

## Article

# Phenomenological Convergence between Major Paradigms of Classic Parapsychology and Cross-Cultural Practices: An Exploration of Paranthropology

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### Abstract

A new generation of researchers have begun to contribute to the emerging transdisciplinary endeavours of paranthropology. This intriguing area of research unifies methodologies and theoretical perspectives of both parapsychology and anthropology to enhance understanding of anomalous phenomena related to consciousness. Furthermore, by employing a paranthropological perspective, a number of cross-cultural convergences between disciplines are revealed. We begin by summarizing a number of major paradigms typically observed in classic parapsychology, followed by a brief historical overview of the development of paranthropology and its implications for subsequent research. Finally, phenomenological convergences between parapsychology and anthropology are discussed, before a final summary of general conclusions are entertained.

**Key Words:** Consciousness, psi, mediumship, culture, shamanism, magico-religious practices, parapsychology, paranthropology, altered states of consciousness, field research, anomalies.

## 1. Introduction

The emerging paradigm of paranthropology seeks to unite the fields of parapsychology and anthropology, treating them as non-mutually exclusive entities despite decades of academic isolation from each other. Paranthropology examines claims of “paranormal” experience by individuals and groups in cross-cultural settings, particularly with regard to shamanism and other magico-religious practices [1-3]. While many practitioners may regard these fields of investigation as incompatible, there are a number of clear convergences of phenomenological experience between these disciplines which may have simply received varying labels by those who study them in differing experimental contexts [4-5].

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Experiences which modern science may typically deem “anomalous” are not only culturally universal [6], but these experiences are not generally considered anomalous by the indigenous cultures which have integrated these various magico-religious practices into their respective traditions and belief systems [7].

### *Mind-Matter Interaction*

Contemporary research in the area of physical anomalies associated with consciousness also bears striking similarities to many cross-cultural practices, including the general area of “psi” phenomena [5]. Outgoing psi processes may include apparent mind-matter interactions, otherwise referred to as psychokinesis (PK) or, to use the more modern terminology, consciousness-correlated collapse (3C). Within the realm of the 3C phenomenon, human operators attempt to influence the outcome of an external random physical system by means of cognitive intention alone [8].

### *Remote Viewing and Precognition*

Similarly, incoming psi processes typically examined include the seemingly related phenomena of remote viewing and precognition. While both of these anomalous processes appear to represent some form of extrasensory perception of non-local information external to the individual, the actual *role* of the observer varies between these processes. Remote viewing involves an active role by the individual, as they attempt to mentally access information about a distant target image of which they have no previous knowledge [9-10] simply by means of intention. While precognition also involves conscious access to external information [11-12], the observer plays a more passive role in this process, as precognitive premonitions in the general population typically occur without an individual’s intention to do so. Furthermore, this phenomenon is often associated with reception of information regarding *future* events [13-14], while remote viewing is generally concerned with accessing information about the present.

### *Poltergeists and Haunts*

While the more esoteric parapsychological fields of poltergeist and haunt activities may appear at greater odds with the proposed cross-cultural convergences found in this area of study, these phenomena also possess marked consistency between subjective labels across research fields. While both poltergeist and haunt reports are typically associated with similar physical manifestations and strong thematic-links [15], there are distinct differences that have been revealed between these areas of investigation. Poltergeist cases, for example, are typically associated with an individual or group of individuals as the focus or source of the phenomenon [16-17], which may include unexplained movement of objects, odd behaviour, and reports of “seeing” or “hearing” things. While the overall physical manifestations of haunt cases are consistent with occurrences of anomalous sensory reports, haunt activity is typically associated with a specific environment or location [18-19].

### *Altered States of Consciousness*

Finally, the more general area of altered states of consciousness (ASC) has also been considered in both empirical and cultural-experiential contexts [5], which again display striking similarities between subjective experiences across both fields of study [20]. While cross-cultural spiritual practitioners may ingest hallucinogenic substances and/or engage in ritual activity in order to induce ASCs [21], many studies have also demonstrated the potential for weak-intensity physiologically-patterned electromagnetic fields (EMF) to induce altered states [22-23]. Many experiences reported by participants in these studies appear consistent with those found in indigenous practices around the world, including out-of-body experiences (OOBE), and the “sensed-presence” phenomenon, where the individual feels as though “someone else” is in the room with them.

## **2. A Brief History of Paranthropology**

The term “paranthropology,” referring to an anthropological approach to the paranormal, and a shortened form of the more cumbersome “parapsychological anthropology,” was first coined by the linguist Roger W. Wescott in Joseph K. Long’s ground-breaking book *Extrasensory Ecology: Parapsychology and Anthropology* [24]. However, the origins of an anthropological approach to the paranormal go back much further into the discipline’s history.

Early anthropologist and folklorist Andrew Lang, for instance, sought to develop what he called “comparative psychical research.” In spite of the clear parallels between accounts of paranormal experiences across cultures, however, Lang was dismayed to find that most anthropologists of his day were unwilling to take seriously the data from psychical research, and the psychical researchers were similarly unwilling to examine more thoroughly the accounts of paranormal experiences and phenomena documented in the ethnographic literature. This impasse continued until 1953, when John R. Swanton published his “Letter to Anthropologists” in the *Journal of Parapsychology* [25], which called for anthropologists to take seriously the data of parapsychology and psychical research.

Later, Francis Huxley [26] wrote a paper specifically concerned with anthropology and extrasensory perception (ESP), in which he highlighted the tendency of anthropological accounts of witchcraft, magic, divination and shamanism to ignore the possibility that ESP might be a genuine phenomenon. Huxley also observed that a cross-cultural survey of divinatory techniques revealed an underlying fundamental characteristic: “a profound dissociation has to be provoked, during which the normal connections between consciousness and physical activity are severed” [26]. In other words, the crucial role of altered states of consciousness in the mediation of psi experiences was recognized. It was further suggested that ethnographic observation of practices

such as shamanism and spirit mediumship may reveal other fundamental process associated with apparent ESP [26].

The Italian philosopher and anthropologist Ernesto de Martino's work [27] discussed how laboratory investigations of ostensible psi phenomena frequently involve a complete reduction of the emotional and environmental contexts within which psi experiences naturally occur. Such an approach does, of course, yield significant benefits to the experimentalist, but it also ignores the natural complexity of psi as experienced in the "real world." It is precisely at this juncture that the ethnographic methodology of anthropology provides insight into the nature of the paranormal through documenting and describing its occurrence in the midst of the social drama that allows psi to manifest in its most elaborate forms, whether spontaneously in the field [28], or as part of a ritual process [29-30].

Joseph K. Long [31] emphasized the role of culture in mediating the experience and expression of psi, a notion that was later echoed by Robert Van de Castle [32], who suggested that ethnographic fieldwork might provide for parapsychology what Darwin's Galapagos Island expedition gave to biology. In other words, an anthropological approach to parapsychology might enable researchers to investigate how the environment and culture shape various psi processes. In this way the over-emphasis of parapsychologists on manifestations of psi in the Western laboratory context was criticized, along with the prejudices of anthropologists in considering non-Western magical beliefs and practices as irrational and primitive.

Subsequent researchers also sought to improve the one-sided approaches of both parapsychology and anthropology. The potential for a fruitful application of parapsychological insights into the nature of psi to the interpretation of the anthropology of magic and religion was suggested, and it has been argued that parapsychology has generally failed to employ the rich and diverse insights provided by ethnographic and cross-cultural investigations [33]. This general perspective calls for a process-oriented approach to psi, an approach that takes into account the many ecological variables (e.g., the ethnographic facts), that correlate with the occurrence of psi phenomena in the field [33].

More recently, Roger Wescott's term paranthropology has been revived and expanded by a new generation of anthropologists and parapsychologists with an interest in ethnographic investigations of the ostensibly paranormal [34]. Social anthropologist Fabian Graham, for example, has sought to differentiate paranthropology from the more traditional approaches of the anthropology of religion by highlighting paranthropology's emphasis on the objects of supernatural belief, rather than on belief:

[...] paranthropology [defines] itself in relation to the phenomena themselves, and not (in relation) to the belief systems, scientific or religious, that have evolved to support the phenomena [35].

Paranthropology, therefore, takes a bold step in attempting to interpret systems of supernatural belief from the perspective of those who subscribe to them, that is, not as beliefs but as ontological realities. In studies of spirit mediumship, for example, a paranthropologist will take seriously their informants beliefs about, and experiences of, spirits as ontologically real entities [36-37]. Further to this, the paranthropologist will attempt to participate, as far as possible, in the rites, rituals and performances under study in order to develop an “insider” perspective [38-39]. A truly rounded study of spirit possession, for instance, cannot be complete without an appreciation of the experiential component, which certainly plays a central role in the development of traditions of practice and belief [40]. Such an approach might also come under the heading of what parapsychologist David Luke calls “first-person parapsychology” [41].

In conclusion to this brief overview of the development of paranthropology, four key areas of focus are apparent for paranthropological research:

1. Cross-cultural comparison of the phenomenology of psi
2. A naturalistic approach to psi, exploring its psychological, sociological and cultural contexts
3. An emphasis on participation and first-hand experience
4. Parapsychological experimentation in the field

### **3. Examples of Cross-Cultural Parapsychological-Convergence**

Given the major areas of classic parapsychology previously discussed, along with the overall objectives of paranthropology as a newly emerging paradigm, the following transdisciplinary thematic and/or phenomenological convergences are proposed for further experimental field research:

#### *Ritual Healing*

First, the recurring experimental phenomenon of mind-matter interactions (MMI; psychokinesis or consciousness-correlated collapse), which has been a continual area of interest for parapsychologists, has revealed many fundamental similarities with cross-cultural practices, particularly regarding shamanic traditions. While decades of persistent research have demonstrated the potential for human operators to seemingly affect the outcome of an external random system [42-43], many traditional and spiritual practices have demonstrated similar effects related to statistical shifts in random physical processes. Previous research in this area has examined potential MMI-like effects associated with both a shamanic healing ritual [44] and group meditation [45]. Similarly, previous theories have suggested the potential enhancement of

this phenomenon in a normal population through the induction of neuroelectrical variations associated with altered states of consciousness [5, 8, 46].

The second major component of cross-cultural-MMI convergence is the importance of conscious intention within specific contexts of this phenomenon. While human “intention” has been correlated with statistical deviations in random event variations [8, 42], the role of this cognitive process has also been examined in relation to cross-cultural spiritual practitioners and their apparent abilities to exert mental influence on various facets of the external environment [47].

Finally, the role of MMI-like effects associated with traditional healing practices may be even more evident than the preceding convergences. A wide range of cultural traditions focus on using what are essentially forms of cognitive intention to heal the body, including *Qigong* [48] and Reiki [49]. In various traditions of non-local or “energy” healing, the practitioner employs their mind in order to affect positive changes in another biological system or individual [50]. While the theoretical consistency is remarkably persuasive, further field studies of veteran spiritual practitioners should be examined with the objective of assessing any equivalence between laboratory MMI effects and traditional healing practices with regard to both overall experimental effects, and potential biophysical or physiological factors.

### *Shamanic Journeying and Visions*

The alternate area of psi research which focuses on various forms of apparently non-local information access includes the previously discussed phenomena of remote viewing practices and precognitive experience. Again, remote viewing typically involves an individual actively intending to access information about a distant object or event, while precognitive predictions may be voluntary or involuntary and are often associated with information about future events [14]. These forms of “incoming” psi may be among the more overtly cross-cultural consciousness-anomaly equivalences.

While individuals located in the West who appear capable of actively accessing external information or passively receiving information about future events have been revealed in the parapsychological literature [9, 51], one of the primary roles of the shaman and other cross-cultural spiritual practitioners is also to access and engage information that is not otherwise available to the rest of the immediate population [20, 52]. A range of cross-cultural spiritual practices, particularly in the specific context of shamanism, include mental imagery as an important aspect of communicating with the “spirit world” [53-54], or mental journeying with the objective of acquiring information not otherwise available. The role of this form of “imagery journeying” and the experience of mental visions in general [55] is markedly consistent with the parapsychological phenomena of incoming non-local information (e.g., remote viewing and precognition).

In comparison to the area of mind-matter interactions, cross-cultural practices associated with shamanism have more often been directly applied in the laboratory with regard to incoming psi information [56-57], and have suggested an enhanced propensity to engage in anomalous psi processes during shamanic-like states compared to other classic parapsychology testing protocols [58]. While the application of indigenous cultural practices in the context of laboratory testing is certainly a step in the right direction with regard to experimental paranthropology, there remains a requirement to investigate these apparent abilities of both Western and non-Western practitioners in a naturalistic field setting. The same benefits previously suggested could be attained, such as further support for a phenomenological convergence between parapsychology and anthropological research, and also to help determine potential physiological and biophysical factors which may be involved.

### *Spirit Possession*

The peculiar area of alleged poltergeists and haunt activity reported in previous parapsychology research has similarly proven to be consistent with anthropological reports regarding spirit possession, sacred sites, and other similar phenomena. The ethnographic literature is particularly rich in data about spirit possession, which has been a subject of constant fascination for anthropologists since the discipline's earliest days [59]. Anthropologist Janice Boddy provides a fairly broad definition of spirit possession as the purported "[...] hold over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she. These forces may be ancestors or divinities, ghosts of foreign origin, or entities both ontologically and ethnically alien [...]" [60].

Belief in the possibility that the physical body may be temporarily occupied by non-physical beings is near-universal. Spirit possession is usually associated with some form of dissociative altered state of consciousness [61], or "trance state." Possession may be either spontaneous or deliberately induced. Spontaneous possession is usually associated with illness, while deliberate incorporation of spirits may lead to enhanced social status for the possessed. Pathological spirit possessions are frequently treated with ritual exorcism to rid the afflicted of the intruding spirit, while deliberate spirit possession may be induced for a variety of social reasons, including healing [62], the acquisition of knowledge, and for political insight [63].

In spite of the huge amount of parapsychological research conducted with spirit mediums in the Western world [64-65], there has been very little in the way of experimental parapsychological research conducted with mediums from different cultural traditions. One notable exception is Giesler [66], who conducted standard extrasensory perception (ESP) tests with Umbanda mediums with preliminary results suggestive of significant effects. Other forms of experimental work have been conducted with non-Western mediums, such as electroencephalograph (EEG) studies with Balinese mediums performing traditional ritual dances [67], which are suggestive of the involvement of interesting psychophysiological processes in traditional spirit possession practices.

These cases reveal a particularly salient experiential consistency between cross-cultural traditional beliefs and the parapsychological phenomenon of poltergeist activity, where a “possessed” individual may display odd behaviour associated with other anomalous physical manifestations. Further research into the parapsychological and neurophysiological aspects of traditional spirit possession practices is required to clarify and expand on these exploratory convergences.

### *Mystical States*

A central biochemical agent employed by shamans and other spiritual practitioners is ayahuasca, a drink brewed by many indigenous cultures throughout the Upper Amazon. The spread of its use for healing and spiritual ceremonies also extends into Ecuador, Colombia and Peru [68]. The ingestion of ayahuasca is integral to the spiritual practices of many indigenous cultures in the Amazon region for inducing altered states of consciousness (ASC), in addition to being central to myths, cosmologies, and other cultural aspects of life [69]. The drink itself is a concoction of two plants, the root of the ayahuasca vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* and leaves of the perennial shrub *Psychotria viridis*, which contain psychotropic compounds such as harmala alkaloids and dimethyltryptamine (DMT) [69]. DMT specifically is a known hallucinogenic compound whose dissociative properties are mediated through the 5-HT<sub>2A</sub> serotonin receptor, with recent studies determining that DMT is a naturally occurring substance within the mammalian nervous system [70].

Contemporary investigation of ayahuasca practices in Brazil have revealed that the adoption and use of the admixture was developed relatively early, and can be traced back to the earliest inhabitants of the region [71]. It is a commonly held belief among these peoples that the ingestion of the “vine of the dead” (*Quecha* meaning ayahuasca), permits the soul to leave the physical body. A freed soul takes on the ability to communicate with dead ancestors and other magical experiences associated with alternate forms of reality and ASCs [71]. Ethnographic studies of the region have illustrated common themes and experiences among indigenous ayahuasca users, such as spirit visions of animals and of distant persons or places, which could be related to out-of-body experiences (OOBE) [71-73]. Some preliminary field experiments have been conducted to test drinkers of the brew for psi [74-75]. Survey research also shows that the majority of people using ayahuasca also report a variety of paranormal experiences, such as the encounter with discarnate entities [76-77].

Additionally, ayahuasca use can lead to the elicitation of entoptic imagery – geometrical visual patterns, zig-zags, grids, and simple shapes [78]. Indeed, archaeological evidence suggests that cultures around the world ritualistically engaged in hallucinatory experiences, as evidenced by the appearance of entopic images in sacred cave paintings [79-81]. That ASCs and other mystical subjective experiences can be elicited through the application of transcerebrally applied physiologically-patterned electromagnetic fields is particularly relevant given the general



thematic overlap of reported experiences [22-23]. These studies have shown the temporal lobes of the brain to be the optimal locus for the development of religious experiences, religiosity, and other mystical experiences similar to those which have been described in ayahuasca states [82-84].

Given that the synthesis and release of naturally occurring DMT has been demonstrated, Hill & Persinger [85] hypothesized that the application of these weak-intensity complex magnetic fields in the order of 1 to 5  $\mu\text{T}$  could increase blood levels of DMT, corresponding with the similarities observed between experimentally-induced altered states and those encountered in the field.

#### 4. Conclusions

Based on a number of previous theoretical approaches [1, 4-5], along with the preceding discussions presented here, there is a clear relevance and transdisciplinary convergence between the realms of parapsychology and anthropological investigation of cross-cultural spiritual practices, particularly with regard to magico-religious activities. The briefly defined overlap present throughout these disciplines suggests something more fundamental to the subjective human experience throughout history with regard to seemingly anomalous or mystical phenomena.

By integrating methods and theories across disciplines, a greater understanding of notoriously difficult to interpret psi processes could be gleaned, and this is especially relevant to furthering an overall ecological understanding of physical consciousness-related anomalies and other “paranormal” activities. Furthermore, an increased focus on psi and other consciousness research with indigenous practitioners may help support the suggestion of paranthropological equivalence between cross-disciplinary phenomenology encountered in parapsychology and anthropological field studies. Ethnographic study within the field of anthropology may also benefit from this emerging paradigm shift. As Stanley Krippner [52] has previously noted, “Western interpretations of [magico-religious practices] often reveal more about the observer than they do about the observed.” In this regard, many anthropologists and other Western field researchers who are fortunate enough to observe a traditional spiritual practice may tend to describe these activities as products of a particularly robust cultural belief system [5], or as little more than fraudulent performances. However, by applying theoretical components of parapsychology, a more accurate understanding may be obtained which could be more reflective of the practitioners’ values and beliefs, while simultaneously enhancing our understanding of the phenomenon itself.

While some researchers have begun to apply theoretical approaches derived from cross-cultural studies in the context of experimental psi and consciousness research [8, 56-57], a concerted effort to conduct field research employing parapsychological methodologies remains in a

preliminary phase of investigation [15, 44, 47, 86]. Ecological studies of psi employing both parapsychological and ethnographic methods seem likely to be able to shed light not only on the fundamental nature of psi, but also on the role and function that psi phenomena may perform in the wider contexts of culture and personal experience. Much is left to be revealed regarding these transdisciplinary relationships, although research efforts are ongoing around the world in order to bridge the gap between parapsychology and anthropology.

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to thank Transnational Anomalies Research team members Nicolas Rouleau for internal review, and Dr. David Luke for useful comments on this paper.

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