

PSYCHOLOGY 110: Psychological Explanations of Paranormal Experiences

Term I - 1998

Professor: Chris Wetzel

Office hrs: MF 3:00 - 5:00; TuTH 9:00-10:00 or by appt.

Office: 115 Clough

I. Course Description

The term the "paranormal" is broad and ill-defined; a list of potential paranormal topics can be found on pages 2-3. A major portion of the course will examine the "scientific evidence" for paranormal beliefs, with a heavy emphasis on the scientific method and what constitutes proof to scientists as compared to laypeople. You will be introduced to the notion of control groups, placebo effects, randomness, observational bias, logical difficulties with establishing the existence or non-existence of a phenomena, etc. This course takes a skeptical stance by trying to explain "away" the paranormal by using psychological theories or research findings. By the end of the semester, you should have the "critical thinking" skills to determine for yourself whether paranormal experiences merely represent "psychological phenomena" or are something supernatural.

In addition to the supernatural/natural issue, we will examine why people might want to believe in the paranormal, the subtle ways in which everyday experience may trick or induce us to believe, the ways in which media portrayals induce us to believe, and how people intentionally misrepresent themselves or other's experiences (e.g., as frauds and con-artists) in order to trick us into believing.

Besides learning about the methodological tools of psychology, you will also learn how various subdisciplines of psychology have addressed paranormal experiences. Studying paranormal phenomena provides a good, general exposure to psychology and how it can be applied to everyday life. Research methodologists, statisticians, and psychometricians have identified a number of inferential/statistical errors which people make when interpreting experiences and even which parapsychologists have made in analyzing their data. Personality researchers have studied what types of people are believers and skeptics and what kinds of personality needs are fulfilled by belief or disbelief in paranormal phenomena. Cognitive psychologists have uncovered a dozen or so inferential errors which could lead to paranormal beliefs, as well as some memory biases which might lead to repressed memory syndrome, alien abduction, etc. Social psychologists have developed theories about persistence of belief after falsification, the need to believe in supernatural forces, and how everyday experiences can bias our perceptions. Behavioral psychologists have studied how people develop superstitious beliefs and behaviors. Neurologists/physiologists have identified brain processes which might explain deja vu, voodoo deaths, out of the body experiences, and even portions of alien abduction experiences. Finally, clinical psychologists have extended psychopathology to the realm of the paranormal, designating some paranormal beliefs as mild forms of delusional or magical thinking.

II. Course Requirements

1) Read the two major texts, Hines, T. (1988). Pseudoscience and the paranormal. Buffalo, N.Y. : Prometheus Books, and Schick, T. & Vaughn, L. (1995). How to Think about Weird Things. Mountain View, CA.: Mayfield Publishing. In the schedule, these are abbreviated

as "H" + the chapter number and "SV" + chapter number. You will also do the reserve reading (mostly handouts which I have adapted from French, 1994 --abbreviated as "F"-- and put on the academic volume). We will read all of these materials at a rapid pace.

2) Write five "reading essays," the top 4 of which are worth 20% of your grade. In these essays, you will critically evaluate the readings, and/or apply them to your personal experience. Each essay should be no more than 250 words and can be as little as 100. These reactions should display a thoughtful, critical analysis of the reading; you will receive a handout on how to write the essays.

3) There will be four exams; they will be largely objective (a combination of multiple choice, short answer, and a few major essay questions). The exams constitute 40% of your grade.

4) write a term paper (literature review) in APA style, worth 20% of your grade. You will pick a topic from the topics list and:

- a) review the literature (scientific as well as popular press) on the existence of the phenomenon and the extent to which people believe it (e.g., surveys, including cross-cultural similarities)
- b) present alternative or "normal science" explanations described in the literature
- c) present the supernatural explanations
- d) come to a conclusion about the validity of the paranormal phenomenon and the explanations for it, applying the SEARCH criteria and other concepts from the class.

5) You will perform simple experiments on yourself, participate in a few class demonstrations, hear guest speakers, and fill out belief/experience surveys in order to determine the impact of the course on your paranormal beliefs. Brief write-ups of these exercises will count 10% of your grade. A class contribution (participation) grade will count another 10%.

6) Because psychology is based on experiments involving humans, an important learning experience will be to participate in at least 3 hours of experiments as a research participant. After each experiment, you are to turn in a brief description (<1 page) of what you felt or thought about during the experiment and what your understanding of the purpose of the experiment is. Failure to turn in this written assignment (even if you have participated) will result in a course grade of incomplete. If you object to participating in research for ethical or religious reasons, there is an alternate activity to fulfill this requirement.

7) You should learn how to use email, the academic server, and a web browser so you can obtain information relevant to this course. All written work must be typed, and you might as well learn how to do it with a computer word processor! This includes the quiz essays, your journal, and your experiment description. An "eliteraci" penalty is evoked when I find more than 3 spelling errors, 2 grammar errors, or more than 3 "typos" per page, and it will lower your grade by 1 letter grade. Their ain't gonna be no eliterat Rhoades studens in this corse! Learn to use the spell and grammar checkers.

- 8) You can earn extra credit in three ways. First, participate in or observe some paranormal situation/phenomena (some suggestions would be attending a seance, a faith healing, a psychic fair, a UFO talk, visiting a fortune teller, a hypnosis session with age regression, etc). You will write up a report of your experience, analyzing it with class concepts or proposing a scientific way to test or investigate the phenomena or explain why the people you observed believe what they believe. [Each of these is worth 1 point] A second means involves reading an alternative text, H.J. Irwin (1994). An Introduction to Parapsychology. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co. This text is much more positive and accepting of ESP than the Hines text. You would write a report [worth 4 points] comparing how Irwin presents and interprets data on the same topics as does Hines. The third way involves participating in extra research studies as a participant. These extra experiments are written up exactly like the required ones; and each hour of extra credit earns you .5 points on the final course grade. The total of extra credit work can bump up your grade a maximum of 5 points or 1 grade step (eg. a B+ could go to an A-).
- 9) Work turned in late loses one grade step per day it is late. Exams may be made up with a legitimate excuse.

Possible Class and Research Paper Topics:

after death experiences
age regression
alien abduction
animal psychics - predicting natural disasters
astrology - predicting the future
astrology - distinguishing different personalities accurately
auras, palmistry, iridology, etc
cancer prone personality
channelling, demon possession, holy texts like Urantia
clairvoyance, mental telepathy
creationism
crop circles
deja-vu
devil's (Bermuda) triangle and other strange places
doomsday cults
dowsing
eye movement desensitization and reprocessing
faces - on the Moon, Mars, of famous people (Jesus, Elvis, etc)
facilitated communication with the autistic
faith healers - laying on of hands, shamans
ghosts, poltergeists
graphology
guardian angels
hemispheric synchronization techniques, right-left brain thinking, etc.
history repeats itself - Kennedy and Lincoln parallels, coincidences
hypnotism- is it an altered state? Can we be made to do things against our will?
left brain/right brain personalities - is there a real difference
lie detectors-polygraphs, pitch analyzers, etc
mind reading
monsters -Loch Ness, Bigfoot, etc.
New Age therapies - crystals, orgone boxes, rapid eye movement, homeopathy, etc
numerology
neurolinguistic programming
out of the body experiences

deja-vu
 precognition, and the prophets (Nostradamus, Casey, Dixon, etc.)
 psychokinesis
 pyramids - their structure, healing powers, construction by aliens, etc
 reincarnation, existence of past lives
 religious icons/places-weeping madonnas, crucifixion stigmata, Lourdes, etc
 religious cult miracles- snake handling, poison drinking, speaking in tongues, etc
 repressed memory syndrome
 ritualized satanic abuse
 subliminal perception and motivation
 superstitious beliefs - black cats, ladders, etc
 tarot cards, palm-reading, and tea leaves
 therapeutic touch
 Unconscious - does it really exist, was Freud right about it?
 UFOs - what are they?
 urban myths - alligators in the sewer, dead cats in old-ladies cars, etc
 voodoo death, curses
 yogi feats -stopping the heart, floating, survive being buried alive, etc

Schedule

#	Day	Date	Reading	Topic	Assignment Due
1	W	8/26	-	Surveying the paranormal landscape	Complete Pretests
2	F	8/28	H-1	What is pseudoscience	Write paranormal experience description
3	M	8/31	F-1	Major themes from psychology	
4	W	9/2	H2,	More basic principles	
5	F	9/4	F-2	Psychics and spiritualism	Write childhood memory (see instructions)
		Labor Day			
6	W	9/9	H-3, F-3	Life after Death	<u>Essay #1 due</u>
7	F	9/11	H-4, F-4	Parapsychology (ESP)	
8	M	9/14			Exam 1: H1-4, F1-4
9	W	9/16	H-6	Astrology and go over exam	
10	F	9/18	H-7	UFO's	Internet remote viewing experiment due
11	M	9/21	F-5	Alien Abduction	
12	W	9/23	H-8	UFO physical evidence	Essay #2 due
13	F	9/25	H-9	Strange Places	

14	M	9/28	H-10	Psychic Healing	Childhood memory analysis due
15	W	9/30	F-6	Quack cures	Select term paper topic
16	F	10/3	H-11	Health cures	
17	M	10/5	H-12, F-7	Miscellaneous oddities	Essay #3 due
18	W	10/7			Exam 2: H 6-12, F 5-7
19	F	10/9	SV-1	Weird things to explain	
20	M	10/12	--	Go over exam + collective delusions	Random behavior exercise due
21	W	10/14	SV-2	Explaining the impossible	
22	F	10/16	SV-3	Personal experience as truth?	Essay #4 due
Fall Break					
23	W	10/21	SV-5	Knowledge, truth, and evidence	
24	F	10/23			Exam 3: SV 1-5
25	M	10/26	Peterson	How to investigate the paranormal	
26	W	10/28	SV-6	Mystical Knowing	
27	F	10/30	SV-7	Assessing miracle cures	Preliminary paper bibliography due
28	M	11/2	SV8 (187 - 210)	Is parapsychology a science and can it ever become one?	
29	W	11/4	SV-9	Using the SEARCH criteria	Essay #5 due
30	F	11/6	SV-Ap.	Informal fallacies	
31	M	11/9			Exam 4: SV 6-9, Ap + Peterson
32	W	11/11		go over exam	Complete post-tests
33	F	11/13		Guest speaker	
34	M	11/16		Discussion, debate	Annotated bibliography due
35	W	11/18		Guest speaker	
36	F	11/20		Video, debate	

37	M	11/23		Guest speaker	Term Paper due
Thanksgiving					
38	M	11/30		Guest speaker	
39	W	12/2		Discussion, debate	
40	F	12/4		Guest speaker	Extra credit due
41	M	12/7		Video: the magic of belief	
42	W	12/9			Most post-tests plus course evaluations
Monday, December 14, 8:30 pm.					Final Exam