

The paranormal

Conceptualizations in previous research

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In this article, I explore previous conceptualizations of 'the paranormal' within religious studies and the social sciences. Introducing some statistics on paranormal variables in Western populations, I argue that the empirical data make a strong case for future studies of paranormal variables, as well as warranting conceptual clarification. Sketching an outline of previous conceptualizations of 'the paranormal', I conclude that definitions tend to stress that purportedly paranormal phenomena transgress the boundaries of scientific explanation, as well as demonstrate a degree of tension towards both mainstream or institutionalized science and religion. Lastly, I present the main contribution of the article: an attempt at a new working definition of the term 'the paranormal' based on the conceptualizations reviewed, encompassing substantial and discursive components and, possibly, functional ones.

Studies suggesting that paranormal beliefs are on the rise are several, and there are signs of longitudinal growth (Bader *et al.* 2011: 189–201; Sjödin 1995 and 2001; Partridge 2004: 58–9). Paranormal, esoteric and occult ideas are further increasingly being disseminated in popular culture, resulting in what the media scholar Annette Hill (2011) has described as a 'paranormal turn' in culture, or what the religious studies scholar Christopher Partridge has called 'occulture': that is, a pool of elements through which esoteric, occult and paranormal ideas, motifs and practices are formulated and reformulated. According to Hill (p. 170), the growth of paranormal media, such as ghost hunting shows or paranormal romantic fiction, reflects a transfer of paranormal motifs 'from the margins to mainstream', which is reflected in a rise in belief in paranormal phenomena: 'polls around the world indicate 50 per cent of the global population believe in at least one paranormal phenomenon such as extrasensory experiences, hauntings, or witchcraft'.

I would argue that any attempt to study the increase, decline or change overall of paranormal beliefs, or their significance to those who hold them,

needs to address the meaning of the category of ‘the paranormal’¹ itself. What does it denote, and entail? Is it possible to differentiate the category from, for instance, religion and spirituality? My own PhD project is on the distribution and contents of paranormal beliefs, practices and experiences in contemporary Sweden, using a variety of methods. Conceptualizing ‘the paranormal’ is thus key, and any reasonable conceptualization should, arguably, be anchored in previous attempts. This article addresses this very need to conceptualize and elaborate ‘the paranormal’ as a working category. At this point, I would merely like to hint at the resulting conceptualization, namely as a category of narratives, beliefs, practices and/or experiences relating to purported phenomena transgressing the boundaries of conventional, mainstream and/or institutionalized science and religion, with some degree of tension to the latter two. Indeed, the very prefix *para* in the word *paranormal* implies something that would go beyond the normal, or normality.

One aim of the article is to provide a general overview of the concept of ‘the paranormal’, as it has been used previously within religious studies and the social sciences. The article could be classified partly as a conceptual review, insofar as authors’ contributions to the concept of the paranormal are assessed. The main aim is, however, to suggest a working definition of ‘the paranormal’ for future research, derived as a synthesis from previous conceptualizations. A delimitation of the article’s content is the exclusion of emic and invested conceptualizations from actors or groups mainly interested in the truth-claims or reality of paranormal phenomena, such as paranormal investigators (be they ghost hunters or ufologists, for instance) or sceptics and debunkers respectively. It could further be added that the texts referred to are Western, mainly English or American, with a few Swedish examples.

The article first presents some quantitative data on known distributions of ‘paranormal’ variables in Western populations. The purpose of this statistical outline is twofold. First, it serves to illustrate that paranormal variables (*i.e.* beliefs, practices and experiences relating to ‘the paranormal’) are already an object of study within the social sciences, albeit under different labels. Second, the quite ample empirical evidence warrants the main purpose and contribution of the article, which is namely to conceptualize ‘the paranormal’. Following the presentation of quantitative data a conceptual

1 Henceforth placed within quotation marks to stress that it is this contested concept that is the main focus of the article.

overview of ‘the paranormal’ within the social sciences and religious studies will be presented. A separate section follows, focusing on ‘the paranormal’ as defined by relations to both mainstream or institutionalized religion and science. Lastly, I present the main contribution of the article, that is, a tentative working definition of ‘the paranormal’. The article closes with a brief discussion and concluding remarks.

Quantitative data on paranormal variables

Paranormal variables – that is to say, approximations of beliefs, practices and/or experiences relating to purportedly paranormal phenomena – have been measured for quite some time, and under different labels. Take, for instance, the following survey question:

Have you ever, when believing yourself to be completely awake, had a vivid impression of seeing, or being touched by a living being or inanimate object, or of hearing a voice; which impression, so far as you could discover, was not due to any external physical cause? (Cited in Finucane 1996: 192)

The above was formulated and studied by the Society for Psychological Research as early as 1889, which points to the common origin of terms such as ‘the paranormal’ and psychic or psychical research, and serves as a reminder that survey methodology has evolved since the nineteenth century. In the following I will present a selection of quantitative data on Western populations from the last decade(s), which illustrates that paranormal variables are already, at least in part, the subject of large-scale empirical studies, and that the frequencies reported warrant conceptual clarification on what ‘the paranormal’ in fact might signify.

An American Gallup survey in 2001 states that 54 per cent of the American population affirm belief in psychics or spiritual healing, 50 per cent belief in extrasensory perception, and 42 per cent belief in haunted houses (Irwin 2009: 1). Further, a CBS News poll in 2005 claimed that 48 per cent of Americans believe in ghosts, and an American AP/IPSOS poll in 2007 showed that 48 per cent of the American population affirmed belief in extrasensory perception, while 14 per cent claimed to have seen a UFO (Bader *et al.* 2011: 7). A 2018 YouGov poll in late October shows that a majority of Americans believe in ghosts, albeit only 15 per cent claim to

have seen one, while 35 per cent believe that extraterrestrials have landed on Earth (Francovic 2018). There are other polls that point to near majorities in the US concerning the existence of UFOs and intelligent extraterrestrial life (Partridge 2006: 165). Results from the Baylor Religion Survey (Bader *et al.* 2011: 129) show that a majority (68%) of Americans affirm belief in at least one paranormal phenomenon, including belief in psychic powers and divination, the existence of lost civilizations such as Atlantis, ghosts and extraterrestrials, while 51 per cent claim to have had some sort of paranormal experience, such as consulting a psychic or medium, or having an out of body experience (p. 75). A YouGov poll (Dahlgreen 2016) in the UK somewhat enticingly concluded that 'British people are more likely to believe in ghosts than a Creator'. Partridge refers to polls from 1981, according to which a majority of respondents (54%) believed in telepathy (Partridge 2006: 217). A survey in Great Britain 2009 showed that 37 per cent of the British adult population report having at least one paranormal experience (Castro *et al.* 2013: 1–4).

A Swedish poll in 2012, on behalf of the Swedish TV channel TV4, claimed that every fifth Swede would be willing to consult a medium, and every fourth claimed some previous contact with spirits.² Looking further at the Swedish context, Ulf Sjödin (2001) could prove that paranormal – or parascientific – beliefs indeed are on the rise, through the use of longitudinal data on variations of roughly the same survey questions on items such as belief in ghosts, divination and reincarnation. Parascientific beliefs are not properly defined by Sjödin. However, it becomes apparent from an introductory chapter (Sjödin 2001: 13–25) that what is intended are alternative views going against the 'tested experience' (p. 150) of both religion and science as traditional institutions of knowledge. In other texts Sjödin refers to the same set of belief statements as 'the paranormal' (Sjödin 2002) and 'the occult' (Sjödin 1995), neither thoroughly defined. Sjödin (2001: 40–2) rightly asks whether the increase of those affirming parascientific statements represents a genuine growth of parascientific belief in the population, or rather an increased acceptance of affirming these statements, but settles for the former interpretation. One could, of course, make the argument that these might be two mutually reinforcing processes.

2 In Swedish: 'Enligt en Novusundersökning, gjord på uppdrag av TV4, kan var femte svensk tänka sig att ta hjälp av ett medium och var fjärde menar att de har haft någon form av kontakt med andar' (Novus 2012).

One could argue that paranormal variables have been studied on several occasions within large-scale quantitative surveys, such as the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) and the European Value Survey (EVS). For instance, in the 1981 edition of the EVS, the following survey question was included:

Did you ever have any of the following experiences? A) Felt as though you were in touch with someone when they were far away from you; B) Seen events that happened at a great distance as they were happening; C) Felt as though you were really in touch with someone who had died; D) Felt as though you were close to a powerful, spiritual life force that seemed to lift you out of yourself. (EVS 2015: question 228, wave 1981)

In the ISSP Religion (several waves), variables that Benno Torgler (2007) operationalize as ‘superstition’ were included: good luck charms sometimes do bring good luck; some fortune tellers really can foresee the future; some faith healers do have God-given healing power; a person’s star sign at birth, or horoscope, can affect the course of their future. Indeed, Torgler refers to superstition as a possible sub-category of the paranormal (p. 715). In the Swedish Enköping study (Enköpingsstudien), presented and analysed statistically by Jonas Bromander (among others) in the anthology *Guds näraste stad?* (2008), a wide-spanning survey (n=1045) was distributed to residents within Enköping municipality. Several alternative spiritual practices, such as yoga, astrology and divination were included. More interestingly still, spiritual, religious or anomalous experiences, of which several might qualify as paranormal, were included as binary variables. These included, to mention just a few, experiences of contact with the dead, telepathy and out of body experiences, referred to as ‘New Age experiences’ (Bromander 2008: 77–82).³ These – the EVS, ISSP and Enköping study – are but a few examples of how large-scale survey projects include variables targeting ‘the paranormal’.

Whether or not paranormal variables are more widely distributed within certain strata in the population is subject to debate. Several studies show that women are generally more affirmative of, or prone to accept, paranormal

3 ‘New Age-upplevelser’ and ‘New Age-inriktade upplevelseformer’ in Swedish.

beliefs than men (Irwin 2009; Bader *et al.* 2011; Sjödin 2001), but there are exceptions: within the American context, Christopher D. Bader, F. Carson Mencken and Joseph O. Baker (2011: 195) found that men are more prone to accept belief statements concerning UFOs. Socioeconomic variables such as income or level of education show ambiguous relations to paranormal beliefs. For instance, Bader, Mencken and Baker (2011: 195) found that subsets of paranormal beliefs appeal more to relatively marginalized people, such as psychic powers or ghosts, while elites are more prone to experience certain purportedly paranormal phenomena, such as out-of-body experiences or witnessing UFOs.

How 'the paranormal' relates to traditional religious belonging, belief and behaviour is likewise ambiguous. While certain data sets show that the traditionally religious are less prone to accept 'the paranormal', other studies point in the opposite direction. Bader, Mencken and Baker (2011: 92) further note variations between different faith communities, but even so, a majority of respondents from all congregations (Christian or not, be it Protestant or Catholic, liberal or conservative) affirm belief in at least one paranormal phenomenon. In the Enköping study, Birgitta Laghé (2008: 152) as well as Bromander (2008: 99–100) found that several 'new age' experiences⁴ were more common among respondents classified as regular worshipers⁵ or strongly Christian⁶ respectively. Bromander (pp. 99–100) further found little or no supporting evidence of the supposed rivalry between Christian affiliation and belief on the one hand, and alternative spiritual practice and experience on the other, as suggested by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005: 8–9) in terms of the congregational domain and the holistic milieu, formulated as two distinct and competing religious environments, or 'heartlands'.

Concluding this introduction on quantitative data on paranormal variables, I make the argument that 'the paranormal' has been studied for quite

- 4 This category, the result of factor analysis, included the following items: to, in a supernatural fashion, be able to predict the future; to communicate with spirits of the dead; to communicate with someone telepathically; to experience the presence of some sort of spirit (Bromander 2008: 79, my translation).
- 5 In so far that they attend ceremonies in the Church at least monthly (Laghé 2008: 145).
- 6 This term is based on the degree to which the respondent identifies as Christian on an ordinal scale (Bromander 2008: 64–7).

some time within the sociology of religion and religious studies, albeit implicitly, and often as part of studies aimed at mapping alternative religion (e.g. Ramstedt 2018) or alternative spirituality (e.g. Willander 2014). As the sociologist of religion Abby Day notes, in relation to fieldwork and interviews on belief in northern England in the 2000s, there are clear overlaps between ‘the paranormal’ and different conceptualizations of religion and spirituality:

At the time, I was particularly struck by a prevailing tendency within the sociology of religion to stretch the definition of religion to include a wide variety of phenomena, much of which I would describe as paranormal. Scholars often defined paranormal experiences as religious or spiritual, renaming them as, folk, common, invisible or implicit. (Day 2013: 158)

Day describes how ‘the paranormal’ is bound up with other central categories within religious studies, such as religion and spirituality, or theoretical concepts such as invisible religion.⁷ One could add more terms used interchangeably with or overlapping ‘the paranormal’ in some sense, such as the aforementioned superstition (Torgler 2007) and parascience (Sjödin 2001), or esoteric and occult beliefs (Höllinger and Smith 2002). The latter two are not explicitly defined, besides referring to the survey items (e.g. belief in spirits in old houses, contact with the dead, psychic healers and telepathy; all of which are simultaneously designated as ‘paranormal’) of interest to Franz Höllinger and Timothy B. Smith (2002: 234). The purpose of introducing these varying terms is not to assess them as alternatives to ‘the paranormal’, but rather to illustrate that paranormal variables have been studied under many different names and labels. Next, I will turn to how ‘the paranormal’ has been defined within the social sciences and religious studies, highlighting key traits of different conceptual contributions.

7 This refers to Thomas Luckmann’s study of the new social form(s) of religion, the latter understood as ‘systems of “ultimate” significance’ (1967: 87), as highly individualized and idiosyncratic, relegated to the private sphere and set apart from the primary social institutions of modern society. It is worth noting that Luckmann (p. 48) views any meaning systems transcending individual biological nature and consciousness as ‘fundamentally religious’, rendering any social or intersubjective meaning-making inherently religious. It is thus a quite extreme functional definition of religion.

'The paranormal', a conceptual review

In order to contextualize the use of 'the paranormal' within the social sciences and religious studies, I will first present two general definitions from encyclopedias, the first of which is popular rather than academic, that capture several recurring features.

'Paranormal events' the Wikipedia page on the paranormal states, 'are purported phenomena described in popular culture, folk and other non-scientific bodies of knowledge, whose existence within these contexts is described as beyond normal experience or scientific explanation'. This aligns partially with another definition, taken from *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*:

Paranormal phenomena are those supposedly due to powers of the mind that go beyond the normal, such as extra-sensory perception, or perception by means independent of the normal use of the senses, telepathy, psychokinesis, precognition or powers of prophecy, and survival of bodily death. (Blackburn 2016)

Both definitions have in common the fact that they place purported paranormal phenomena outside of the boundaries of conventional, or normal, science. As another dictionary entry – from *A Dictionary of Psychology* – makes clear, paranormal phenomena are sometimes called psychic or psychical (Colman 2015). Thus, 'the paranormal' as a concept is tied up with the history of psychic or psychical research, and later parapsychology (Penman 2015; Kripal 2011). Given these relations, a brief etymology of the terms may be appropriate.

Leigh T. I. Penman (2015) shows how the term 'the paranormal' is assumed, somewhat mistakenly, to originate in the 1920s. He further notes how 'the paranormal' lately has come to signify anything supernatural. In its inception, the concept of 'the paranormal' is bound up with the founding of the British the Society of Psychical Research (SPR), in 1882. The term psychic, or psychical, referred to phenomena seemingly contradicting the known laws of nature, such as Mesmerism, Spiritism and Spiritualism, and extrasensory perception (e.g. the aforementioned phenomena of telepathy and psychokinesis). At the onset, one of the founding figures, Frederic Myers, designated the 'debatable phenomena' in question as 'supernormal' (Penman 2015: 32). The launch of the term 'paranormal' in the English language

seems to derive from French works on anomalous phenomena. In French, 'the paranormal' can be traced back to at least 1848. It appears in English translations of the Bordeaux physician (and SPR member) Joseph Maxwell in 1905, with the designation paranormal intact. As used by Maxwell, 'the paranormal' designated phenomena such as 'clairvoyance, clairaudience, teleaesthesia, telepathy... [and] exteriorisation of motor power' (Maxwell as quoted by Penman 2015: 33). During the 1920s, 'the paranormal' gained a more widespread use within psychical research journals, often used interchangeably with the earlier term supernormal, eventually surpassing the latter in the 1930s (Penman 2015: 33). As Jeffrey Kripal (2011: 8) notes, the category of 'the paranormal' is early on imbued with spiritualist associations and relations, resulting in 'religious connotations'. Therefore, the term *psi* was coined in order to provide a more descriptive term for the anomalous phenomena in question during the 1940s, denoting 'what was thought to be the underlying unitary nature of the disparate telepathic, precognitive, and psychokinetic phenomena' (p. 8). Indeed, as Egil Asprem (2010) has shown, paranormal phenomena as phrased within a parapsychological nomenclature can be understood as an attempt to redefine, or naturalize, what previously belonged to the domains of the supernatural, on scientific terms.

A more technical and thoroughly elaborated definition of 'the paranormal' is provided by Harvey J. Irwin, an associate professor in psychology. Irwin, it might be added, focuses on paranormal beliefs rather than practices or experiences (or paranormal phenomena themselves, for that matter). Irwin proposes the following conceptualization of paranormal belief:

... a paranormal belief is defined on a working basis as a proposition that has not been empirically attested to the satisfaction of the scientific establishment but is generated within the nonscientific community and extensively endorsed by people who might normally be expected by their society to be capable of rational thought and reality testing. For these people, the belief is phenomenologically a part of their sense of reality and truth rather than 'a proposition they endorse'. Like other types of belief, a paranormal belief will be either intuitive or reflective; will have cognitive, affective and (sometimes) behavioural components; will be distinct from a value or simple statement of preference; will be relatively stable and thus somewhat resistant to the influence of counterargument; and will be dimensional, that is, marked by various

degrees of endorsement between the poles of extreme scepticism and extreme gullibility. (Irwin 2009: 16–17)

Irwin further provides the reader with an inventory of referents of ‘the paranormal’, such as superstitions, psi processes (including the previously mentioned extrasensory perception, or ESP), divinatory arts (such as numerology or the tarot), esoteric systems of magic, New Age therapies, Spiritism, Eastern mystico-religious beliefs, Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, extra-terrestrial aliens, and cryptozoological creatures, or cryptids (Irwin 2009: 3–7). Used thusly, the paranormal belief category is wide ranging indeed. Do note how Irwin does not differentiate between beliefs associated with organized or institutionalized religion, and those falling outside of it. This lack of delimitation is problematic, and I will return to relations between religion (alongside science) and ‘the paranormal’ later.

Another conceptualization is provided by sociologist Erich Goode. Goode shifts the focus and rephrase ‘the paranormal’ as the concept ‘paranormalism’, understood as a disposition, attitude or pattern of interpretation: ‘Paranormalism is *a non- or extra-scientific approach to a phenomenon* – a scientifically implausible event is believed to be valid and literally and concretely true’ (Goode 2000: 19–20, italics in original). Transgressions of scientific thinking are thus the defining feature of paranormalism. For this reason, Creationism is viewed as ‘*paranormal* in nature’ (p. 101, italics in original). Much like Irwin, Goode employs an inclusive approach to ‘the paranormal’, boundaries to religion remaining open. Goode (pp. 165–75) thus writes about traditional religious paranormal beliefs (i.e. belief in the devil or heaven and hell) and non-religious paranormal beliefs (i.e. belief in extrasensory perception or UFOs). Sticking to delimitations (or the lack thereof) between religious beliefs and ‘the paranormal’, I now turn to conceptualizations of ‘the paranormal’ within religious studies, and whether or not beliefs, experiences or practices related to ‘the paranormal’ fall within the purview of religious studies.

The historian of religion Jeffrey Kripal’s definition of ‘the paranormal’ is quite different from the ones previously introduced. According to Kripal, ‘the paranormal’ could be defined ‘as *the sacred in transit from the religious and scientific registers into a parascientific or “science mysticism” register*’ (Kripal 2011: 9, italics in original). Thus, according to Kripal, ‘the paranormal’ is a mode of the sacred in the sense employed by, for instance, Rudolf Otto or Mircea Eliade. If I interpret Kripal (p. 9) correctly, ‘the paranormal’ as an occurrence

of the sacred would denote *sui generis* phenomena, or ‘the mystical ... as both fucking scary (*tremendum*) and utterly fascinating (*fascinans*)’. However, the *sui generis* approach to the sacred and, by extension, religion, is problematic, in effect rendering religious phenomena to be something qualitatively different and irreducible or, in the words of Russell T. McCutcheon (1997: 26): ‘autonomous, strictly personal, essential, unique, prior to, and ultimately distinct from, all other facets of human life and interaction’. Given my reservations towards the *sui generis* approach to the sacred and religion, I am reluctant to extend it to the category of ‘the paranormal’.

Joseph P. Laycock, assistant professor of religious studies, refers to and critiques Irwin’s conceptualization of paranormal belief in an issue of the journal *Nova Religio* explicitly dedicated to ‘the paranormal’. The main point of Laycock’s critique is that the working definition Irwin proposes is far too broad, making it ‘effectively useless as a category for critical analysis’ (Laycock 2014: 5). Laycock is positive concerning studies of paranormal beliefs from the viewpoint of religious studies, the main reason being that large segments of the American population believe in one or more paranormal phenomena. The popularity of paranormal belief is an empirical reality that needs to be accounted for theoretically, argues Laycock (p. 11), placing ‘the paranormal’ within the center of key theories within the sociology of religion: ‘what would it mean for the secularization narrative if persons who identify as having no religious affiliation turn out to be keenly interested in ghost hunting?’ Investigating and analysing claims of UFO phenomena or hauntings could further, from a strategic viewpoint, demonstrate the instrumental value of religious studies or, as Laycock (p. 13) himself puts it: ‘Can we be trusted to speak on the historical, cultural and political significance of religion if we cannot even talk about UFOs?’ In the same volume, David Feltmate (2014), sociologist of religion, argues as well in favour of studying ‘the paranormal’ within religious studies. Omitting it mainly reifies normative, implicit assumptions on what counts as religion proper. Feltmate (2014: 90) prefers, instead, to deconstruct the delimitations between religion and ‘the paranormal’, both understood as *etic* or academic constructs, viewing ‘the veil’ in-between as ‘tenuous and incongruous’.

In the same issue of *Nova Religio*, David G. Robertson provides an inventory of paranormal phenomena, similar to Irwin’s:

Popular definitions typically include psychic phenomena such as telepathy and clairvoyance, and alleged anomalous physical phenomena such as ghosts, crop circles, UFOs and reincarnation. Somewhat less common are cryptozoological animals such as the Yeti or Loch Ness monster, alternative medical therapies, and religious, mystical or magical practices, with Western Christian experience less likely to be included. (Robertson 2014: 60)

Robertson, however, finds that the conceptualization through a headcount of common referents of 'the paranormal' is unsatisfying, urging us instead to study 'the paranormal' discursively, mapping out a genealogy of 'the paranormal' and its potential normative assumptions. Prior to Robertson, both David J. Hess (1993) and Jeremy Northcote (2007) have approached (mainly English-speaking) debates on paranormal phenomena on discursive terms, viewing subject positions such as New Agers, sceptics and parapsychologists as determined or mutually constituted by these very debates. While the religious studies scholar might choose to bracket truth claims of paranormal narratives (often interpreting them as expressions of the mystical), disciplines such as psychology often view 'the paranormal' from a pathological viewpoint, both perspectives being based on 'epistemic norms' (Robertson 2014: 60) of our culture. The rationale that relegates some phenomena into the domain of 'the paranormal' is not absolute or ahistorical, but based on 'assumptions which are contested, negotiated and subject to change over time' (p. 61). For this reason, Robertson claims that 'the paranormal' cannot be understood without considering the dominant epistemology of our time. The latter would not only be that of scientific materialism, but organized, institutionalized and mainly Christian religion as well, at least for 'large sections of the population' (p. 61).

Christopher Bader, F. Carson Mencken and Joseph O. Baker, all American sociologists, conceptualize 'the paranormal' in a manner resembling Robertson's. According to them (2011: 24), 'the paranormal' designates beliefs and experiences that 'are dually rejected' by both science and mainstream religion. Thus, 'the paranormal' includes phenomena (or beliefs and experiences related to these) such as extrasensory perception, ghosts and spirits, astrology, extraterrestrials and cryptids. 'Belief that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead' the authors infer, 'would not qualify as part of the paranormal per this definition, since Jesus is associated with the majority religion in the United States' (p. 24). Thus, unlike the definitions provided

by Irwin or Goode, it is possible to delimit ‘the paranormal’ from the realm of religion, albeit the distinction might be historically contingent and far from absolute. This is a strength in Bader, Mencken and Baker’s working definition.

The common feature between Robertson’s conceptualization of ‘the paranormal’ and the one provided by Bader, Mencken and Baker, is the relationship to mainstream religion and science. Unlike the previously introduced definitions of ‘the paranormal’, it would not suffice that the included phenomena go beyond (or against) conventional scientific approaches. Rather, for any phenomena (or beliefs, practices and/or experiences relating to them) to be ascribed the status of paranormal, they would need to transgress the boundaries of *both* science and religion. I will elaborate on this in the next section.

Beyond science and religion

The two approaches suggested by Robertson (2014) and Bader, Mencken and Baker are quite different, yet result in similar consequences for the concept of ‘the paranormal’. In common for phenomena usually ascribed the status of paranormal is some degree of tension in relation to mainstream or institutionalized science and religion as ‘epistemic authorities’, according to Robertson (2014: 61). Robertson opens up possibilities for studying the power structures of ‘the paranormal’ and subject positions there within, ranging from those denying it to those who engage in it as a form of epistemic critique. Thus, descriptions such as paranormal, or the related concept of conspiracy theory, might be used by those loyal to the established epistemic authority of science and religion, in order ‘to marginalize viewpoints that differ from epistemic norms’ (p. 62). From the other way around, expressions of paranormal belief as well as conspiracy theories can be viewed as counter-epistemic positions, or ‘a critique of hegemonic authority’ (p. 74). Bader, Mencken and Baker’s (2011) conceptualization of ‘the paranormal’ is partly based on classifications of the people engaged within paranormal subculture, and the survey respondents of the Baylor Religion Survey. Nevertheless, they all frame ‘the paranormal’ (and, by extension, the variables encompassed by the category) as alternative views of knowledge, marked by a tension in relation to mainstream religion and science and falling outside of the boundaries of both. This further resembles the parascientific (or paranormal) beliefs studied by Sjödin (2001: 150), as ideas transgressing the

domains of the Church and science as institutions or ‘guarantees’ for ‘tested experience’.

It is further possible to view both ‘the paranormal’ and conspiracy theories as parts of a shared ‘counter-epistemic milieu’ (Robertson 2014: 74), which recall the features of the cultic milieu, as conceptualized by Colin Campbell (2002, first published in 1972). Like Robertson, Bader, Mencken and Baker seem to be indebted to this concept of the cultic milieu, describing ‘the paranormal’ as:

... a set of ideas and experiences, which have not yet been adopted, at least wholly, by the dominant religions in a given society. They lack the stability and organization that characterize successful religious groups. They lie on the periphery of American religion, spreading through conferences, the media, and the Internet rather than through sermons. And yet the paranormal comprises a pool of concepts from which new religions can draw a set of ideas that may prove to be the content of future religions. (Bader *et al.* 2011: 14)

The concept of the cultic milieu was originally coined by sociologist Colin Campbell, and is defined as follows:

The cultic milieu can be regarded as the cultural underground of society Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground. In addition, it includes the collectivities, institutions, individuals, and media of communication associated with these beliefs. Substantively, it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure. This heterogeneous assortment of cultural items can be regarded despite its apparent diversity as constituting a single entity – the entity of the cultic milieu. (Campbell 2002: 14)

The cultic milieu was formulated in order to capture the source from which new religious movements, cults and other culturally heterodox groups emerge. ‘The paranormal’, as rephrased in alignment with the cultic milieu, comes close to the concept of occulture, as defined by Partridge. Partridge seems to employ several versions of what occulture signifies. For instance, it is described as ‘magical culture’ (Partridge 2004: 40), or as an ‘environment/

reservoir/library of beliefs, ideas and meanings and values which inform the processes of thinking, of symbolizing, and of reflecting on experience' (p. 187). At other times, it is rephrased as the 'occultural milieu' (p. 121), which seems to refer to nearly the same phenomena as the cultic milieu. Take, for instance, the following description:

It will be a milieu of constantly changing spiritualities and religious trends. Within the occultural milieu, new religious groups will coalesce, of which some will fade and others grow. Spiritualities will emerge stimulated by occultural peaks – such as interest in UFOs, fascination with ancient societies, apocalyptic speculation, eco-spiritualities, and so on – and then fade with the general fading of media and public interest. Others will emerge around particular charismatic figures, only to die with their passing. For some, routinization may lead to the continuation of new religions and alternative spiritualities for many years. (Partridge 2004: 187)

So what, if anything, differentiates occulture from the cultic milieu? In a later text, Partridge (2013: 45) argues that occulture is less prone to aggravating tension in the surrounding society, it is thus 'something more ubiquitous, more ordinary and less oppositional'.

Viewed in this way, as a pool of elements or a loosely organized milieu, 'the paranormal', occulture and the cultic milieu all show some resemblance with the New Age movement, as conceptualized by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1996). The New Age movement was, in his view: '*the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself ... as constituting a more or less unified "movement"*'. *All manifestations of this movement are characterized by a popular western culture criticism expressed in terms of a secularized esotericism*' (Hanegraaff 1996: 522, boldface and italics in original). The esoteric or occult heritage reproduced within contemporary paranormal beliefs, practices and experiences, thus becomes salient. An alignment with belief in conspiracy theories further points to either shared roots, or functions, of various forms of rejected or stigmatized views of knowledge, which Tommy Ramstedt (2018) points out in his study of the Finnish fringe science scene Rajatieto. Rejected knowledge is a term derived from James Webb which denotes a cultural underground of occult or esoteric ideas, much like the cultic milieu, in which 'different claims ... can be reshaped, combined, and reinterpreted' (Ramstedt 2018: 42). Stigmatized knowledge, developed by Michael Barkun, refers

to a similar reservoir of heterodox ideas, or ‘a broader intellectual universe into which both rejected knowledge and the cultic milieu may be fitted’ (Barkun 2013: 38). Whether these different concepts should be viewed as complementary, as related but separate cultural environments, or as aspects of essentially the same thing is debatable.

A characteristic uniting all of the concepts addressed in this section, from ‘the paranormal’ to stigmatized knowledge, is that they give rise to some degree of tension within mainstream epistemic authority and expressions of alternative views on knowledge. Indeed, this was apparent back in Campbell’s (2002: 16) original formulation of the cultic milieu, elements thereof being defined in relation to religion and science as dominant cultural orthodoxies. In the next section, I will return once more to the concept of ‘the paranormal’, at last proposing a working definition that might be employed (and assessed in the light of) future research.

‘The paranormal’ as a tentative working definition

For any future conceptualization of ‘the paranormal’, I would argue that it needs to account for at least two components, possibly more. First, I believe that we need a *substantial* component. As the *para* in paranormal implies, the phenomena in question ought to, somehow, go alongside or beyond what is currently accepted as conventional, or normal, science. The transgression of the boundaries of mainstream scientific theory and practice might serve as a minimal substantial definition, rendering ‘the paranormal’ a relational category. However, since the contents and boundaries of contemporary scientific explanation are subject to change, relations between ‘the paranormal’ and the normal ought to be stressed further, which brings me to the second component. This might be achieved through the use of a *discursive* understanding of ‘the paranormal’, as suggested by David G. Robertson. By stressing relations with, tensions in and contestations of the epistemic authorities of mainstream, or institutionalized, science and religion, the historicity of the category, as well as underlying normative assumptions, may become salient. It may help capture the contingency of the category, and how items encompassed by it are likely to change over time, as the limits and boundaries of scientific explanation shift. Uniting the substantial notion of ‘the paranormal’ as that which falls outside of the boundaries of ‘normal’ science with a discursive view of the contingency of these boundaries, we

might come to terms with a concept marked by historicity and relations rather than any fixed or unitary content.

One could argue that a family resemblance type of conceptualization can be combined with the two above stated components, or even be preferable, which might indeed be the case. According to family resemblance approaches, referents encompassed by a category are united through commonality and similarity rather than identity. The referents are thus 'like' one another to some extent. A good example of the conceptual use of family resemblance comes from anthropologist of religion Benson Saler (Salter *et al.* 1997), and his analysis of a particular mythic narrative within contemporary ufology; namely that of a UFO-crash 1947 at Roswell, New Mexico. The occurrence of a mythic (albeit not supernatural) narrative, non-hypothetical (*i.e.* practicably unfalsifiable) truth-claims, superhuman beings (the extra-terrestrials) and the evocation of powerful emotions are the shared features of a particular ufological narrative and religion, making the Roswell myth 'an effort at enchantment in an increasingly postmodern world' (p. 149). Saler elsewhere (2000: 213) suggests that the scholar of religion employs what he calls a prototypical approach, that is, to view the category of religion as a 'pool of elements': phenomena are compared to 'prototypical examples' (such as Christianity or Islam), that the phenomena may resemble to a lesser or greater degree. Religion thus becomes an 'unbounded category' (p. 25). Accordingly, phenomena could be classified as 'more or less' religious. The main point here is, through analogy, that referents within the category of 'the paranormal' might be brought together through common traits, or family resemblance, rather than any set and strict criteria. Further, paranormal referents could be viewed as somewhat similar to phenomena encompassed by the category of religion, without the former formally belonging to the latter category. As Saler (p. 226) states: 'elements that we may apperceive as "religious" are found in phenomena that numbers of us, for a variety of reasons, may not be prepared to dub religions'. This view is reminiscent of one of the founding fathers of the sociology of religion, Émile Durkheim, and his acknowledgement that many objects of folklore could be viewed as elementary phenomena of religion(s): 'In general they are the debris of vanished religions, disorganized remnants; but some are formed spontaneously under the influence of local causes ... A definition that fails to take them into account would not cover everything religious' (Durkheim 2001: 36). The prototypical approach suggested could start out from prototypical paranormal referents, such as the objects described within ufology, cryptozoology

or psychical research, and assess any other candidate as more or less like these prototypes of 'the paranormal'.

Lastly, one might attempt to capture *functional* components of 'the paranormal', or what 'the paranormal' does rather than what it is. As Annette Hill (2011: 75) has observed through audience reception studies of paranormal media such as ghost hunting TV, paranormal media can function as a way for viewers to negotiate identity positions of unbelief and belief respectively, or to navigate between 'a revolving door of scepticism and belief'. These instances might be viewed in light of ambiguities or contradictions associated with modernity, to which the audience employ '[s]trategies for re-enchantment' (p. 171), modernity being characterized by shifts between rationality and irrationality, or disenchantment and enchantment (p. 125). Consumption of paranormal media thus becomes a method for 'identity work and playful experimentation with paranormal beliefs' (p. 171). Further, 'the paranormal' might be employed as a strategy (or even compensator, reminiscent of rational choice or deprivation theory) to accommodate the universal human fact of mortality (p. 167), alongside existential, social and cultural insecurities and anxieties, some of which might be specific to certain temporal, cultural and socioeconomic conditions (p. 175–6). Viewed alongside Robertson, beliefs or activities relating to 'the paranormal' could thus be employed in order to negotiate various identity positions, to accommodate or compensate for personal or social anxieties, or to construct counter-epistemic positions in order to challenge dissatisfactory cultural hegemonies. Surely other functions might be included, this presentation being in no sense exhaustive. And as with any functional definition of religion, we might run into trouble when trying to differentiate 'the paranormal' from other social and cultural phenomena, if indeed we should.

Attempting to combine the first two of the components I have addressed, namely the substantial and discursive, a tentative definition of 'the paranormal' might be formulated as:

The paranormal refers to purported phenomena, or narratives, beliefs, practices and/or experiences related to these, which fall outside of the boundaries of current scientific explanation. These phenomena are marked by some degree of tension in relation to mainstream or institutionalized science and religion, and are to some extent rejected by the two as epistemic authorities.

Trying to include functional components, an additional, secondary and provisional section would be:

The paranormal can further serve as a way for individuals or groups to: navigate or negotiate between different identities pertaining to belief and skepticism; reflect on or handle hardships such as mortality or individual, social and cultural stress and anxiety; formulate a form of cultural critique against perceived cultural and epistemic authority, or hegemony.

The latter, functional supplement would not be a necessary component in a conceptualization of the paranormal, but can serve to capture some common functional traits that are recurrent in various instances of paranormal beliefs, practices and experiences.

Discussion and concluding remarks

What might, or might not, qualify as paranormal is prone to change, since the relations between, and boundaries of, the epistemic authority of science and religion, are themselves subject to change. For instance, a cryptid found, classified and explained by science would not be a cryptid, but a known species. UFO phenomena or hauntings that would fit within the explanatory frameworks of conventional science would also step out of paranormal nomenclature. This, too, is reminiscent of how Partridge understands occulture as part of popular culture, in the sense of a reservoir of ideas and practices that might, or might not, be deemed alternative, and give rise to some degree of tension in relation to mainstream culture. In fact, Partridge argues, much like Hill, that occulture is moving in from the margins: ‘occulture/non-traditional spirituality becomes increasingly less alternative, less exotic, less deviant, and more respectable – it becomes *popular* occulture’ (Partridge 2004: 184, italics in original). This mainstreaming of the paranormal, and related social and cultural phenomena such as conspiracy theories, might prove a challenge to earlier conceptualizations such as the cultic milieu, previously formulated as a heterodox cultural underground, giving rise to a high degree of tension relative to the cultural mainstream.

As several others (Penman 2015; Robertson 2014; Kripal 2011) have pointed out, ‘the paranormal’ as a historical category is bound up with the appearance of research dedicated to psychical and spiritualist phenomena

in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In part, the difficulties of defining ‘the paranormal’ might be due to the term’s history, or how a concept rooted in a particular historical context translates into subsequent ones. Implicit in the word ‘paranormal’ itself is the process of going beyond or transgressing normality, for any referent encompassed by the category. As the boundaries of epistemic authority, or normality, shift and change, so too will the contents of ‘the paranormal’.

In this article, I have presented various conceptualizations of ‘the paranormal’ as the term has been used within the social sciences. I have argued that the meaning of the term is contested, as is its place as an object of inquiry within religious studies. A recurring feature is that purported paranormal phenomena fall outside of the boundaries of mainstream science. ‘The paranormal’ is further marked by some degree of tension or conflict with scientific and religious traditions as epistemic authorities. The extent to which Western populations are willing to affirm belief in ‘the paranormal’ speaks, in itself, in favour of studying ‘the paranormal’ – or paranormal variables – as social and cultural phenomena: it represents an empirical reality that begs explanation. The main contribution of the article is, however, an attempt at synthesizing previous conceptualizations of ‘the paranormal’ into a working definition that could be used in future research.

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