Weird Paranormal Beliefs: They Never Seem to Go Away

A Review of
Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem
by Peter Lamont
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Reviewed by
Jonathan C. Smith

Author response: Weird Beliefs, Indeed! A Response to the Review of Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem

Humanity has always struggled with the weird world of the extraordinary, things that defy accepted explanation. Technically we are referring to paranormal claims, assertions that go beyond what science says can happen. Such is the subject of historian and magician Peter Lamont’s scholarly book Extraordinary Beliefs: A Historical Approach to a Psychological Problem.

Lamont asks why people persist in believing or dismissing paranormal phenomena. He proposes that conjuring theory (the tricks magicians use), the social context of our beliefs, and how well they are communicated create “frames” of beliefs and disbeliefs that filter and form our perceptions and interpretations. Furthermore, this milieu of frames can actually create the phenomena they attempt to explain (or explain away) and even determine who we are as believers and skeptics. Lamont’s strategy is to apply his proposal to a selection of European and American paranormal claims from the 19th through the 21st century: mesmerism, mediums and spiritualism, mind reading, and a few topics from contemporary parapsychology.

At his best, Lamont provides fascinating glimpses into portions of the history of the paranormal. Lamont (p. 31) offers interpretation of the links between phrenology (a 19th-century discipline that claimed that bumps in the skull reveal underlying “propensities, sentiments, and faculties”), mesmerism (the application of a mysterious energy fluid, animal magnetism, to humans), psychic abilities potentially activated by magnetic energies in parts of the brain, and eventually contemporary neuroscience and brain localization.
But Lamont’s goal is not to entertain us with stories of paranormal history. He is definitely not Mary Roach, an excellent writer who provided a historical and journalistic romp through the history of research on the afterlife (Roach, 2005). He is not James Randi, who has delighted us with accounts of the famous psychic Uri Geller (Randi, 2011). Indeed, the paranormal literature is replete with excellent and illuminating histories.

Lamont’s scholarly mission is to explain why believers and disbelievers persist in their paranormal beliefs and disbeliefs. His thesis is that social beliefs have framed how we embrace or dismiss claimed paranormal events throughout history. His strategy is to select an event, such as a séance in which a medium receives messages from the departed, and list a dozen or so opinions supporting, dismissing, and debating the phenomenon.

Each reported opinion illustrates a belief framed by a particular group. So, traditional Christian ministers may reject spiritualistic communication because it runs counter to some framings of the Bible. Other Christians may endorse the claims of spiritualists, noting (framing) that similar things happen in the Bible. Mesmerists may claim, consistent with their beliefs, that séances reflect mesmeristic influence. Advocates of new views of hypnosis may observe that séances are simply group suggestion. Skeptics may reject the entire séance enterprise as trickery, something easily performed by a magician. Spiritualists may reply that the occasional use of trickery is required because channels of communication with the dead are unreliable (trickery is thus evidence of the veracity of such communications).

So everyone has his or her own opinion, supported by whatever set of beliefs he or she may embrace. Over time, this play of opinions displays a certain evolution, with some growing out of favor and others emerging. However, every opinion reflects a social frame, beliefs held by a certain group. To me, this is not deep scholarship but a rather tiresome listing. Actual framing theory is complex (Goffman, 1974) and considers a variety of processes, including how unconnected frames are sometimes linked, how some frames are selectively augmented and amplified, and how frames change and transform (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). Lamont makes little effort to apply the subtleties of this mature perspective.

With some fanfare, Lamont continues by proposing that not only do group beliefs influence individual beliefs, but they actually change an individual’s identity. He even goes so far as to suggest that psychologists need to reconsider their scholarly endeavor. Yes, we can find vivid examples of how our beliefs concerning reality may create the very reality we see. For example, mesmerism has been framed in terms of an irresistible dominating energy fluid over which one automatically loses control to the mesmerist, perhaps acquiring psychic abilities and often losing consciousness. And, indeed, subjects of animal magnetism studies (after presumably hearing or reading about demonstrations) dramatically displayed these very characteristics.

As described in Chapter 3, “The Making of Mesmeric Phenomena,” James Braid reframed mesmerism as neurohypnotism. In doing so, he described a phenomenon in which the subject did not lose control to a hypnotist, was not unconscious, and did not acquire psychic abilities. One could claim that Braid also created a new type of person. The “hypnotized person” was not unconscious, an automaton, or psychic. And indeed, that is how Braid’s subjects behaved (quite likely after encountering the specifics of his theory).

One could make similar claims about Freud’s framing of hysteria (which suddenly became remarkably prevalent in the late 1800s) or even the contemporary prevalence of
posttraumatic stress disorder and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder as psychiatric definitions change. However, in spite of these occasional vivid examples, Lamont fails to make the case that most of our belief framings of the paranormal have changed us as people, other than to influence how and what we believe.

Lamont concludes with a rambling and somewhat incoherent complaint against the contemporary skeptical and critical thinking movement: the "misguided orthodoxy" (p. 254) of what he tags the "psychology of error" (p. 248). Frankly, I am not entirely sure what he means by misguided, orthodoxy, and psychology of error or why these terms merit criticism.

Worse, he misses most of the current focus of contemporary paranormal research and thinking, even important work on the sources of paranormal beliefs. My own text on critical thinking, pseudoscience, and the paranormal (Smith, 2010) is one of many (Schick & Vaughn, 2013) that can easily be “framed” as reviewing dozens of well-researched current explanations of how one comes to believe or dismiss a paranormal claim. Any writer claiming to consider how such beliefs form should at least acknowledge the territory already covered and point out how his or her perspective offers something new and better. In this endeavor, Lamont fails.

In general, Extraordinary Beliefs is an attempt at scholarship, occasionally interesting, but more often flawed. Standing back, I believe Lamont’s work displays one deficiency that is all too common in paranormal scholarship. Permit me to share a closing observation.

An examination of the burgeoning library of books on the paranormal and articles in defining journals reveals typical objects of study similar to those selected by Lamont: psychics, communication with the dead, mesmerism, and similar energies. To these we can add angels, astrology, flying saucers, fortune telling, crystals, the Loch Ness monster, the Bermuda triangle, and the like. Often these are chosen for entertainment value, especially their capacity to boost sales and ratings.

In our enlightened age, irrational paranormal beliefs—those that are inconsistent with or not supported by science (Smith, 2010)—are still used to justify burning witches, depriving children of life-saving medication, persuading us and insurance companies to spend millions on worthless alternative Oriental treatments, influencing public policy in Congress, ignoring threats of global warming because they contradict promises of a holy book, denying unfavored minority groups their rights, and, yes, inspiring true believers to drive airplanes into skyscrapers. One of the most passionate claims of current texts skeptical of paranormal beliefs is that they can have deadly consequences (Smith, 2010).

In this age of toxic true belief and dehumanizing superstition, I think the pressing questions go beyond the realm of mind-reading tricks or communication with the dead. We need to know: “Does the evidence support any useful paranormal claim?” “Why do some paranormalists persist in ignoring clear, contrary evidence?” “When do paranormal beliefs become dangerous and stir antisocial and personally harmful behavior?” and “What are effective strategies for teaching and encouraging open-minded critical thinking?” Such questions are topics of urgent consequence, worthy of our most serious scholarly efforts.


