

Broken Relationships and Claims of Psychic Phenomena

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ABSTRACT: The usual definition of a broken relationship is one where the person is bereaved, separated or divorced. It has been found in at least six studies that persons coming from broken relationships are more likely to believe in and allege experience of the paranormal. It is suggested that we have here a parallel with those studies which show that childhood trauma is related to adult paranormal belief, and that the common factor is the occurrence of some kind of trauma, albeit at different stages of the person's life. Such trauma is likely to evoke paranormal belief and experience (real or imagined) as a kind of defence mechanism.

In March 1974, parapsychologist John Palmer (1979) mailed a 46-item questionnaire to a randomly selected sample consisting in part of 700 adult residents of Charlottesville, Virginia, in the United States. Items requested respondents to report the incidence and detailed characteristics of various paranormal and paranormal-related experiences. Palmer solicited information concerning attitudes as well as demographic data.

This questionnaire yielded a huge number of results, but I want to focus upon just one, to do with marital status. Palmer classified respondents as single, married, separated/divorced, or widowed. There was a tendency for either the separated/divorced respondents and/or the widowed respondents to report a greater

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number of paranormal-related experiences than single or married respondents, significantly so for waking ESP, ESP dreams, out-of-the-body experiences, apparitions and hauntings. Something about coming from what later researchers called “broken” relationships—separation, divorce or bereavement—seems to be associated with a higher reportage of paranormal experiences.

This probably would have disappeared as a minor anomalous finding had it not been replicated at least five times. The first replication was in 1991. Three items on personal paranormal experiences (telepathy, clairvoyance, and contact with the dead) were included in a survey on human values that was conducted on large representative samples in 13 countries in Europe and in the US—the Multinational Human Values Study. Total number of respondents was 18,607. One of the findings of this survey, reported by Icelandic parapsychologist Erlendur Haraldsson and his Dutch colleague Joop Houtkooper (Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991), was that nationality is evidently an important and significant factor in the reporting of experiences of telepathy, clairvoyance, and contact with the dead. But marital status also had a relatively strong effect in the reporting of paranormal experiences, again in the direction of more experiences from persons in broken relationships.²

This finding was replicated a second time, by myself (Thalbourne, 1994). I surveyed 402 members of the Society for Psychical Research. Persons coming from “broken” relationships (separated, divorced or widowed) had a significantly higher average score on the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale—a questionnaire that measures belief in, and alleged experience of, paranormal phenomena—compared with those persons from “unbroken” situations (single or married).

I am also responsible for a third replication (Thalbourne, 1996). This time, however, the respondents consisted of 99 psychology students who volunteered for an ESP experiment. Though there were only six people in the separated-divorced-widowed category, their average score on the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale was approximately 24, significantly higher than the average of 17 obtained by the persons in unbroken relationships (note that the Scale ranges from 1 to 36).

A year later, Nancy Zingrone and Carlos Alvarado (Zingrone & Alvarado, 1997) reported two confirmatory studies of this phenomenon—the fourth and fifth replications. The researchers used three samples: 492 readers of a Spanish New Age magazine; 308 students of McHenry County College, Illinois; and 120 people canvassed by students in a parapsychology course in Puerto Rico. Number of five ostensible psychic experiences was measured by a Psi Index. This Psi Index was

² For some reason which I have been unable to ascertain, these researchers classified people living-together-as-married (i.e. as not legally married) as being in a broken relationship. I performed an analysis in which the effect of broken relationships remains significant even with the omission of persons living as married.

significantly higher in the separated/divorced/widowed categories in the first and third studies.

An interesting incidental finding was that the Psi Index scores of those respondents living together were “quite dissimilar” to those obtained by the married participants—in fact higher than the latter, just as Haraldsson and Houtkooper had found.

Zingrone and Alvarado raise the question of whether there are differences in psychic claims between respondents who have recently experienced the breaking of a relationship, those who have been separated/divorced/widowed for a long time, and those who experience one broken relationship after another, and those who have never had a relationship. Indeed the authors’ report should be studied for a host of relevant research questions.

What could be the cause of such differences? As Haraldsson and Houtkooper ask,

Are psychics more likely than non-psychics to have marital difficulties? Is an unstable or broken relationship psi-conducive? Are people who are under emotional strain that may accompany broken relationships more likely to have psychic experiences? Or do people in such relationships have a greater need for psychic experiences? Or—taking a more skeptical approach—do those living as married, separated, divorced or widowed more often “feel as though” or imagine that they have psychic experiences? The data give no answers to these questions.

It is my contention that, unwittingly, Haraldsson and Houtkooper did indeed hit upon the correct explanation when they suggested that “people who are under emotional strain that may accompany broken relationships [are] more likely to have psychic experiences”. The broken relationship effect may be a particular instance of a general principle that *trauma of whatever variety is likely to lead to claims of the paranormal*. There is already evidence from a number of studies that *childhood* trauma can lead via various routes to adults who believe in and claim experiences of the paranormal. Harvey Irwin (1992) administered to 72 university students the Survey of Traumatic Childhood Events (devised by Council and P. W. Edwards, 1987), along with a questionnaire measure of belief in the paranormal; Irwin tells us that the trauma questionnaire taps childhood trauma of the following types: intrafamilial sexual abuse, extrafamilial sexual abuse, intrafamilial physical abuse, loss related to a friend, loss related to the family, isolation, personal illness or accident, parental divorce/separation and adolescent abortion/miscarriage, assault, loss of the home, and robbery. Irwin found strongly suggestive evidence that trauma in childhood (especially physical abuse within the family) was correlated with adult belief in the paranormal. Three years later, Tony Lawrence and his colleagues at the University of Edinburgh (Lawrence, C. Edwards, Barraclough, Church & Hetherington, 1995) were

able to replicate and extend Irwin's findings. In the meantime, Irwin (1994) had been able to demonstrate that adults who were children of alcoholics—who can be presumed to have had a more traumatic childhood than children of non-alcoholics—had stronger beliefs in various aspects of the paranormal. Lenore Terr and her associates (Terr et al., 1997) studied children who witnessed on television the explosion of the *Challenger* spacecraft and those who merely heard about it later. Amongst other effects the researchers found, compared to the less involved children, a higher percentage of paranormal experiences 5-7 weeks after the explosion. (However, these experiences, except for omens, had significantly decreased 14 months later. The effect of trauma on psychic experience may be relatively transient. Future research might take some account not only of the developmental stage at which trauma occurred, but also the severity of trauma. These factors may bear on the transience of an effect on paranormal experience.)

People who experience a broken relationship—whether bereavement, separation or divorce—can frequently be said to undergo considerable trauma, but in this case in adulthood. Could it be the case that the common denominator between children with traumatic childhoods and adults with broken relationships may be the fact that each undergoes trauma of some kind? It should be mentioned that broken relationships are not in fact independent of childhood trauma: thus, people who have been abused as children tend to be re-victimised in adult relationships and the incidence of broken relationships is therefore relatively high among this group. We may ask, is childhood trauma or adult trauma more predictive of paranormal experience?

From the point of view of the person, one way of solving the problem of trauma and regaining some control over one's life might be to engage in ways of thinking and perceiving that reinstate the relatively calmer pre-trauma status, as for example the common situation where a bereaved person appears to sense in some way the presence of the deceased (Greeley, 1987; Marris, 1958; Olson, Suddeth, Peterson & Egelhoff, 1985; and Rees, 1971). This suggests that a future direction of research may be to construct (if it does not exist already) a questionnaire for adults about life-time trauma (which would include items about marital status, preferably using “re-married” as well as “married one time” and “living together as married”), and predict that the most heavily traumatised persons will also most strongly believe in and claim experience of the paranormal.

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