

There's a Haint Up in Here Somewhere!—Paranormal Belief Construction, Experience, and Meaning-Making in the American South

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Abstract

Belief in some form of paranormal--ranging from traditional Christian ideas of resurrection and Virgin Birth to aliens and clairvoyance--is the norm, with 90% of Southern Focus Poll (SPF) respondents believing in one or more forms.¹ The notion of ghosts and the paranormal "violate a number of binaries" that dominate Western culture: life or death, past or present, body or soul.² Rather than "or," the paranormal exists within the *and*, where life *and* death are deeply intertwined. The paranormal subsist somewhere between conventional time and space, and belief in such leads to a "culturally powerful position" wherein participants can "shatter" the binary constraints of reality.³ Believers in the paranormal, ranging from use of astrology to communicating with the spirits of the deceased, create meaning from these encounters. This is an exploration of how believers in the paranormal from the south construct, experience, and make meaning from paranormal belief across varying social locations.

1. Introduction

Dominant groups in America tend to value rationality and scientific thinking in comparison to other embodied and spiritual forms of knowledge. Why is it, then, that paranormal belief is so pervasive in the American imagination? In fact, belief in some form of paranormal phenom--ranging from traditional Christian ideas of resurrection and Virgin Birth to non-traditional beliefs like aliens and clairvoyance--is the norm, with 90% of Southern Focus Poll respondents believing in one or more forms.⁴ By another measure, nearly half of Americans believe in ghosts, and nearly 25% claim to have felt the presence of one.⁵ Belief in the paranormal is a liminal position that exists somewhere between the confines of science and the structured beliefs of organized religion. The paranormal is "dually marginalized by organized religion and mainstream science" and therefore can coexist with other systems of belief.^{6,7} The notion of ghosts and the paranormal "violate a number of binaries" that dominate Western culture: life or death, past or present, body or soul.⁸ Rather than "or," the paranormal exists within the *and*, where life *and* death are deeply intertwined. Sociologist Emile Durkheim notes that although a belief in the paranormal has been around as long as time, the supernatural is a "modern" idea because there can be no "super" natural without the assumption that there is a "natural" order of things, certainly a post-enlightenment sentiment.⁹

Since the paranormal subsist somewhere between conventional time and space, and belief in such leads to a "culturally powerful position" wherein participants can "shatter" the binary constraints of reality, or the "natural order."¹⁰ Those with paranormal beliefs may feel less confined by doctrines of large institutions, and in turn are more free to construct their own beliefs and values in conjunction with, or in contrast to, these institutions of belief.¹¹ Paranormal beliefs do not always exist in opposition to religious practices. Religion and paranormal belief are inherently compatible in that they both speak to truths that we cannot see.¹² Religion today in Westernized nations is less about strict adherence to doctrine. In fact, church attendance and confidence in organized religion have been declining in the U.S. since the 1970's and given way to a more pluralistic view of spirituality.^{13,14} As we have shifted to a more individualized mode of spirituality, belief in the paranormal has also increased.^{15,16}

With this pluralistic view of spirituality on the rise, believers are liberated from the confines of Western binary thought that spirituality is scientific *or* religious, someone is living *or* dead. As such, belief in the paranormal can be an effective tool for believers to navigate the everyday world. The paranormal are a “wide-ranging set of beliefs” which can be “meaningful and rational in the subjective and cultural contexts within which they are constructed.”¹⁷

The paranormal exists outside of rational thought. It is not “rational” to believe in things like spirits, psychics, angels, or UFOs. Yet, for many people, these beliefs are comforting and provide means of knowledge that exist outside of Western rationalities. For some, belief in forms of the paranormal, like conspiracy theories or UFOs, comes with a desire to exist outside of mainstream beliefs. For others, belief in powers like clairvoyance, saints, and spirits of passed loved ones is a great comfort that can emerge from empirical evidence. Either way, belief in the paranormal provides *something* for its believers.

This research is not to discuss the validity of paranormal claims, but rather to observe how believers from the south interact with these beliefs. This qualitative research project seeks to explore the ways in which paranormal belief affects believers across varying social locations. Belief in the paranormal has very real spiritual and physical consequences for participants. It is important to understand how differing groups construct these beliefs, and furthermore how these beliefs impact their interactions with the world. Humans have great power in their ability to “make life meaningful,” and as such, create belief systems that reconcile with the unknown, as such, it is important to explore how believers construct, experience, and make meaning from their paranormal beliefs.¹⁸

In-depth interviews were used to provide in-depth analysis of paranormal belief in the south. Interviews allow one to go in-depth and gain access to stories that folks may not otherwise feel comfortable sharing in an online survey setting. Interviews allow for a deep, natural progression of conversation that gave insight to the personal belief systems and their effects.

2. Review of Literature

The construction of paranormal belief varies across social locations. Previous research has examined the differences in paranormal belief by gender, age, socioeconomic status, race, and mostly, religion. I hope to extrapolate upon these studies by providing in-depth interviews that explore not just a participant’s social location, but how (or how not) their social location has impacted their *construction* of these beliefs. Existing literature on paranormal belief mostly looks at who is more or less likely to believe in such. This literature is mostly through the lens of religion and how religiosity may or may not coincide with paranormal belief. Social scientists have also used deprivation theory to examine paranormal belief systems. It is important to understand *why* paranormal belief may be constructed in a person in order to examine *how* it affects them. The literature is ultimately inconclusive on what social factor is more or less likely to construct paranormal belief, but the bulk of research focuses on religiosity and deprivation theory.

2.1 Religiosity

In the Baylor Religion Survey, one of the most comprehensive American polls on religion and spiritual belief, religiosity is measured by three key factors: how often an individual attends church, sect of religion, and Biblical literalism.¹⁹ Overall, religiosity and paranormal belief have been found to have a net negative relationship, although studies differ in severity. Church attendance and Biblical literalism are both negative predictors of paranormal belief.²⁰

The sect of Christianity differs however in terms of paranormal belief. Roman Catholics and mainstream Protestants are more likely than Evangelicals to report paranormal belief.²¹ Catholics in particular show a high inclination toward paranormal belief. In Eaton’s study of the religious experiences of ghost investigators, 41% of his interviewees identified as Catholic while Catholics compose less than 21% of the U.S. population.²² In that same vein, Hergovich et al. observed a positive correlation between spiritualism (such as communication with the dead) and Catholicism but did not note the same with Protestantism.²³

Orenstein, however, found that this order paranormal belief by Christian denomination only holds true for some types of paranormal phenomena, such as ESP and clairvoyance, over others, like astrology and belief in ghosts.²⁴ In the lens of religion, it has been found that the most likely to believe in the paranormal are those with “moderate levels of religious belief” and “low levels of ideological exclusivity.”²⁵ Those in “other” religious sects (non-Christian, non-Jewish) but not explicitly “non-religious” are the most attracted to the paranormal.²⁶ Paranormal-ism is neither driven by “irreligious” nor by those at the “extremes” of religious belief and participation.^{27,28} Therefore, any sort of research into paranormal belief must be “interpreted in the context of contemporary religion” and viewed as “profoundly religious in nature.”²⁹

2.2 The “Small Step” Hypothesis

Some researchers have called the relationship between Christianity and paranormal belief “net positive,” meaning that as one increases, so will the other, while others have preferred “curvilinear.”^{30, 31} Nevertheless, there is a relationship between the two systems that have been accounted for primarily through the “small step” hypothesis.³² The “small step” hypothesis asserts that it is a “small step” from believing in religiously sanctioned “conventional paranormal” happenings like the resurrection of Christ or Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary to non-religiously sanctioned “classic paranormal” like psychic phenomena or ghosts.³³ Both conventional Christian paranormal and classic paranormal happenings are “resistant to attempts at scientific proof and must rely on the faith of the individual,” therefore, it is pretty plausible that belief in one category of the paranormal is completely compatible with the other.^{34, 35} Eaton’s study of paranormal investigators even observed that many engaged in religious prayers or rites before beginning a ghost investigation, reinforcing that these beliefs can exist side by side.³⁶ This “small step” hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that 40.2% of SFP respondents surveyed were “full believers” (believing in both conventional Christian and classic paranormal happenings) while 49.7% believed in one or the other.³⁷

Other researchers have refuted this “small step” claim, stating that there are “significant consequences for holding beliefs outside of the mainstream of religious dogma,” rendering conventional Christian paranormal belief and classic paranormal belief incompatible which would lead to a negative relationship between the two.³⁸ Ultimately, though, existing research suggests a linkage between Christianity and paranormal belief.

2.3 Deprivation Theory

Deprivation theory as it relates to the paranormal asserts that “those who live on the margins of society and have loose bonds to primary groups may eschew conventional standards and be more inclined to believe in supernatural phenomenon.”³⁹ This has ultimately proven to be true, but to a lesser extent than one may think.^{40, 41} Various studies have yielded different results for what the strongest marginalized demographic predictor for paranormal belief may be. The Baylor Religion Survey found that gender is the highest predictor, claiming that “females are approximately twice as likely as males to believe that psychics can foresee the future, astrology impacts one’s life and that it is possible to communicate with the dead.”⁴² Mencken concurs, claiming that since spirituality is often labeled as a female trait, women may be more likely to embrace paranormal beliefs.⁴³ MacDonald also found that women are more likely than men to have reported contact with the dead.⁴⁴ He points out though that this might not be an indicator of structural strain, but rather due to the fact that women pray more than men and higher rates of prayer are connected to more instances of reported clairvoyance.⁴⁵ Response bias of women being more likely to report paranormal belief or experience is also important to note here.⁴⁶

Baker and Bader assert that the strongest demographic predictor of paranormal belief is age, wherein younger people are more likely to believe in the paranormal than their elders.⁴⁷ Additionally, some assert that those with lower socioeconomic statuses are more likely to believe, while others claim that paranormal believers tend to be more elite.^{48, 49, 50}

Race has been found to have an impact on paranormal belief, with African Americans being more likely than white Americans to believe in the paranormal.^{51, 52} However, this may be accounted for by increased religiosity and church attendance and lower income among African Americans than their white counterparts.⁵³ Another researcher, however, has found no statistical significance between minority indicators and paranormal beliefs, both classical and religious.⁵⁴ Teesdale found no relationships between marital status, race, income, age, and education level.⁵⁵ The discrepancies here indicate a need for further research.

Paranormal belief, whether religious/conventional or classical is pervasive in the American psyche. It affects the stories we tell, prayers we pray, movies we watch, and beliefs we hold so close to us. Researchers have found connections between Christian religiosity, Christian sect, and paranormal belief. Yet, research exploring demographic determinants of paranormal belief are not in agreement with each other. Some claim gender to be the highest predictor of paranormal belief, others claim race or socioeconomic status. Regardless, it is evident that paranormal beliefs are held by a large group of Americans. Some hold these beliefs in conjunction with, others in opposition to traditional religious beliefs. In light of this research, I would like to provide more insight to *how* participants come to construct these beliefs, as well as *why* paranormal activities, in all forms that they may take, influence and drive the American mind.

3. Methodology

In order to explore how believers construct, interact, and coordinate with these paranormal belief systems across varying social locations such as gender and religion, I interviewed 8 participants who were all born and raised in the south, and have indicated some sort of interest in the paranormal. Respondents ranged in age from 21 years old to 58 years old and were found on a snowball and availability basis. Six interviews were done in person, two were done over the phone. Interviews ranged in time from twenty minutes to an hour and ten minutes. No respondents grew up in a rural area, most were from either cities or suburbs of North Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana, although several respondents indicated that their parents or grandparents had once lived in the country. Two were males and five were females, one has a graduate degree, two have an undergraduate degree, and four are still completing their degrees currently. Only one identified specifically as a Christian, two claimed spiritual with an appreciation for Christianity, and four were “spiritual” or “agnostic.” All indicated an openness to the paranormal, and for some, it made up their entire belief system.

Belief in the classical paranormal that I am interested in may be defined as any non-traditionally Christian paranormal beliefs, including but not limited to: consulting a psychic or belief in other psychic phenomena such as ESP or clairvoyance, belief in spirits, use of a Ouija board, prophetic dreams, reliance on horoscopes, belief in UFOs, or reincarnation.^{56,57,58} To understand where belief comes from, I first asked them to describe their upbringing, both geographically and religiously or spiritually, as well as the spiritual beliefs of their parents. Interviewees were then asked generally what their spiritual beliefs are, and if their religious (or lack thereof) upbringing had an effect on the beliefs they hold now. This question was followed by asking if they hold any “non-traditional” beliefs and when they first remember holding that belief. This question got them engaged with talking about paranormal belief. I then asked interviewees if they had had any experiences with the paranormal, and if so, how they made sense of it and if it changed their beliefs in any way. I often times would ask them to tell me if they have ever experienced a death of a loved one and/or what happens when we die, and how that impacted their spirituality as well. I asked every respondent some operationalizing questions, such as if they believed in astrology, ghosts, aliens, had ever consulted a psychic, or used a Ouija board. This question helped me better understand what sorts of paranormal beliefs they may hold, and how they came to those beliefs in the first place.

I then asked some more identity-based questions in order to understand how both personal identity and the physical space of the south have guided their construction of paranormal belief. I asked respondents, basically going off of what I already knew about their identity, if being (a woman, black, LGBTQIA, a man, etc.) impacted their spirituality. This question helped to interrogate the deprivation theory from my literature review. Lastly, I asked respondents if there was something specifically about the south that made people more or less likely to believe in or experience the paranormal, getting at the spatial aspect of this research topic. With all of these interview questions in mind, I have been able to glean a small picture how participants from the south construct, experience, and derive meaning from their paranormal beliefs and experiences. Although this sample is not representative of the population of the south as a whole, each interview gives us one small piece of a much larger puzzle of paranormal and spiritual belief.

4. Findings

Findings can be categorized into three areas: construction, experience, and meaning-making. Each piece is important to understand in order to glean a whole picture of the ways in which participants gain comfort and meaning through paranormal belief. Participants constructed their paranormal beliefs at various times in their lives and through varying means. Some were influenced by family, others by a more traditional religious belief system, and a few even claimed to always have had a childhood fascination in it. All exhibited a “spiritual openness” to both the unknown and the beliefs of others. This spiritual openness leads to a greater potential acceptance of that which we cannot see. Experiences of the paranormal help shape belief, and the experience of participants varied greatly, but most mentioned seeing signs of lost loved ones. Many spoke of the location of the south leading to a greater number of paranormal proclivities. Experiences varied by identity too, and those who were women and/or identified as LGBTQ spoke to the ways in which their identities shaped their paranormal beliefs. Lastly, participants noted the meaning that they make from these paranormal beliefs and experiences, especially surrounding a tragic or untimely death. Participants found great comfort and peace in exploring the paranormal. A belief in the paranormal, then, becomes a powerful tool for participants to glean meaning from to make sense of the world around them.

4.1 Construction

The first area of research is how participants actually *came* to their beliefs in the paranormal. Respondents primarily constructed their beliefs in three ways: influence by family, their religious or spiritual upbringing, and/or a fascination with the paranormal that happened in an unmarked time throughout childhood. Through any combination of these means, belief in or openness to the paranormal began. All participants spoke of possessing a spiritual openness, both towards other religious/belief systems, and being open to paranormal experiences themselves.

For the most part, the paranormal was not entirely talked about in the home but would come up on occasions such as a death in the family. Josh, a young man from Nashville, Tennessee remembers that when his grandfather died when Josh was a child, his parents would say things like “you know, he’s still around, or like his spirit has gone on, and now he’s in a better place.” At the time, “it didn’t really mean that much to [him], although [he’s] sure that it impacted [him] in a way that affects [his] belief today”.

Karen, a young woman from Knoxville, Tennessee also remarked that the paranormal and spirituality was not really a discussion topic in her home, yet her spiritual beliefs align remarkably well with her parents, specifically her mother’s. Her dad is a conspiracy theorist and “*loves* to believe in things,” and this must have affected her in some way. They never really talked about it, yet they have all come to similar conclusions. Timothy from Winston-Salem, North Carolina also remarked that his mom was somewhat of a spiritual leader for him, and as he got older and “started looking for it for [himself], a lot of what [he] was taught back then” still sticks with him now.

For others, spirituality and the paranormal was very much a part of home life. Carrie from Charlotte, North Carolina, remembers open conversations at home about spiritual and paranormal beliefs. These discussions were not for the sake of her parents teaching her, but rather “giving [her] the space to develop [her] own beliefs.” Maria was raised in a large Catholic family in New Orleans, Louisiana. As a result, according to her, spiritual and paranormal beliefs were not necessarily talked about in the home, but were inherently present in everyday life, particularly when it came to their almost paranormal relationships with the saints. From the time she was little, she remembers that whenever her grandmother would lose something, she would “ask St. Anthony (who she called ‘Tony’) to find it, and sure enough he would. It was just a natural thing, they were just like your relatives. They were just the people who were a part of your family.” For Maria’s family, the paranormal “wasn’t a topic of conversation...it just *was*. Just like you wouldn’t talk about your relationship with your parents when you were little--it just was. Same thing with spirituality. There was no need to talk about it--it just was.”

All eight interviewees had some sort of religious upbringing, ranging from attending a religious preschool to attending church multiple times per week. Timothy, the only participant in my study who currently identifies as a Christian, grew up going to a church where he regularly saw people “praying over you to get the demons out,” which he identified as a paranormal experience that he saw throughout his childhood. Mark, a middle-aged man from eastern North Carolina had a “very hyper religious, fundamentalist” childhood. As he got older and came out as a gay man, he had to reevaluate everything that he had formerly been taught spiritually:

I had been taught the first 20 years of my life seemed to have any value for I as an individual human being or individual soul had any value in that structure, therefore it made me question everything that I had believed before and in doing so I became more spiritual than religious.

Mark’s religious upbringing and subsequent ousting led him to explore more spiritual avenues, ultimately leading him to an openness to the paranormal, seeing signs, and other “nontraditional” forms of spirituality. Maria’s upbringing as a New Orleans Catholic “gave [her] a deep, deep, deep ingrained belief in the other world that there is life after this.” She credits not just her Catholic faith for this, but also her location. “In New Orleans because Catholicism is so intertwined with other beliefs that come from the West Indies...there’s a lot of other world beliefs too, not just traditional Catholicism, but they all combine to this real spiritual belief in the other world.” Maria’s belief supports previous claims that Catholics are more likely than other Christian sects to believe in the paranormal.^{59,60,61} Josh’s belief in the paranormal was also informed by his Methodist upbringing, in that he subscribes to a more Christian theology that we have everlasting souls that go on after we die, also supporting evidence that mainline Protestants are more likely to believe than Fundamentalists.⁶² Several participants have indicated that their upbringing in a religion have had a lasting impact on their current paranormal beliefs.

Some participants noted that their belief in the paranormal started with what can only be described as a fascination as a child. Emily, a young woman from Cary, North Carolina, has been interested in the paranormal since she was a child, particularly when it came to paranormal investigation television shows. To her, it’s “really intriguing” because “it’s not something we can confirm necessarily.” Karen also remembers watching paranormal movies and television

shows, which in turn led her to do more research on the internet, where she learned about Wicca, the occult, and astrology. “I was a weird kid and liked to go play with Ouija boards and graveyards,” she said.

Christine, a woman who grew up in Charlotte but has lived in the mountains of western North Carolina for almost thirty years, also described that “she’s always been open-minded” to paranormal experiences ever since she was a kid. Maria remembers her enthrallment with her family’s Catholic practices, particularly when it came to lighting the Advent wreath to celebrate the coming of Christmas, as a paranormal experience:

I was the most fascinated with all of it...in terms of the paranormal. My siblings were also religious, but in terms of the paranormal, I was the most fascinated...[when we did the Advent wreath] we would turn out the lights, light the candles, and I was just... enthralled. I felt it was the most spiritual, calling of the ghosts. As a little kid, there was something about it that just really touched me in a way that was really important to me.

For these participants, belief started when they were children, and they have been interested in the paranormal ever since.

4.1.1 spiritual openness

All participants indicated that they feel an openness to other religions and spiritual paths. This openness plays a large role in their acceptance of or interest in the paranormal. This is consistent with Baker and Draper’s findings that those with “moderate levels of religious belief” and “low levels of ideological exclusivity” are the most likely to believe in the paranormal.⁶³ Only one participant, Timothy, identified himself with an organized religion--Christianity. The other six placed themselves as “spiritual” or “agnostic.” Both Christine and Maria, the two respondents over 45 years-old, said that they saw validity and “had affection for” some organized religions, but according to Christine, she’s, “a real mix of everything and you can’t pigeon-hole me.” Carrie also wouldn’t necessarily classify herself into any particular faith practices, but she does believe that “there’s truth in all religions.” Others were against organized religion altogether. Karen, for instance, intentionally identifies herself as spiritual, as “organized religion isn’t right for [her],” she just believes in “a mix up of what [I] feel is the most right, there’s no way to label it.”

In keeping with this spiritual openness, no participants indicated that their belief system was the only correct one. Just the opposite, in fact. Josh claims he believes in a higher power, yet “I don’t think I have the right nor anyone really has the right to say what that is for sure.” Carrie is also intentional about being open to the experiences of others, particularly when it comes to the paranormal:

I can hold space for something to be true for someone without that necessarily being true for me, and without me feeling the need to think that that’s wrong, you know? If someone says something happened to them, I’d be kind of skeptical, but also I know that it’s true for them, even if it’s not for me.

Mark also suspends “hardcore belief in most anything,” and because of that, he has “gained peace from the acceptance of not knowing what I don’t know, which also freed me up to be able to explore so that I can see what feels right for me so that I can choose my belief systems based on what works for me, and accept that others do the same.” According to Mencken et al. and Baker and Draper, any sort of paranormal or spiritual belief is not as reliant on the burden of scientific proof, but rather is dependent on the faith of the individual, and all participants spoke to being open to many different pathways of said faith.^{64,65} Spiritual beliefs, then, are quite relative for all participants, and there is no “right way” to experience them.

Many participants also indicated that the paranormal exists, and you have to be open to having those experiences, and most exhibited a sort of “anything’s possible” attitude. For instance, Christine said point blank that “anything’s possible. I’ve never had a [paranormal ghost] experience myself or known anybody to, but I’m not gonna say it can’t happen.” For Emily, she wasn’t exactly positive whether or not ghosts were real, but she stated “I don’t know. But because I don’t know, I want to keep an open mind about it.” Additionally, her holding some sort of paranormal belief “definitely does make me more open to my own experiences to it as well as other people’s.”

This open mindedness was not only true of believing that “anything is possible,” therefore, so is the paranormal, but also that anyone can experience it if they are open enough. According to Josh, anybody can experience the paranormal. “But if you’re not open to it, then you’re cutting yourself off...if you’re not an empathetic person, you’re cutting yourself off from a lot of outside energy.” Josh’s spiritual openness, according to him, doesn’t necessarily make him more susceptible to experiencing the paranormal, but rather his empathy does. “I am just pretty empathetic to stuff. I don’t think I am especially spiritual by any means, but I do think the fact that I accept it and would acknowledge and allow it would make me more susceptible than someone who completely shuts that sort of thing out.”

Christine's remarks were very similar, and she claimed that she's always been a very "open-minded" person, and that makes her more open to experiences. Yet, anyone can have these experiences if they just "tap into" it:

I personally think that everyone would experience this kind of stuff if everyone was open to it. I think it's there for us all to experience. But some people are just so closed in their heads and so myopic in their thinking that they won't experience it. But I think it's there for us all to experience.

Other respondents made similar claims that anybody could experience the paranormal if they kept their minds open. Christine, Josh, and Karen all stated that they are especially sensitive and empathetic not just to the paranormal, but towards people in general, which might make them more susceptible to a paranormal experience. Another respondent remarked that "maybe there's too many distractions in this world" in order to tap into it. There seemed to be a general consensus that the paranormal was something that we could all experience if we were just open to it. Being "open to it" can also look like trusting your own intuition, the signs that you see from the universe, and being open to understanding experiences that are not your own. Again, most researchers have indicated that belief in the paranormal is neither driven by "irreligious" nor by those at the "extremes" of religious belief and participation, and all participants fell in this spectrum.^{66,67} Today, there is less confidence in organized religion and a more "spiritual buffet" style has taken hold wherein participants are free to explore their own modes of spirituality, which has also led to an increased belief in the paranormal.^{68,69,70} Participants reinforced this data, and a sense of spiritual openness and sense of empathy towards the views of others was a recurring theme throughout.

4.2 Experience

Respondents were asked if they had ever had experience with the paranormal, and all of them did to varying degrees and through various means. Some mentioned prophetic dreams, others noted the manifestation of a prayer. Most pointed to the feeling of a spirit presence or feeling the energy of a room. Many noted their belief in energies or spirits. Four had used a Ouija board before, and five had consulted a psychic, tarot card, or palm reader. Location also plays a role in paranormal belief. While this research does not set out to substantiate claims of paranormal experiences, it is important to understand said experiences in order to gather how meaning is made from them.

When it came time to share paranormal experiences, many different types came up. Maria and Christine spoke of having very vivid dreams. Emily mentioned an experience with dowsing rods crossing in an old church lot. Karen, Maria, Emily, and Carrie all shared a Ouija board experience. Many experiences were tied to the death of a loved one sending "signs." Maria claims that "the paranormal is [my] belief system" and she frequently experiences knowing of a presence there, not seeing it, but knowing that there's something there and feeling it, and then having some physical manifestation show up" such as when she felt her late husband around her while talking to him on a Ouija board, and her cat going and pawing at his old childhood sled at the same time. Carrie related a paranormal experience that her grandfather had had as a boy in an old Plantation house in Pinopolis, South Carolina, which he later found out was shared by many other residents of the town. Carrie believes that there is something to this, and this "shared paranormal experience is more than just individuals with suggestible minds."

Some participants noted a belief in energy that is either residual, or that people turn into after they die. Carrie, who was raised as a Unitarian Universalist, claims that spiritual energy is similar to "the law of conservation of energy":

Death isn't the end of sorts, but I don't really know exactly what happens. I'd like to think that like the law of conservation of energy kind of like makes it clear that the energy in our bodies--I mean obviously on a physical level, you know it can be converted into like fire or decompose in the dirt or stuff--but I think the same is true of like spiritual energy that it's not necessarily created or destroyed, and so I do think it does something.

For her, energy is not created or destroyed, is just transformed.

Josh too spoke about energy that continues on after we die, and also sticks with us and what we put out into the world:

I believe in spiritual energy, if you will (not to get too heady), but, I mean I do think that people's aura or spirit or whatever you want to call it stays around after they pass, or even while they're still living, you know? I feel like people give off a certain spiritual energy and that affects others and the world around them in a big way.

Christine and Karen too share a belief in energy. Christine described that there are “definitely different energies depending on situations and the people that are in the space.” Karen’s entire spiritual belief system is “focused on energy and vibrations of those energies.” She believes that “[w]e are made of energy, our souls are made of energy, and that means something. The concept that we are souls and bodies.” This belief in energy permeates and explains every other spiritual belief she holds. Timothy too spoke of spirits as “energies” that he “knows are present.” Out of seven interviews, five interviewees mentioned some sort of belief in “energy,” whether that energy is a stand in word for “spirit,” or an explanation for what happens after we die.

4.2.1 location and the south

For some, belief in the paranormal is deeply tied to location. Emily works in an old building in the downtown of a small southeastern city. She and her coworkers will experience cameras and lights going out at random times, things she calls “minor inconveniences.” Her belief in this spirit is very much tied to its location. Her city has “been through so much...I wouldn’t be surprised if someone died in here...it keeps me on edge a little bit. Especially when I’m in locations that have been said to be paranormal. My belief in it is very much tied to locations.” This spirit “reaffirms” her belief in the paranormal. “If [my coworkers] had not told me that it’s a haunted location, I would think nothing of it. But because they told me that, I associate it with that. It’s this whole idea of location. I think it’s very tied to location.” Josh expressed this too, in conjunction with his belief in energy. “I think that if something awful has happened in any place, that energy is gonna linger, and the more bad shit that’s happened, the more energy is gonna be there, the longer its gonna linger.” When he believes that the space holds dark energy, he can really feel that energy.

Christine expressed a similar sentiment toward energies being tied to location, and her particular sensitivity to those energies. She says “typically if I find myself in a place that makes me uncomfortable, I’ll stay for a few minutes then I’m gone.” She recounts her experience going to an old hotel in the mountains of Western North Carolina:

Lord when we walked in there! I said there’s something freaky-deekie about this place. I can remember this feeling that came over me—that there’s a haint up in here somewhere! This time stands out cause too it was an uncomfortable feeling...I want to get the hell out of there as soon as we can!

Her paranormal belief is tied to location.

The location of the south is particularly pertinent in playing a role in paranormal belief. Several participants indicated that southerners are more inclined to believe and experience the paranormal more than anyone else, particularly because of the “bloody history” of the south. Carrie noted that “the history of slavery and genocide are huge sources of ghosts, especially in the south.” Christine spoke of the “underbelly” that the south possesses:

The south, sometimes when I try to explain it to people who aren’t from the south, I’m like...you’ve just got to immerse yourself in the south to completely understand the—I call it the ‘underbelly’ of the south. I don’t mean that in a bad way, but we’ve had a lot of bad history in the south that can be also part of the underbelly, but the underbelly I’m talking about is all the spiritual comings and goings that exist in the south. And I honestly, no offense to anybody, but when I got up north, it just felt so sterile. It just doesn’t exist out there....

The south’s sordid history can lend itself to more paranormal happenings.

Carrie also spoke of not only ghosts of people in the south, but the ghost of white supremacy that still lingers and the need to heal from it. Her ancestors owned slaves in South Carolina, and remarks on the need to confront that within her own family.

When we think about ghosts too, there’s the ghosts of the people who were enslaved and stuff, but I think there’s also the ghosts of white supremacy that run through our families, and so I think we have to recon with those ghosts as well...I think the history--there’s a lot of like pain in the past that hasn’t really been healed or reconciled with and so I think that lends itself obviously to a lot of spiritual energy that’s still kind of like hasn’t been healed or resolved.

The paranormal in the south could come from a history that has not been reckoned with. Christine also mentioned that the south has done some spiritual reconciling. “With everything that’s happened here that’s bad, there’s been a lot of spiritual reckoning around that.”

Others remarked that the spirituality or religious inclination of people in the south might make them more likely to believe. Emily suggests that “people in the south are raised to believe in it, and I feel like it’s because of religion.” Maria, who was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana believes that the spirituality of African Americans who were enslaved in the area that permeated the culture so deeply:

Because of the whole slavery thing that in New Orleans...the first people there were white but it was very soon thereafter that slaves came and the whole slavery experience in the south which obviously goes without saying was so horrendous, really in order to be able to survive that, I think slaves had to turn to spirituality and the other world to just be able to make it out of there. and that permeated...slaves began to outnumber their white owners, and that permeates the culture, even though there’s a division there obviously on social and economic lines, the spirituality permeates the whole culture. And so, I think a lot of it in the south can be attributed to African American’s slave experience and trying to just survive it and the deeply held belief in the paranormal and the other world that they had and that they influenced the entire culture with. Including in New Orleans, I firmly believe that. A lot of the stereotypical things you think about New Orleans...that all is tremendously influenced by the Haitian and West Indies influence in New Orleans...it infiltrated the whole of the culture. White society, even in highly segregated times.

Josh also discusses the impact of slavery on the paranormal in the south and is in keeping with his belief in energy and sensitivity to physical locations.

I feel like if I were to go to, you know, a plantation, cause you know they do tours of those things, I feel like I would feel heavy, I feel like the air would feel thick. Or it has. In Nashville there’s a big Belle Meade plantation, this big tourist attraction as fucked up as that is...I would drive past frequently and look at the stone walls that were clearly built by slaves, stuff like that kind of hits me. Seeing stuff that was obviously built with slaves’ hands. Like woah, that’s got spirit on it, you know? If I were in slave quarters or something, gravity would maybe weight a little bit more, it would be stronger I guess because of the torment that went down there.

Josh often wonders “walking down the street, 200 years ago, what was there, who was there, how they were living, and if they’re still around seeing what’s going on here, and what they think about it.” For most of my participants, place is deeply important to their paranormal belief, in both the energy that a location can hold, and the storied geography of the south itself.

4.2.2 identity

Belief was also impacted by the social identity of each participant, particularly when it came to sexuality and gender. Two participants openly identify as LGBTQ, and both mentioned how their sexualities and spiritualities interact. Carrie believes that her queer identity makes her inherently aware of binaries in the world, particularly when it comes to gender or sexuality, and she believes that that has affected her spiritual journey:

I think that my spiritual understanding of like the oneness of everything and how binaries and dichotomies don’t really capture the wholeness of reality has definitely shaped how I understand gender as not being binary, and as sort of like, I think for me, sort of a part of my spiritual journey is like a quest towards oneness of self, in regards of sort of incorporating masculine and feminine or being attracted to the full spectrum of people, but also connecting to the shadow part of myself.

Mark, too, notes that “being a gay male within a patriarchal, heterosexist society” has definitely influenced his spirituality and paranormal belief in some way. Carrie also holds a fondness for astrology, and remarks that its accessibility and openness is what makes it so appealing to queer people:

There can be a lot of alienation from Christian churches or other organized religions, that still drives people to find a spiritual practice that resonates with them on a less rigid and maybe more personal level...I think maybe the accessibility of astrology and how easily it kind of lends itself to the internet and memes I think makes it a lot more accessible than other forms of like earth-based rituals that might be a little more involved.

Karen is bisexual and draws a parallel between the negative feelings that she perceives people in the south hold about both her bisexuality and her paranormal spirituality, as both deviate from what she perceives as the straight, Christian norm. “I kind of relate my spirituality and the reaction that I get to it to my sexuality and the reaction that I get to it.” Karen also subscribes to astrology and believes that it is in part because of its traditionally female history.

Astrology is girls and gays because...it’s a science that has been primarily throughout history been associated with women and so it’s not viewed as like...people have a perception of astrology that it’s just like a ‘girls thing’ and not real and not factual. I think that the gays are attracted to it because I think it’s easy to connect with something that can explain who you are and your experiences to an extent and it can validate you and it’s something that if we’re already being judged for this, why not go full force and practice occult shit, you know?

All five women interviewed believe that being a woman impacts their paranormal belief in some way. Emily believes that she “might be more emotional than most people,” and that that would make her believe more. Christine, a middle-aged woman with two children, believes that her female identity definitely makes her more “in tune” to things:

I think it’s got to. We exist on a whole other level than guys do just because of our hormonal makeup for one thing and I think that makes us more susceptible maybe or being more in tune to things. There’s something to women’s intuition....After giving birth twice? Yeah that puts you on a whole other playing field of spirituality...the whole, the labor thing...it’s not fun in the pain department, but you talk about one of the coolest experiences you could ever have. It’s pretty fricking amazing actually.

Christine and Emily believe that as a woman, they are more emotional or have more intuition than men. These responses are consistent with previous findings that being a woman is the highest predictor of paranormal belief.^{71,72,73} Maria also believes that being a woman has impacted her paranormal belief, but perhaps it is because of how society already views women as more emotional:

I know some men who are highly sensitive and spiritual, but I do think that being a woman makes me more receptive, and it makes it more okay for me to express myself this way. I can express myself this way with a tremendous amount of freedom. And I don’t know if it’s just that I generally don’t care what people think and that would be the same thing if I was a man, or if just because I’m a woman I have license to.

Maria’s point that perhaps she feels more free in expressing her belief because of being a woman is not unlike MacDonald’s point that woman might actually be more comfortable indicating that they hold paranormal belief than men.⁷⁴ Mark, a therapist, has also observed in his experience that he typically finds women “a little more open and I find that they have a little more of the ability to suspend the need to know” compared to men who “often need to find something to believe in and they put all of their energy into that.”

Josh, a young white male, believes that his identity makes him *obligated* to being accepting and positive:

I think I feel an obligation to be more empathetic and open to other people’s spirituality from I guess if you wanted to call it ‘white guilt’ you could call it that, I don’t really like that term. But I guess that would be what you could call it.” Not just godly, but its about “people’s life forces and how we all are part of something, together. So I think being a white male, again I feel obligated to feed that with good output if I can, or uplift, you know. I think everyone should, but especially someone who is, who just got plopped out into a good spot.

Josh feels that his non-marginalized identity of being a straight, white man implores him to be more accepting of others’ beliefs, while Carrie, Emily, Karen, Mark and Christine feel that their identities women and/or LGBTQ might possibly make them more receptive to a belief in the paranormal. This is ultimately compatible with previous literature that marginalized identities may make one more likely to believe in the paranormal, however the emphasis on LGBTQ identity is something that previous research has not yet explored. The sample of participants was not racially diverse, so it is hard to substantiate Rice and Baker and Bader’s claims that that African Americans are more likely than whites to believe in the paranormal with these interviews alone.^{75,76} However, Timothy, the one African American participant stated that:

To be black in this world, you have to have some form of faith or believe in some sort of higher power or spirituality, like you can't go through what our people have been through and not hold faith or hold something that's gonna be better...you have no choice but to have some kind of faith or believe that there's a higher power operating.

This may indicate increased religiosity or, in terms of these parameters, an increased need to believe in *something* be it traditionally religious or paranormal. These findings all support previous claims that marginalized identities may be more likely to believe than non-marginalized ones.

4.3 Meaning-Making

All of these beliefs being said, it is important to glean how people create *meaning* from said beliefs. Five participants had started experiencing the paranormal after experiencing the death of a loved one, and belief in the paranormal has comforted believers after the death of someone close to them, particularly in the three cases of untimely deaths. This belief in the paranormal has been described as both comforting and a coping mechanism but is no less valid for that fact. "Seeing signs" of loved ones both comforts believers and reinforces currently held beliefs about the afterlife.

Several participants noted having paranormal experiences at the time of a death of a loved one. For these participants, the "paranormal" happening that they experienced was "reaffirming" of the beliefs that they already held. Karen's 23 year-old brother was in the hospital in a coma for four days when she knew that he had died, before the hospital even called to tell them. This occurrence "reaffirmed" what she had already believed about an everlasting soul:

I never had proof for what I believed in until the night that [my brother] died. Before he was declared dead, [my girlfriend] and I were in my bed and there were footsteps so loud on my roof that we like grabbed each other, we were so scared. It was maybe like 20 seconds, and by the end of it, I was like 'oh my god, there's no one on the roof. There's no way anyone would be on the roof.' I just knew it was [him]. I had seen him in the hospital earlier that night around 8 and this was around 11. It was like so real, that even when I say it now out loud, I feel like it couldn't have happened. It did, [my girlfriend] was there, it's real. And I had never had something so concrete. When I look back at it is like why would someone have been stomping at my roof at 11pm? I had lived in that room for 18 years and had never experienced something like that...I just knew it was my brother. I was crying and talking to him. I remember thinking 'I know that [he] is dead—how am I going to keep this from my parents?' knowing that he was just going to be...like a soulless body the next day. How am I going to tell my parents? That was a lot to process. And then at 6 in the morning, the hospital called and his heart just like slowly stopped beating throughout the night, and it was officially done around 6 in the morning...so that just like reaffirmed it for me.

Karen believes that her brother came to visit her right when he died, and that only reaffirmed the paranormal and spiritual beliefs that she already held. Maria noted a similar story the night that her mother died unexpectedly:

I told myself that this was a vigil night. I didn't really know that she was gonna die that night at a conscious level, but I had told myself it was a vigil night and I stayed up all night. Then at about 4 in the morning, I got the clearest message that I should go read this piece of poetry that talked about moving on, don't mourn for me, I am free, and I think that was my first message from nana, like right when she died, she sent me that message.

She had a similar experience, too, right after her husband passed away. He loved Christmas, and when the ambulance came to take his body away, they wrapped him in a Christmas blanket, even though it was in the middle of July. Maria recounts "within the hour of his dying, he sent me the message like 'listen' I'm okay, it's really good...here's me wrapped in a Christmas tree.' She remarks that the two people she was closest with, her mother and her husband, "both sent me very clear and very profound messages." Both Karen and Maria were "sent signs" of their loved ones who had just passed away, and these experiences were both highly comforting and belief-affirming for them.

Six out of eight participants noted getting "signs" from a deceased loved one as both a means for paranormal belief and a source of comfort. These "signs" came mostly through animals and insects, and for one participant, dimes. Often times, these signs would be referred to as coming from "spirits" rather than "ghosts." Josh "always believed in ghosts, like scary ghosts but more recently I kind of don't buy into the torment thing," particularly after the tragic death of his childhood friend. Seeing signs from a loved one, as well as believing that their spirit is still present, is a great source of comfort, particularly in cases where someone was suffering greatly before their death:

In recent years after having lost people close to me, you know, have found comfort in the idea of them being around. When I think of them randomly, thinking that they might be around me checking in. The logical stoic side of me sees that that might just be my way of coping with that loss, but that doesn't really make me believe any less...It comforts me, it makes me feel like, you know, to put it in simple terms, he's in a better place. He was having a hard time on this plane and I like to think once you shed the burden of his physical form, you're better off. I'd like to think, maybe that's not the case always, but it definitely comforts me.

Seeing signs from a loved one as comforting is also true for Carrie, whose aunt committed suicide when she was young:

I definitely associate animals with people that I've lost and there's some kind of like bunnies that come around that I definitely think are like my aunt's presence. And then my grandma who died a year or two after that, I always associate with hummingbirds...I know there's a lot of bunnies around here obviously, but I feel like I see A LOT of bunnies!

For Carrie, seeing signs of loved ones is "a way to feel like people live on and people don't completely disappear, even when they're gone."

Even though this sense of comfort comes from the paranormal, it doesn't make it any less true for believers who are able to process their grief through it. When Karen was asked if believing in seeing signs from her brother was just a coping mechanism, she responded "I don't, and the reason I can say that is because I've experienced like when he came to me on the roof, messages from him that there's no way they couldn't have been from him." A belief in the paranormal, in fact, fundamentally helped her and her family get through the loss of her brother. Believing in the afterlife became a *need* for her:

When [my brother] died, there was a very intense need to like think about it and understand it...Absolutely a need. It was such an intense pain that the only thing...It was more hurtful to imagine that he was just nothing, cause death is so weird, and I had never experienced it until I lost someone so close to me...when I lost him, and was older...I think the concept of him existing in this world one minute and just not was just, unbelievable. And so I had to make sense of it and understand that he yes existed in this world and let me understand what's happening to kind of sooth the questions.

"Making sense of it" for Karen meant exploring the paranormal and affirming her own believes on the afterlife in order to cope with such a tragic loss. Mark, too, spoke of a need to explore spirituality during a time of extreme grief during the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980's where he was "dealing with intimates that were dying, that were cohorts and people that were [his] age." He states:

Being a gay man and I was in college, graduated undergrad in '86, which is right when HIV and AIDS was becoming an issue. And then I became very involved in that epidemic for about a decade. And that almost became my religion, it almost became my spirituality because when dealing with people that are in your close friendship circle who have imminent death and they're young and it's considered a curse, it really causes you to question the very core being of who you are, why you're here, and what's the purpose.

Mark's friends and those in his inner circle were dying prematurely all around him, and this inexplicable tragedy and loss of life forced him to explore the spiritual realm to make some sort of meaning or find peace in the midst of an epidemic that affected his immediate cohort.

In order to work through grief, many have turned to a belief in the paranormal to reinforce or confirm their existing beliefs. When Maria "sees signs" from her deceased mother or husband, she remarks "I think it's a source of comfort. I think they're trying to just be comforting and I think also not just comfort, but...also a way of saying 'you were right! It's really amazing up here!'" This interaction with the paranormal not only comforts here, but also confirms her pre-existing belief in the afterlife.

5. Conclusion

Participants construct, experience, and gain meaning from paranormal beliefs. This research does not set out to discuss the validity of these paranormal claims, but rather interrogate how participants interact with these beliefs and the meaning that they make from it, especially considering that nearly half of Americans believe in ghosts, and 90% of respondents of the largest survey of religion in the US indicated belief in some form of the paranormal, either classical or religious.^{77,78} Participant's religious/spiritual beliefs were consistent with Baker and Draper's assertion that the most likely to believe in the paranormal are those with "moderate levels of religious belief" and "low levels of ideological exclusivity."⁷⁹ All participants displayed a great deal of spiritual openness, often ending any paranormal claims that they made with "but anything's possible," or "I don't know for sure." Orenstein suggests that "paranormalism" is neither driven by "irreligious" nor by those at the "extremes" of religious belief and participation, and all participants fit into this category and indicate some sort of belief.⁸⁰

Previous literature has suggested that women are more likely to believe than men, and this was consistent with interviewees, particularly in observing the sheer number of women who were really willing to be interviewed, rather than men. A major limitation to this study however is that only those who were accessible either physically or proximally could be interviewed, which did not include a gender or racially diverse population.

Paranormal belief for some is tied to location, for others tied to energy that spirits carry or leave behind. The south as a location for paranormal belief has a large impact for several participants, particularly when it came to the history of Native American genocide, the enslavement of African Americans, and the "ghost" of white supremacy. Two participants, Carrie and Christine even noted that the south has to do some "spiritual reckoning" around its past.

Belief becomes especially pertinent when it comes to coping with the loss of a loved one, and five out of eight participants indicated so. Participants look to experiences of feeling the presence of or getting signs from their deceased loved ones for comfort and the affirming of their spiritual beliefs. The paranormal, then, becomes a belief system from which participants derive meaning and comfort by either bolstering or taking the place of a more traditional religious belief.

Belief in the paranormal is a powerful tool that allows participants agency in an accessible way to make sense of the world, particularly when it comes to grief. Belief lets participants escape the potentially oppressive binary of Western rational thinking, and, according to Maria, rely on "not what's in the mind so much as what's in the heart." As aforementioned, the notion of ghosts and the paranormal "violate a number of binaries" that dominate Western culture: life or death, past or present, body or soul.⁸¹ Rather than "or," the paranormal exists within the *and*, where life *and* death are deeply intertwined. A belief in the "and" is a powerful tool for meaning-making. As Mark was reflecting on his Fundamentalist Christian childhood, he noted that many things were often "framed in black and white, good and bad, good versus evil, god versus satan, heaven versus hell" terms. "Anything outside of that particular culture that would be considered paranormal or other-worldly," he states, "often gets demonized and so it doesn't get as understood or accepted or embraced, or a full explanation of it as it gets demonized and put into the taboo or secretive world." This binary way of thinking, according to him "limits exploration and developing a richer meaning for that which we don't know" and can even be potentially harmful. A belief in the paranormal, either coinciding with or instead of a traditional religious system for Mark and other participants is a way to circumvent Westernized norms of black and white modes of belief, and can open up new doors for comfort, exploration, and the processing of traumas like death.

There is a need for more research here in order to fully understand how people use paranormal belief to explain the world around them, but participants have fully displayed a means by which they have come to understand the beautiful process of living as well as the challenges surrounding death. People have great agency in the methods through which they "employ their creative capacities to construct spiritual experience" in this world of black and white.⁸² A belief in the paranormal, ranging from aliens to seeing signs of lost loved ones, has become an avenue for great spiritual exploration for these participants, and a mechanism to make sense of and draw meaning from the world as a whole.

6. Acknowledgments

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