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Chapter 1: Introduction

The fundamental purpose of this monograph is to examine paranormal belief from a psychological perspective. More specifically, the objective here is to explore the origins and psychological functions of paranormal beliefs. Chapter 1 sets the scene by considering what the term ‘paranormal belief’ may signify and by identifying the psychological and cultural significance of scientific research into these beliefs.

The definition of paranormal belief

It would perhaps be an overstatement to describe paranormal beliefs as ubiquitous, but they certainly are shared by many people. Rigorously solicited poll data suggest that a majority of the American population embraces at least one paranormal belief. A 2001 Gallup poll (Newport and Strausberg, 2001) reported the following levels of endorsement.

	per cent
Psychic or spiritual healing	54
Extrasensory perception (ESP)	50
Haunted houses	42
Ghosts	38
Telepathy	36
Visits to Earth by extraterrestrial beings	33
Clairvoyance	32
Astrology	28
Spirit communication	28
Witchcraft	26
Reincarnation	25
Spirit possession	15

In addition, an earlier Gallup poll (Gallup, 1997) indexed support for some other paranormal beliefs: psychokinesis (‘mind-over-matter’ effects): 17 per cent; the existence of the devil: 56 per cent; diabolic possession: 42 per cent; UFOs (unidentified flying objects, or ‘flying saucers’): 48 per cent; and being at least ‘somewhat superstitious’: 25 per cent.

By way of independent confirmation, a Southern Focus poll conducted in 1998 (Institute for Research in Social Science, 1998) also identified substantial endorsement of selected paranormal beliefs:

	per cent
God answers prayers	86
God	84
Life after death	73
Heaven or hell	68
Biblical account of creation	62
ESP	60
Diabolic possession	55
Psychic or spiritual healing	55
Ghosts	41
UFOs	39
Extraterrestrial beings' visits to Earth	34
Astrology	33
Being at least somewhat superstitious	25
Reincarnation	25

Some account here should also be taken of the degree of conviction, because the rejection of even the less widely endorsed paranormal beliefs may be unequivocal in only a minority of the population. For example, Hamilton (2001) found that while there was considerable scepticism toward astrology, only 25 per cent of her sample said they had 'no belief at all' in astrology. In short, some degree of conviction in paranormal beliefs is very common in the general population.

Apart from documenting the frequency of paranormal beliefs in contemporary America, the above data also serve to instantiate some specific paranormal beliefs. A few readers may be surprised by some of the categories included in these polls. This surprise is not due merely to some trivial conceptual fuzziness in the notion of 'the paranormal'. Rather, we have the curious situation that in the sense in which the term is used both by many professional researchers and the general public, 'paranormal belief' in fact encompasses rather more than belief in paranormal phenomena. Strictly speaking, paranormal phenomena are scientifically impossible events or, as Broad (1949) argued, they are phenomena that violate the 'basic limiting principles' of current scientific understanding.¹ Not all of the above beliefs relate to paranormal phenomena as thus defined; it may reasonably be argued that in a strict sense the existence of UFOs or the existence of God, for example, is not 'scientifically impossible'.

There is a fundamental dilemma here that requires at least tentative resolution. One option would be to implement from the outset a definition of paranormal belief as belief in scientifically impossible phenomena and henceforth to exclude discussion of any belief (e.g., the existence of UFOs or God) that does not meet this criterion. Although this option is logically defensible, at this point of the exposition it would be tactically injudicious. There is a substantial quantity of research on these 'paranormal' beliefs that do not pertain to scientifically impossible phenomena and it would be premature to discard this knowledge

without examining its potential implications for paranormal belief as more widely conceived. If belief in scientifically impossible phenomena were to be found to differ from the other beliefs that researchers have classified as paranormal, there will be ample opportunity in the final chapter of the monograph for some conceptual house-cleaning in relation to the ‘paranormality’ criterion.

Thus I now aim to construct a *working definition* of ‘paranormal belief’ that accommodates the common broad usage of this term by most researchers and lay people. Under this approach paranormal belief cannot viably be defined simply as belief in scientifically impossible phenomena and, indeed, even a minor modification of Broad’s (1949) definition of paranormality would not suffice for this purpose. As will become evident, the formulation of a working definition is not a straightforward task, but the following critical scrutiny of various definitional issues may help to clarify the nature of the concept of paranormal belief as it is popularly applied.