an inherently controversial subject are significant. Even if psychologists could provide a 'neutral' context in which 'true' beliefs might be expressed, it would bear little relationship to the world beyond the laboratory. If we assume, on the other hand, that avowals of prior scepticism are representative of actual prior (dis)beliefs, we must question a theory that treats sceptics as relatively resistant to paranormal attributions, or sceptics and believers as different types of people. History shows that there are all sorts of people who have expressed beliefs in a wide range of mysterious, unexplained, anomalous, psychic and paranormal phenomena (Lamont, 2006). However, further study of how such beliefs are expressed and warranted may identify patterns of discourse that are used, like avowals of prior scepticism, in a variety of contexts. Indeed, such an approach could form a significant part of a 'discursive parapsychology' (Wooftitt & Allistone, 2005).

One need not assume that spoken and written expressions of belief mirror ongoing internal mental states to recognize that they are normally treated by hearers and readers as if they do. Thus, whatever the cognitive status of an individual's belief, an expressed belief is a social phenomenon that has potential social consequences (cf. Billig, 1987; Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). So far as avowals of prior scepticism attend to such consequences, they work to maintain an individual's avowed belief in the face of potential dispute. In short, they function as a social and discursive form of 'belief maintenance', that is, as a means of warranting one's stated position to others (and, it might be argued, to oneself) that is both grounded in interactional concerns and displayed in talk and text. Cognitive psychologists might regard such discursive warranting as an outward representation of internal mental processes through which 'actual beliefs' are maintained, but the problems of understanding 'actual beliefs' about the paranormal remain (not least the need to access them via avowals of belief). From a discursive point of view, however, it is these avowals that are of primary interest, and it is in the discursive maintenance of avowed beliefs about the paranormal that we not only express but also defend versions of what is possible in our world.

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