

The attraction of young people to the paranormal: the role of Experiential intelligence.

Abstract

This study, carried out among francophone young people ($N = 675$) aged between 13 and 25 years old ($M = 16.8$, $SD = 1.9$), validates other studies of the relationship between an interest in the paranormal and a type of intelligence that is intuitive and emotional (experiential) rather than rational. There is a clear correlation between experiential intelligence (EI) and practically all forms of paranormal belief (besides superstition) and paranormal experiences (except satanic rituals). This type of emotional intelligence also correlates with paradigm shift (a change in the way reality is understood and coped with). The mediating role of EI between a paranormal practice such as spiritualism and paradigm shift is insubstantial and suggests this kind of intelligence would play more of a role in moderating the way paranormal practices influence worldview.

Keywords: experiential intelligence, paranormal beliefs, paranormal experiences, young people, moderation, worldview

1. Introduction

1.1. Rational or experiential intelligence

According to the *Cognitive Experiential Self-Theory (CEST)* of Seymour Epstein (1980, 1991, 2003), each individual uses two systems, independent of each other but interactive, to decode information: a rational system and a preconscious experiential system. While the rational system decodes information about reality consciously and abstractly, the experiential system interprets reality spontaneously and generally, based on the emotions generated by the situation. According to the *CEST*, these emotions respond to 4 fundamental needs, which sustain the basic beliefs that give them meaning. According to Epstein, any emotionally affecting event either nurtures or contradicts these beliefs. The more emotional an event, whether positive or negative, the more experiential decoding will challenge or confirm these fundamental beliefs (Epstein, 2003).

1.2. Type of intelligence and paranormal beliefs

Several studies highlight that, among these fundamental beliefs, the *experiential system*, the more intuitive form of intelligence, highly emotional and creative, correlates with, among other things, *paranormal beliefs* (Aarnio et Lindeman, 2005 ; Bressan, 2002 ; Dudley, 2002 ; Genovese, 2005 ; Gianotti, Mohr, Pizzagalli, Lehmann & Brugger, 2001). According to Aarnio et al (2005), the many observations of more developed paranormal beliefs in women rather than men (Auton, Pope & Seeger, 2003 ; Dag, 1999 ; Hergovich, 2004 ; Lange, Irwin & Houran, 2001 ; Spinelli, Reid & Norvilitis, 2003 ; Tobacyk & Milford, 1983 ; Tobacyk, Miller & Jones, 1984) could be linked to the fact that the experiential system of intelligence seems more developed in the female sex. Equally, some responses attributed to bad analytical skills among believers in the paranormal

(Musch & Ehrenberg, 2002 ; Tobacyk, 1983), could in fact be a prevalence of the intuitive system. Indeed, the distinction between believers in the paranormal (superstition, magical thought and paranormal beliefs) and sceptics could be, on one hand, ontological confusion (for example “this house has experienced things”) and on the other hand, intuitive reasoning (Lindeman & Aarnio, 2006). In this kind of cognitive function, beliefs, whether paranormal or religious, are strengthened by the impact of positive emotion (Epstein, 2003 ; Watson, Morris, Hood, Miller & Waddell, 1999). Everything works as if enthusiasm (positive stimulus) were activating a predominance of the experiential system over the rational system in a paranormal interpretation of what is being visually perceived.

1.3. Experiential intelligence and cognitive dissonance

It seems that people who function with a predominance of the experiential system are more vulnerable to *cognitive dissonance* (Vaidis & Halimi-Falkowicz, 2007). Faced with a situation of logical stress, this type of person will be distressed by a cognitive situation they cannot control (Gianotti & al., 2001). This kind of personality will therefore be more vulnerable to anxious emotions faced with experiences beyond their understanding, in contrast to those with a logico-mathematical personality (Aarnio & Lindeman, 2005 ; Sjöberg & Af Wahlberg, 2002). However, in the experiential system of thought, events and the reactions they provoke seem more easily considered obvious: “Seeing is believing” (King & al., 2007). There is therefore a greater propensity to accept as true a perception that is subjectively experienced as real. And therein lies an important aspect of the paranormal experience: the person is engaged in an approach to the world that relies on subjective experience, whether real or projected (Houran, Kumar, Thalbourne & Lavertue, 2002).

2. Focus of research

Previous studies have examined the link between forms of intelligence and paranormal *beliefs*. 1) We hypothesise that, in the same way, *paranormal experiences* (PEs) tend to affect people with an intelligence structure that is predominated by the experiential system, rather than the logical and rational one. 2) If what is perceived does not correspond to what the person can cognitively cope with, this creates a paradigmatic disturbance and an anxiety (Mathijssen, 2011) which could be mediated or at least moderated by the experiential cognitive system. Therefore, a PE, particularly the practice of spiritualism (IV), could lead to a paradigm shift (DV) mediated by experiential intelligence. 3) This hypothesis would be even more pertinent to female subjects, since they achieve higher scores in *EI*, according to the literature. 4) These hypotheses are particularly relevant to young people since many of them profess an interest in paranormal beliefs and practices (Francis & Williams, 2009; Le Vallois & Aulenbacher, 2006) and their identity is clearly shaped by these two forms of cognitive system (Klaczynski, Fauth & Swanger, 1995).

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

1200 young people between 13 and 25 years old ($M = 16.8$, $SD = 1.9$), mostly Belgian francophone secondary school pupils (96%) from rural areas (65%), were asked to complete an anonymous online survey (*LimeSurvey*). 675 completed and valid surveys (66.2% from girls and 33.8% from boys) were retained. In agreement with their teachers and the school management, the young people were briefed on site and, in most cases, filled in the survey in their school computer room. This meant the groups of young people were homogenous and open to all, even those who showed no interest in the subject,

which enabled comparisons with a control group. Those who wished to do so could partially waive anonymity (confidentiality of responses was guaranteed) by supplying their email address for entry into a prize draw to win cinema tickets. The procedure met the requirements of the *British Psychological Society Ethical Guidelines*.

3.2. Measurement

1) With the agreement of Seymour Epstein, his scale for measuring intelligence type, the *Rational and Experiential Intelligence scale (REI)*, was translated into French and pre-tested. After back-translation, this was reworked with Epstein. It consists of 40 items measuring the 4 types of cognitive structure established in the Cognitive Experiential Self-Theory (CEST); Rationality (1. rational ability, 2. rational favorability) and Experientiality (3. experiential ability, 4. experiential favorability). For clarity of results, ability and favorability were grouped together as one single variable of experiential or rational intelligence. Cronbach's alpha for the french version of the REI is 0.85.

2) The perception of a disturbance in the basic grasp and cognitive and emotional understanding of reality is measured using the *Paradigm Shift Scale (PSS)* (Mathijssen, 2011_b). This short scale for self-reporting was designed and validated on the basis of two quantitative studies carried out with a total of 812 adolescents ($M = 14.72$ years old, $SD = 1.56$) and young people ($M = 16.8$, $SD = 1.9$). The *PSS* consists of 5 items and has a one-dimensional, reliable factor structure ($\alpha = 0.97$).

3) The *Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (R-PBS)* by Tobacyk (2004) measures 7 forms of paranormal belief empirically, graduated along a scale in 7 degrees:

traditional religious belief, psi belief, witchcraft, superstition, spiritualism, extraordinary life forms and precognition. The *Modified Paranormal Belief Scale* (M-PBS) by Williams, Francis and Lewis (2009) excludes traditional religiosity from the total R-PBS score, since this form of belief reacts differently to the 6 others on the *Francis Scale of Attitude towards Christianity*.

4) *Paranormal experience* encompasses 8 types of experience, active and passive, based on qualitative interviews with young people aged between 16 and 25 years old ($M = 21$, $SD = 2.6$) who had undergone an experience that they themselves defined as paranormal (Mathijsen, 2010). Passive PEs: 1) anomalous sensitive perceptions and 2) having apparitions, and active PEs: 3) practicing spiritualism, 4) consulting one or more healers or hypnotists or 5) clairvoyants, 6) practicing white magic or 7) black magic and 8) satanic rituals. Cronbach's alpha is 0.79.

4. Analyses and results

4.1. Type of intelligence and paranormal beliefs

A non-parametric correlation confirms a significant link between *experiential intelligence* (EI) and practically all forms of *paranormal belief* identified in the literature. Conversely, *rational intelligence* shows only inverse or nearly non-existent links. The two types of intelligence show either no correlation (EI), or negative correlation (RI) with superstition. A factor analysis using the French version of Tobacyk's R-PBS scale shows that this form of belief, along with belief in extraordinary life forms, rarely features in the paranormal beliefs of young francophones. Indeed, like belief in the *Loch Ness Monster* or the *Bigfoot*, young people consider superstition a naive, rather than paranormal, belief.

Table 1: Type of intelligence and paranormal beliefs

<i>prevailance of intelligence system</i>	<i>Rational Intelligence</i>	<i>Experiential Intelligence</i>
Paranormal Belief		
Existence of spirits	.06	.21**
Psi faculties	.01	.20**
Precognition	-.07	.18**
Witchcraft	.04	.17**
Superstition	-.12**	.01
Traditional religious belief ¹	-.01	.10*
Existence of extraordinary life forms	.02	.09*

N = 342

¹ only in the R-PBS

** significant correlation at level 0.01 (bilateral)

* significant correlation at level 0.05 (bilateral)

4.2. Type of intelligence system and paranormal experiences (PEs)

With respect to *paranormal practices*, EI correlates significantly with all practices, with the exception of *satanic rituals*. Furthermore, the *rational intelligence system* shows no correlation with PEs, with the exception of a slight correlation with white magic. Setting aside *witchcraft*, having paranormal experiences is clearly linked to a form of intelligence that is more intuitive and emotional than rational.

Table 2: Type of intelligence and paranormal experiences

<i>prevailance of intelligence system</i>	<i>Rational I. system</i>	<i>Experiential I. system</i>
Paranormal experience (PE)		
Practiced white magic	.08*	.17**
Had apparitions	.02	.17**
Invoked spirits	.04	.17**
Perceived unexplained sounds/lights	-.02	.14**
Practiced black magic	.05	.12**
Practiced satanic rituals	-.02	.00
Consulted clairvoyant	.01	.11**
Consulted hypnotist	-.01	.09*
<i>General paranormal experience</i>	.03	.21**

$N = 342$

** significant correlation at level 0.01 (bilateral)

* significant correlation at level 0.05 (bilateral)

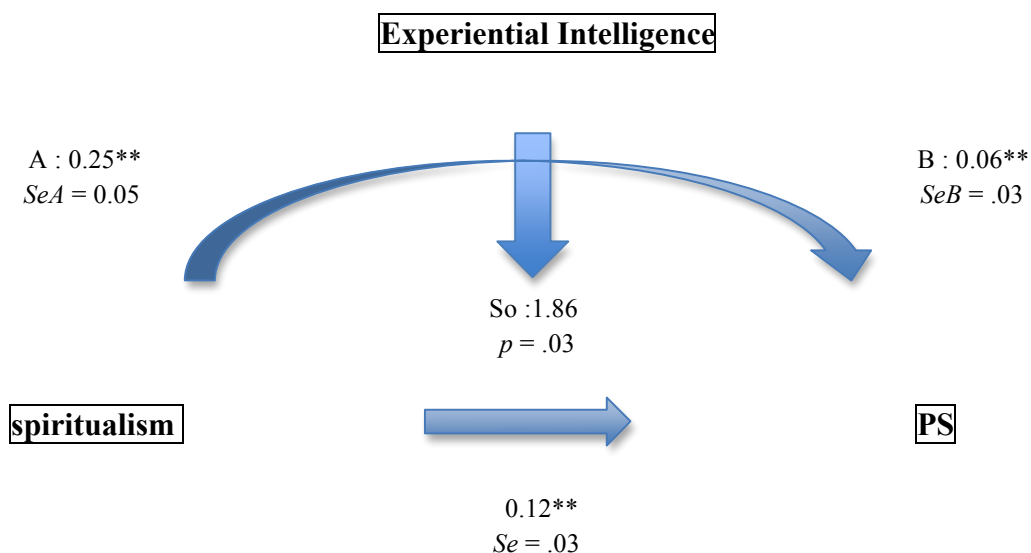
4.3. Experiential intelligence system and paradigm shift

A correlation between type of intelligence and *paradigm shift* (PS) reveals a significant link between *PS* and the *Experiential Intelligence system* ($r(339) = .18, p < 0.01$). Furthermore, there is no significant relationship with *rational intelligence*. A linear regression measuring variation in the intensity of the *PS* according to the two intelligence types confirms this finding: *paradigm shift* is predicted by a prevailing *experiential intelligence* $\beta = .15, (t(337) = 2.84, p = 0.005)$ but is not predicted by a prevailing *rational intelligence* $\beta = .08, (t(337) = 1.51, p = 0.13)$.

Having established the effect between *experiential intelligence* and PS, it is now possible to measure the potential mediating role of *EI* between paranormal practices (in this case, *spiritualism*) and PS. A link between the three variables is probable, since a correlation reveals significant correlations for each combination: the practice of *spiritualism* (IV) and PS (DV) ($r(337) = .18, p < 0.01$), the practice of *spiritualism* (IV) and *EI* (MV) ($r(337) = .17, p < 0.01$) and *EI* (MV) and PS (DV) ($r(337) = .15, p < 0.01$).

A regression shows that *spiritualism* significantly predicts PS ($\beta = .19, (t(337) = 3.55, p < .001)$). In the case of mediation through *experiential intelligence*, the link between *spiritualism* and *EI* reveals a coefficient of 0.25 ($Se = .05, p < .000$) and between *EI* and PS of 0.06 ($Se = .03, p = .02$), which is almost insignificant. The Sobel test (which measures the degree of effectiveness of this mediation) gives also a slightly significant coefficient of 1.86 ($p = .03$, one-tailed). The role of *experiential intelligence* as mediator between the practice of spiritualism and paradigm shift does exist therefore, but only very slightly.

Diagram 1: *experiential intelligence as mediator or moderator between spiritualism and paradigm shift*



It follows that *EI* would perhaps play more of a moderating role in the way paranormal experiences can change young people's relationship with reality and the way they understand the world around them, their *worldview*. But, when introducing *EI* as a moderating variable in our *spiritualism* - *PS* pattern after standardization, this results in no significant increase in R^2 (the change is 0.004 and $\beta = .07$, $(t(337) = 1.25, p = .21)$ which means there is no moderation of *EI* in a change of worldview.

4.4. Gender and type of intelligence

A comparison of the mean intelligence type by gender confirms a unique significant distinction between girls and boys. In line with the literature, the male sex shows much higher mean levels of *rational intelligence* than the female sex ($N = 228$, $M_{boys} = 3.39$, $SD = .53 > N = 447$, $M_{girls} = 3.13$, $SD = .55$). A t-test confirms a significant effect ($t(674) = 91.24$, $p < .001$) of the use of more rational intelligence by boys compared to girls. While this corresponds with the findings of previous research, it does not confirm a prevalence of *experiential intelligence* in the female gender of our research sample. Indeed, an ANOVA shows no significant effect of gender on *paradigm shift*.

5. Discussion

Our study confirms the literature by finding a clear link between young people who have a form of *experiential intelligence* (*EI*) and all forms of *paranormal belief*, with the exception of superstition. Undergoing any *paranormal experience* (*PEs*) (with the exception of satanic rituals) also clearly corresponds with a form of a prevalence of an intelligence system that is more intuitive and emotional rather than rational. The absence of significant correlation of any form of intelligence with *satanic rituals* is probably linked to the moral

peculiarity and social stigma associated with such practices. In any event, rational intelligence shows an overall tendency to react negatively to PEs, with the exception of *white magic* - a correlation with no satisfactory explanation.

That said, a factor analysis of the 8 forms of PE explaining 55.8% of the total variance gives a matrix of 2 component factors after rotation: on one hand, the 2 forms of witchcraft, satanic rituals and invocation of spirits. On the other, the consultation of a healer or clairvoyant, apparitions and extrasensory perceptions. These 2 factors correspond to an *active experience* and *passive experience* respectively. That is to say, in the first case, the young person takes a participatory approach to something in which they can play a role. In the second form of PE, they are more a beneficiary spectator or "victim" of a phenomenon.

Analysis of the link between *experiential intelligence* and *paradigm shift* uses two newly validated scales (PSS) or a French translation in the process of being validated (REI). The results should therefore usefully be compared to other studies. Nevertheless, the scores of different tests are all along the same lines and don't confirm the existence of a relationship between an experiential type of intelligence and a propensity for *PS* as the link of direct causality (mediation) is too weak, and there is no indirect causality (moderation) measured of *paradigm shift*.

As well, while the prevalence of the male gender in a logico-mathematical type of intelligence is confirmed, the findings in our sample (size and type of population), according to the measuring scale used (REI), do not allow confirmation of a female prevalence in experiential intelligence.

6. Acknowledgements

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8. Appendix

The translated and back-translated French version of the REI

1. Résoudre des problèmes compliqués n'est pas mon point fort.
2. Si je devais faire confiance à ce que je ressens au plus profond de moi, je me tromperais souvent.
3. Je préfère des problèmes complexes aux problèmes simples.
4. En général, je ne me fie pas à ce que je ressens pour prendre des décisions.
5. Je n'ai pas de problème à aller jusqu'au bout d'une réflexion.
6. Pour discerner si une personne est digne de confiance, je peux me fier à ce que je ressens au plus profond de moi.
7. Réfléchir n'est pas une activité qui me réjouit.
8. J'aime me fier à mes pressentiments.
9. Je ne suis pas quelqu'un qui a une pensée très analytique.
10. Je crois que je peux faire confiance en mes intuitions.
11. Je prends plaisir à résoudre des problèmes qui demandent beaucoup de réflexion.
12. Je trouve que c'est de la folie de prendre des décisions importantes sur base de ce qu'on ressent.
13. Je suspecte mes pressentiments d'être aussi souvent vrais que faux.
14. J'ai souvent des raisons claires et explicites pour prendre mes décisions.
15. Savoir la réponse sans chercher à comprendre le raisonnement qu'il y a derrière me suffit.
16. Je ne voudrais pas dépendre de quelqu'un qui se dit intuitif ou intuitive.
17. D'habitude, la logique me permet de résoudre des problèmes dans ma vie.
18. J'aime les défis intellectuels.
19. D'habitude je sens quand une personne se trompe ou pas, même si je ne peux me l'expliquer.

20. Je passe souvent par mes instincts quand il faut décider d'agir.
21. Mes jugements rapides sont probablement moins bons que chez la plupart des personnes.
22. Aller jusqu'au bout d'un raisonnement sur un sujet n'est pas un de mes points forts.
23. Je n'aime pas les situations où je dois compter sur l'intuition.
24. J'essaie d'éviter les situations qui demandent une réflexion approfondie sur un sujet.
25. J'ai confiance en ma première impression au sujet de quelqu'un.
26. J'ai un esprit logique.
27. Je ne pense pas que ce soit une bonne idée de s'appuyer sur ses intuitions pour prendre des décisions importantes.
28. Je n'aime pas devoir réfléchir beaucoup.
29. Je n'ai pas un très bon sens intuitif.
30. Je ne suis pas très bon dans la résolution de problèmes qui demandent une analyse logique précise.
31. Je pense qu'il y a des moments où l'on devrait se fier à ses intuitions.
32. J'aime réfléchir en termes abstraits.
33. En général, suivre mes impressions profondes m'aide bien à résoudre des problèmes dans la vie.
34. Je ne raisonne pas bien quand je suis sous pression.
35. J'ai tendance à écouter mon cœur pour guider mes actions.
36. Réfléchir fort et longuement sur un sujet me procure peu de satisfaction.
37. Je me trompe rarement en écoutant mes impressions profondes pour trouver une réponse.
38. Je suis bien meilleur que la plupart des gens pour résoudre les choses de façon logique.
39. L'intuition peut être une façon très utile de résoudre des problèmes.
40. Apprendre des nouvelles façons de raisonner me plairait beaucoup.

Rationalité : capacité rationnelle : 1r, 5, 9r, 14, 17, 22r, 26, 30r, 34r, 38

favorable au rationnel : 3, 7r, 11, 15r, 18, 24r, 28r, 32, 36r, 40

Expérientialité: capacité expérientielle : 2r, 6, 10, 13r, 19, 21r, 25, 29r, 33, 37

favorable à l'expérientiel : 4r, 8, 12r, 16r, 20, 23r, 27r, 31, 35, 39