

“Give us a Sign of Your Presence”: Paranormal Investigation as a Spiritual Practice

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The recent proliferation of ghost hunting television shows reflects the broad public interest in what participants refer to as “paranormal investigation.” Currently, over 3,000 paranormal investigation teams exist in the United States, and more exist worldwide. Paranormal investigators use a wide variety of investigative methods in their attempts to find evidence of ghosts and, therefore, life after death. Based on three years of participant observation and 32 interviews with paranormal investigators, this article argues that paranormal investigation functions as a spiritual practice for participants. Investigators’ motives, methods, and the meanings they attribute to investigating are all imbued with spiritual significance. For some investigators the practice helps validate existing religious beliefs, while for others it prompts a spiritual transformation. Many participants rely upon conventional religious or New Age beliefs to interpret experiences during investigations, but even those who primarily rely upon science and technology find the practice spiritually meaningful.

Key words: paranormal; spirituality; practice; United States of America; ethnography.

For the past 40 years, confidence in organized religion has been declining in the United States. In 1975, 68% of Americans reported having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in “the church or organized religion,” but by 2012 this percentage had slipped to 44% of those polled (Saad 2012). Likewise, church attendance has declined in the United States since the 1960s (Stark 2008). This is not to say that Americans are abandoning faith. Though a recent study indicates that self-identified atheists in the United States nearly doubled (from 1.6 to 3.1%) between 2007 and 2014 (Pew Research Center 2015), this percentage is consistent with 70 years of data showing that only 2–4% of Americans identify as atheist (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012; Stark 2008). People in

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the United States are not necessarily losing faith but rather diversifying their engagement with what they perceive to be supernatural or divine. Modern religiosity in Western nations is characterized by such pluralism, as more and more religions compete with one another on the “spiritual marketplace” (Roof 1999; Swatos and Christiano 1999).

At the root of this phenomenon is a shift toward individualized modes of belief and practice. Wuthnow (1998) identified this as a transition from dwelling to seeking. In seeking forms of spirituality, individuals are empowered to define their own unique belief systems and relationships to what they believe to be sacred. This general process has taken many forms. In one trend Davie (1994) referred to as “believing without belonging,” many people are disengaging from religious institutions while retaining personal religious beliefs. A related trend is the rise of religious “nones,” people who report no religious affiliation. Nones increased from only 7% in 1972 to nearly 23% of the United States population by 2014 (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012; Pew Research Center 2015). According to Pew Research Center (2015), movement away from religion to identification as religiously unaffiliated is the most common trend in religious switching in the United States. This population is two times more likely than the general public (37% versus 18%) to identify as “spiritual but not religious” (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012), which Fuller (2001:4) describes as “concerned with spiritual issues but [choosing] to pursue them outside the context of formal religious organization.” A third trend is what can broadly be called the New Age movement. Among other beliefs, New Age practitioners assert that the spiritual can be directly experienced through an eclectic assortment of Western religious beliefs, Eastern philosophy, and elements of neo-pagan and Native American spiritualities (Bruce 2002; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Partridge 1999).

Each of these is a manifestation of a spiritual “quest culture,” in which spirituality has been freed from the boundaries of doctrines and institutions (Roof 1999). In this article, I argue that paranormal investigating (aka “ghost hunting”) is part of this quest for authentic spiritual experiences. Much like the spiritualists of the latter half of the nineteenth century, who attempted to communicate with the departed through “spirit rapping,” séances, and Ouija boards, contemporary paranormal investigators are driven by a desire to confirm, for themselves and others, the existence of life beyond death (Moore 1977; Weisberg 2004). The spiritual overtones of this practice have been documented by Baker and Bader (2014), who report that paranormal investigations are infused with religious and magical beliefs. Likewise, Draper and Baker (2011) conclude that reported beliefs in ghosts, extraterrestrials, Bigfoot, and psychic phenomena strongly predict belief in guardian angels. The spiritual significance of paranormal beliefs is not restricted to ghosts and hauntings. As Denzler (2001) and Partridge (2003) show, beliefs in UFOs and extraterrestrials are often infused with spirituality.

In light of its historical similarity to the spiritualist movement and recent research revealing the spiritual nature of many paranormal beliefs, I propose that

paranormal investigating can be considered a spiritual practice. Wuthnow (2003:309) defines spiritual practice as “those activities in which individuals engage in order to become more aware of their spirituality or to enrich and grown their spiritual lives.” In this context, spirituality refers to “a state of being related to a divine, supernatural, or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a supereality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced” (Wuthnow 2003:307). Paranormal investigators are motivated by a desire to make contact with a reality beyond the physical world, which investigators usually call “the afterlife,” “the spirit realm,” or simply “the other side.”¹ Using technological tools, their own senses, and even reported mediumistic abilities, paranormal investigators attempt to communicate with what they variously call “ghosts,” “spirits,” “entities,” or “disembodied consciousness.”² Paranormal teams usually include a combination of members who identify as scientific (reliant upon technology to monitor the environment) and sensitive (reliant upon extra-sensory perceptions, such as seeing, hearing, or otherwise sensing the presence of spirits). This mixture of mediumistic and ostensibly scientific methods of investigation also echoes the spiritualist movement (Moore 1977; Weisberg 2004). Much like their predecessors a century and a half ago, contemporary paranormal investigators differ in their techniques but are motivated by a shared desire to capture evidence of life after death.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent data show that nearly half of all Americans believe ghosts exist, and roughly one-quarter say they have seen or felt the presence of a ghost (Alfano 2009; Spiegel 2013). Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2009) reported that the percentages of people who felt they were in touch with someone who had died (29%) or reported being in the presence of a ghost (18%) had roughly doubled since 1990. This increase in reported belief in ghosts and hauntings corresponds to a boom in paranormal television shows, most notably ghost hunting programs. In the United States, this trend arguably began in 2004, with the SyFy Channel’s launch of *Ghost Hunters*. By 2012, at least 31 paranormal reality television shows aired in the United States (Baker and Bader 2014). Indeed, many people I met while conducting research explained that these shows inspired them to join or create paranormal investigation teams (see also Molle and Bader 2014). Although it is difficult to precisely estimate the number of active investigation teams in the United States at any one time, an online directory reported

¹Because paranormal investigators use these terms interchangeably, I will also use these “emic” phrases in this article.

²As with “emic” phrases for a nonphysical realm, I use paranormal investigators’ terms for non-embodied beings interchangeably throughout this article.

over 3,400 teams across all fifty states as of July 2015 (ParanormalSocieties.com 2015).

Sociological research indicates that paranormal believers want assurance of an afterlife but are dissatisfied with scientific and religious explanations ([Goode 2000](#); [Greeley 1975](#)). [Bader, Mencken, and Baker \(2010\)](#), [Denzler \(2001\)](#), and [Northcote \(2007\)](#) concluded that people who participate in the paranormal community either desire spiritual growth or hope to make a scientific discovery. However, as [Bader et al. \(2010:24\)](#) pointed out, paranormal beliefs “are dually rejected—not accepted by science and not typically associated with mainstream religion in the United States.” This dual marginality is reflected in sociological research on the paranormal, which usually treats the relationship between paranormal beliefs and organized religion as a separate issue from its relationship to mainstream science.

Some research suggests that paranormal beliefs are a substitute for conventional religious beliefs. [Emmons and Sobal \(1981\)](#) and [Hergovich, Schott, and Arendasy \(2005\)](#) both found that people who reported low levels of religious practice and interest were more likely to report belief in the Loch Ness monster, Sasquatch, and ghosts. [Carlton \(1987\)](#) suggested that parapsychology functions as a “surrogate religion” for practitioners. Indeed, a survey of members of the Parapsychological Association showed that over one-third of respondents entered the field for spiritual reasons, and an equal number continued to be motivated by spiritual interests ([Tart 2003](#)).

Another body of research contends that paranormal and conventional religious beliefs may coexist. [Goode \(2000\)](#) found that paranormal and conventional religious beliefs positively correlate, while [Draper and Baker \(2011\)](#) reported that paranormal beliefs are the second strongest predictor (after religious practice) of reports of guardian angel experiences. In a similar vein, [Baker and Bader \(2014\)](#) found that paranormal investigation groups frequently engaged in religious rituals and magical rites, such as protection prayers and exorcisms. A growing body of research ([Glendinning 2006](#); [McKinnon 2003](#); [Mencken et al. 2008](#)) indicates that the relationship is curvilinear ([Baker and Draper 2010](#)), in that reported paranormal beliefs are higher among those who report religious beliefs but do not regularly attend church. As [Orenstein \(2002:309\)](#) suggests, it seems that “paranormal beliefs are profoundly religious in nature.”

If the relationship between the paranormal and religion may be characterized by coexistence, its relationship to mainstream science is best described as contentious. Many paranormal proponents clothe their beliefs in “the trappings of science” ([Brewer 2012](#)), only to be rejected as pseudoscience ([Farha 2014](#)). Paranormal investigators root their “truth claims” ([Aronowitz 1988](#)) in scientific discourse in an effort to counter claims that such beliefs are contradictory to materialist understandings of the world ([Goode 2000](#)).³ Such efforts are met with skepticism by the scientific community, which rejects paranormal claims on the basis that they are not falsifiable or replicable ([Ladyman 2013](#)). Through this “boundary work” ([Gieryn 1983](#)), paranormal beliefs are stigmatized and

marginalized as deviant (Goode 2013). Nonetheless, many paranormal proponents, including the paranormal investigators in this study, continue to rely upon scientific language and technology (Bader et al. 2010; Baker and Bader 2014; Denzler 2001; Northcote 2007).

The current study responds, in part, to recent calls to explore how spiritual practices have become intertwined with aspects of life that would not normally be defined as religious, such as secular organizations and other aspects of the “everyday” (Ammerman 2014; Cadge and Konieczny 2014; Marti 2014). More specifically, it adds to our understanding of the spiritual significance of paranormal beliefs. Through an ethnographic examination of the micro-level practices and interpretations of paranormal investigators, this research illuminates how paranormal investigators intermingle conventional religious and New Age beliefs during investigations. As such, it contributes to a growing body of work that examines paranormal beliefs using a qualitative or mixed methods approach (Baker and Bader 2014; Bader et al. 2010; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). Additionally, by focusing solely on paranormal investigators, this study isolates beliefs in ghosts and hauntings from disparate paranormal beliefs, such as belief in Bigfoot, aliens, and extrasensory perception. Studies show that people who hold one paranormal belief do not necessarily believe in a wide variety of paranormal entities or powers (Bader et al. 2010; Moore 2005). This approach allows depth of understanding in one area of the paranormal and thus compliments quantitative analyses that consider broader trends in paranormal belief.

This article also explores how attempts to establish the scientific legitimacy of paranormal investigation are ultimately part of a larger process of spiritual seeking. My research suggests that paranormal investigators who relied upon scientific discourse and technological gadgets nonetheless ultimately wanted to prove the existence of an afterlife. Unlike conventionally religious and New Age investigators who already believed in the spirit world, scientifically oriented investigators constructed what Tart (2010) called “evidence-based spirituality.” He argued that researchers could “apply the methods of science . . . to the phenomena associated with religion,” and thereby “gradually refine our spiritual systems in ways compatible with the scientific method” (2010:37). Such an approach opens the possibility of spiritual seeking among those who adhere to a materialistic worldview. Thus, this study proposes that examinations of the spiritual quest culture (Roof 1999) should include paranormal beliefs and paranormal investigation in all of its forms.

After a brief overview of my research methods and participants, I explain how paranormal investigation was infused with spiritual significance through investigators’ motives for participating, methods of investigation, and the meanings

³Here I use “discourse” in the Foucauldian sense, as a process by which a body of knowledge is asserted as the authoritative source of truth in a society, and its ideological nature is masked (Foucault 1972).

that emerged from these investigations. By virtue of being dually marginalized by organized religion and mainstream science, paranormal investigators were less constrained by the doctrines and methods of these institutions. As such, they were free to develop their own approaches to interacting with the spirit world.

METHODS

Like many paranormal investigators, my interest in the topic began by watching *Ghost Hunters*, the popular SyFy Channel series. I was intrigued by the show's portrayal of paranormal investigating as a scientific endeavor. Although at the time I had never personally had an experience that I would label paranormal, over the years several trusted friends claimed they had seen or felt the presence of a ghost. More than wanting to prove or disprove the existence of such phenomena, I wanted to "investigate the insiders' perspective," as Goode (2000:46) put it. I was curious why people got involved in paranormal investigating, how their religious beliefs influenced the process, how they gathered evidence, and ultimately what they believed this evidence told them about the existence of a world beyond the physical realm.

My research began in February 2012, when I interviewed three members of a local team and then joined them for an investigation of a theater. Over the years, I took an "active member-researcher" role, which allowed me to experience investigations much like an actual team member (Adler and Adler 1987). I helped teams set up and break down equipment, took "baseline readings" (measurements of atmospheric conditions in a location, such as temperature, barometric pressure, and electromagnetic frequencies), asked questions during "EVP sessions" (based on a theory that spirits' voices could be captured on audio recorders through a process called "electronic voice phenomenon"), and reviewed my audio and recordings for evidence after investigations. Teams encouraged participants to audio-record entire investigations in order to capture EVPs, as well as to capture and "tag" (claim responsibility for) sounds made by investigators. This encouragement to record investigations provided me with transcribable audio of all investigations. Because I regularly accumulated eight or more hours of audio per investigation, complete transcription was impractical. Instead, after analytic themes began to emerge, I returned to these recordings and produced "selected field transcripts." These transcripts captured moments from each investigation that were most relevant for my developing analysis.

Research is ongoing, but as of writing I have participated in 16 investigations (including one séance) and conducted 32 interviews with investigators. Interviews ranged in length from 49 to 108 minutes, and averaged 79 minutes. Of the 32 interviews, 12 were conducted in person and 20 via telephone. Pseudonyms were used when transcribing and are used in all excerpts below. In addition to investigations and interviews, I attended five "paraconferences," where paranormal researchers and celebrities (such as television stars) discussed paranormal

investigation and sold their wares. When given permission by presenters, I audio-recorded presentations at these conferences; in other cases, I took extensive notes. Later, I transcribed the recordings and converted the notes into formalized field notes (Emerson et al. 1995). Lastly, I engaged in informal conversations with attendees, picked up flyers and business cards, and—with vendors' permission—photographed vending tables.

My primary sampling method was snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981), in which I asked paranormal investigators with which I had contact if they would put me in touch with others. Although this sampling method is not random and therefore limits the generalizability of the findings, it was important to use such a method for two reasons. First, because paranormal investigation is stigmatized (albeit less so than a decade ago), investigators were reluctant to discuss their participation with a stranger until a respected fellow investigator vouched for me. Second, the paranormal investigation community is quite insular. As such, it is difficult to break into, but once accepted by a gatekeeper it is quite easy to meet other investigators. This dynamic of the setting allowed me to quickly accumulate interview and investigation contacts once inside the community. More generally, I selected ethnographic methods for this study because I wanted to build an inductive theoretical understanding of the interpretive processes through which paranormal investigators understood their practice.

While the sample in this study is not presented as generalizable, it is nonetheless important to note points of demographic similarity and difference with studies of related populations. All but one of my interviewees identified as white (one woman identified as Latina). This racial trend was reflected in my interactions with paranormal team members and paraconference attendees. Of the 79 team members with whom I directly interacted, 2 were Hispanic and the remaining 77 were non-Hispanic white. Likewise, of the hundreds of attendees at each paraconference, I noted no more than seven attendees at any one event who, based on observation, could be categorized as people of color. In fact, the single African American presenter I saw during my observation at five paraconferences even commented during her presentation that she was almost always the only African American person at such events. This overrepresentation of white participants is in accordance with research on the New Age movement (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Roof 1993) but contrasts with research on belief in ghosts (Bader et al. 2010; Goode 2000).

Though research consistently shows that women are more likely to believe in ghosts (Bader et al. 2010; Goode 2000; Newport and Strausberg 2001), the population of paranormal investigators I observed did not reflect this trend. Fifteen of the 32 paranormal investigators I interviewed were female, as were 36 of the 79 investigators with which I had direct contact. Interviewees ranged in age from 21 to 63 and averaged 39 years of age. This trend was also reflected among investigators I met and conference attendees. Based on reported educational credentials, most investigators had some post-secondary education. Five interviewees completed only a high school diploma, 2 completed high school and additional

specialized military training (building electronics, for example), 8 completed 3-year degrees (beauty college, for example), 13 completed 4-year degrees, and 4 completed post-graduate degrees. Research on the correlation of belief in ghosts with education level is mixed; some (Goode 2000; Newport and Strausberg 2001) indicate a negative correlation, while others (Farha and Steward 2006) report a positive correlation. Overall, the demographics of my sample did not support marginalization theories, which argue that paranormal beliefs are more common among less socially integrated individuals (Goode 2000; Mencken et al. 2008; Orenstein 2002). In fact, at least in terms of race, class, and educational attainment, my research aligns more with Bader, et al.'s conclusion that many paranormal proponents are "better described as elites" (2010:69).

The majority of investigators I interviewed reported exposure to religion at a young age. Thirteen of 32 interviewees reported being raised Catholic, which was a surprisingly high proportion given that Catholics make up less than 21% of the United States population (Pew Research Center 2015). Bader et al. (2010: 94) found higher rates of reported belief in hauntings and mediums among Catholics as compared to Evangelical and Mainline Protestants. Likewise, Hergovich et al. (2005) reported positive correlations between spiritualism (operationalized as belief in reincarnation and communication with the dead) and Catholicism, but did not find such a correlation for Protestants. Therefore, the overrepresentation of Catholics may result in part from their increased tendency to believe in such paranormal activities. Eight interviewees said they were raised in a Protestant tradition, and another four stated they were raised non-denominational Christian. An additional five interviewees reported a mixture of religious backgrounds, such as one man who alternated between his father's Catholic cathedral and his mother's Baptist church. Only two interviewees said they were not raised with any religious exposure. The fact that over 90% of my interviewees reported a religious upbringing is not surprising in light of data showing over three-quarters of Americans identify as religious (Pew Research Center 2015) and is consistent with Goode's (2000) argument that religion and paranormal belief are compatible to the extent that they share a spiritual worldview and faith in non-hypothetical truths.

Most interview participants still expressed some form of religious or spiritual beliefs, though only 11 (6 Catholics, 2 Protestants, and 3 non-denominational Christians) still identified with the religious tradition in which they were raised. One other interviewee transitioned from an atheist upbringing to Judaism when she got married. The remainder—20 of the 32 interview participants—reflected a larger societal pattern of drifting away from organized religion to alternative spiritualities or an absence of spirituality. As a share of the United States population, Christians have declined by nearly 80% since 2007 while the unaffiliated population (atheists, agnostics, and "nothing in particular") has increased by nearly 7% (Pew Research Center 2015). Moreover, 18% of American adults who were raised in a religion are now unaffiliated (Pew Research Center 2015). Research by Glendinning (2006) and others (Baker and Draper 2010; Mencken,

et al. 2008) supports the hypothesis that paranormal beliefs are highest among those who are religiously unaffiliated but still identify as religious or spiritual. Together, these trends suggest that paranormal investigators may perceive the practice as an alternative avenue of spiritual exploration.

Overall, the paranormal investigators I interviewed could be divided into four groups. The first group, seven in total, was composed of spiritual seekers (Roof 1993). These people either “flirt[ed] around with different religions,” as one interviewee put it, or adhered to New Age beliefs. The latter group included three reiki practitioners, a Wiccan, and a woman who claimed Native American spirituality. A second group of ten could be categorized as spiritual but not religious (Fuller 2001). One interviewee, for example, drifted from her Catholic upbringing but nevertheless described herself as “very spiritual.” The third and smallest set of investigators (three in total) identified as atheists or agnostics but nonetheless hoped to find evidence of an afterlife. As one said during an informal conversation, “Just because I don’t believe doesn’t mean I don’t *want* to believe.” Lastly, 12 investigators I interviewed identified with an organized religious group (all Christian except for the Jewish investigator mentioned above). In general, my sample supports the curvilinear model of the relationship between paranormal and conventional religious beliefs. These people retain a supernatural worldview but are only loosely coupled to mainstream religious institutions, leaving them free to explore other options in the spiritual marketplace (Baker and Draper 2010; Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1998).

PARANORMAL INVESTIGATION AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Paranormal investigation functioned as a spiritual practice for many investigators in that it allowed them to feel like they were connecting to “a divine, supernatural, or transcendent order of reality” (Wuthnow 2003:307). Investigators’ motives, methods, and the meanings they drew from investigating depended upon their prior spiritual and scientific orientation. Generally, the practice both conformed to and helped confirm investigators’ beliefs, though for some it was a catalyst for spiritual transformation.

Motives for Investigating

Paranormal investigators who adhered to established religious doctrines saw the practice as a way to validate their beliefs. Phillip, an investigator who was raised Roman Catholic and still identified as such, stated simply that, “If you could prove the existence of ghosts, then you could prove the existence of an afterlife.” Likewise, Heidi, a 34-year-old investigator who was raised “very strict Lutheran,” explained:

Honestly, the reason why I even thought about getting into this was for answers. You know, what does happen to you after you die? And why do some people seem to go up to heaven, and

some people stay here? . . . It would be nice to be able to prove something that you believe in without any doubt. You want to find that definitive thing that's going to go, "Look, here's the evidence. Here it is."

In such cases, investigators viewed evidence of ghosts as supportive of their religious faith, which is in line with research showing the two belief systems can coexist (Baker and Bader 2014; Baker and Draper 2010; Draper and Baker 2011; Goode 2000).

As may be expected, investigators who identified as atheist or agnostic expressed the most faith in science and technology. For these people, paranormal investigating was an alternative source of reassurance in light of a lack of belief in traditional notions of the afterlife. Chad, a 34-year-old warehouse worker, was raised Catholic but lost faith after questioning the existence of God while in college. He identified as an atheist but experienced internal conflict over what he *thought* was true and what he *wished* was true. This conflict was a major factor in his decision to join a paranormal investigation team:

I always tell myself, "I don't believe in God," but I wish God was there because I want to believe. I want to know that there is something for us after this. Because it's depressing to believe that we're plant food. So I want to believe there's something for us afterwards. I want to believe that I'll see my kids in the afterlife. Maybe that's all [paranormal investigating] is. Maybe it's just a false sense of security.

Another investigator, a 33-year-old software engineer named Jack, described himself as agnostic and stated, "I don't believe in heaven. I don't believe in hell. I don't believe any of that." However, when I pressed him about whether or not paranormal investigating had any spiritual element for him, Jack replied, "If I didn't believe in spirits, why would I be ghost hunting in the first place?" Atheist and agnostic investigators lacked faith in organized religion but nevertheless acknowledged that they were at least partially motivated by a desire to find proof for life after death. Thus, unlike research that presents paranormal proponents' motivations dichotomously, as spiritual enlightenment *or* scientific discovery, paranormal investigators often relied upon science as an avenue by which they could prove—at least to themselves—the existence of a spiritual realm (Bader et al. 2010; Denzler 2001; Northcote 2007).

The loss of a loved one heightened others' interest in paranormal investigation. In such cases, paranormal investigating fulfilled a very personal need to believe in a loved one's continued existence. A 21-year-old investigator named Xavier told me that his interest in paranormal investigation deepened after the untimely death of his beloved uncle. In our interview, he recounted efforts to communicate with his uncle and said, "I *want* to be able to hear his voice again. . . I want to be able to feel him again, 'cause he was a huge, huge part of my life." Another investigator, a 38-year-old mill worker named Steven, described himself as "angry at God" after his father died when he was 15 years old. For the next 15 years, he said his "religion went away," yet he wanted to believe that his father

was still around. After purchasing a house in 2006, Steven began hearing loud footsteps upstairs and noticed that his dog frequently followed something invisible around the house. He attributed the activity to his father, a suspicion that was confirmed in his mind when the unusual sounds ceased after he asked his father to leave:

[My dog] was in the corner. He was shaking, terrified of something. And I just looked to my left where [my dog] was looking and said, "Dad, I'm okay. You can go now. I'm going to be alright."

These experiences convinced Steven to start his own paranormal investigation team. In cases such as these, paranormal investigating offered reassurance that loved ones survived physical death, much like other forms of after-death communication (Kwilecki 2011).

Lastly, several paranormal investigators described their motivation in terms akin to the religious notion of a "calling," in which God has preordained one's purpose on earth (Christopherson 1994). This was particularly common among those who claimed to have sensitive abilities, such as seeing and hearing the dead, but was not exclusive to this group. One sensitive in his early fifties named Jeremiah said he could see and hear spirits at an early age. These abilities greatly increased after several near-death experiences caused by severe illness. In our interview, Jeremiah said he believed he was given psychic abilities to help people:

Some people want fame and fortune, and everything that goes with it. I don't believe that's the reason I have the ability. The reason I have it is so I can help somebody with their loved one's passing, you know. Give them the answer that they're looking for, or the answers they're looking for.

Similarly, Allison, a 34-year-old investigator who also said she could see and hear spirits, described her role as "liaison between the home owner or business owner and the spirit world." She said her abilities began with sensing other people's emotions when she was young, and she was eventually able to see spirits "with my mind's eye, in the same way we daydream or imagine." Allison reported that she "always felt a sense of purpose" to "help people and explain this strange other side of life." Jeremiah and Allison clearly believed that a higher power gave them gifts of discernment to help the living and the dead. By claiming that their abilities were present since childhood, they rooted their claims in a sense of perceived destiny.

Steven, the man who believed his father was haunting his home, did not claim to be sensitive but nevertheless explained that investigating gave his life purpose:

At the time [I was] 31 and kind of just, like, floating through life, you know . . . Always in the back of my mind it was like, "If I die tomorrow, is anybody going to ever remember anything

about me?" And it was almost like the paranormal field gave me purpose, you know? . . . I feel like this field chose me. I don't know why . . . It just kind of happened by dumb luck, but honestly it's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

Steven's account is interesting in that he used the phrase "dumb luck" to describe his entry into paranormal investigating yet also claimed that the field "chose" him. This confusion may arise from an incongruity between the accidental nature of his exposure to the paranormal and his deep commitment to investigating at the time of our interview. To reconcile these two aspects of his history, Steven offered a retrospective account that placed his experience within the interpretive frame of the calling. Rather than framing his experience as destiny, Steven provides a vocabulary of motive (Mills 1940) that explains his participation as the discovery of his calling.

Methods of Investigation

Investigators' varied motivations also shaped how they engaged in the actual process of investigation. Paranormal investigators incorporated conventional religious and New Age beliefs and practices into preparatory rituals, investigations, and post-investigation cleansing and closing rituals. Even those who placed their faith in science used technological tools to seek spiritual answers.

Preparatory rituals. Investigators who adhered to traditional religious doctrines used these as guidance for how to properly prepare for investigations. Xavier, the investigator whose interest was spurred by his uncle's death, self-identified as "Christian non-denominational." Like other Christian investigators, he engaged in a protection prayer before entering a location. As Xavier explained, "I always pray that God will send angels our way and protect us on these investigations." Some teams engaged in group protection prayers before each investigation, but most teams—including Xavier's—encouraged individuals to seek protection individually out of respect for differing religious beliefs among team members.

New Age investigators often engaged in visualizations. Kathleen, a nurse and reiki practitioner, said that before each investigation she would, "try to imagine being surrounded by a sphere of protection, and try to make sure I'm as centered and balanced as I can be." As with protection prayers, investigators usually engaged privately in visualizations out of respect for those who did not believe in the practice. Occasionally, though, a leader conducted a group visualization ritual in an effort to protect all of the participants. At a séance, Allison led the circle of participants in a visualization that mixed Christian and New Age requests for protection:

Visualize a white light coming down to meet you. And maybe it pours itself right down into the crown of your head, surrounding each and every one of us. And as this light pours down into each of our heads, understand that this is a divine light. A light from God, from Source, whichever you're comfortable with. This is from a divine source . . . And at this time we ask our guides and our guardian angels, each and every one, to come in and stand beside us, stand behind us, and protect this space from all negative or low vibrational energies. Let nothing that

comes from anything but the light enter this space . . . Michael, the archangel, we ask that you watch over us, that you protect us from any negative energies, anything that might cause us harm. We ask that you guard, with your angels under you, each and every per—every individual, every person here.

It was not uncommon to hear investigators call upon the protection of spirit guides and guardian angels, as Allison did during this visualization. Belief in such entities constituted a form of “folk religion,” a flexible interpretive schema that [Draper and Baker \(2011\)](#) describe as “loosely coupled” to religious doctrine. New Age investigators like Allison called upon these beings to magically intervene to protect those living in the physical realm.

Lastly, investigators also frequently carried protective artifacts. Kevin, a 27-year-old investigator from Ohio who was raised strictly Southern Baptist, always carried a cross on his body during investigations for “peace of mind,” as he put it. Such use of crosses and crucifixes was common, as was adornment with a Saint Michael’s medal. In the Catholic tradition, Saint Michael is the archangel and protector against the devil and other evil spirits. In a similar vein, a Wiccan investigator named Raven explained how she used neo-pagan objects for protection:

I’m very spiritually protected with whatever talismans I carry. I currently have around my neck two different pentacles . . . I also use satchels. And what typically goes into these satchels are various herbs, ah, stones, ah, other talismans that you think are lucky or protective. I usually do a small blessing with them. So I would light a candle, perhaps incense, and focus my energy and say a prayer, and really focus on the satchel’s intent of spiritual protection.

At a reportedly haunted bar, another investigator poured from a velvet bag onto a pool table approximately 15 polished, agate-like stones. She explained to me that a friend gave her the stones for protection from evil spirits. This eclectic mixture of protective rituals and objects reflected the freedom allowed by the marginal status of paranormal beliefs. Because they were not bound to any one doctrine, investigators commonly intermingled Christian and New Age beliefs ([Baker and Bader 2014](#)).

Contacting the spirit world. Investigators’ beliefs shaped how they negotiated attempts to contact the spirit world. Those who were influenced by New Age or spiritualist traditions often focused on crossing over trapped spirits. I witnessed Allison, the sensitive who described herself as a liaison between the physical and spiritual realms, attempting to cross over the spirit of a boy who—she reported, based upon sensitive impressions—was trapped in the basement of a museum. Allison kneeled, faced into the dark back corner of the basement, and began speaking:

Hey sweetheart. I don’t know if you know, um, we’re here to help. You don’t have to be afraid . . . You don’t have to stay here anymore. Your family is looking for you, and they want to find you . . . You wanna hold my hand? C’mon, it’s okay. [10-second pause] Do you want to go and find your family? You want to find your mom? . . . Your family on the other side loves you. Your grandparents will be there. Cousins, and aunts, and uncles. Extended family. They will all be there for you.

Similarly, Kathleen used reiki to help spirits. At one location, her team began hearing what they thought were spirits asking to be crossed over. Jerry, a medium on Kathleen's team, opened a spiritual doorway to allow the spirits to cross over, while Kathleen assisted him:

So Jerry was doing his spiritual work, and I was trying to help with my reiki. And he said, "Okay, I opened it. It's over there. Tell me what you see." And I saw, like, the most beautiful rainbows, kind of like a fountain of rainbows . . . And, you know, we would say things like, "How many?," and [we would hear] "Seventeen," you know. And then all of a sudden you would get, "Goodbye. Goodbye. Thank you." It was just really cool.

New Age investigators like Allison and Kathleen felt a duty to assist both the living and the dead using spiritual practices influenced by Eastern spirituality, spiritualism, and (in cases other than those cited above) Native American beliefs. Their multifaceted approach was indicative of the bricolage nature of New Age spirituality and showed that such practices could be used to do more than simply heighten one's own enlightenment (Bruce 2002; Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

Investigators who held conventional religious beliefs incorporated traditional rituals in investigations, especially if a location was reportedly haunted by evil spirits or demons. In the most extreme cases, teams brought in religious leaders to cleanse a property or deal with purported cases of possession. Xavier's group dealt with one such case:

We actually had a reverend come up from [a nearby major city] because we were of the belief that this client was possessed. That was one of the scariest things ever! The client would hear voices in their head, and they'd be talkin' to themselves . . . And then when the reverend came up, the client was saying things to the reverend that I was completely stunned by. The client started crying and was in lots of pain, and [experienced] contortions and stuff. One of the things the client actually said to the reverend was, "Go F yourself." They said that multiple times. And the name the reverend got out of the client was . . .

Xavier drifted off because he was reluctant to state the name, which was a name he had learned while studying demonology. Christian investigators like Xavier were predisposed to believe in angels, demons, and the afterlife. As a result, they viewed paranormal investigation as an extension of their religious beliefs (Baker and Bader 2014; Draper and Baker 2011).

I also witnessed investigators blending conventional and paranormal beliefs with a strong faith in science and technology. One team performed a communion service in a Catholic rectory that was supposedly inhabited by demons as well as the spirit of a pedophilic priest.⁴ Three team members sat in the parlor, lit a

⁴The association of this haunting with pedophilia reflects a common narrative trend in which hauntings are presumed to occur at sites of physical and/or emotional trauma (Davies 2007; Goldstein et al. 2007). According to Clarke (2012:114–16), this theme can be traced back thousands of years to ancient Rome.

candle, and laid out bread and grape juice. An investigator who was a practicing Catholic led the service, but in order to provoke an angry reaction by the ghostly priest he also gave communion to Chad, an avowed atheist. The team hoped to capture the priest's reaction on audio and video recorders in the room. During communion, the leader and a female investigator felt a chill run through their bodies, so the team decided to conduct an EVP session. They asked the priest to "Give us a sign of [his] presence" by playing a note on a nearby piano or pulling an investigator's hair. As a follow-up to this request, Chad stated, "I'm an atheist, but I'd really like to believe. Can you show me a sign of the afterlife?" This comment revealed that even the atheist in the room perceived paranormal investigation as a method of making contact with the spirit world.

The "fusing of science and spiritualism" (Baker and Bader 2014:582) captured in this instance showed that teams often relied upon the cultural legitimacy of science and technology as a means of reinforcing the meaningfulness of what was essentially a spiritual quest. In the same way, investigators' methods and interpretations were influenced by their preexisting religious and spiritual beliefs. This suggests a recursive relationship exists between these belief systems: pre-established beliefs conditioned investigators' methods, which were then used to find evidence of paranormal events that further reinforced the validity of the same beliefs that shaped investigations at the outset.

Cleansing and closing rituals. Investigators who approached the practice from a religious or spiritual perspective often engaged in post-investigation cleansing rituals to prevent spirits from "attaching" to investigators and following them home. For example, one conference attendee commented that he began saying a closing prayer at the end of each investigation after getting scratched by what he believed to be a demon. A speaker at the same conference told his audience "God is your best protection" and also advised investigators to tell spirits that they must stay in a location. A speaker at another conference recommended saying a protection prayer for oneself, but to also "take a moment to pray for the souls of those who are trapped. You have a responsibility to them." This speaker claimed to be a sensitive, and in keeping with the sense of duty reported by Allison and Jeremiah, he felt a responsibility to help the living and the dead.

At a third conference, an investigator who was also a reiki practitioner presented a New Age approach to spiritual protection. She encouraged her audience to practice "good psychic hygiene" after investigations by soaking crystals in salt water, physically scraping one's body to remove foreign energy, visualizing a "psychic waterfall" flowing over one's body, and "smudging." Smudging was adapted from Native American tradition, in which sage smoke is believed to help cleanse negative energy from a person or location. It was one of the most common non-Christian protection rituals reported by investigators. Kathleen, the nurse who practiced reiki, smudged her vehicle because it began running poorly shortly after an investigation. Raven, the Wiccan investigator, smudged her home after a Tupperware container fell off of her refrigerator. She believed the incident resulted from an attachment and told me, "After the smudging, I

also took the time to say out loud that whatever is in the house, if it's negatively charged or here for ill intent, must leave the house immediately." Even a couple of investigators who identified as Christian, including Xavier, reported smudging their homes at least once because they feared that something had followed them home.

Related to cleansing rituals were closing rituals, in which investigators attempted to close portals between the physical and spiritual realms that they believed had opened during an investigation. As with the preparatory ritual, the closing ritual of the séance I attended included appeals for protection from both Christian and non-Christian sources. Allison told us to breathe deeply and visualize our consciousnesses re-entering our bodies, then closed with this statement:

We're gonna thank all of our guides, all of our guardians, and of course Saint Michael for protecting us as we close this circle. We bless it with love and light. We remind all spirits that you may not attach to us. We are protected even as we leave by the light of God. We are divine children, each and every one of us. And we are free from any negative or low vibrational energies that might suck our energy, or make us feel bad. You're not allowed anywhere near us. So we thank our guides for being there to protect us.

As these examples show, many investigators relied upon a variety of protection rituals. Because they functioned on the margins of conventional religion, investigators' post-investigation rituals were less constrained by tradition. The "syncretic nature of ghost belief" (Baker and Bader 2014:580) allowed them to develop rituals that blended organized religion and New Age spiritualities.

Meanings Drawn from Investigation

Paranormal investigating affected people differently depending on what beliefs they brought to the practice. The 12 investigators who identified with an organized religion viewed their experiences during paranormal investigating as confirmation of their religious beliefs. When I asked Heidi how she reconciled her participation with her Lutheran faith, she responded:

I don't see a conflict with being a paranormal investigator . . . I don't know that we're meant to know exactly what happens after you die, but there's equipment now available that we can somewhat get closer to understanding that. And I just think that if God truly didn't want us to understand, he wouldn't have ever let these pieces of equipment—you know, we wouldn't have made that connection.

Heidi believed that paranormal investigation was enabled by God, and therefore anything she experienced in the process of investigating was, by extension, further confirmation of God's existence. Similarly, Debra, a team leader and practicing Catholic, asserted that:

There is a higher power. To me it's God, it's Jesus, because of my Catholic upbringing. And to me there's no doubt in my mind. So when I go out and [investigate] scientifically, and I've captured something that there is no possible way that it can be anything other than paranormal

activity . . . So now I have my spiritual belief that I know there's something more out there, and now I've got the validation to show you, Marc, because you can look at that video tape.

For people like Heidi and Debra, evidence of the paranormal only added to their faith in a traditional vision of God that was rooted in the doctrines of organized religion. This reinforces the argument that paranormal and conventional religious beliefs may be used in conjunction to affirm a supernatural worldview (Baker and Bader 2014; Draper and Baker 2011; Goode 2000).

Eight investigators who were originally rooted in conventional religious beliefs experienced a shift toward identifying as spiritual but not religious. Kevin, the investigator who was raised Southern Baptist, explained that paranormal investigating made him more accepting of other beliefs:

I've heard my entire life that when you die, you go one place or the other. You don't get stuck in limbo. Then, you know, once you start investigating and you really, really know that you've seen a full-bodied apparition, it's kind of one of those things, like, "How does that work?" . . . In all, it's made me more open to other beliefs and practices . . . I guess you could say that I have become more spiritual from everything that I've seen, that I've done, that I've witnessed.

Pattie, a 49-year-old investigator who was raised Lutheran, stated, "My faith is stronger that there is an afterlife . . . I always believed that we had a soul and it continued on after, but I guess [before paranormal investigating] I was just like everyone else in organized religion: you go up to heaven, you play the harp all day, or whatever." Investigators in this camp expanded their beliefs beyond the doctrines of organized religion and began to define their worldview as spiritual but not necessarily religious, just as those studied by Fuller (2001).

A third group of investigators (six in total) found themselves returning to a more spiritual understanding of the world after being alienated from religion. For these people, paranormal investigating offered the sort of experiential certainty that Partridge (1999) cites as a central element of New Age epistemology. As mentioned above, Steven lost faith in God after his father died. After starting to investigate the paranormal, though, his spirituality increased:

The more I get into the paranormal, the more spiritual I get. It kind of brought it full circle for me, because now I know there's something after death. Before I was hoping, putting my faith in something I didn't know. And now through the research we've done and the experiences I've had, there's no doubt in my mind that there's something after death.

Allison, the sensitive who ran the séance, had been raised Catholic but, as she said, had "completely drifted from the dogma." She clearly stated to me that her interest in the paranormal was not motivated by a search for God, but her belief in the reality of a higher power was strengthened as a consequence of investigating:

I never joined to quote-unquote "look for God." . . . I wasn't strong in any sort of faith when I joined, at all. I was kind of following my own path. And investigating has helped strengthen not only my faith that God exists, but that what I sense—the ability to have a personal relationship—is very

much correct . . . I didn't go looking for God as I became an investigator, but as I have done more and more investigating it has become harder to deny the existence of God or some higher Creator.

For this third group, the investigative process functioned as a catalyst for “extraordinary experiences” (Mayer and Gründer 2011) that led to the development of a spirituality based in paranormal beliefs.

A fourth trend was especially notable among six investigators but appeared in all three of the above-listed subgroups alongside their religious or spiritual beliefs. To a greater or lesser degree, all of the investigators I interviewed touted the importance of empirical evidence. Rather than trusting personal experiences, investigators asserted that the afterlife could be scientifically proven. This general sentiment was expressed more directly by several investigators who downplayed the spiritual overtones of paranormal research. Tommy, an investigator with over 30 years of experience using technology to investigate, articulated this perspective when he said, “I don't wanna just believe, I wanna know. I wanna know, and I'm gonna keep looking until I *know*.” Likewise, during our interview Kaye, a 46-year-old math teacher, emphasized the science behind investigating. She described herself as a “science person” who brought “all the toys” to investigations, such as night vision cameras and other gadgets. Kaye used these devices to measure electromagnetic frequencies and other invisible forces that may affect people's perception, with the goal of ruling out all possible natural explanations for perceived paranormal occurrences. By focusing on debunking paranormal claims, investigators like Kaye felt more confident that any evidence they did gather during an investigation was scientifically valid. When I asked Kaye what this evidence meant to her, she replied:

For me, it gives me proof that there's more to the human experience. There's a bigger picture. It's not just you're a blip on the screen, and that's it, you're gone. But there's something that continues . . . I feel like there are different planes of existence, there are different levels.

On the surface, use of technology appeared to be solely driven by a desire to accumulate empirical data for scientific purposes. However, this reliance on technology drew upon the legitimacy of scientific discourse (Aronowitz 1988; Gieryn 1983), with the ironic (if not unintended) consequence of increasing the perceived validity of paranormal claims (Baker and Bader 2014; Brewer 2012). Commentary on parapsychology has described this as “evidence-based spirituality” (Tart 2010), in that both parapsychology and religion “provide their adherents with a sense of purpose,” “a philosophy of life,” and “proofs of the possibility of dimensions of reality as yet largely unexplored” (Carlton 1987:137). My data suggests that scientifically oriented paranormal investigating functions alongside more overtly spiritually oriented investigative techniques to intensify the empirical aura surrounding purported evidence of ghosts and hauntings. As such, both approaches ultimately reaffirm the value of paranormal investigating as a method of contacting the spirit realm.

CONCLUSION

Paranormal investigation is a spiritual practice in that the act of investigating creates within participants a sense of being connected to and aware of some transcendent, perhaps divine, reality beyond our world (Wuthnow 2003). Some investigators enter into the practice already perceiving it as spiritual in nature, while others who claim to hold no religious or spiritual beliefs nonetheless experience a transformation through the process of investigating. Indeed, even those who claim to be motivated by scientific interest are engaged in spiritual seeking to the extent that their efforts establish an “evidence-based spirituality” (Tart 2010) that relies upon the legitimacy of scientific discourse to make spiritual claims.

The ethnographic nature of this study enabled direct observation of how investigators intertwined conventional religious, New Age, and scientific beliefs and practices throughout their investigations. For those who approached paranormal investigating from a more scientific angle, the practice was about *seeking* answers and looking for irrefutable evidence of life after physical death. On the other hand, those who claimed to be sensitive to the spirit realm, or who were otherwise convinced of its existence, were more interested in *providing* answers and assistance for the living and the dead. Interaction with ghosts became a central element of the practice of their spiritual beliefs. The fact that scientific and sensitive investigators were able to coexist in the paranormal community—and often within the same team—suggests that divisions between religion, science, and the paranormal may be overstated. Within the paranormal investigation community, at least, paranormal beliefs peacefully coexisted with conventional religious, New Age, and scientific beliefs (see also Baker and Bader 2014).

This intermingling of quite divergent belief systems into one broader spiritual quest is symptomatic of the culture in which it is occurring. As Wuthnow (1998, 2003) and Roof (1993, 1999) concluded, people in the United States have shifted toward spiritual seeking, where spirituality takes myriad forms and is practiced in many ways. Spiritual seeking practices are consistent with a culture that valorizes individuation through consumption and breaks down institutional barriers between the self and the sacred. In such a culture, people treat beliefs as free-floating interpretive resources rather than systems that must be adhered to wholeheartedly or not at all. Roof (2003:144–45) argues that members of such societies “selectively draw off religious traditions,” borrowing “symbols, beliefs, and practices from many sources” in a quest for personal meaning. The rise of interest and participation in paranormal investigation is understandable in this cultural context.

Paranormal investigating is readymade to serve multiple masters. Because it is marginalized by organized religion and mainstream science, participants are afforded great latitude in developing their own methods, interpretations, and standards for what counts as legitimate evidence. In a sense, there is no wrong

way to hunt for ghosts; any and all cultural resources are available to assist in processes of sense-making. While previous research has shown how New Age philosophies are built through spiritual bricolage (Bruce 2002; Heelas and Woodhead 2005), my research shows that paranormal investigators add science to the mix. Even as mainstream science derides the paranormal as pseudoscientific, paranormal investigators leverage the legitimacy of science as a resource to increase the perceived validity of evidence for the existence of a spirit world.

As with any research, the current study has several limitations. First, the sample size and sampling method limit the generalizability of the findings. Although the patterns described in the analysis were robust among the investigators observed and interviewed, one must not assume that these results are applicable to all paranormal investigation teams. Second, this research only examined paranormal investigators, not the larger population of people who hold paranormal beliefs and/or consume paranormal media. This was a conscious choice in order to provide for focused analysis. Nevertheless, as research on paranormal believers and paranormal media consumers shows, one does not need to participate in paranormal investigations in order to imbue such beliefs with spiritual significance (Baker and Bader 2014; Bader et al. 2010; Brewer 2012).

Several avenues for future research follow from the limitations of this study. First, a survey-based inquiry into the spiritual significance of paranormal investigation could allow for more generalizable results to emerge. Second, paranormal investigators' reliance upon scientific truth claims seem related to similar efforts by UFOlogists (Denzler 2001; Northcote 2007), parapsychologists (Goode 2000), and creation scientists (Gieryn et al. 1985). Therefore, future research could compare and contrast rhetorical appeals to scientific legitimacy across all of these fields of study. Lastly, future research may explore how preparatory rituals may prime participants for certain kinds of emotional experiences during investigations. Though limited, research shows that people retroactively interpret after-death communication (Kwilecki 2011), ghost tour (Thompson 2010), and paranormal investigation (Childs and Murray 2010) experiences on the basis of preexisting beliefs about ghosts and hauntings. It may be fruitful to use insights from the sociology of emotions to examine the emotional scripting and staging of paranormal investigations (Zurcher 1982, 1985). As Zurcher (1982:2) states, "emotion, or more accurately the performance of emotion, is enacted by the individual in terms of his or her understanding of appropriate emotional behaviors in a particular situation." Future research could consider how investigations are affected by emotional cues drawn from preparatory rituals, investigation leaders, and external factors, such as ghost hunting television shows.

In a society in which organized religion has lost a great deal of authority (Chaves 1994), New Age alternatives have ascended (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), and science remains the dominant discourse (Aronowitz 1988), paranormal investigators have harnessed the strengths of all three to serve the purposes of their spiritual quest. The freedom afforded by being marginal has fostered the growth of an epistemological pluralism, a live-and-let-live mentality that enables

individuals to pursue spiritual meaning in their own ways while also maintaining their membership in a community of belief. As such, paranormal investigation serves the spiritual needs of participants in a way that is consistent with James's (2002[1902]) definition of religion as a personal relationship to the divine, while also providing the social solidarity benefits emphasized by Durkheim (2001[1912]). Given that it fulfills both the personal and social requirements for a religion, paranormal investigating may be considered a spiritual practice.

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