

## **CONFLICTIVE PSI EXPERIENCES: A SURVEY WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR CLINICAL PARAPSYCHOLOGY<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Surveys have been one of the most valuable research instruments for studying the psychological and social dimensions of parapsychology. Surveys seem to show that there is a high prevalence of spontaneous experiences in the general population. The present report explores in a descriptive way the incidence of conflict produced by spontaneous psi experiences. Two-hundred and sixty Argentinians participated in our study, 58.8% women and 41.2% men (Mean age= 44.65; SD= 14.26). Most of the participants were interested in parapsychology and in psi phenomena. Using questionnaires we determined the type and frequency of their psi experiences, and if the experiences were conflictive or traumatic for them. We found that over a third of the sample had had a psi experience such as a precognitive dream or a telepathic perception. Two thirds said they had RSPK disturbances and more than half claimed healing abilities. Near death experiences and possession were considered to be conflictive or traumatic by over a third of the sample. A third of the respondents consulted family members, friends and acquaintances, while over a fourth of the sample consulted a physician. We believe that these experiences mark a process of personal growth and of a sense of connection with the world. The experiences may be a healthy response to a hostile and alienating environment or context. Further analyses of the introspective accounts may give us more information about the experiencer's emotional reactions to their psi experiences. In a future report we will present statistical analyses of the interaction between these variables.

### **INTRODUCTION**

For some individuals psychic or parapsychological experiences seem to produce or to be related to high levels of anxiety or fear. For these individuals a psychotherapeutic approach may be necessary.

Every parapsychology research institute receives calls for help regarding psychic experiences. Nonetheless, not all the institutes are prepared to provide clinical help. There also seems to be lack of interest in the study of these problems. An exception is the study of poltergeist phenomena. Roll had suggested that the poltergeist agent suffers from extreme emotional pressure and that they are not capable of containing the pressure in a normal way (e.g., Roll, 1968). However, in recent years there has been an increase in interest to understand parapsychological experiences better from a clinical point of view (Kramer, 1993; Parker, 1993; Harary, 1993).

Still, most of the survey work is not clinically oriented. Most of the work has focused on prevalence, demographics, and general psychological correlates. Some work regarding general psi experiences has been conducted with students (Green, 1966; Haight, 1979; Kennedy, Kanthamani & Palmer, 1994), or with special groups such as children (Hunt, Gervais, Shearing-Johns, Travis, 1992). Other work has focused on specific phenomena such as apparitions (West, 1948) and out-of-body experiences (Alvarado & Zingrone, 1997; Blackmore, 1984; Brelaz de Castro, 1998; Hart, 1954).

John Palmer (1979) conducted a survey of parapsychological experiences that inspired the present survey. More than half of his sample claimed at least one experience. In addition, the experiencers said that the phenomena affected their attitudes towards life and their lifestyles. Kohr (1980), who studied 406

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members of the Association for Research and Enlightenment using Palmer's questionnaire, obtained results similar to Palmer's.

L. E. Rhine (1966) noticed that the people that wrote to her with accounts of psychic experiences were worried about their experiences. According to Harary (1993), when someone talks about their spontaneous psi experience, that person is in search of an explanation. People who have had these experiences react in different ways to them. Hastings (1993) has argued that the way in which a person responds to a psi experience is more important than the details of the experience.

Tart and Labore (1985) have suggested that people are anxious about the existence and workings of psi. In their survey many individuals expressed fear that their minds could be invaded by the thoughts of another person. They were also concerned about the ethical and responsible use of ESP to avoid intrusions into people's privacy.

In this stage of our research project we are concerned with a descriptive study of experiences considered to be conflictive by the experiencers. This may include a variety of psychological, physical, social or existential effects or reactions to the experiences. We will present information about the prevalence of: types of spontaneous psi experiences, frequency of experiences, conflictive experiences, type of consultation or treatments sought by the experiencers (neurological, psychiatric, psychotherapeutic, religious, and others). We will also present demographic information about the respondents.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The sample included both female (58.8%) and male (41.2%) participants, their ages ranged from 17 to 77 years ( $N= 260$ ;  $SD= 14.26$ ). Following the epidemiological profile of Argentines established by the Instituto Nacional de Salud Mental (1999) [National Institute of Mental Health], we divided the sample into six health zones, from which we received replies. These include the Federal Capital and the Province of Buenos Aires, Northwest area, Cuyo, Center, North-east area, and Patagonia. Table 1 presents more details about the demographics.

### *Instrument*

We designed a 51 item self-report questionnaire. From question 1 to 13 each question inquired about: (1) the frequency of each type of experience; and (2) if any of these experiences were considered to be conflictive (that is the physical, psychological, social or existential reaction to the experience).

*Psi experiences* were defined as those experiences in which a person believed he or she had a parapsychological experience, that is, experiences such as extrasensory perception (or anomalous cognition) and psychokinesis (or the influence of mind over matter), including spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK) and healing through paranormal means.

Table 1  
DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES OF THE SAMPLE

	% (N= 260)
<b>Place of Residence</b>	
Capital Federal and Province of Buenos Aires	84.4
NOA	5.0
Cuyo	2.7
Centro	5.0
NEA	2.3
Patagonia	0.8
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	41.2
Female	58.8
<b>Age</b>	
18-25	11.8
26-35	16.7
36-55	47.9
56-65	15.2
66 and older	8.4
<b>Education (Highest level)</b>	
Grade School	6.9
High School	53.4
Some college	23.3
Post-graduate	16.4
<b>Occupation</b>	
Business	14.1
Professional (Bachelor Degree)	15.6
Professional (Advanced degree)	11.5
Employee	30.2
Housewife	7.6
Retired	5.7
Technical	5.7
Student	9.5
<b>Religion</b>	
Catholic	55.9
Non-denominational Christian	12.7
Non-denominational	10.0
Agnostic	10.9
Eastern philosophy	4.5
Atheist	2.3
Protestant	1.8
Jewish	1.8

*Psi-related experiences* are those that are not necessarily psi processes but that provide the context for the manifestation of parapsychological phenomena. This may include some out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, past lives recall, and contact with the dead or with extraterrestrial entities. The items of the questionnaire may be classified in 15 categories as follows:

*Precognition in dreams:* This refers to dreams about events that will take place in the future.

*Telepathy:* The experience of perceiving the thoughts of another person not present at the moment.

*Perceptions of lights and/or energy:* The perception of lights or energies around the human body or around objects.

*Out-of-body experiences:* Experiences in which a person feels that their consciousness is separated from their physical body.

*Near-death experiences:* Experiences, usually during a surgical operation or an accident, in which a person has been declared clinically dead and returns with the recollection of events experienced during such trance.

*Past lives recall:* The experience in which a person has recollections of an apparent previous life, that is, the recollection of having being someone else before the present life. These experiences may take place during dreams, meditation, or in other non-ordinary state of consciousness.

*Extraterrestrial/spiritual contacts:* A range of experiences in which a person has had some type of contact—spontaneous or induced—with extraterrestrial beings, spirits, angels, saints (or Mary), or visual apparitions of ghosts that may include other sensory modalities (feelings, smells, being touched) by all kind of entities.

*Mediumship or channeling:* The capacity of receiving and/or transmitting information presumably coming from a spiritual or an extraterrestrial entity.

*Control at a distance—Possession:* The feeling of being controlled or possessed by a spiritual/extraterrestrial entity or a living person not present at the place in question.

*Poltergeist or RSPK:* A series of physical anomalies, malfunctions of electronic equipment, raps and sounds, things burned, and movement of objects usually associated to “agents” or persons around which the phenomena occur. The phenomena are sometimes attributed to spiritual beings or other entities.

*Psychokinesis:* The ability to influence objects (e.g., move them) at will without touching them.

*Healing:* The capacity to heal disease or improve the condition through a parapsychological procedure (this would also include those that practice reiki, qi-gong, laying-on-of-hands, and similar techniques).

*Demographic information:* Includes general demographic information (place of residence, age, sex, education, profession or occupation, and religion).

*Consulted someone in the past:* The person consulted someone or received some type of treatment about their experiences in the past.

*Consulting someone at present:* The person is currently asking for help or counseling from someone, or is receiving some type of treatment because of his experiences.

#### *Procedure*

A questionnaire about paranormal experiences was published in *Año/Cero*, a popular magazine about all sorts of paranormal experiences and topics. We also mailed questionnaires using lists obtained through parapsychology and transpersonal psychology groups and institutes, including the list of the Instituto de Psicología Paranormal [Institute of Paranormal Psychology], directed by the second author (AP). The latter list is formed of the institute’s members and students that have taken courses at the institute. Four thousand questionnaires were distributed during courses, or sent through the mail or through fax, or through the

popular magazine mentioned above. Two hundred and sixty questionnaires were usable for the survey. All the participants said they had at least one type of parapsychological experience, so we did not receive any uncompleted questionnaires.

#### Analyses

This paper presents descriptive analyses of the participants' replies to the above mentioned questionnaire. The percentages presented were produced using Simstat 3.5 (Péladeau, 1994).

### RESULTS

Frequency of Psi Experiences and Conflicts. The results for this section appear in Tables 2 and 3:

#### Precognition in Dreams.

The question is: Have you ever had a dream about an event and later found that the event actually took place? (# 1, see Appendix). Dream precognition was reported by 72.3% of the respondents. The experience was found to be conflictive or traumatic by 14.8%.

Table 2  
FREQUENCY OF PSI EXPERIENCES AND PSI-RELATED EXPERIENCES (N=260)\*

	Yes, once	Yes, sometimes	Yes, always	TOTAL
<i>Psi-experiences</i>				
ESP Dreams	35.9	47.9	16.7	72.3 (189)
Telepathy	14.5	55.1	30.4	82.0 (213)
Psychokinesis	50.0	34.4	15.6	12.8 (32)
RSPK <sub>1</sub> (Electromagnetic disturbances)	37.5	45.6	16.9	51.7 (134)
RSPK <sub>2</sub> (Objects flying / breaking)	41.2	42.9	16.0	47.3 (119)
Psi healing	22.8	34.2	43.0	56.5 (147)
<i>Psi-related experiences</i>				
Perception of lights / energy	28.1	43.8	27.4	55.3 (144)
Out-of-body experiences	33.2	51.8	15.1	75.7 (197)
Near death experiences	88.1	11.9	--	15.7 (41)
Past life recall	33.7	48.1	18.2	71.1 (185)
ETs / spiritual contacts	28.9	47.0	24.7	75.3 (197)
Mediumship or channeling	28.9	31.6	39.5	28.8 (75)
Distance control - possession	32.8	45.4	21.8	45.0 (117)

\* The results are presented in terms of number of cases and as percentages (in parenthesis).

Table 3  
 CONFLICTIVE PSI EXPERIENCES AND PSI-RELATED EXPERIENCES (N=260)\*

	Was conflictive	Was not conflictive	Don't know
<i>Psi-experiences</i>			
ESP Dreams	28 (14.8)	154 (81.5)	7 (3.7)
Telepathy	13 (6.1)	189 (88.7)	11 (5.2)
Psychokinesis	5 (15.6)	25 (78.1)	2 (6.3)
RSPK <sub>1</sub> (Electromagnetic disturbances)	22 (16.4)	100 (74.6)	12 (9.0)
RSPK <sub>2</sub> (Objects flying / breaking)	22 (18.3)	88 (73.3)	10 (8.3)
Psi healing	5 (15.6)	138 (78.1)	4 (2.7)
<i>Psi-related experiences</i>			
Perception of lights / energy	16 (11.1)	124 (86.1)	4 (2.8)
Out-of-body experiences	28 (14.4)	161 (82.6)	6 (3.1)
Near death experiences	14 (34.1)	24 (58.5)	3 (7.3)
Past life recall	21 (11.4)	155 (83.8)	9 (4.9)
ETs / spiritual contacts	34 (17.3)	141 (71.8)	21 (10.7)
Mediumship or channeling	14 (18.7)	57 (76.0)	4 (5.3)
Distance control - possession	40 (34.2)	66 (56.4)	11 (9.4)

\* The results are presented in terms of number of cases and as percentages (in parenthesis).

*Telepathy*: The question is: *Have you ever had the sensation of perceiving mentally the thoughts of another person, be this a family member, a friend or an acquaintance that was not present at the moment that you perceived the thoughts?* (# 2, see Appendix). This experience was reported by 82% of the participants. Six percent said that this experience was conflictive or traumatic.

*RSPK<sub>1</sub>*: The question is: *Have you seen abnormalities in the functioning of electrical apparatus, computers, or other equipment that seem to you very strange, and that, as far as you could determine, were not due to normal or natural causes?* (# 10, see Appendix). This was reported by 51.7% of the sample, while 16.4% said that the experience was conflictive or traumatic.

*RSPK<sub>2</sub>*: The question is: *Have you ever heard blows or found broken or cracked glass, or burned objects without an apparent physical cause?* (# 11, see Appendix). This experience was reported by 47.3% of the participants. 18.3% said the experience was conflictive or traumatic.

*Psychokinesis*: The question is: *Can you move objects mentally, that is, without physical contact?* (# 12, see Appendix). This experience was reported by 12.8% of the sample. For this question, 15.6% said that the experience was conflictive or traumatic.

*Psi Healing*: The question is: *Do you believe that you have a power to cure or heal?* (# 13, see Appendix). This was answered affirmatively by 56.5% of the respondents. Of these, 15.6% said that the experience was conflictive or traumatic.

#### PSI-RELATED EXPERIENCES.

The results also appear in Tables 1 and 2:

*Perception of Lights/Energies*: The question is: *Have you ever seen a light or lights, or fields of energy around the body or part of the body of a person, which, as far as you could determine, was not caused by normal or natural means?* (# 3, see Appendix). This experience was reported by 55.3%, and found to be conflictive or traumatic by 11.1%.

*Out-of-Body Experiences*: The question is: *Have you ever had the experience of feelings outside or far from your physical body, that is, the sensation that your mind, consciousness or spirit was in a different place than your physical body?* (# 4, see Appendix). This was reported by 75.7% of the sample. Of these, 14.4% found the experience conflictive or traumatic.

*Near-Death Experiences*: The question is: *Have you had the experience of being clinically dead and "returned" bringing with you the recollection of what you experienced during that moment?* (# 5, see Appendix). This was answered affirmatively by 15.7% of the participants. The experience was considered conflictive or traumatic by 34.1%.

*Past lives recall*: The question is: *Have you had recollections or experiences that seem to come from a previous life?* (# 6, see Appendix). Experiences of this sort were reported by 71.1% of the sample. The phenomena were considered conflictive or traumatic by 11.4%.

*ETs/Spiritual Contacts*: The question is: *Have you had, while awake, the vivid impression of hearing, smelling, being touched by, or simply a strong sensation of feeling the presence of an entity (a deceased person, a living person not present in the place, an extraterrestrial entity, etc.), an impression that as far as you could determine was not due to any external physical or natural cause?* (# 7, see Appendix). This was reported by 75.3% of the sample. The experience was conflictive or traumatic for 17.3%.

*Mediumship or Channeling*: The question is: *Have you ever had an experience in which you have functioned as a medium or a channel for the manifestation of an entity (a deceased person, an extraterrestrial entity, etc.)?* (# 8, see Appendix). This experience was reported by 28.8% of the sample. The experience was conflictive or traumatic for 18.7%.

*Control at a Distance-Possession*: The question is: *Have you ever felt that you were watched, persecuted, controlled, or possessed by an entity (a deceased person, a living person not present at the place in question, an extraterrestrial entity, etc.)?* This experience was reported by 22.2% of the participants. It was found to be conflictive or traumatic by 34.2%.

*Consulted Someone in the Past - Consulting Someone at Present*: The results in this section appear in Table 4 and Table 5.

*Consulted someone in the past*: The question is: *Assuming some of the above mentioned experiences were conflictive or traumatic to you, did you consult another person (family member, friend or acquaintance) or did you received any type of treatment because of these experiences?* (# 14, see Appendix). This was answered positively by 31.1% of the sample. That is, these persons consulted at least once a parent, a friend or a professional to get advice.

Table 4  
RESPONDENTS WHO CONSULTED OR REQUESTED ORIENTATION IN THE PAST (N=102)

Consultant	N (%)
Physician	21 (20.4)
Relative / Friend / Acquaintance	32 (31.1)
Psychologist / Psychiatrist	10 (7.8)
Religious	8 (7.8)
Parapsychologist	8 (8.7)
More than one consultant	23 (22.3)

Table 5  
RESPONDENTS WHO CONSULTED OR REQUESTED ORIENTATION IN THE PAST (N=40)

Consultant	N (%)
Physician	12 (26.1)
Relative / Friend / Acquaintance	15 (32.6)
Psychologist / Psychiatrist	5 (10.9)
Religious	3 (6.5)
Parapsychologist	5 (10.9)
More than one consultant	6 (13.0)

*Consulting Someone at Present:* The question is: *In case that you are having one or various other experiences PRESENTLY, do you feel they are conflictive or traumatic?* [If yes] are you consulting another person (family member, friend or acquaintance) or are you getting any treatment because of the experiences? (# 15 and 16, see Appendix). Regarding both questions, 32.6% said that they were in fact currently consulting someone for help regarding their experiences.

#### DISCUSSION

*Psi Experiences and Psi-Related Experiences.* More than a third of our sample has experienced psi phenomena such as telepathy (82.0%) and ESP in dreams (72.3%). Table 6 shows our results in comparison to those of previous studies. Our dream ESP percentage differ slightly from those of Palmer (85%) and Kohr (87%), and are closer to Zangari and Machado's (64%). Other phenomena have similar

Table 6  
COMPARISON BETWEEN OUR FINDINGS AND THOSE OF PREVIOUS STUDIES \*

	Palmer	Kohr	Zangari & Machado	Gomez, Montanelli & Parra
ESP in dreams	85	87	64	72
RSPK	86	60	17	52
OBE	87	72	31	76
Past life recall	69	85	18	71
Aura	87	87	--	55

\* This information is taken from Blackmore (1984), Kohr (1980), Palmer (1979), and Zangari & Machado (1996).

Table 7  
FREQUENCY OF PSI EXPERIENCES AND PSI-RELATED EXPERIENCES:  
DIFFERENT SUB-SAMPLES (N=260)\*

	Sample A**	Sample B**	Sample C**
<i>Psi-experiences</i>			
ESP Dreams	72.6	72.6	63.8
Telepathy	85.5	81.7	72.3
Psychokinesis	12.0	12.5	8.5
RSPK <sub>1</sub> (Electromagnetic disturbances)	59.0	52.1	38.3
RSPK <sub>2</sub> (Objects flying / breaking)	48.7	46.4	42.6
Psi healing	58.1	58.9	53.2
<i>Psi-related experiences</i>			
Perception of lights / energy	59.0	55.1	53.2
Out-of-body experiences	82.1	75.3	72.3
Near death experiences	15.4	16.0	8.5
Past life recall	71.8	70.7	66.0
ETs / spiritual contacts	73.5	75.3	74.1
Mediumship or channeling	34.2	29.8	19.6
Distance control – possession	45.3	44.9	40.4

\*The results are presented in terms of percentages.

\*\* Sample A: Students of parapsychology and/or transpersonal psychology.

\*\*Sample B: Readers of the Spanish popular magazine Ano/Cero

\*\*Sample C: Non-parapsychological respondents

proportions, such as out-of-body experiences and spiritual extraterrestrial contacts (75.7% y 75.3%, respectively). However, the previous surveys have not asked about extraterrestrials, so the results may not be strictly comparable. Regarding out-of-body experiences our percentages are similar to those reported by Kohr (72%), who used a sample of individuals with a high level of interest in spiritual and parapsychological matters.

There was also a high prevalence of the two types of RSPK phenomena (51.7% and 47.3%) and of claimed healing abilities (56.5%). Regarding RSPK, both Palmer (86%) and Kohr (60%) obtained high prevalences of these experiences. In our study, near-death experiences (15.7%) and psychokinesis (12.8%) obtained lower percentages. Regardless of the comparisons, our results show a high prevalence of experiences, something to be expected from a self-selected sample and from the ways the data was collected.

In addition, we have not found significant differences between questionnaires from the popular magazine, from the students, and from parapsychological and/or transpersonal psychological groups.

**Conflictive Feelings and Psi Experiences and Psi-Related Experiences.** Near-death experiences and the control at a distance-possession experiences were frequently identified as conflictive (34.1% and 34.2%, respectively). In future work we should measure the degree of conflictive feelings for each experience as opposed to a simple yes and no answer. For example, a high degree of conflictive feelings regarding a near-death experience could be associated with a high degree of change in the experiencer's lives regarding values or attitudes, to high anxiety situations (fear of death), or specific critical events in the lives of the experiencers (accidents, surgery).

There are several aspects that should be considered in the evaluation of the conflictive feelings produced by psi experiences. We did not measure the degree of conflict, although we hope to do this later using more clinically meaningful measures. The determination of presence or absence of conflict or trauma is based on self report. Conflict and trauma may be measured better with other instruments, and in relation to clinical concerns.

At the Instituto de Psicología Paranormal we have developed discussion groups for persons that have had these experiences, be they conflictive or not. The purpose of these groups is to give experiencers the opportunity to discuss their experiences and their meaning in a supportive environment.

In our opinion it is very important to conduct more studies about people's reactions to psi and about the defense mechanisms people use to deal with these experiences. An early discussion of the dynamics of these mechanisms was that of Freud (1984). Regarding this, we should remember that some studies have suggested that individual with low defenses have obtained higher ESP scores than individuals with high defenses (Johnson & Haraldsson, 1984).

It is possible that ESP is affected by these defense mechanisms and that this mechanisms are lower during altered states of consciousness. Similarly, the relationship between hypnotic susceptibility and psychodynamic defenses. In terms of cognitive psychology, maybe we are dealing with cognitive processes that regulate the flow of information towards consciousness (Irwin, 1994b).

To further explore these issues, our future study will include correlations of psi experiences with psychological and psychopathological variables. In this way we will be on better grounds to study if the cases with conflict are associated to pathology or maladjustment.

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