

# Some personality traits of believers in extraordinary phenomena\*

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A scale of belief in extraordinary phenomena and one of three personality inventories, the MMPI, TDOT, and MPI were administered to each of 297 college students. Scores on the scale of beliefs in the extraordinary phenomena correlated with several of the personality traits, indicating the tendency of believers in such phenomena as reincarnation, witchcraft, ESP, and astrology to have higher scores on personality scales that would characterize a person as impulsive rather than controlled, reflective rather than practical, neurotic rather than well adjusted, and showing responses characteristic of a schizoid group.

The belief in a certain kind of phenomena, here named "extraordinary," appears to be widespread. On the bulletin boards of college campuses, one can see a variety of announcements of meetings of groups interested in yoga and meditation. Newspapers feature astrological columns. Cults dealing with the occult seem to flourish. The London weekly magazine, *The Sunday Times*, obtained over 8,000 completed questionnaires inquiring about the extent of belief in ESP, life after death, premonitions coming true, astrology, etc. The sample was by no means representative of the English people (the bulk of respondents being members of the better educated classes), yet it is indicative of the extensiveness of beliefs in these phenomena. Results showed that a majority of respondents gave some credence to ESP, communication with the deceased, and astrology, with a sizable minority of respondents expressing belief in the reality of phenomena ranging from UFOs to the Loch Ness Monster (Evans, 1972).

The present study attempts to throw some light upon the personality characteristics of the believers in extraordinary phenomena, and so it becomes mandatory to define these events. Under the term *extraordinary phenomena* are understood to be beliefs, preoccupations, and practices connected with (a) phenomena that are outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition and more closely connected with the traditional Hindu culture, such as Yoga, meditation, and the concept of reincarnation; (b) beliefs on the fringes of the Western tradition, such as astrology, ghosts, magic, and witchcraft; (c) possibly natural phenomena, yet such as ESP, UFOs, some aspects of hypnosis, dreams, and death.

## PROCEDURE

### Subjects

Ss were 297 male and female undergraduates enrolled in

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laboratory sections of an introductory course in psychology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Ss were divided in 14 sections. All test materials were completed during the laboratory sessions.

### Administration of Materials

Each S was administered 38 items in a questionnaire that dealt with extraordinary phenomena (*the Scale of Beliefs in Extraordinary Phenomena*, or SOBEP). In addition, different groups completed one of the following personality inventories: the *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory* (MMPI) (Hathaway & McKinley, 1943), the *Thorndike Dimensions of Temperament* (TDOT) (Thorndike, 1966), and *The Maudsley Personality Inventory* (MPI) (Eysenck, 1962).

### Scale Construction

To establish the degree of the Ss' belief in the extraordinary phenomena, a self-descriptive scale was constructed. Initially, the relevant literature—the verbal statements of the proponents of extraordinary beliefs—was collected. On the basis of these data, 55 positively worded statements were made up and arranged in Likert-type scales, with five alternatives ranging from *agree* to *disagree*. These items were administered to 72 Ss enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. A subsequent analysis of responses to each statement in terms of discriminating power reduced the number of statements to 38.

These remaining statements were administered (together with the three personality instruments) to a total 349 Ss. Fifty-two protocols were excluded as incomplete. The remaining 297 protocols were subjected to an item-total analysis. Three items were excluded. The final Scale of Beliefs in Extraordinary Phenomena (SOBEP)<sup>1</sup> consists of 35 items such as: "A person who died may be reborn as another person." "Dreams do foretell future." "One can understand a person's personality by studying his handwriting."

### Treatment of Data

The SOBEP scores were correlated with the three personality measurement instrument scores mentioned above (Pearson product moment). The split-half reliability of the SOBEP, corrected by the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula, ranges from .91 to .92 in the different groups studied.

## RESULTS

The correlation of personality trait scores to the belief in extraordinary phenomena scores are given in Table 1. Results indicate three interrelated elements. The first indicates a positive relationship between SOBEP scores,

Table 1  
Correlation Between the SOBEP and Certain  
Personality Trait Scores

Instrument	N	Traits	r
MMPI	72	Hypochondriasis	.31†
		Depression	.05
		Hysteria	.08
		Psychopathic Deviate	.16
		Masculinity-Femininity	.02
		Paranoia	.03
		Psychasthenia	.20
		Schizophrenia	.30†
		Hypomania	.36†
		Social	-.17
TDOT	103	Ascendant	.09
		Cheerful	-.05
		Placid	-.03
		Accepting	-.02
		Tough-Minded	-.02
		Reflective	.27†
		Impulsive	.23*
		Active	-.06
Responsible	-.14		
MPI	122	Extroversion	.05
		Neuroticism	.21*

\*Significant at the .05 level in a two-tailed test.

†Significant at the .01 level in a two-tailed test.

respectively, and the *impulsive* trait scores of the TDOT and the *hypomania* scores of the MMPI, showing that the higher the held belief in extraordinary phenomena, the higher the propensity to action at the spur of the moment. The positive correlations of the *neuroticism* scores of the MPI and the *hypochondriasis* scores of the MMPI with the SOBEP scores indicate complaints about bodily ailments, a general dissatisfaction, a lack of emotional stability, and, on the whole, a subjective state of suffering so often associated with neuroticism for Ss higher on the SOBEP scale. The positive correlation obtained between the SOBEP scores and the *reflective*

scores of the TDOT imply a greater tendency of the believers in extraordinary phenomena to be interested in ideas, and to speculate and reflect, especially on the more abstract level. The relatively higher correlation between the SOBEP scores and the *schizophrenia* scores of the MMPI indicate a tendency toward bizarreness in thought pattern and behavior for Ss higher on the SOBEP scale.

## DISCUSSION

The results in the study allow for a tentative description of the individuals who show a tendency to accept as real a set of phenomena that are best described as extraordinary; that is, such phenomena that are on the periphery of beliefs of Western thought, or, that, while within the realm of empirical confirmation, are yet associated with sensational aspects.

The "believers" have neurotic tendencies that express themselves in subjective suffering and complaints about somatic symptoms. These individuals also have a greater propensity to action, especially of the impulsive sort, rather than for deliberate, planned action. Dissatisfied and impulsively motivated, they have a tendency to reflect, where the content of their thought is of abstract rather than concrete nature. Apparently, their general dissatisfaction expresses itself in the more emotional rather than objective thought processes. Hence, the tendency is toward private, more fantastic contents of beliefs that characterize the schizophrenic thinking.

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## NOTE

1. The SOBEP is available from the authors upon request.

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