

Society and Paranormal Belief

Brandon R. Parker

Cold, dank, and dreary areas, floating Corbs in the night sky, flickering lights, creaking old floorboards, whispers heard through the winds, and ghostly forms passing just out of sight are events that all seem to share commonalities. Many people in societies across the globe believe these occurrences, as well as others, are the physical manifestations of paranormal activity. Others may observe the same phenomena and conclude that they result from poor insulation, failing lighting circuits, settling foundations, plumbing issues, and some creative use of one's imagination. Paranormal activity cannot be proven to truly exist, but it cannot be scientifically and definitively proven not to exist altogether either. However, from a sociological perspective, it matters not whether these paranormal phenomena are real or figments of our imagination; instead, it matters why human beings believe in the paranormal at all and how it might affect our societies. Sociology is concerned more with understanding the influences of these beliefs and what encourages them to persist in the midst of constant scrutiny. After reviewing information relevant to the paranormal and its sociological ties, it is clear that the continued belief in the paranormal is likely influenced and supported through several cultural constructs such as folklore, the impact of social factors, religious ideology, relationship to societal struggles, and the paranormal being adopted into idioculture.

For centuries or more, ghost stories/folklore have thrived globally, including in the Western hemisphere. Despite the vast belief in paranormal activity, it is often dismissed as unreal and the investigation of it is labeled as nothing more than pseudoscience. However, the massive interest in the paranormal and the media's response to the general public's interest has fostered two decades of paranormal experiences, paranormal programming, and active televised pursuits for paranormal evidence. Culture has created a clear idea of what a haunting may look like, sound like, and even smell like. Society has taken the cultural possibility of ghosts existing, a separate spirit freed from the body, and turned to modern technology to validate the beliefs (Baker and Bader 570-571). Today, one might believe that advanced technology would have diminished the belief in more "mysterious" things. However, technology is being designed, developed, and relied upon to make retrieving evidence, and even communicating with ghosts, a greater possibility by those involved in the pursuit.

Belief in ghosts is not a small, isolated phenomenon; it is shared by many cultures worldwide. Even in modern America, greater than 90% admit to having a belief in some aspect of the supernatural, occult, or paranormal activity (Markovsky and Thyne 21). With such a large number of believers, it seems prudent from a sociological perspective to be curious about where

that engrained faith spurs from. Social Impact Theory argues that people's beliefs in something can be directly impacted by the social environment in which they interact. Considering this, even someone with little or no belief about something may come to manifest those beliefs when encouraged by those people with whom they interact (Markovsky and Thye 23-24). For example, if several people are exploring the dark, dank basement of an old, abandoned hotel and one person mentions the possibility of the place being haunted and ghostly attributes being observed, the other members are more likely to start perceiving the same simply based on the initial person's cues.

One might also think that paranormal activity and religious ideology would coalesce. After all, the idea of the soul existing separately from and outside of a person's body is paramount to many faiths. Yet belief in one does not necessarily result in a belief in the other. Those who have no doubt and believe in the paranormal are more likely to have a "spiritual" ideology instead of adhering to a specific structured religion. According to Baker and Draper's survey study, "Diverse Supernatural Portfolios: Certitude, Exclusivity, and the Curvilinear Relationship Between Religiosity and Paranormal Beliefs," those with more devout religious affiliations or none at all tend to be less likely to believe in or be involved in the paranormal (422). Based on this, we can confer that paranormal belief is not directly linked to religious beliefs which is logical considering the large number and varying groups of people who admit to a belief in some form of the paranormal.

Some investigate the lengthy influence of paranormal belief from a contrasting perspective. They investigate the "hauntings" and how they are presented by modern media as a direct reflection of social failures. Often narrated by the everyday, average Americans themselves, credence of

events is assumed and even enhanced. In these haunting tales of the American Dream gone wrong, a family often purchases their "Dream Home," they settle into their new home, face mounting financial difficulties and familial dysfunction, and ultimately conclude that their home is trying to kill them. Some even end up losing everything in this process. Although paranormal activities are blamed, these tales are a reflection of the loss of the American Dream and the faults of people (Lawrence 228-229). In this scenario, the paranormal becomes a surrogate issue for the people to blame; they consider themselves victims and then survivors making them the heroes in their own story whether or not the haunting actually occurred. As this loss of the American Dream to paranormal activity seems to be serving a social purpose, this might be a relevant area of study and potentially prove fruitful with interesting results.

According to Eaton, an idioculture refers to the knowledge, behaviors, beliefs, and traditions that are shared by members of a given group (157). People who believe in the paranormal and those who might have experienced paranormal activity share a common bond. This bond and peoples' interactions validate and encourage greater shared beliefs among one another causing the experiences to become further validated and therefore become the defacto standard by which other experiences are interpreted and judged throughout the world. In short, these beliefs are self-confirming. In Eaton's ethnography, "Manifesting Spirits: Paranormal Investigation and the Narrative Development of a Haunting," the author suggests that this idioculture may be an even stronger influence on paranormal belief than folklore, local legends, and media promotion of the paranormal (177-178). This could infer that there are many implications for future study and a more in-depth analysis of the influence of the idioculture in the

area of paranormal beliefs is warranted.

It is not the place of sociological analysis to determine whether the paranormal activity that people report is fact or fiction, science or belief. However, such analysis does offer some insight into how beliefs form, how they are perpetuated, and how strongly they can become embedded within society and thereby impact the behaviors and traditions of its people. Through this kind of research, we can gain an understanding of other shared beliefs and influential concepts that guide peoples' behavior and interaction within their social circles (Markovsky and Thye 21). Belief in the paranormal may be a small part of the human experience, but it garners enough social significance not to be immediately dismissed or disregarded.

Most research into paranormal activity, the presence of what is considered paranormal activity, and the technological proof offered by those who believe is often dismissed by mainstream science (Bader and Baker 580). Many mainstream scientific fields consider the research into the paranormal to be a pseudoscience which makes the topic and any research undertaken in the subject controversial, yet it would be shortsighted to not investigate how and why such a large number of people have embraced the paranormal and how it has embedded itself in the fabric of almost every culture around the world. Further re-

search into the cultural, psychological, and certainly sociological aspects of paranormal beliefs would produce immense intellectual research.

Throughout the world, there are many people who believe in and associate certain activities, whether audible, visual, or technological observance, with the paranormal. Whether these proposed paranormal activities are authentic supernatural occurrences or are solely embellishments and misinterpretations/misrepresentations of scientific data, is of no significant consequence. From a sociological perspective, understanding where these paranormal beliefs originate, how they are perceived and transmitted, what factors affect the differences in beliefs between different individuals, cultures, and periods of history, and how they become so ingrained within societies around the world is paramount. The supporting evidence surrounding the sociological ties of the paranormal indicate that ongoing belief in the paranormal is influenced by several factors: cultural constructs, like folklore, the impact of social factors, religious ideology, relationship to societal struggles, and the paranormal being adopted into idioculture. However absurd mainstream science might consider research into the paranormal, it remains relevant in understanding a culture from a sociological perspective.

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