

Belief in, and Alleged Experience of, the Paranormal in the Portuguese Population

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ABSTRACT: Belief in, and alleged experience of, the paranormal in the Portuguese population were gauged via a random telephone survey of 750 persons, using a Portuguese version of the 18-item forced-choice Australian Sheep-Goat Scale (Thalbourne, 1995). Belief and experience tended to be on the low side, as shown both by the low average scores obtained for each of the 18 individual items and by the tendency of Scale-scores to occur at the low end of the range. There were significant and moderate correlations with selected other variables such as belief in reincarnation and claimed recall of a previous life, and significant but rather weak correlations with belief in astrology and religious variables.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, the term “paranormal” will be taken to be synonymous with “psychic”, and with the phrase “that cannot be explained according to the viewpoint of conventional science.” The paranormal is further subdivided into mental phenomena (ESP, or extrasensory perception), and physical phenomena (PK—psychokinesis—or mind-over-matter), as well as the issue of whether the conscious personality survives the death of the physical body.

One of the most basic questions that can be asked in this subject area is to what extent the average person believes in, or claims experience of, the paranormal of one type or another. One way of answering this question is to carry out a representative regional or national survey. A number of such surveys have been carried out, for example by Erlendur Haraldsson and his

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colleagues (1977) in Iceland, by John Palmer (1979) in Charlottesville, Virginia, by Susan Blackmore (1984) in Bristol, England, by Dave Clarke (1991) in New Zealand, and perhaps most recently in Germany (Bauer & Schetsche, 2003; Deflorin & Schmied, 2000; Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005). Haraldsson (1985) in fact published a review of representative national surveys carried out not only in Iceland, but also in Great Britain, Sweden, the USA and Gallup's Multinational Survey. Moreover, Haraldsson and Houtkooper (1991) reported a multi-national survey conducted in most countries of Western Europe and in the United States and which included three items on psychic experiences. However, Portugal was not one of the countries surveyed.

In 2004, Drs. Carlos Fernandes da Silva and Sergio Razente, with the assistance of Dr. Michael Thalbourne, carried out a representative survey of paranormal belief and experience in Portugal. In contrast to all previous surveys, the questions asked were those of a well-established and widely used "Sheep-Goat Scale"—that is, a questionnaire that measures the extent of the belief (or disbelief) and alleged experience (or non-experience) in the paranormal. In this case the forced-choice Australian Sheep-Goat Scale was used (Thalbourne, 1995). This scale contains 7 belief items and 11 experience items (the claim to be psychic was placed in the latter category). Normally the questions are given as statements (which have as response possibilities "true", "uncertain" and "false"), but in this case they were in fact asked as questions and the responses allowed were "yes", "maybe" and "no". This Sheep-Goat Scale is thus much briefer than many of the previous surveys. In addition to its individual 18 items, a Scale-score can be computed by allotting 2 points to "true/yes", 1 point to "uncertain/maybe" and zero points to "false/no". The total Scale-score can thus range from 0 to 36.

A great advantage of using this Sheep-Goat Scale is that it thereby renders comparable, data obtained in other previous surveys or experiments (e.g., Basterfield & Thalbourne, 2002; Storm & Thalbourne, 2005). Also, if the Scale is, in future, administered in a representative survey in other countries, the language of course being appropriate, national samples can more readily be compared for level of belief in, and alleged experience of, the paranormal. Indeed, the first author plans to do this, using the Australian population for comparison.

The Portuguese survey was conducted using a careful Portuguese translation from the English. It was carried out as a telephone survey, so its brevity was an advantage in securing the cooperation of the people phoned. This article describes the survey in detail.

METHOD

Materials

As mentioned in the Introduction, the centrepiece of the survey questionnaire was the forced-choice version of the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale (ASGS; Thalbourne, 1995), in the question format (as it was in Thalbourne, 1994.) There were 18 items, covering ESP, psychokinesis and issues surrounding life after death, all with three alternative responses (Yes/Maybe/No). ("Maybe" was intended to translate "uncertain", and in future surveys using this instrument it is recommended that the middle response be "uncertain".) Respondents were also permitted to say they didn't know, and in a very small number of cases no response was recorded at all.

Regarding the translation of the Scale into Portuguese, it was first given to a teacher to translate. That version was administered to 10 people in order to ascertain what they did not understand in respect to the wording or expression. Thus, suggestions were given as to how to phrase the survey for the Portuguese culture. Some divergences from the original English were inevitable. For example, in the original ASGS there is the expression "sensory channels", the exact translation of which in Portuguese is "canal sensorial". But people preferred an alternative expression, "órgãos dos sentidos", the exact translation of which in English is "body senses". Again, there is no term for "ESP" in Portuguese. The first item was therefore translated as "Do you believe in the existence of 'extrasensory perception' (ESP), like for example: Telepathy; Clairvoyance; Precognition?"

Next, the revised Portuguese version of the Scale was translated back into English, which was approved after some minor revisions by M.A.T. The Scale was then ready for administration to the sample of 750.

In line with previous studies using the forced choice ASGS, "true" or "yes" is allotted 2 points, "false" or "no" zero points, and the middle response ("uncertain" or "maybe") was allotted 1 point. We can therefore add the point-scores for the 18 questionnaire items.

Thirteen other questions were also asked (see APPENDIX). The first seven were taken from Thalbourne (1994, Section II, Appendix): (1) reading of books or articles about the paranormal; (2) belief in reincarnation; (3) experience of a past life; (4) reading of religious books or articles; (5) Bible-reading; (6) self-rated religiosity; (7) prayer; (8) miracles; (9) the supernatural; (10) miraculous properties of water; (11) belief in reincarnation (a second time); (12) resurrection of the dead; and (13) astrology. Also asked were religious affiliation and religious attendance. A final four questions were asked about belief in and attitudes and behaviour towards Fatima and other shrines, but these data will be reported elsewhere.

Procedure

The population of continental Portugal for persons aged 15 and older is 7,528,000. The total population of the country is 9,592,541 (General Census of Population and Habitation—March 2001). The administration of the survey was carried out by telephone by professional Portuguese pollsters TNS-Euroteste in January 2004 in a representative sample of 750 people randomly selected from five regions of Portugal. The sample was stratified for region and habitat. Each stratum was allotted a specific number of interviews, and a selection of households was conducted through a “step-by-step random method” with systematic intervals. Only one individual was interviewed from each household.

When TNS-Euroteste finished the 750 interviews, they then randomly selected and called again 15.5% of those people to see if they responded to the questions in the same way as they did originally, to check the results for reliability and accuracy and prevent fraud or mistakes.

To anticipate the results slightly, a good many respondents had missing data for more than four items. These respondents were omitted from the calculation of the overall ASGS score, who consisted of those people with 14 or more valid responses, with the missing data represented by the mean of the items validly answered (that is to say, using the method of Mean Substitution).

Respondents

A total of 750 persons were interviewed—52.4% female. There were six categories of age: 15 to 24 years (17%), 25-34 yrs. (18%), 35-44 yrs. (17%), 45 to 54 yrs. (15%), 55 to 64 yrs. (14%), and 65 and older (19%). The vast majority (85%) were Roman Catholic, with 1% Protestant, 3% agnostic, 4% atheist, and 7% “others”.

RESULTS

Responses to Individual Australian Sheep-Goat Scale Items

The results for each of the 18 questions of the forced-choice Australian Sheep-Goat Scale are summarised in Table 1. Note that for each item, the sample average (M) was calculated, theoretically ranging from 0.00 (if everyone said “no”) to 2.00 (if everyone said “yes”). The items are given in descending order of this statistic, as in the study of Thalbourne and Delin (1993, p. 179).

Bearing this 0-2 scale in mind it can be seen that the most affirmative response given was to the question about hunches (cf. the same

results found by Thalbourne & Delin, 1993, in an Australian student population), to which 47% gave the answer “yes”. The percentages “yes” decline steadily until they reach the bottom at 9% for the claim to be psychic. As a generality it may be said that the Portuguese population tends not to report an extremely high degree of belief in, or experience of, the paranormal. It would be interesting to repeat the survey using the middle response “uncertain”, which carries a value of one point, since the Portuguese made very little use of their middle value “maybe”.

We can perhaps compare this sample with the 243 Australian tertiary students in the sample described by Thalbourne and Delin (1993). Such a comparison shows that the Australian students were more believing in and claimed more experience of paranormal phenomena than this Portuguese sample. However, the rank-order correlation between the levels of belief for the 18 individual sheep-goat items in the two samples was a high, $r_s = .73$, $p < .001$, which suggests that the *order* of items was relatively similar in both samples.

The responses to the remaining items are given in the Appendix. Taking the modal—that is to say, the most frequent—response we can say that Portuguese people never read books or articles on paranormal topics, do not believe in reincarnation, have never had a memory of a genuine past life, sometimes read religious books or articles, read the Bible either never or occasionally, consider themselves to be religious persons, and pray sometimes or more often.

Belief in miracles was about evenly split between “yes” and “no”. Similarly for belief in supernatural phenomena. The majority of people did not believe in the miraculous properties of holy water, nor reincarnation (see above for a very similar result), nor resurrection of the dead. But opinion was about evenly split for belief in astrology. Note that the correlation between the responses to the two questions on belief in reincarnation was .70, which suggests a relatively high degree of test-retest reliability.

In summary, belief in and behaviour regarding, the paranormal was generally low, and somewhat but not greatly higher for belief in and behaviour regarding religious topics, though 77% of respondents believed themselves to be religious and the vast majority of persons claimed a religious affiliation.

The 18-item Australian Sheep-Goat Scale: Distribution of Scores

Using the method as described in the *Materials* section, respondents were selected if they answered 14 or more items of the 18-item Sheep-Goat

Scale. A total of 289 respondents were eligible for inclusion according to this rather liberal criterion.

Table 1
Statistics for the 18 items of the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale in Order of Magnitude

Q.	Item	Valid (N)	Don't Know (n)	M	SD	Yes %	Maybe %	No %
4.	Had a hunch?	728	22	.98	.98	47	5	48
1.	Does ESP exist?	652	98	.96	.94	42	11	47
17.	Believe in an afterlife?	698	52	.91	.93	39	13	48
2.	Experienced ESP?	263	487	.84	.96	39	6	55
18.	Spirit-contact possible?	704	46	.81	.93	35	11	54
6.	Dream came true?	738	12	.76	.95	36	4	60
5.	Experienced precognition?	726	24	.71	.93	33	6	62
14.	Witnessed PK?	196	554	.68	.93	33	3	64
7.	Receptive telepathy possible?	717	33	.65	.91	30	5	65
11.	Does PK exist?	718	32	.63	.89	28	7	65
3.	Precognition possible?	701	49	.58	.87	25	7	68
8.	Active telepathy possible?	738	12	.56	.88	26	3	71
15.	Experienced RSPK?	198	552	.56	.89	27	3	71
9.	Experienced telepathy?	739	11	.54	.87	25	4	71
13.	Have PK powers?	187	563	.48	.82	21	6	73
12.	Have exerted PK?	191	559	.39	.77	18	3	79
10.	Have had a vision?	742	8	.33	.73	16	2	83
16.	Am psychic?	731	19	.19	.57	9	2	89

The Sheep-Goat Scale-scores were calculated for these 289 people. The theoretical range is 0 through 36, but the minimum encountered here was 2, the maximum in fact 36, $M = 15.56$ ($SD = 7.70$). (If the respondents had all said “maybe” the mean would have been 18.0—the theoretical midpoint of the Scale.) The reliability coefficient alpha was calculated for those 93 persons who had valid responses for all 18 items: $\alpha = .82$, which is satisfactory. A histogram of the scores can be found in Figure 1.

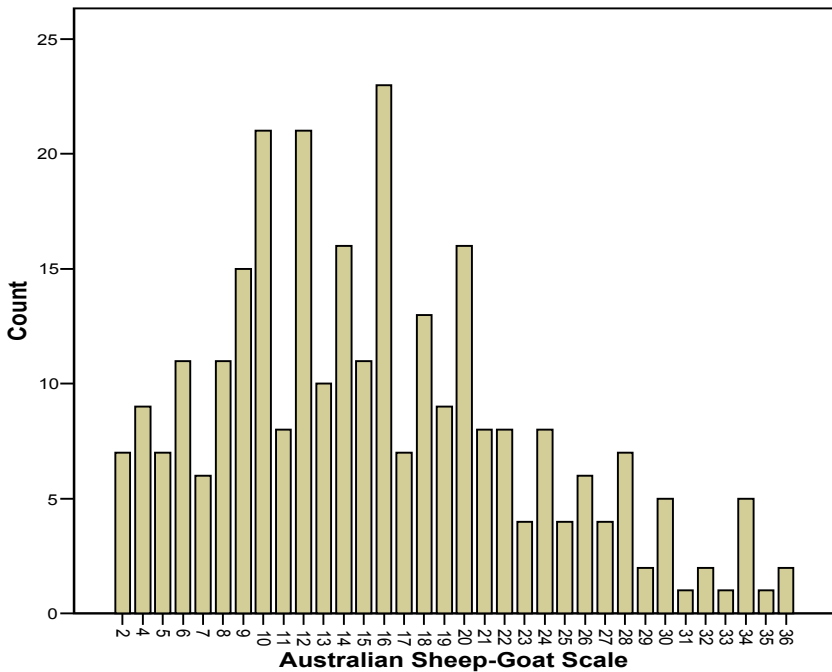


Figure 1. Frequency distribution for scores on the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale.

As can be seen from the Figure, the scores showed a tendency to be shifted towards the low, disbelieving end of the Sheep-Goat Scale, and while kurtosis is normal, skewness is significantly positive (i.e., the scores tend to be down the left-hand end, $z = 3.61$, $p < .001$). So there is more disbelief than belief in the paranormal, and a lack of paranormal experience.

Correlations with the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale

The scores on the ASGS were correlated with each of the 14 individual paranormal/religious items listed in the APPENDIX. The results, in order of magnitude of the Pearson correlation coefficient, are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2
Correlations Between the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale and 13
Variables ($N = 289$)

ID	Item	r
20.	Belief in reincarnation #1	.45***
32d.	Belief in reincarnation #2	.41***
21	Recall of a previous life	.40***
19.	Reading about paranormal phenomena	.31***
32b.	Belief in supernatural phenomena	.29***
32f.	Belief in astrology	.25***
22.	Reading about religion	.23***
23.	Bible-reading	.21***
25.	Prayer	.21**
24.	Self-reported religiosity	.18**
32e	Belief in the Resurrection of the dead	.18**
32a	Belief in miracles	.17**
32c	Belief in miraculous properties of holy water	.09

** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

As can be seen from the Table, persons who endorsed the items of the ASGS also tended, to a moderate degree, to believe in reincarnation, and to believe that they had experienced a genuine personal memory of a past life. The remaining correlations were all significant, except for one, but at a low level. The correlations with the four 4-response religiosity items were significant but weak. They were combined into a 4-item religiosity scale (coefficient $\alpha = .65$ for 574 respondents), which correlated $r(572) = .22, p < .001$, with the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale: those who were sheep tended to a small degree also to score high on measures of religiosity.

DISCUSSION

This is the first time that the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale has been administered to a representative sample of a nation's population. Thus there are no other national surveys that are directly comparable. The first author hopes that a similar study will be carried out in the Australian population, pending funding, and then the results will be statistically compared with those in Portugal. In the meantime we can note that, compared to the range of scores available, Portuguese people tended to score somewhat on the skeptical side when it comes to belief in, and alleged experience of, the paranormal.

Religious affiliation and self-reported religiosity were both high, but other indices of religious activity were relatively low, though higher than for the paranormal.

There does seem to be an association between religiosity and paranormal belief/experience but, like many other surveys (e.g., Thalbourne & Hensley, 2001), that association is small and comparatively weak.

A possible exception to this rule is reincarnation, depending on whether one regards belief in reincarnation as a religious belief or a paranormal belief. To a moderate extent, those who were sheep tended to believe in reincarnation (and past-life recall). This is consistent with the findings of Thalbourne (1996; 1998-1999) that reincarnationists tend, of all types of believer in an afterlife (such as immortalists, eclectics and non-survivalists) to score the highest on the Australian Sheep-Goat Scale.

If this survey is to be repeated in the Portuguese population, the response alternative in the middle when there are two extremes should be "uncertain". "Maybe" is inherently ambiguous. Researchers might then find a somewhat higher level of belief in their national samples.

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APPENDIX

Wording of questions used other than those of the 18-item Australian Sheep-Goat Scale, with rounded percentages for response options (separated by oblique lines)

- 19. Do you read books or articles related to paranormal phenomena? never 64 / sometimes 31 / frequently 5 / always 1
- 20. Do you believe in reincarnation? yes 28 / maybe 7 / no 59 / don't know 6
- 21. Do you believe you have ever been through the experience of having a real memory of a past life? yes 15 / maybe 4 / no 79 / don't know 2
- 22. Do you read religious books or articles? never 34 / sometimes 53 / frequently 9 / always 3
- 23. How often do you read the Bible? never 45 / sometimes 44 / frequently 8 / always 4
- 24. Do you consider yourself a religious person? yes 77 / maybe 6 / no 17
- 25. Do you usually pray? never 9 / sometimes 43 / frequently 14 / always 34
- 32a. Do you believe in miracles? yes 50 / no 41 / don't know 8
- 32b. Do you believe in the supernatural? yes 42 / no 45 / don't know 11
- 32c. Do you believe in the miraculous properties of holy water? yes 31 / no 55 / don't know 13
- 32d. Do you believe in reincarnation? yes 32 / no 60 / don't know 8
- 32e. Do you believe in the resurrection of the dead on the last day? yes 34 / no 54 / don't know 10
- 32f. Do you believe in astrology? yes 40 / no 50 / don't know 9

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