Explaining the unexplained: warranting disbelief in the paranormal
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Explaining the unexplained: warranting disbelief in the paranormal

ABSTRACT Psychologists have studied paranormal belief for over a century, but have been concerned with belief in the paranormal rather than disbelief. However, disbelief in the paranormal is a position in its own right and, for many, by no means a self-evident position. An avowal of disbelief is, therefore, a social phenomenon that may involve some interesting discursive work. This article examines the discourse of self-ascribed 'sceptics', and analyses how they warrant their expressed position when faced with an ostensibly paranormal event for which they cannot provide a 'normal' explanation. We show how, for example, through the use of 'definitely/something' constructions, they appeal to an explanation that exists in principle, though the details are not available to them. Such devices can be seen as social and discursive forms of belief maintenance, in that they are designed to maintain a social position established through an avowal of (dis)belief.

KEY WORDS: belief, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, paranormal, scepticism

Introduction

For well over a century, psychologists have attempted to understand belief in psychic or paranormal phenomena (e.g. Carpenter, 1873; Jastrow, 1886). In doing so, they have traditionally approached such beliefs as erroneous, and often the product of misattribution of normal (i.e. non-paranormal) experiences. Such experiences have been attributed to malobservation, probability misjudgement, gullibility and wishful thinking, while belief in the paranormal has been associated with low intelligence, marginal social status, inadequate education, and a lack of critical thinking (e.g. Gilovich, 1991; Irwin, 1993; Wiseman and Watt, 2006). The psychology of error that has dominated the literature can be seen in the titles of journal articles (which invariably refer to belief in the paranormal rather than belief about the paranormal), of books such as How we know what
isn’t so (Gilovich, 1991) and Why people believe weird things (Shermer, 1997), and of various hypotheses that seek to explain ‘belief’ rather than ‘disbelief’ (for example, the ‘misattribution hypothesis’, the ‘cognitive deficit hypothesis’, the ‘social marginality hypothesis’). In short, psychologists have typically treated ‘belief’ rather than ‘disbelief’ as problematic, and sought to understand why people believe in the paranormal rather than why people do not.

Given the widespread scepticism among psychologists about the existence of paranormal phenomena, this asymmetry is hardly surprising, but as research in the sociology of scientific knowledge has shown, there is much to be learned from a symmetrical approach to matters of controversy such as the paranormal (e.g. Collins and Pinch, 1982; Pinch, 1979). This article begins from the position that ‘disbelief’ in relation to the paranormal (commonly referred to as ‘scepticism’) is itself worthy of study. After all, ‘disbelief’ is not the absence of belief, but a belief position in its own right. It may be a position that most psychologists regard as normal, unproblematic, even self-evident, but beliefs in paranormal phenomena have been widespread throughout history and in most cultures, and even in the UK today a majority of people reportedly believe in paranormal phenomena of some sort (Blackmore, 1997; Wiseman and Watt, 2006). In many social situations, therefore, a position of scepticism is not necessarily the norm.

Furthermore, the popular media regularly provide the public with evidence of the paranormal, and alternative ‘normal’ explanations that would undermine such evidence may not be obvious to many people who nevertheless regard themselves as ‘sceptics’. If they wish to justify their position – for example, in a conversation with colleagues or friends who describe events they that have seen or heard about – this might prove problematic. Thus, from a social psychological perspective at least, articulating such a position may involve some interesting discursive work.

The importance of discourse as an arena in which beliefs about the paranormal are expressed has received little attention. Though studies have shown how talk about the paranormal is designed in a way that attends to the interactional context in which it is produced (e.g. Wooffitt, 1992, 2006; Wooffitt and Allistone, 2005), there has been little consideration given to the rhetorical and constructive nature of avowals of belief relating to the paranormal (Lamont, 2007). Instead, research on paranormal belief has relied almost exclusively upon the use of questionnaires, and such an approach is not without problems. In addition to the specific criticisms of paranormal belief questionnaires (e.g. Wiseman and Watt, 2006), there are more fundamental issues such as the problem of constitution (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). For example, participants’ responses to questions about different categories of paranormal phenomena are taken to represent internal mental states, but the questions relate to abstract categories (such as ‘mind reading’) rather than to specific events, and participants’ responses may not reflect beliefs about similar ‘objects of thought’ (Lamont, 2007). One way to provide specific events about which participants might express a view is to show them a pseudo-psi demonstration, but so far as these have been used in experiments, they have been accompanied by questionnaires.
about general categories of paranormal phenomena in an attempt to study how paranormal belief might be related to observation and interpretation of specific 'paranormal' events (e.g. Hergovich, 2004; Wiseman and Greening, 2005). Thus, responses to questions about abstract categories are taken to represent ongoing beliefs while responses to questions about the specific demonstration are used to access observational or interpretational differences (relating to the event itself) between 'sceptics' and 'believers'. This both fails to address the problem of constitution, and raises the question of whether participant responses can be taken as representative not only of beliefs at that time but also of ongoing internal mental states.

This article takes a different approach, by treating participants' discourse about an ostensibly paranormal event as functional, rather than as descriptive of ongoing internal mental states. In the present study, we certainly found that participants' talk included avowals of belief regarding the paranormal. Indeed, one participant reported that 'I don't believe in paranormal activity whatsoever' and, a few minutes later, that 'I don't have strong beliefs against it but I don't have strong beliefs for it'. Since both these expressions came from the same participant, within a few minutes of each other, they can hardly be taken as representative of an ongoing internal position. By treating beliefs as positions that are not only expressed but also defended and warranted in social interaction, this paper seeks to identify how individuals 'maintain' such positions. In this sense, belief maintenance is being seen as a social, discursive process, one involving discursive work in order to uphold a social position (which may indeed correlate with an internal cognitive position, but which is nevertheless primarily a social phenomenon) (see Lamont, 2007). To this extent, the present article adopts the theoretical stance exemplified by discursive psychology (Edwards, 2006; Potter, 2003, 2005).

In the extracts that follow, we argue that the function of participants' talk is primarily that of warranting a position of disbelief (in the paranormal cause of the events they saw) despite the lack of an alternative 'normal' explanation. The particular interactional difficulty identified here can be contrasted with other situations in which individuals might lack explicit knowledge. For example, if someone is asked how a magic trick works, they may respond by saying that they do not know, or they may provide some guesses as to possible methods. In interactional terms, this may be heard as an adequate response provided the speaker is not positioned as having expertise in magic. However, people do not have a stake or interest in denying the reality of magic tricks. What happens in the cases examined here is that participants position themselves as belonging to a certain category, that is, 'a sceptic' or 'sceptical' person. Claiming membership of that category is normatively associated with certain category-properties, such as entitlements and responsibilities (Sacks, 1992). In particular, the context explored here, in which participants are asked to account for potentially paranormal events, is one in which self ascriptions of the 'sceptic' label can be seen to carry a responsibility to provide non-paranormal explanations for events that might otherwise be construed as paranormal. The interactional problem they face is how they are to justify a position in which they reject
these events as paranormal in the absence of a non-paranormal explanation. As we shall see, participants do not merely attribute the events to trickery, or offer some guesses as to possible methods, but rather employ a number of discursive strategies to justify their position.

Data

Relevant discourse is not easily available, so this study created a context designed to provoke sceptical justification talk, one that was intended to be analogous to real life situations in which sceptical views might be in need of justification. Participants were invited to a show at the Edinburgh Fringe entitled ‘Confessions of a Psychic’, followed by a focus group discussion about the show at the psychology department nearby. Recruitment was by block e-mail invitations throughout departments within the University of Edinburgh. It may be worth pointing out that there was no attempt to recruit on the basis of ‘belief’ or ‘scepticism’ since such terms are understood here as discursive positions that occur in certain contexts rather than as ongoing internal mental states. It was expected that the particular context would be one in which participants would talk in a ‘sceptical’ manner about the ostensibly paranormal events in the show. However, the study was concerned not with whether they expressed a sceptical view but rather with how they engaged in ‘sceptical’ talk.

On each of six nights, a group of between three and six participants attended the show, with a total of 25 participants in all. The show, which was explicitly billed as a presentation by an expert on the paranormal, discussed various possible ‘normal’ explanations (i.e. types of deception and self-deception) for paranormal phenomena. However, no particular position was adopted in relation to such explanations; rather, the audience was told throughout that a paranormal event is one without a ‘normal’ explanation, and that establishing the paranormal nature of a phenomenon required all ‘normal’ explanations to be ruled out. The performer also demonstrated certain ostensibly paranormal feats that, though they relied upon certain conjuring techniques, were presented as straight demonstrations. The context of the performance was clearly one of entertainment, but the demonstrations were explicitly designed to be seen as potentially genuine.

For example, in a ‘psychokinesis’ demonstration, which was the main topic of discussion in the extracts below, a die was examined and openly dropped into a glass (by members of the audience) to show that it produced different numbers. The audience was then asked to concentrate on a number (say six), and a member of the audience was asked to drop the die into the glass. The result was a six. This was repeated successfully with another number. On the third trial, however, the number was wrong. This failure was deliberate, and based on a well-known theory in mentalism (the area of performance magic that specializes in the simulation of psychic feats) that perfect predictions are less likely to be viewed as genuine than predictions that are slightly off (Lamont and Wiseman, 1999). The failure on the third trial is also discussed below.
The focus groups were interviewed by a researcher other than the performer, on university premises close to the venue. A brief semi-structured interview (see Appendix) was used to guide the discussions, each of which lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. The discussions were tape-recorded, and the data were transcribed in a way consistent with Jefferson’s (2004) conventions for conversation analysis. The analysis followed general procedures as outlined by discursive psychologists (Edwards, 2006; Potter and Edwards, 2001), in which an initial coding identified relevant talk, and subsequent analysis focused upon construction, variation and rhetorical function of such talk. In the present case, analysis focused on instances in which participants produced avowals of beliefs about the nature of what they had seen. Where participants’ descriptions incorporated avowals of this sort, these descriptions were examined in order to discover the ways in which participants oriented to the sensitivity of such claims.

Discourse analysis is now represented by a variety of analytic forms (McKinlay and McVittie, 2008). The particular analytic processes employed here reflect the broadly conversation-analytic approach adopted by discursive psychology. However, it is clear that the interactional context in which the data to be discussed arose was not one of everyday discourse. Instead, it was an artificially created focus group setting in which participants responded to issues presented to them by a researcher who was herself identified with the performance that was the focus of discussions. The potential difficulties of applying this particular form of analysis to focus group data have been well identified by Puchta and Potter (2004). In the light of this, we have made explicit reference at various points in the analyses to the relevance of the background context of what Puchta and Potter have described as the ‘interactional choreography’ of researcher and participants. We have also made reference to the ways in which various elements of the show are drawn upon by the participants both as means to frame overall responses and to introduce detail into their descriptions in a rhetorically persuasive fashion.

Analysis

During preliminary readings of the transcripts, two themes were easily discernible throughout the groups. First, participants overwhelmingly framed the events as trickery rather than paranormal, that is, at no point did any participant avow the belief that what they had seen was paranormal, while most explicitly stated that they thought they were the result of trickery. While this may not seem surprising, given that the events took place in a theatre as part of a piece of entertainment, it is worth noting that informal feedback, and written reviews of the show, included expressions not only of uncertainty about but also belief in the paranormal nature of some of the demonstrations. That they were the result of trickery therefore, was by no means self-evident. Second, participants nevertheless oriented to a lack of explanation for what they had seen as problematic. Rather than merely appeal to what might seem obvious (for example, that it was simply a trick), all the groups made the matter of explaining
what they saw the dominant topic. While the questions of the interview schedule were designed to direct participants to the topic of explanation, participants in all the groups oriented to explanation as a topic of significance prior to being asked, and engaged in ongoing discursive work relating to possible explanations throughout the discussions.

Subsequent analysis therefore focused upon how participants were able to warrant an avowal of disbelief (in the paranormal nature of the events that they saw) in the absence of an alternative ‘normal’ explanation. What is common across these justifications is that they deal with two related interactional difficulties: first, the problem of accounting for a lack of belief in a paranormal cause; second, the problem of accounting for the fact that the speaker does not have an alternative explanation. As the following extracts show, there is a variety of ways in which such justifications can be brought off. In particular, we show how speakers engage in explanatory talk in which the practical unavailability of an adequate explanation is addressed by reference to explanations that are available in principle.

Extract 1 (Group 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Transcript</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>My name’s M—. Em I actually didn’t even (.) heh really plan to come and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>talk tonight sort of followed on from a bit of a show that I’d seen ( .). So I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>had, I had absolutely no idea what, what to expect other than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>y’know h::hearing the term ‘paranormal’. Em I guess essentially I came into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>it as a sceptic and I have to say it “probably hasn’t really” changed um my</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>view that much †other than I guess the dice thing is “a bit sort of” ( .) tricky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Uuh. Uuh. (2.0) Em So would you say that the dice was stood out for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>during the show?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Oh &gt;I suppose it was something as it was going on&lt; I just sort of thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>well I dunno ah you know ( .) h::how you sort of ( .) I guess probably magic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>you know somehow explains it but I don’t uh you know I don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>I think I think how does someone actually ( .) &gt;sort of set that up&lt; don’t know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the initial part of this extract, the speaker’s introduction emphasizes a prior lack of interest in and knowledge about these events. The speaker’s attendance is portrayed as having been unplanned (line 70) and contingent through the vague formulation of the prior events that preceded them: ‘sort of followed on from a bit of a show’ (line 71). Her knowledge of events is presented as minimal: she states that she ‘had absolutely no idea’ what to expect (line 72), and refers to the paranormal as no more than a ‘term’ that she has heard (line 73). Although these preliminary descriptions present a version of the speaker as someone who is neither especially concerned with, nor knowledgeable about, the matters under discussion, at lines 73 to 75 a particular position is then adopted in relation to such matters when M categorizes herself as someone who is sceptical about the paranormal (line 74). Moreover, this categorization is presented not only as having current relevance, but also as having been the case prior to the fact that M ‘came into’ the show (line 73).

However, her scepticism is presented in a particular way. It is described as a ‘guess’ (line 73), as a view that ‘probably hasn’t really’ changed ‘that much’
(lines 74–5), and as something in relation to which ‘the dice thing’ is ‘a bit sort of tricky’ (line 75).

Her scepticism, therefore, is presented as having potentially doubtful grounds, but without specifying what the problem might be. The description of this element of the show as a ‘thing’ rather than, say, a ‘trick’ or ‘paranormal feat’, enables this feature to be introduced without any commitment on the part of the speaker as to what the nature of this ‘thing’ is (see Woofitt, 1992: 105). Thus, although the speaker positions herself as having a sceptical view of the issues being discussed, the claim is managed in a way that addresses the extent of her prior interests and knowledge that her previous descriptions in this context made relevant.

When M is then asked by the researcher whether the ‘dice’ represented a prominent aspect of the show, she provides a vaguely formulated response to this question, followed by a spontaneous explanation of the event (lines 78 to 81). In the earlier descriptions provided, the ‘dice thing’ had been identified as problematic or tricky in relation to her sceptical position. However, at lines 79 to 80 she provides a candidate explanation, ‘probably magic explains it’ and, at line 81, it is depicted as something that can be ‘set up’ by someone. The spontaneous production of an explanation for the ‘tricky’ element of the show addresses an aspect of the sceptical claim that might have been vulnerable to undermining counter claims.

However, the explanation proffered is also oriented towards the speaker’s prior claims of lack of knowledge. First, the claim itself is produced in a way that marks its provisional status by incorporating terms such as ‘I suppose’, ‘sort of thought’, ‘I guess probably’ and ‘somehow’. Second, the explanatory account incorporates a series of avowals of not knowing that both establish limits on the speaker’s own responsibility for offering such an account and display a lack of investment in providing such details (Edwards, 1995). Third, the precise detail and cause-and-effect structure normatively associated with explanatory talk are treated in this instance as being practically unavailable to the speaker, although the potential availability of such details is implied through the claim that ‘someone actually sort of set that up’.

What this extract shows, then, is that the sceptical claim being offered is designed in a specific way: it incorporates a particular sort of explanation that is offered in anticipation of potentially undermining counter-claims. Having introduced ‘the dice thing’ as a feature of experience that is ‘tricky’ in relation to a sceptical claim, it then incorporates an explanation for the problematic event that forestalls such potential counter-claims. In this instance, the precise details of this explanation are treated as being known by someone, even though they are practically unavailable to the speaker in the current context. The function of this appeal to an explanation that is available in principle, if not in practice, is therefore to establish the speaker’s sceptical claim as appropriately grounded, in a context within which the speaker is not herself in a position to supply these details.

It is important to remember that the local context in which these descriptions are produced is one in which M is responding to questions and prompts introduced by the researcher who has been identified as associated with the show that
M has just attended. In the first place, elements of the show become immediately relevant to the participant’s task of responding to these questions. Thus M temporally frames her initial response around her attendance at the show itself, and goes on to draw upon detail of the show in developing her sceptical position. Moreover, in the context of this focus group discussion, claims of scepticism about the paranormal have an immediate relevance to the speaker, in terms of whether the researcher might be expected to hear the making of such claims as criticisms of the show itself. By prefacing her sceptical self-ascription with a claim of lack of prior planning and knowledge, M is able to present the description of herself as sceptical as not an immediate critical outcome of her attendance at the show, but rather as an aspect of herself that has endured through time.

In this extract, the speaker could be seen to support sceptical claims by drawing upon vaguely formulated explanatory accounts in which some unspecified person caused or ‘set up’ events. In the next extract, however, similarly sceptical claims are warranted by a more direct appeal to others’ knowledge.

Extract 2 (Group 2)

124 A    So how how did you make sense of what was going on?
125 H    In relation to the dice? Or everything the ( )
126 A    Let’s say in relation to the dice.
127 H    I mean I walked out of there and presume there’s I mean I (.) I have to believe
128    that the fix is in at some point.
129 A    [Hehehe]
130 H    [Hehehe] <The next show it’s going to be 6 and 1 and=
131 A    =Yeh
132 H    you know and then maybe whatever but em. (2.0) >For the second one< I
133    thought well maybe is he is he jiggling the cup there (((ssss))) you know is that.
134    somehow there’s (.) Y’know I’m sure there’s a (3.0) if you looked on those
135    magic sites you eh alluded to on the internet there must somehow there must
136    be a way of doing that. That’s what I tell myself when I look at that. I’m eh
137    the sceptic. Hehehehe It’s sort of ( )
138 M    Hehehehe I agree I think that

The initial response to the question asked treats the matter of how to make sense of what went on as in some way problematic and as requiring further explanation. Following the reformulation of the question at line 126, the answer provided describes the speaker’s standpoint as one which is sceptical in nature: ‘the fix is in’ (line 128). It is noteworthy here that although this sceptical position is initially presented as a presumption, it is then upgraded, at lines 127 to 128, to a belief that is held by necessity. However, the use of an idiomatic expression (‘the fix is in’), rather than a literal avowal of scepticism, is treated as humorous by the interviewer and speaker, and avoids a potential criticism that a more literal avowal might provoke. In this way, the initial dubiety indicated in the speaker’s first response provides a local context in which the relatively strong sceptical claim can be raised, albeit one that is not necessarily to be taken entirely seriously.

At lines 130 and 132, the speaker draws upon shared cultural knowledge that shows are the sort of event that may be repetitive in nature, in describing how the next show will involve the same numbers coming up when the die is dropped.
into the glass, and thereby making available the implication that the results can be repeated if wanted. He goes on to provide a possible explanation for how this might be done by 'jiggling the cup' (line 133). However, he explicitly indicates uncertainty about this claim, then orients to it as in need of further justification by presenting a description of how further information might be retrieved by searching the Internet. This latter description is presented in relatively strong terms, with the speaker indicating his own certainty that there is 'a way of doing that' (lines 134 to 136). It is in this context of expressed certainty about the existence of knowledge, the details of which are unavailable to the speaker, that he again presents himself as a sceptic (lines 136 to 137).

What is noteworthy here is that the speaker presents what is being said in vague terms while establishing the certainty of the claim being made: 'Somehow there's (. . .)' Y'know I'm sure there's a' (line 134). 'There must somehow there must be a way'. These formulations, which might be described as 'definitely/something' constructions, on the one hand set out the claim being made in terms of certainty ('I am sure') and necessity ('there must') while, on the other hand, leaving unstated the description of what it is that is certain and necessary beyond vague references to 'somehow' and 'a way'. The pragmatic consequence of these constructions in the local context is that the speaker is able to present his sceptical stance as something that is certainly warranted, even though detail about the warranting information is absent.

As in extract 1, then, the speaker presents a particular sort of candidate explanation: one in which appropriate explanatory details are presented as being in principle available, although practically unavailable in the current context. However, unlike the speaker in extract 1, here the speaker sets out his description of events in terms of a 'definitely/something' construction that implies a certainty about the vague explanation on offer. In this respect, the appeal to searches on the Internet can be seen as rhetorically supporting these claims to certitude, by appealing to the specialist knowledge represented by 'magic sites'. In this way, the speaker aligns his position as a sceptic with the knowledge of others rather than his own, and thus warrants his scepticism as having the status of a certainty even though he is unable to provide a non-paranormal explanation for what happened.

In the following extract, another speaker can be seen to establish sceptical claims while, at the same time, addressing the interactional difficulty of lacking a sceptical explanation for an event that might be framed as paranormal.

Extract 3 (Group 2 continued)

135 H  Yeh I wanted him to get the 6 and the 1 but I knew (. . .) I never really believed
136 that (. . .) Hehehe you know I'm sure there's the gla- you know there's
137 something.
138 G  And interesting the fact that he actually pro- eh produced a three i:in a sense
139 could be used as evidence for that point of view because he had it under
140 control (. . .) and the mind (cont:) thing doesn't actually apply. >So that fact<
141 that he actually produces that hh It's all very much the whole thing is a
142 tease and kind of con<troll>
143 H  Uhuh
In this extract, as the speakers continue to discuss the die demonstration, the first speaker provides a vague description of his knowledge and belief at the time. The vagueness of this description of what is known is given emphasis by the reformulation produced at line 136, where the speaker begins to identify one element of the matters being described, ‘there’s the gla-’ before re-presenting this claim in terms of the more vague ‘something’. However, this involves another ‘definitely/something’ construction, in which although the matters at hand may be vaguely formulated, the speaker states he is ‘sure’ in his knowledge of those matters. It is noteworthy here that had the speaker gone on to complete the referential term ‘glass’ this would have made relevant the question of what it was about the glass that warranted the speaker’s lack of belief. By providing the self-repair in which introduction of this referential term is replaced by a ‘definitely/something’ construction, this potential interactional difficulty is resolved.

At lines 138 to 142, the second speaker directly addresses the prior vagueness of the explanation on offer by explicitly indicating as newsworthy one of the occurrences that arose during the show, in which the die landed with the three upwards. This was the third and final (but unsuccessful) trial in the demonstration. He identifies what is interesting about this event by claiming that this was under the control of the performer, and that ‘the whole thing is a tease’ (lines 141–2). It is in the context of presenting the unsuccessful final outcome as a deliberate tease, one that was under the performer’s control, that the speaker offers it as ‘evidence’ for the first speaker’s ‘point of view’ (line 139), that is, that there was ‘something’ (line 137), and that ‘the mind thing’ does not ‘apply’ (line 140). This warranting of a sceptical position is followed by what can be seen as indications of agreement from the first speaker. Notably, they both use the language of certainty (‘fact’, ‘the whole thing’) in their warranting, yet end by agreeing on the uncertain status of their claims (‘haven’t the faintest idea’, ‘Made plenty of guesses’).

What this extract shows is that, as in the preceding extracts, speakers orient to positioning themselves as having sceptical views in a particular way. An ascription of scepticism is dealt with as a potentially contentious matter that stands in need of justification. In particular, speakers display sensitivity to potential counter-claims that they have not provided sufficiently detailed ‘normal’ explanations for what might be regarded as paranormal events. As in the preceding extract, this matter is dealt with through a ‘definitely/something’ construction; and, once again, the assured status of the claim is warranted by reference to knowledge or expertise that is available in principle but not in practice to the speakers in this context. In extracts 1 and 2, certainty of the sceptical claim was warranted by attributing such knowledge to others. Here, in a similar vein, the speakers warrant the assuredness of H’s scepticism by making relevant the ‘fact’ that the performer was in control of events. The next extract shows, however, that such appeals may be treated by participants as themselves standing in need of further justification.
Extract 4 (Group 1)

129 C Just to get back to the dice issue that you mentioned as before what did you
130 think what was going on (. ) when you were watching the dice
131 D Well I don’t know ( ) it’d it had something to do with the fact that he was
132 holding the glass I think. Um But that’s the i: I don’t have an explanation for
133 it obviously um I didn’t really understand um how that happened. But (. ) I
134 think I’d be sceptical whatever happened but
135 C [Right]
136 D [it makes] you more sceptical thinking he’s holding that glass and there’s
137 probably some way he can be controlling that (. ) maybe um and the fact that
138 there (was) water in the glass (. ) which may have had something to with it (. )
139 or the fact he had a different dice he’s obviously quite good at sleight of
140 hand so
141 C Hehehe
142 D So there may have been different dice at work (. ) there um
143 C Uhuh uhuh There’s sorts of [sort of]
144 D [Yeh ]
145 C trick explanations

At the beginning of this extract, the researcher invites the participants to provide a description of what happened during the show when the dice were used. In his response, the first speaker presents a sceptical position whilst explicitly stating that he has no explanation for what happened. Indeed, the sceptical position is presented as relatively rigid (‘I think I’d be sceptical whatever happened’[lines 133–4]), while the inability to explain is described as ‘obvious’. Nevertheless, within this context he offers a partial vague explanation relating to the glass having been held by the performer. That the latter held the glass is described as a ‘fact’, though how that relates to an explanation is left as ‘something’. The equivocal explanatory status of this ‘fact’ is given emphasis both by the vague terms in which it is set out and by the reformulation that D provides at line 132, in which a statement that might be taken to be relevant to the preceding explanation is cut short and replaced by a statement of D’s inability to provide such an explanation. It is notable, then, that in this context in which he states he does not have an explanation, the sceptical position initially presented is not attributed to the event being discussed.

As was the case in preceding examples, however, the speaker then orients to the possibility that his own lack of understanding might undermine a sceptical position by going on to link his sceptical position to explanatory talk. At lines 136 to 137, he describes the holding of the glass as directly contributing to his greater scepticism, and then links this to the possibility that the performer can control events. He also offers two further ‘facts’ (‘that there (was) water in the glass’, ‘he had different dice’) that might be linked to the performer’s control. It is interesting to note at this point, though, that even this more developed explanation is presented in a somewhat tentative way through the use of terms such as ‘probably’, ‘some way’ and ‘maybe’.

At lines 141 to 145, C then joins with D in collusively working up the claim that such possibly relevant features of the events under discussion support the upshot jointly established at lines 143 to 145: ‘There’s sorts of trick explanations’.
What is noteworthy about this upshot is that it neatly encapsulates the nature of D’s earlier account. In establishing his sceptical claim, D acknowledges a lack of knowledge about the matters being discussed but provides potential candidate explanations, albeit in relatively vague terms. In the final upshot, the claim is made that explanations do exist. However, the absence of an appropriately detailed account of what it is that such explanations consist of is addressed by describing such explanations as ‘trick’. This draws upon the hearers’ commonplace understanding that tricks, by their nature, are the sorts of things the explanations of which are not known to those who are being tricked but are known to the person who is in control of that trick.

So as in the previous examples, speakers attend to the interactional problem by providing a particular sort of explanation in which the practical unavailability of an adequate explanation is addressed by reference to explanations that are available in principle. In the preceding extract, the locus for this in principle explanation was located in the performer’s control of events. Here, too, the performer’s control is drawn upon as an explanatory resource. However, in the present case this explanatory strategy is further developed. The explanation on offer expands upon the nature of the performer’s control by identifying certain details that may be relevant to how such control occurred. In the present case, then, the explanation-in-principle that is provided refers not only to the performer’s control in general but also to his control as it relates to the glass, the water contained in the glass and the possible deployment of different dice. However, despite the provision of ancillary detail, what is noteworthy is that here too the speakers continue to orient to their explanation as being incomplete. It is this incompleteness that makes relevant the particular representation of such events as explicable only in terms of ‘trick explanations’. But, just as preceding extracts showed that participants establish such vague claims as being sure or certain via ‘definitely/something’ constructions, what is also noteworthy here is that the provision of extra detail about the performer’s control as ‘facts’ (lines 131, 137, 139) allows the speakers to imply that the vaguely presented explanation on offer has a solid epistemic basis. In this way, as was seen in the preceding examples, the definite factual status of the explanatory details as described works to balance the vagueness of their explanatory function.

In summary, what we see from the extracts presented here is that when the participants present themselves as holding a sceptical position, they engage in a significant amount of discursive work in order to warrant such a position. The warrant on offer sets out a sceptical explanation for these events whose epistemic status is presented as certain or factually based, even though relevant explanatory detail is produced in a somewhat vague way by appealing to others’ knowledge or attributing events to the control of the performer. The functional consequence of setting out these particular claims in just this way is that the speaker is able to describe the events under discussion as a case where ‘definitely something’ was going on, despite the practical unavailability of appropriate explanatory details. In short, what these descriptions provide for the speakers is a means of offering an ‘explanation’ without actually explaining anything.
Discussion

This article began by arguing that psychologists have traditionally approached belief in the paranormal as problematic in ways that disbelief is not. Implicit in this orientation is that believers are in some way at fault, and therefore carry a special burden of explanation when accounting for their beliefs, and that disbelievers are not similarly required to account for their disbelief. The purpose of the present study was to invert this position by examining the ways in which people discursively construct and maintain a position of disbelief in the paranormal. To do this, participants were placed in a context in which paranormal processes were readily available as an explanation for events yet sceptical forms of talk were expected.

Of course, there may well be features of the specific interactional context in which such sceptical avowals and their justifications arose that are relevant to the ways in which such descriptions were produced. In particular, the context was one in which participants may have heard the researcher’s questions as requests for explanations. Moreover, they may have taken themselves to be responding to issues raised by a researcher who had a particular interest in the paranormal nature of the events under discussion. In such a context participants might well be expected to display sensitivity to the question of whether they are in a position to offer an explanation and to the possibility of being heard as critical of the interests and motivations of the researcher. However, the point at issue here is not to discover whether such a context is one in which individuals do or do not express sceptical beliefs, but rather to understand how sceptical avowals of this sort are produced and warranted.

Though the context was an artificially created one, disputes about paranormal phenomena have regularly taken place within contexts in which alternative explanations have been expected but details have been lacking. What we found is not only that ‘sceptics’ themselves orient to their own accounts as though they do stand in need of justification, but also that the types of warranting they employ are in line with widely socially available arguments. As we have seen, participants addressed the problem of lacking details about how ostensibly paranormal events might be explained via normal means by appealing to others’ knowledge about such details and by attributing the events to the control of the performer, and these have been regular themes throughout the history of disputes over paranormal phenomena.

The appeal to others’ knowledge has been a recurrent theme in disputes over ostensibly psychic phenomena, and magicians have regularly claimed not only that they possess such specialist knowledge but also that this makes them better qualified than scientists to assess psychic claims (e.g. Houdini, 1924; Lamont, 2004; Randi, 1975). By attributing control of events to the performer, of course, the implication is that the performer possesses such knowledge. However, as extract 3 shows, the attribution of control to the performer could be used as a warrant for scepticism in its own right, and this notion has also been central to discourse relating to psychic claimants since at least the 19th century. By definition, the term ‘medium’ assumed that the performer was not responsible for
ostensible spiritual or psychic phenomena, and psychic claimants since have invariably denied that they are in control of events. Indeed, the apparent control over extraordinary events is one common distinction between the magician and the pseudo-psychic (e.g. Fuller, 1975; Lamont and Wiseman, 1999). Indeed, this distinction was made explicit later in the same discussion from which extract 3 was taken when, in again warranting a sceptical position by attributing control of events to the performer, a participant explained: ‘a true psychic can’t predict what’s going to happen ... so the fact he’s doing a show night after night means he had to be sure about the results that he is coming up with’ (group 2). There is, of course, no self-evident reason why a psychic should not be able to control his or her abilities. However, the use of such an attribution as a warrant for scepticism towards the paranormality of an event makes sense in terms of this widespread notion that, though magicians are in control of what they do, psychics are not.

Finally, it is perhaps worth remembering that, though informal feedback and newspaper reviews of the show reflected a wide range of views about whether or not the feats were paranormal, and yet participants in the study overwhelmingly rejected this, this cannot be taken as evidence of the latter actually being ‘sceptics’. There were several expressions of belief in other forms of paranormal phenomena during the discussions by individuals who, in relation to the events of the show, had expressed a sceptical position about the paranormal. Such variability serves as a reminder that expressions of belief in the paranormal cannot be taken as straightforward representations of internal positions about general categories. By adopting a discursive approach to this topic, on the other hand, it has been possible to examine expressions of (dis)belief in more detail, and to identify how such beliefs can be justified. Such discursive justifications may reflect cognitive processes, insofar as individuals no doubt engage in internal rhetorical argument when thinking through their beliefs on their own (see Billig, 1987) though, of course, such internal discourse is not directly accessible. A discursive approach, on the other hand, by examining the interactional processes involved in maintaining a discursive position, can illustrate the social aspect of belief maintenance (Lamont, 2007).

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX. Semi-structured interview schedule

Section 1: general impressions

1. What were your expectations about the show before it began?
2. Then, having seen it, what struck you most about the show? (OR What was the most memorable aspect for you?, What stood out most for you?)
PROBES:
Why (that particular aspect)?
What was striking about it?
Was there anything that happened (an event) during the show that was striking or memorable?

PROBES:
Why?
What was striking about it?

If there was nothing (an event) that was striking, move to section 2.

Section 2: ‘psychic’ demonstrations

During the show certain things happened, that were presented as “experiments” with ESP (the cards) and PK (the dice):

3. What did you think was going on as you were watching it?

PROBES:
Why did you think it was (e.g. paranormal, coincidence, trick)?
Were there other reasons that made you think that?

4. Did you wonder at any point whether there was something else going on?

PROBES:
IF YES: Why?
At what point?
Why at that point, you think?
IF NO: Why not?
What made you certain that it wasn’t something else (e.g. paranormal, coincidence, trick)?

Was there any other aspect of the show or something that happened during the show that was striking or memorable?

Section 3: Summing up and closing down

5. If you had to sum up the show in a few words, what would you say?
6. Is there anything else that we didn’t talk about that you’d like to discuss?
7. If there was one question you could ask the performer, what would it be?

REFERENCES

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