

# Everyday Miracles: Results of a Representative Survey in Germany

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## Abstract

*This essay introduces the central results – for the first time in the English language – of a representative survey which was carried out at the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene in Freiburg in the year 2000. Over 1500 persons of the Federal Republic of Germany were questioned in a telephone interview about their attitude towards paranormal phenomena and about personal experiences in this field. The results are surprising: Germans are quite open-minded about paranormal phenomena, and more than half of the people even give an account of personal exceptional experiences. Interestingly, it is primarily young people who believe in the existence of psi phenomena and who are increasingly having personal experiences in this field. Presented are qualitative results, as well as descriptive statistics. In a second telephone interview more than 200 persons were questioned once again, this time in detail, about their personal experiences. It was found that dealing with the paranormal is not seen as problematic at all.*

## Introduction

Exceptional experiences are finding widespread public interest. This can be seen simply by taking a short glance into bookshops, the yellow pages or television programs; the disillusionment ("Entzauberung") of the world in the third millennium (as postulated by the

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German sociologist Max Weber at the beginning of the twentieth century) is not to be found.<sup>1</sup> Even though scientific and technical progress is fast-paced, postmodern people still have transcendent (“magic”) experiences quite often - and few seem to see this as a problem, as we will show in this paper.

Such “exceptional” experiences were the focus of an interview study that was conducted at the *Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie* in Freiburg, the central results of which are now being introduced to the English-speaking public for the first time. The survey set out to answer the following questions: How common are such exceptional experiences in Germany today? What exactly do the people involved experience? How do they assess their experiences when looking back at them? Neither the (ontological) question of “authenticity” nor the scientific explanation of the phenomena was the central issue, but rather the attempt to sociologically describe “paranormal” experiences. These, as we will show, are not considered to be exceptional but are seen as (almost) everyday experiences.

### *Previous Empirical Investigations*

This study follows a number of empirical research projects, conducted in the last few years, which have dealt with the occurrence and phenomenology of so called *exceptional experiences*. Most of these studies were conducted in English-speaking countries as in Germany there are few up-to-date reports. It was remarkable that similar phenomena were studied in the context of quite diverse areas of research, including parapsychology, religious studies, sociology and psychology. On the one hand, this shows the connections and similarities between religious, mystical and paranormal experiences. On the other hand, this diversity is evidence of a strong heterogeneity of the research traditions involved.

The results of this study are familiar in that they show that these types of experiences are not as uncommon as the term *exceptional* would suggest. According to much of the literature, it is assumed that between 30 to 50 percent of humans have exceptional experiences (for example see Clarke, 1995; Gallup & Newport, 1991; Gaynard, 1992; Haight, 1979;

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<sup>1</sup>With “Entzauberung der Welt” (“disillusionment of the world”) Weber (1972, p.308) described the replacement of a mythological world view through processes of rationalization of the modern age. This “disillusionment” destroyed the magical and relatively homogeneous world view of the Middle Ages and lead to a rationalization of the world, which effects at the same time the “disillusionment” of the sacred sector of life – and also the sphere of religious experiencing.

Haraldsson, 1985; Haraldsson & Houtkooper 1991; McClenon, 1994a; Ross & Joshi, 1992; West, 1990) even though comparing the data is problematic due to varying methods, sample size or question wording. Nonetheless many authors conclude that such a common occurrence is independent of historical, cultural, national and sociocultural influences.

*The IGPP-Study "Paranormal Experiences in the German Population"*

Our survey was carried out in the year 2000 and had two phases of enquiry: a representative survey ( $N = 1510$ ) was followed by qualitative interviews of those persons who had personally had exceptional experiences ( $N= 220$ ). Objectives were (a) the systematic analysis of attitudes towards exceptional experiences, (b) their frequency in the German population, and (c) to determine factors which may be instrumental in bringing about such experiences (for instance, certain groups of people or specific attitudes). For this purpose, demographic criteria such as age, education, occupation, regional differences, marital status as well as religious affiliation, association with a church and religiosity were determined.

The choice of what "exceptional" experiences were considered in the questionnaire turned out to be difficult. After all, there is no agreement about what can or cannot be considered a paranormal phenomenon. The items included in the questionnaire comprise a selection of items which were empirically and pragmatically justified. In order to facilitate comparison, there was a preference for those phenomena which had commonly been included in previous studies about paranormal experiences.

The standardized questionnaire consisted of four thematic blocks: (1) questions about the conceivability of paranormal phenomena, (2) questions about the existence of personal exceptional experiences, (3) socio-demographic variables and (4) details of those persons with exceptional experiences who were willing to participate in a second interview (including, on a voluntary basis, address and/or telephone number).

The representative survey was conducted in collaboration with a professional institute for opinion polling (Academic Data, Essen) in the form of computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). The large sample of 10,000 telephone numbers which is the basis of our study were obtained by the following strict randomising procedure. First, a

sample was drawn out of telephone directories, then the last digits of the chosen telephone numbers were modified via an automated randomising process. Theoretically, even those terminations that are not included in telephone lists (secret numbers or the like) may thereby be reached. However, invalid number combinations are also created in this way, so selection continued until we had reached our prespecified sample size of 1500 persons. For valid numbers which were answered, 51.5% of the persons subsequently participated in the survey.<sup>2</sup>

Before we present the most important results of our survey in the following sections, a short note on the composition of our sample. As already mentioned, altogether 1510 interviews were carried out. The average age of the interviewees at the time of the survey was 48.5 years, with 61.5% women and 38.5% men. Despite the randomized selection procedure, this meant that women were over represented by 7% in comparison to the female population of the Federal Republic of Germany.

## Selected Results

### *Conceivability of Paranormal Phenomena*

The first section of the questionnaire concerned the attitude of the population towards paranormal phenomena. For that purpose, the interviewees were asked whether they thought that the existence of certain predetermined paranormal phenomena was possible.<sup>3</sup> The interviewees were asked whether they could imagine that:

**“Animal-Psi”** Pets are connected to their owner across large distances and are, for example, able to sense whenever he is in danger.

**“Precognition”** Humans are able to foresee things which are otherwise impossible for them to know or guess.

**“Telepathy”** Humans can perceive thoughts and feelings of other human beings across great distances.

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<sup>2</sup>The telephone interviews of the main study (30/03 – 18/04/2000) were conducted on Mondays to Saturday from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

<sup>3</sup>The idea behind “conceivability” was to give a neutral item and to avoid the (difficult) question of believing in something (or not). On the other hand, data on “conceivability of paranormal phenomena” bear on the issue of paranormal belief and the relation between beliefs and experiences. Even though a lot of studies attend to these questions, the controversy regarding the direction of the relation continues: are paranormal experiences based on paranormal beliefs, or is it the other way round? (For this special discourse see e.g. Bainbridge & Stark 1980; Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991; Irwin, 1994; Otis & Alcock, 1982; Thalborne, 1995; Tobacyk & Wilkinson, 1990).

**"Psychokinesis"** It is possible for humans to move or bend objects with the power of their mind.

**"UFO"** Flying objects of extraterrestrial beings, so called UFOs, exist.

**"Crisis-ESP"** Humans sense when a person close to them is dying or in danger somewhere.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the answers in order of the frequency of affirmation.

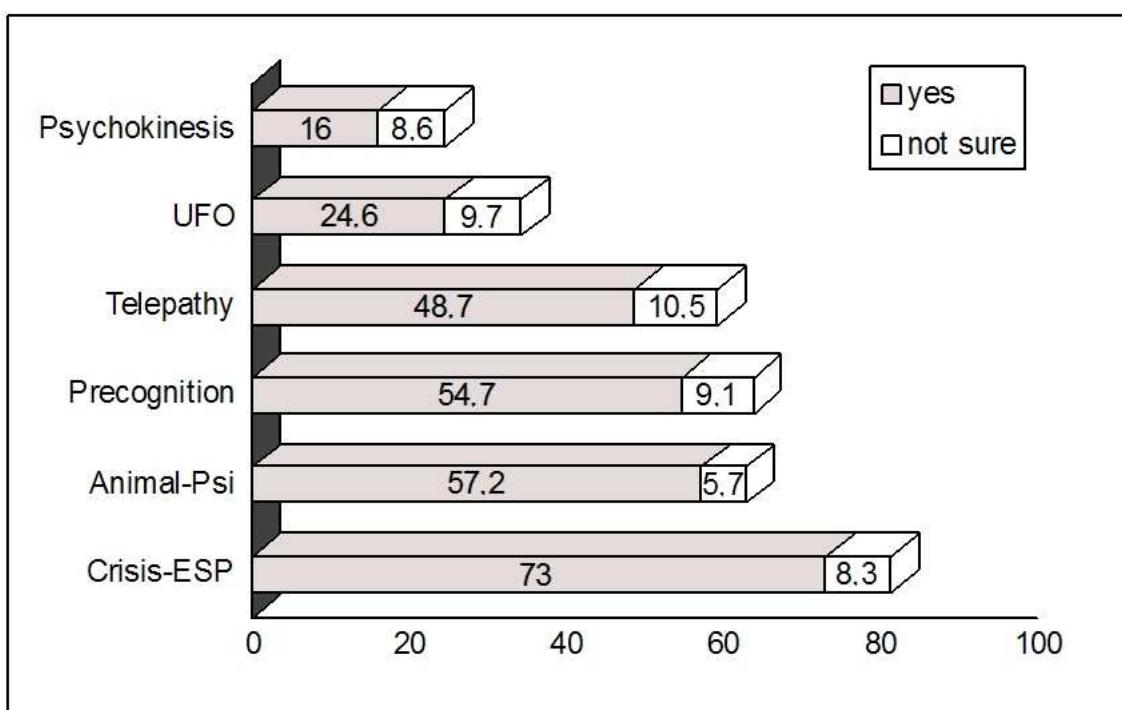


Figure 1. Percentage of "yes" and "not-sure" responses for conceivability of paranormal phenomena ( $N = 1510$ )

It seems there are considerable differences with regard to the conceivability of paranormal phenomena. To begin with, it appears that there is a high percentage of persons who can imagine that one senses when something happens to other people or when others die (crisis ESP). In general, the affirmative responses to the question of so called extra-sensory perception (including the previously mentioned death and crisis events as well as the questions about telepathy, precognition and Animal Psi), are significantly higher than the UFO and psychokinesis items, though even there positive response rates are 25% and 16% respectively.

However, that doesn't mean that everyone can imagine everything. On average, three of the six predetermined phenomena were conceivable for the persons questioned. Maximum values of five or six "Yes" responses were only found in 12% of respondents, and almost as many persons (11%) think none of the paranormal phenomena are possible.

Relationships can also be observed for socio-demographic factors, primarily age, religiosity and sex of the interviewees. For instance, significantly more phenomena are conceivable for women (mean value 2.9) than for men (mean value 2.4). Furthermore, considerable differences between the sexes can be observed for single phenomena (only exception psychokinesis). Distinctly more women than men think that the extra-sensory phenomena (precognition, telepathy, 'Animal Psi', ESP in case of death and crisis) are possible, whereas in the male interviewees only the idea of the existence of UFOs is significantly more frequent (table 1).

Table 1: Percentage 'yes' responders for conceivability of paranormal phenomena by sex

Conceivability Item	% Women (N= 926)	% Men (N= 584)	$\chi^2$	(p)
Crisis-ESP	79.0	63.5	46.16	(< .001 )
Animal-Psi	63.2	47.9	49.62	(< .001 )
Precognition	60.4	45.7	47.82	(< .001 )
Telepathy	53.7	40.8	41.55	(< .001 )
UFO	19.4	32.9	35.76	(< .001 )
Psychokinesis	15.9	16.1	-	( .61 )

There is also a distinct relationship between the age of the interviewees and the conceivability of paranormal phenomena. In general one can say that the open-mindedness towards such phenomena *decreases* significantly with increasing age. As table 2 shows, this result is also valid if we look at the conceivability of single phenomena.

It seems that people are more open-minded towards the paranormal when they are young as, except for the "psychokinesis" item, the younger the interviewees, the more likely they are to agree with a general conceivability of paranormal phenomena. This is most explicit in the UFO item. While one half of the 18 to 30 year olds can imagine the existence of UFOs, only 15% of the over 66 year olds can. We believe that this is due to a large extent to the fact that UFOs have become a prominent part of discussion in the mass-media in the last twenty years, where the topic of UFOs, especially in fiction, is primarily addressed to younger people. Similar significant patterns are also evident in the

Table 2: Percentage 'yes' responders for conceivability of paranormal phenomena by age

Conceivability Item	18–30 yrs (N= 256)	31–45 yrs (N= 451)	46–65 yrs (N= 501)	66 and older (N=287) <sup>a</sup>	$\eta$	(p)
Crisis-ESP	75.8	77.3	71.0	67.9	.095	(.007)
Animal-Psi	59.8	57.8	57.9	54.9	-	(.357)
Precognition	59.8	58.7	53.2	47.7	.092	(.015)
Telepathy	48.8	51.7	48.8	44.9	-	(.317)
UFO	43.0	28.9	17.4	14.6	.222	(< .001)
Psychokinesis	16.8	16.8	17.8	11.1	.075	(.017)

<sup>a</sup>Not all interviewees specified their age so that the sum across all the age groups is less than the total N of 1510.

"crisis-ESP" and "Precognition" items. We believe that these represent different patterns and traditions in dealing with exceptional experiences that are specific to certain generations, especially as there is a near linear trend of decreasing conceivability with increasing age. Whether this is due to the process of aging and maturing or whether the results should be viewed as cohort effects unfortunately cannot be answered with the present cross-sectional design.

Relationships with the conceivability of paranormal phenomena can also be found in the variables concerning religion. On average, there appears to be more affirmative responses if the interviewee is member of a church, though the specific denomination makes no difference. However, considering the general tendency towards secularization in modern societies, formal membership of a church may not be a very convincing criterion.<sup>4</sup> Instead, a more informative relationship with religion may be found by considering the self-assessed religiosity of the interviewees.<sup>5</sup> Here, statistically significant relationships appear: the conceivability of all phenomena is higher when the interviewees consider themselves "somewhat" or "very" religious. Those who consider themselves "not religious at all" on average believe that 2.2 phenomena can exist. This value rises with increasing religiosity, with "barely

<sup>4</sup>Moreover, the specific situation of the German reunification must be taken into consideration as the situation in the two parts of the country is still extremely different, even more than ten years after the reunification. While in West Germany most people (81% of the interviewees in our sample) are a member of one of the two large German churches, this is true only for 30% of the interviewees in East Germany (the former GDR).

<sup>5</sup>The question was: "Besides the fact of whether you are a member of a church or not: How religious would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 4? 1 being *not religious at all*, 2 *barely religious*, 3 *somewhat religious*, 4 *very religious*."

religious" believing in the existence of 2.7 phenomena, "somewhat religious" accept 2.88 phenomena, and "very religious" accept 2.94 phenomena. An ANOVA showed this to be a statistically significant trend ( $\eta^2 = .152$ ,  $p < .001$  ).

Only the UFO item shows a trend in the opposite direction: about 20% of the interviewees classified as "somewhat" or "very religious" thought that it is possible that flying objects of extraterrestrial beings exist but this increased to 30% in the groups "barely" and "not at all religious". This shows once again the peculiarity of the UFO item, suggesting that this should be interpreted by considering the background of current media fiction and the changing scientific picture of man's in the universe rather than in the context of classic paranormal ('psychic') phenomena (cf. Schetsche, 1997).

To sum up we can say that, while only the *conceivability* was studied and therefore not much can be said about individual convictions or specific belief in the existence of these phenomena, it can be confirmed that in principle the interviewees are quite open-minded towards paranormal phenomena. At the same time, occasional distinct differences between single groups of persons must be acknowledged. These are due to the influence of cultural factors in the formation or adoption of personal attitudes. For example, the distinct differences between the age groups make it possible to draw conclusions about traditions in dealing with such phenomena that are typical for each generation. The assessment of single psi phenomena can vary as well and may depend on whether explanations exist that are compatible with the prevalent scientific world view or with existing possibilities of interpretation.

### *Incidence of Paranormal Experiences in Germany*

Besides the questions about conceivability the questionnaire also contained a second thematic section, which asked about the existence of *personal* exceptional experience. The selection of the items was based on the very wide spectrum of varying forms of exceptional experience. However, once more a concrete selection had to be made to allow comparison both with already existing empirical studies and the first "conceivability" section. The participants in part two of the study were asked whether:

**"ESP-Dream"** They had ever seen something in a dream that later actually happened, something of which they could have had no prior

knowledge and which they could not have guessed.

**‘Strange Coincidences’** They had ever had certain things happen suddenly in such an amazing way that it was impossible for them to believe in pure chance any longer.

**“Crisis-ESP”** They had ever experienced strange things happening at exactly the same time someone died or had an accident elsewhere.

**“Animal Psi”** They had ever seen an animal behave in such an unusual manner that they thought it must be caused by something supernatural.

**“Apparition”** They had ever perceived something they took for a ghost of someone who had died or for some other unusual being.

**“Déjà Vu”** They had ever suddenly had the strange feeling that they had been in the same situation or in the same place before even though they never knowingly had.

**“Haunting”** Things surrounding them had ever behaved in such a peculiar manner that they had the feeling the place was haunted.

**“UFO”** They had ever seen anything they believed to be an UFO.<sup>6</sup>

**“Other/Miscellaneous”** They had ever had extraordinary experiences other than the above.

To begin with, the conclusion: certainly the most important result of our study was that altogether 73%, that is almost three quarters of the interviewees, had personally experienced at least one of the given phenomena.<sup>7</sup> In other words: “exceptional” experiences are astoundingly common in the German population.

On average, the 1100 interviewees with exceptional experiences have experienced between two to three of the given phenomena (mean value 2.8). About one quarter of the interviewees (25.7%) have personally experienced four or more of the given experiences. Of course we are aware of the fact that this high frequency of extraordinary experiences also includes experiences such as *déjà vu* and “amazing coincidences”

<sup>6</sup>Only those persons that had stated in the preceding part that they could imagine that UFOs as extraterrestrial flying objects really exist were asked this question. This leads to some methodological problems that make it necessary to exclude this item in this section.

<sup>7</sup>Whether a phenomenon was experienced once or more than once could only be clarified in the second (qualitative) survey. Here, merely the occurrence of certain types of experience was relevant.

which can be characterized as relatively ordinary. However, the percentage of those who only agree with the *déjà vu*-item is a mere 8% of all respondents. Only 4% have only experienced “amazing coincidences” and the number of those who have experienced only these two ‘ordinary’ experiences is 4.5% (together representing a total of 68 people). Even if we take into consideration only the classical paranormal experiences “ESP dream”, “apparition”, “crisis-ESP” and “haunting”, still 52% of the interviewees have *personally* experienced at least one of these extraordinary phenomena.

Table 3: Incidence of paranormal experiences ( $N = 1510$ )

Incidence (personal experience) of:	N	%
Déjà Vu	747	49.5
ESP-dream	554	36.7
Strange Coincidences	551	36.5
Crisis-ESP	283	18.7
Apparition	238	15.8
Animal-Psi	231	15.3
Haunting	183	12.1
Other/miscellaneous	115	7.6

However, these numbers must be interpreted with caution , if only because what they show is no more than mere agreement to a standardized given item. Which individual experience lies behind each of the answers, in which context these experiences occur, which personal relevance and what kind of exceptional character the interviewees see in these phenomena – all this cannot be determined without concrete accounts of these experiences. Furthermore relativisations must be accepted. For instance, only after the second interview did an overlap between the ESP-dream and the *déjà vu* item become apparent: many persons had (also) affirmed the ESP-dream question when in fact they meant a *déjà vu*. It showed that many interviewees employed the (special) state of experience in a dream as a possible *hypothesis* to explain the otherwise unexplainable recognition of situations (*déjà vu*).

### *Socio-Demographic Variables*

But let us go on to further results of the survey. It can be said that differences between men and women, between East and West Germans, as well as criteria such as denomination, affiliation with a church and religiosity have *no significant influence on the occurrence of an excep-*

tional experience. If we however consider the average number of experiences, significant differences can definitely be found. For instance, women have experienced significantly more phenomena (an average of 2.8) than men (an average of 2.6).

Once again, statistically significant differences can be found especially in regard to the age of the interviewees: with increasing age of the interviewees, the percentage of persons with exceptional experiences decreases significantly. While 89.5% of the younger interviewees under 30 years of age have had exceptional experiences, which is almost 17 percentage points more than in the complete sample (72.8%), the percentage decreases successively to 77.9% in the 31 to 45 year olds, to 66.8% in the 46 to 65 year olds, and to a mere 61% in those interviewees who are more than 65 years old. The relationship between occurrence of exceptional experiences and age groups is statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 71.415, p < .001$ ).

So, not only is a more open-minded attitude towards paranormal phenomena therefore a characteristic of the younger generation (as was already apparent in the increased conceivability of the younger interviewees compared to the older ones), but younger persons also have more personal exceptional experiences. The reason for this cannot be derived from the statistical data; as sociologists, we assume that the biographical context of such experiences plays an important role. At a relatively early stage in life, people are possibly more preoccupied with such phenomena, which can be quite different from serious and binding convictions and belief systems. Often, simple curiosity or a behavior specific to a certain group or environment are the basis for so-called occult interests. Furthermore, the relevance of extraordinary experiences can decrease with increasing age and experience. Exceptional experiences are then only one field of experience among many others, and accordingly they are repressed or considered hardly worth remembering. Maybe the growing experience in life simply brings other, more ordinary possibilities for explaining these phenomena.

However, if one takes into consideration *single types* of experience, restrictions must be made. Distinct connections are evident in *déjà vu*-experiences, in ESP-dreams and in strange coincidences, which are experienced significantly more often by younger people (table 4).

This is reversed in the items “apparitions” and “crisis-ESP”. That is however at the most a trend, as the results are not statistically signifi-

Table 4: Percentage 'yes' responders for type of paranormal experiences by age ( $N = 1496$ )

Experiences	18–30 yrs (N= 256)	31–45 yrs (N= 453)	46–65 yrs (N= 500)	66 and older (N=287) <sup>a</sup>	$\eta$	(p)
Déjà Vu	76.2	64.0	36.2	26.1	.366	(<.001)
ESP-dream	57.0	42.6	30.4	21.6	.244	(< .001)
Strange coincidences	42.2	42.0	33.1	30.1	.120	(< .001)
Crisis-ESP	14.5	18.3	20.4	21.3	-	(.111)
Apparition	13.7	15.0	16.2	18.8	.091	(.036)
Animal-Psi	16.1	15.3	15.9	14.3	-	(.071)
Haunting	16.8	10.8	11.6	11.5	-	(.177)

<sup>a</sup>14 people did not indicate their age, so that the sum across all the age groups is slightly less than the total  $N$  of 1510.

 Table 5: Percentage 'yes' responders for paranormal experiences by sex ( $N = 1510$ )

Experiences	Women (N = 926)	Men (N= 584)
Déjà Vu	48.8	50.5
ESP-dream	38.2	34.2
Strange coincidences	37.3	35.3
Crisis-ESP	23.0	12.0
Apparition	18.6	11.3
Animal-Psi	14.9	16.1
Haunting	12.9	11.0

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Differences can also be found by comparing men and women (Table 5). It appears that women experience "apparitions" ( $\chi^2 = 28.541$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and "crisis-ESP" ( $\chi^2 = 28.541$ ,  $p < .001$ ) significantly more frequently. The difference with men amounts to up to 11 percentage points. This can also be found in the items "amazing coincidences", "haunting" and "ESP dreams" as a statistically non-significant trend. Only in the Déjà vus and animal experiences is the percentage of men having experiences higher.

With regard to the question of whether the occurrence of certain exceptional experiences is dependent on religious variables, no factors in regard to affiliation with a church, attachment to one's church or denomination can be found. It has already been mentioned that in addition these factors don't seem very convincing when taking into consideration the tendencies towards secularization in societies. The issue changes however, if we take another look at the individual religios-

ity beyond traditional affiliation with a church. Table 6 shows distinct connections between certain types of experience and the religious self-assessment of the interviewees.

Table 6: Percentage 'yes' responders for paranormal experiences by religiosity ( $N = 1477$ )

Experiences	'Not at all' (N= 218)	'Barely' (N= 307)	'Somewhat' (N= 725)	'Very' (N= 227) <sup>a</sup>	$\eta$	(p)
Déjà Vu	60.6	51.5	47.0	46.3	.090	(.022)
ESP-dream	37.6	38.8	34.9	38.8	-	(.812)
Strange coincidences	26.3	34.3	37.2	48.2	.127	(< .001)
Crisis-ESP	12.8	14.7	19.4	27.3	.119	(.001)
Apparition	11.0	11.4	17.4	20.8	.098	(.014)
Animal-Psi	9.7	19.5	14.9	16.4	.040	(.012)
Haunting	9.2	9.8	12.4	15.9	-	(.24)

<sup>a</sup>The sum of the interviewees is reduced to  $N = 1477$  here, because 17 people answered 'I don't know' and 16 people answered 'not specified'.

We can see that certain experiences such as amazing coincidences, apparitions or extra-sensory perception are reported significantly more often by those persons who assessed themselves as (somewhat or very) religious in the questionnaire. The second interview showed that these experiences in particular are often put in the context of religious interpretations by the interviewees.

Other aspects of the data also indicate that exceptional experiences are linked with spiritual, religious or ideological attitudes in a complex manner. As expected, a connection between the conceivability and the occurrence of extraordinary experiences can be observed. Those interviewees who can imagine that paranormal phenomena really exist, thereby displaying a corresponding positive attitude, have also personally experienced extraordinary experiences significantly more often: 98% of those who can imagine all phenomena report personal experiences. In those who can imagine only one phenomenon, these are a "mere" 54%. Furthermore, those who can actually imagine many of the given phenomena usually also have several (different kinds of) experiences on average (Pearson  $r = 0.487$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, no conclusion is possible here about the direction in which this connection goes. Three connections are conceivable in principle: (1) someone who is more open-minded towards these phenomena is more likely to have corresponding personal experiences (in other words, is more disposed

to interpret occurrences in terms of paranormal experiences); (2) Someone who has had a number of exceptional experiences during his lifetime is more disposed to believe in the existence of such phenomena; (3) Experiences with the psychic and corresponding positive attitudes are both dependent on a third factor or influence one another in such a manner that one cannot speak of a causal connection in one direction.

### **Is an exceptional experience always a paranormal phenomenon?**

This ambivalence in the interpretation of the data is due to the relatively limited character of this standardized survey. So far, our statistical results allow neither for conclusions about the contents of the experiences, their interpretations and consequences, nor for information about the individual (biographical) context of the experiences or about cultural factors of influence. Questions about how such exceptional experiences are assessed and interpreted by the people involved also remained unanswered. For example, is an exceptional experience always also a paranormal phenomenon?

In order to follow and reconstruct such processes of interpretation, we decided to conduct a second part of the study. In this part, qualitative interviews were carried out, so that altogether a research design was available to us that wasn't restricted by statistical distributions, but rather allowed those people with such experiences to have their say.<sup>8</sup>

A positive effect of the first survey was that almost half of the interviewees with exceptional experiences agreed to participate in a second interview (altogether 525 contact addresses). Because of this we had to make a selection. We used the procedure of "theoretical sampling" (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which the selection of a single case takes place after consideration of its content and of the results from the collected material. In particular the interviewees profile of conceivability and experience as well as socio-demographic criteria served as factors. Altogether, 220 telephone interviews were conducted in this phase of the study.<sup>9</sup>

For the evaluation, a main point was the reconstruction of typical characteristics for each of the extraordinary phenomena. In addition,

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<sup>8</sup>Several previous studies have undertaken this step (combining a standardized survey and open interviews) e.g., Greeley, 1975; Knoblauch et al, 2001; McClenon, 1994b; West, 1990. For the qualitative methodology in examining psi experiences see: Stowell, 1995; Virtanen, 1990; White, 1990; Woffitt, 1992.

<sup>9</sup>The thematic interviews were conducted by R. Deflorin, H. Falkenhagen and I. Schmied-Knittel.

emphasis was placed on the analysis of the narrations and on an assumed heterogeneity and individuality of the reports. Furthermore, more complex questions were pursued, for instance about the socio-linguistic mediation of extraordinary experiences as well as about the subjective interpretation and assessment of the phenomena. Although the reports do show a great heterogeneity and individuality of experience, we were nevertheless able to detect structural similarities. Unfortunately it is not possible for us to give detailed proof of this here due to the necessary brevity of this article. All we can do in the next paragraphs is to introduce some of the central assumptions which developed out of the qualitative data.<sup>10</sup> The following hypotheses are based on an extensive qualitative analysis (not to be mixed up with a quantitative content analysis!):

*Exceptional experiences are generally widespread but biographically rare.*

The representative survey came to the conclusion that in general exceptional experiences are common. However, in the qualitative interviews it became evident that that doesn't mean that the individual person is regularly affected. On the contrary, from an individual or biographical point of view the phenomena occur rather rarely, so at least in this sense they are *exceptional* experiences.

*Similar experiences are interpreted quite differently.*

We found clear similarities or returning elements and characteristics in certain types of experience. Reports about apparitions or about *déjà vu* experiences turned out to be quite similar, whereas this was not true for subjective attempts to explain the experienced phenomena, which were surprisingly diverse. For experiences that are comparable on the level of content and structure, religious and parapsychological as well as scientific and popular (lay) psychological interpretations compete with each other. Here it is remarkable that one's choice of a model is not as dependent on the type of exceptional experience as on one's particular worldview.

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<sup>10</sup>We only can present excerpts from the complete results due to the limited space. For German speaking readers we refer to the extensive publication "Alltägliche Wunder" (Bauer & Schetsche, 2003) which contains the complete results of the research project.

*Everyday explanations are more frequent than transcendental ones.*

We observed that the application of 'paranormal' models of explanation or references to the 'psi' qualities of the experiences are distinctly more rare than one would expect considering the traditional (and also parapsychological) understanding of such phenomena. Only very occasionally do the interviewees resort to the effects of supernatural powers or to the existence of psychic abilities in their reports. Far more frequently, the interviewees are guided by an everyday and pragmatic perspective. In all of the interviews, this can be seen by the following indicators: (1) the predominance of rational explanations for the experienced phenomena, (2) the seamless integration of the exceptional experience into the individual biography and (3) the fact that aspects relevant to counseling or even clinical practice are almost never an issue.

We don't mean to suggest that the persons concerned don't hold on at all to any specific quality of experience. On the contrary, the quality of the respective experience is brought out as remarkable and peculiar compared to conventional experience, even though it is not declared as transcendental or supernatural. Most of the interviewees rather classify their experiences – often told in form of an anecdote – as a kind of 'abnormal-normal' incident, which is why we coined the term *every-day miracle*.

*Communication takes place in a 'shielded mode'.*

Even though there is not one specific characteristic of 'exceptional' experience, we can nevertheless determine a characteristic when regarding the communication of these experiences. A structural similarity exists which allows us to continue speaking about exceptional experiences (without any quotation marks) despite all our reservations. This characteristic is that communication about this type of experience almost always takes place in a specific, secure mode of speech. We have named this recurrent style of narration "shielded communication". This mode signals (to oneself and to others) that one has dared enter into an area of 'special knowledge'. To be precise, the narrator, using a number of communicative precautions, sees to it that it is possible to actually believe him or her. S/he employs specific strategies such as naming witnesses and experts, emphasizing her/his (otherwise) rational attitude, or argumentatively eliminating other logical possibilities of explanation. The latter signal to the conversational partner that one only resorted to the

paranormal explanation in the end because all other considered ‘natural’ explanations *had to be* ruled out.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusions

Whatever the explanation turns out to be, the persons concerned still feel that their experiences are rather unspectacular. Even though they are seen as definitely remarkable and memorable, they seldom require special interpretations or even actions. In other words, most of the experiences that are seen as “exceptional” by science appear to be an integral part of the (familiar) everyday world, though perhaps more accurately a ‘special world’. In this world, such experiences seem to find their place without any problems, although narrative precautions are employed when discussing them. The specific scientific preoccupation with the respective phenomena is in no small part responsible for this. As is known, parapsychology constitutes an exception among research disciplines, as it doesn’t *per se* deny exceptional phenomena an objective reality as accepted disciplines do. This is positive if one takes into consideration how many people report such experiences – in our study alone this is between 50 and 70 percent of the population! Many other studies come to similar results and even find an increase of exceptional experiences over the years (cf. Greeley, 1975, 1978, 1991; Newport & Strausberg, 2001; McClenon, 1994a, 1994b; Yamane & Polzer, 1994). Some authors such as Greeley (1975) think that the high occurrence of such experiences is evidence of the fact that the so-called exceptional is rather something common. This process of normalization is seen as something that makes it increasingly easy for the people concerned to talk about their experiences, including in interviews.

Of course, the question of whether it is the number of experiences that is increasing or the willingness to talk about them cannot be resolved completely. However, if one takes a final look at our complete research results, it becomes evident that the personal convictions about the existence and effects of paranormal phenomena are still an integral part of the belief systems of our modern societies, albeit not one that guides actions. We were able to show that the population is not only quite open-minded towards paranormal or anomalistic phenomena but that personal experiences in this area are also common. The important

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<sup>11</sup>Remember this is only a short presentation of the results without references to other studies. There are various authors who did work in this field, and most of their thesis fit with our results. For example Wooffitt's work (1992) applied discourse analysis to people's narratives of paranormal experiences.

factor is that completely normal people have these experiences.

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