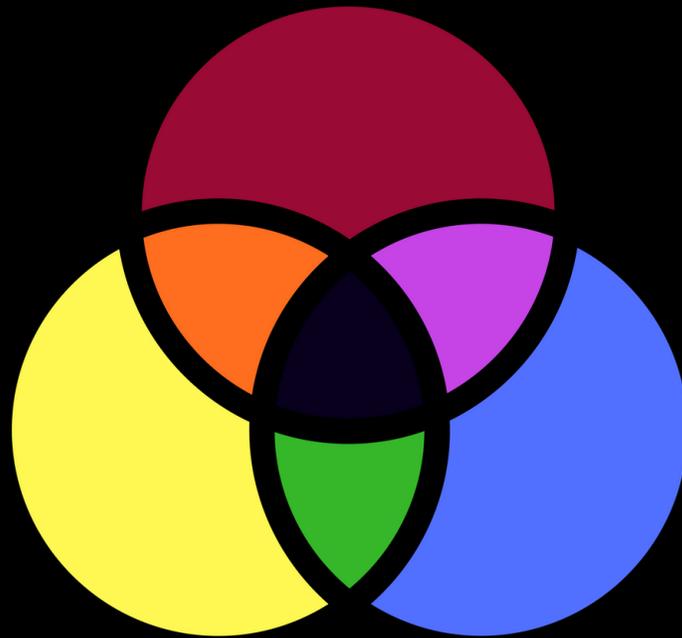


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**THRESHOLD:
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Threshold: Journal of Interdisciplinary Consciousness Studies (TJICS) is a free, online-only, open access journal that disseminates information focusing on interdisciplinary studies of consciousness as it relates to dying, death, and what comes next. Articles include original peer-reviewed research, review articles, research briefs, conference presentations, education and training aids, essays, editorials, case studies, and book reviews. Specific content is tailored to meet the needs of practitioners, clinicians, scientists, and the general public.

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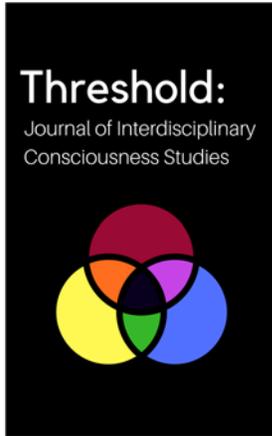
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Intended Audience: Researchers, Clinicians, Practitioners, General

Welcome to *Threshold*

David B. Metcalfe

Editor-in-Chief, Threshold

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the inaugural issue of *Threshold: Journal of Interdisciplinary Consciousness Studies*! With a focus on the interdisciplinary study of consciousness as it relates to dying, death, and what comes next, *Threshold* stands at the forefront of contemporary research into our complex relationship with mortality—especially those areas of this relationship where our experiences begin to cross into the unknown.

The articles we have chosen to highlight in the first issue set the tone for our future explorations of this enigmatic domain, including guidelines for end-of-life caregivers providing direction on how to approach potential anomalous experiences that may be encountered during the dying process, the integration of afterlife studies into lifespan development methodologies, a presentation of research into the impact of near death experience narratives on non-experiencers, and implications for social research developed from the application of text analysis to experiencer requests for anomalous investigation.

Each selection demonstrates the exciting possibilities that empirical approaches hold for helping us to better understand the experiential dimensions of dying and death. Together, they develop a starting point for powerful approaches integrating these themes with broader questions of evidence-based medicine, applied sociology, and public policy.

Most importantly: the topics addressed in these articles help to highlight the significant role that science can play in deepening our experience with areas of life that remain taboo for the culture at large.

Threshold serves as a vehicle to support the vital need for dialogues that address the full range of emotional, cognitive, and experiential effects which are so integral to our interactions with dying, death, and the burning question of what comes next.

Thank you for joining us in this journey. We look forward to seeing what develops from our conversations as we seek to step into the exciting possibilities that lie beyond the threshold of our understanding.

About the Journal

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ESSAY

Intended Audience: General

End-of-Life Experiences: Advice for Caregivers

Patricia Pearson, MSc

Toronto, Canada

Keywords: ELEs, end of life, hospice, palliative care, dying, death

It is common, in hospice and palliative care settings, for family members, friends, or other caregivers to be offered resource material about what to expect from the dying process. They may be advised, for example, about the waning of appetite and congestion in the lungs. The aim is to reassure caregivers that these developments are normal, so that they don't feel alarmed or even responsible in some way.

However, a gap existed in the available resource material. The dying process is, of course, psychological as well as physical, and often features subjective experiences. For example, through interviews with hospice staff, researchers in the UK found that end-of-life experiences are not uncommon. These experiences can include "visions, coincidences, and the desire to reconcile with estranged family members" and seem "to comfort both the dying and the bereaved" (Fenwick, Lovelace, & Brayne, 2010, p. 173). Similarly, Buffalo Hospice researchers interviewed palliative patients and found that 88% described comforting dreams and visions in the final days of life (Kerr et al., 2014) and that the dreams and visions had several common themes including comforting presences, preparing to go, and unfinished business (Nosek et al., 2015).

Note: With funding from the Donner Canadian Foundation, a glossy, four-page pamphlet was created about the experiences described here without promoting any particular view of their meaning. The objective was to normalize aspects of consciousness in the dying process, which staff can distribute on an as-needed basis. For more information on these pamphlets, please contact Patricia Pearson at pearsonspost@sympatico.ca

While the meaning of end-of-life perceptions may be subject to ongoing scientific debate, caregivers deserve to be reassured that it is normal for them to occur. After consulting with hospice physicians and nurses, I discovered that the following phenomena regularly occur and can be viewed and described in a completely neutral way.

Terminal Lucidity

The dying may experience a sudden elevation in mood and awareness in the days before death. They may brighten, perk up and begin to speak clearly to those around them. Caregivers sometimes mistake this new burst of energy and clarity for a recovery from the terminal illness. Usually, however, the interlude of terminal lucidity is brief. It does, however, present a precious opportunity to interact before loved ones enter the final stage of dying.

Terminal Agitation

The dying may experience a sudden bout of restlessness and agitation. They may bat away hospital equipment, attempt to get out of bed, moan or yell, pick at their clothes and bed sheets, mutter, rock, or chatter their teeth. This can leave caregivers feeling helpless and worried. It is important to check for underlying causes, such as the need to adjust pain medication or check equipment. But, like Terminal Lucidity, it can simply be an interlude in the dying process.

Visions and Sensed Presences

The dying may see or sense others in the room with them, and will sometimes hold conversations with these invisible presences. They may tell you that they are perceiving those who have died before them. Sometimes they describe light or scenery. Occasionally, they describe hearing music. In the vast majority of cases, the dying are comforted by these perceptions.

While caregivers may be tempted to interpret such visions as hallucinations, and request a change in medication, it is very important to allow the dying to draw solace from their experience without trying to explain them away.

Vocabulary Around Travel

The dying may begin to speak (or have dreams) of departure. This can occur in ways that the caregivers don't expect. A person may ask for their coat or their car keys, for example, or ask when "the plane" is due to take off. They may express frustration about a bus being late, or about not being able to find a map, or their passport. Sometimes, they will announce that they want to go home.

These statements can be confusing for caregivers, who may feel guilty that they can't take their loved one back home to the house or out for a walk with their shoes on. It is important not to take these statements literally, unless there is some very obvious reason why they should be. But generally, the dying will speak of going home even when they are home, so these appear to be symbolic statements, indicating that the dying person is ready for the end of life. On occasion, they may be asking for permission from the caregivers to let go.

Choosing Time of Death

It is not uncommon for the dying to let you know quite specifically of the date or hour they will die. Sometimes, they will phrase this interior knowledge in relation to travel. They might say that they "want to go shopping" on Monday. Then, on the following Monday, they will die.

Although it is unclear why the dying would have awareness of or control over their time of death, it's important to listen to what they may be trying to say.

In the same way, it is quite common for them to wait for the room to be empty before they pass on. Caregivers may feel bereft that they were away from the bedside in the final moments. But, given how often it occurs, there is no reason to assume that it wasn't a choice on the part of the dying person, to die privately.

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ESSAY

Intended Audience: General, Practitioners, Clinicians

The Afterlife as an Extension of Lifespan Development

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Keywords: life stages, learning, spiritual growth, afterlife, life review, spirit

Lifespan development is traditionally divided into a series of chronological stages, beginning in the womb and ending in late adulthood, with dying and death. Each period involves the mastery of certain cognitive-behavioral skills and/or virtues. However, what about after death, if it occurs as many of us believe it does? Do we remain unchanged? Or do we continue to grow and develop as disembodied spirits?

When Jon Klimo and I were gathering material for our book, *Suicide: What Really Happens in the Afterlife?* (2006), we read a tremendous number of channeled messages, near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, electronic voice phenomena (EVP) transmissions, reincarnation research facts, past life hypnotherapy regressions, mystic visions, deathbed apparitions, and accounts of hauntings. It became clear to both of us that the afterlife can be thought of not merely as a place (or series of them) where souls reside, but as a continuation of lifespan development involving acceptance, adjustment, and spiritual growth. As with its counterpart before physical death, this involves various stages through which souls must progress, each with its own required tasks and purpose. In *Handbook to the Afterlife* (2010), Jon and I discuss these steps, what they are, possible adjustment problems, and how souls can be helped.

Much of what we found will be no surprise to those familiar with the channeled literature. Death *per se* is responsible for very few (if any)

changes in an individual's basic personality, beliefs, attitudes, and moods. Nor do the newly dead find themselves instantly in the light. Before they can even begin their transitions, they must first recognize that they are, in fact, dead. This may not be as easy as one might expect. Many souls report feeling as if they have a body in spirit and are more alive than ever. If their deaths were sudden or unexpected or they were convinced nothing exists after death, this can be particularly difficult. In addition, the newly dead must learn how to perceive the world around them without the use of the sense organs.

Once the newly dead understand what has happened to them, they must separate from what remains of their physical bodies. Many times this is effortless. However, sometimes—possibly because of belief systems or emotional attachment to their bodies, or other people, places, or things in the physical world—this can take time. For example, some spirits speak of being tethered until their bodies have rotted away, while others state that if people die “before their time” (as planned in their “life blueprint” before incarnating), souls may have to wait near the earth plane until their “allotted hour” is up. It is unclear how much these problems are the result of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Spirit helpers usually, if not always, show up to orient newcomers and help them move forward through “vibrational levels” to a higher plane of existence, often described as rapidly traveling past a variety of levels or dimensions via a tunnel of light. Problems can arise if the newly dead reject this aid and remain in what is known as the “lower astral” near the earth plane. This can be more likely in cases where the recently crossed over have false expectations, psychological baggage, or addictions. In some cases, these lost souls can trouble the living. Fortunately, both psychic rescue circles (made up of the living) and spirit guides may be able to eventually help these lost souls.

The number of levels said to exist vary, but are often mentioned as being around seven or nine, with the “lowest” level of vibration being close to the earth plane and the highest level closest to the Source or the Light. Most souls appear to go to a middle level. Here, there can be a second wave of spirit greeters, and a joyous reunion of friends and family members. This is especially useful in helping the newly dead shift their focus from what they have lost—their bodies, jobs, lifestyles, and physical friends and families—to what they have gained.

The reunion phase and adjustment to the afterlife can be emotionally draining. Most spirits spend time in peaceful places of reflection or healing

centers. The recovery stage may be repeated and combined with the others that follow it. Sleep appears to be a major component of this stage early on. However, if (as is common) souls return to this phase later in combination with their life reviews and spiritual work, then it may take on more of a social quality, and relaxing in managed communities of like-minded beings.

Visits to the living may occur, for the dead to reassure themselves that loved ones are okay and provide a kind of closure. Although some spirits speak of being afraid of becoming sucked back into the lower vibrations of the Earth plane, many contemporary mediums feel that souls attend their own funerals.

Once souls are mentally and emotionally strong enough, they enter the life-review and judgment phase. This is where the most learning and change takes place. Spirits sometimes speak of re-experiencing (from both their own viewpoints and those of others) the choices they made in life and their impact on others. While older channeled material speaks of this judgment as being done by God, angels, or other spiritual beings, most newer material emphasizes self-judgment under the direction of guides. This life-review is not limited to a single time, but repeated until souls have wrung every bit of learning they can from this experience. Needless to say, this can take a long time to finish.

Once the life review process is over (and sometimes before then), many souls choose to take on a kind of spiritual work. For some, this may mean working as spirit guides to the living or the dead, acting as spirit greeters, transmitting messages to the living, or spending time in quiet contemplation. However, in all cases, this work appears to be freely chosen by the souls themselves.

From the perspective of the spirit realm, soul growth is everything. The cleansing and self-refinement which are an intrinsic part of this process may continue indefinitely or end with a return to the physical realm for a new set of lessons and challenges. Although reincarnation remains controversial in the channeled literature, many sources suggest it occurs, and that souls spend time planning in advance where they want to be born and what they want to accomplish. In some cases, lives are chosen so as to let them “work off” karma, which can exist on an individual, group, or regional level. Once souls reincarnate, they return to the traditional developmental stages to begin the process again. Thus, we come full circle, with a never-ending cycle allowing each of us to eventually unfold to our greatest potential.

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RESEARCH BRIEF

Intended Audience: Researchers, Clinicians, General

Impacts of the NDE on Non-NDEers

Ryan Rominger, PhD

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ryan_Rominger

Keywords: anomalous experiences, near-death experiences, dying, spirituality, mirror neurons

Traditionally, the study of the near-death experience (NDE) has focused on the NDE narrative itself. More recently researchers focused on the aftereffects of the NDE, attempting to describe how a person changes after having such an experience. Occasionally the focus became how to help the individual who has had the NDE, how the NDE varies across cultures, and how learning about the NDE influences the learners' attitude toward and basic understanding of the experience. However, both Kenneth Ring and I have studied the direct impact of an individual who has had an NDE (an NDEr) on someone who has not (a non-NDEr) (e.g., Ring, 1995; Rominger, 2009). Why this effect has not been studied more, as well as what we might further discover if we do study this effect, remain questions ever present in my mind.

Cognitive Changes

A number of cognitive changes have been reported by non-experiencers, generally after an individual has either learned about the near-death experience, such as in a class, or encountered a person who has had an NDE and then shares her or his experience. After their learning, people reported changing in ways similar to how many NDEers change after the NDE. Ring's students reported a more positive view of death; an increased belief in the authenticity of the NDE, the afterlife, and the purposefulness of life; and increased spiritual orientation. Ring indicated he

believed the strongest influence on the students was the first-hand interaction with people who had an NDE.

In my study, participants reported similar changes after they participated in group expressive art and spiritual direction along with individuals who had an NDE. These individuals reported contemplating spirituality more, understanding there is a great variety of NDEs, learning how common NDEs are, and better understanding their own personal life-changing events. In one case, a “non-experiencer” discovered she had an empathic NDE several years prior. Additionally, individuals reported an overall change in perspective toward those who report having had an NDE.

Emotional Changes

Along with changes in thought patterns, changes in emotional patterns have been reported. Ring’s students reported a decreased fear of death. Individuals in my study felt a greater connection with people who reported NDEs, an increased appreciation for the NDE and for the person who has had the experience, and, in some, increased positive emotions (love, caring) toward one’s own family. Additional emotional effects appeared to be a general increased sense of openness, validation, confirmation, love, and self-acceptance. One individual in my study reported, “I feel like a different human being after the group... feels like my words aren’t even touching my experience. The experience was very profound for me, hearing those stories. And I just don’t feel the same.”

Changes in Spirituality

Encountering the NDE narrative, especially as heard from the NDEr, may also change a non-NDEr’s spiritual orientation, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. As noted above, Ring’s students reported an increase in purposefulness in life, decreased fear of death, and increased belief in the afterlife, all of which can be correlated with spiritual beliefs. The participants in my study who had not had an NDE reported similar, and more extensive, changes. Simply put by one individual, “It helped me grow in my spirituality.”

Potential Neurological Changes

Considering the changes in cognition, emotion, and spiritual attitudes and beliefs, one must naturally consider the potential changes occurring in the brain. In particular, recent research regarding the mirror neuron system indicates that humans may be influencing each other at a neurological level. The mirror neuron system is a system of neurons within the brain that become active when a person either sees another person take action in the world (like picking up a tool) or when a person shares a particularly emotional life event. While seeing the action or hearing of the emotional event, various areas of the brain become active, and these happen to be the same areas that are active within the original individual's brain. The hypothesis is that through hearing an event our brain is activated in much a similar way, and thus we have a neurological basis for empathic connection with the teller. This provides a neuro-social interaction wherein the one hearing the event is, in a small way, actually "experiencing" the event at a micro-neurological level.

Applied to near-death experiences, when an individual who has had an NDE shares the experience, the question becomes: do certain areas of the brain become active in the listener, indicating some similar internal, neurological, empathic experience? If so, then NDErs are directly influencing non-experiencers at a neurological level. In this case, the one who is listening could be feeling the near-death experience subjectively, although on an obviously much smaller scale. Additionally, how long might these effects last? While research does not yet exist for the influence of NDErs on non-experiencers at the neurological level, I suspect this influence might be occurring and I have proposed research in this area.

Conclusions

One caveat with this phenomenon revolves around influence of the researchers and the context within which the study was conducted for both Ring's and my own studies. Ring conducted his study with his students, which may have led to inflated responses from the students desiring a "good grade." My own study was conducted within the guise of spiritual direction, and, like therapy, there is an expectation of change. Due to this expectation and the spiritually oriented environment, the participants may have unintentionally exaggerated changes in spirituality, cognition, and emotion.

Even with the above caveat, it is entirely possible individuals who have had an NDE, or any type of dramatic exceptional human experience, may influence a person who has not had the experience. I invite you to think back on your own experience of learning about a powerful, life-changing experience. The shared narrative of that experience, especially when it is something like the NDE, challenges one's own belief system, raises questions regarding the afterlife, and invites dialogue of things "not of this world." Because of this, NDEs, those who experience them, and how they affect others become rich areas of exploration.

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RESEARCH BRIEF

Intended Audience: Practitioners, Researchers, General

Analyzing Linguistic Characteristics in Requests for Paranormal Investigations

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Keywords: computerized text analysis, LIWC, ghost, paranormal, investigation

I conducted my first paranormal investigation in 1999 and shortly after that set up websites to collect requests for investigations. Since then, I have received and catalogued hundreds of these requests. In reviewing them, I noticed striking changes in their content and tone. Early emails expressed a more inquisitive attitude toward understanding the unusual events that the experiencers were reporting. Sure, there were a good number of requests that included reports from fearful experiencers who simply wanted their unexplained events to end, but it was my impression that around 2007 the descriptions of paranormal activity changed from frightening to downright malicious. I decided to explore this idea using text analysis techniques on my catalogue of case requests.

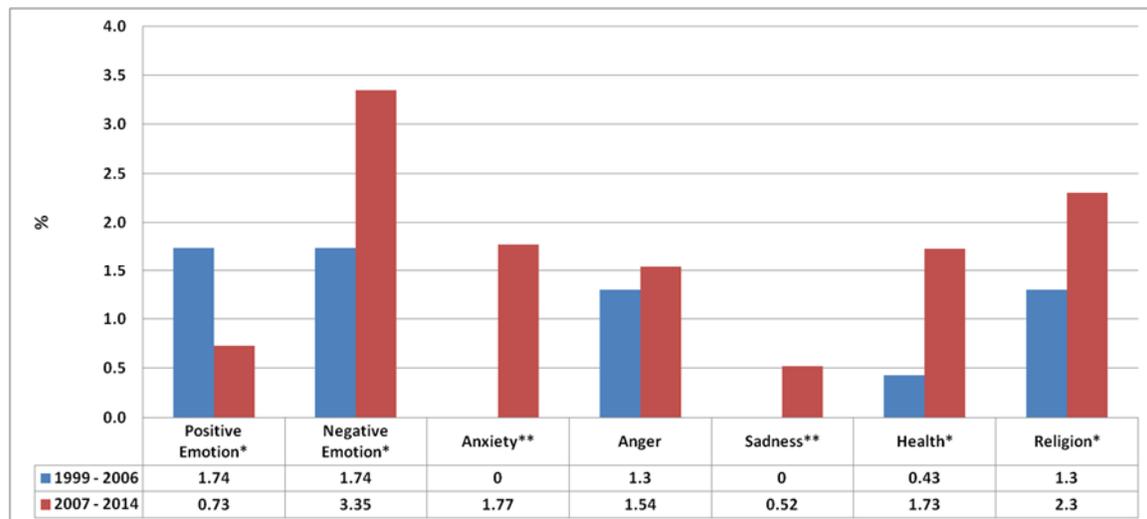
Method

To create the data sets, I sorted all the Investigation Request emails into two groups: Group 1 was from August 1, 1999, to December 31, 2006, and Group 2 was from January 1, 2007, to June 1, 2014.

The primary analysis was conducted using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; <http://liwc.wpengine.com>) text analysis software. Additional analyses were completed using the statistical program R (R Core Team, 2013). LIWC (pronounced ‘Luke’) is a validated text analysis software program that calculates the degree to which different psychologically meaningful categories of words are used in a given text. LIWC is used to examine text for the degree to which 80 different language categories including positive/negative emotions, self-references, causal words, attentional focus, emotionality, social relationships, and thinking styles are represented. The psychometrics of words assessed by LIWC are based on a random collection of over 2,500 blogs, experimental essays, poetry, books, science articles, and natural speech transcripts (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). LIWC has been used to “classify texts along psychological dimensions and to predict behavioral outcomes, making it a text analysis tool widely used in the social sciences” (Chung & Pennebaker, 2012, p. 206). The output from LIWC includes the percentage of words in a given text that fall in each of the categories.

Results

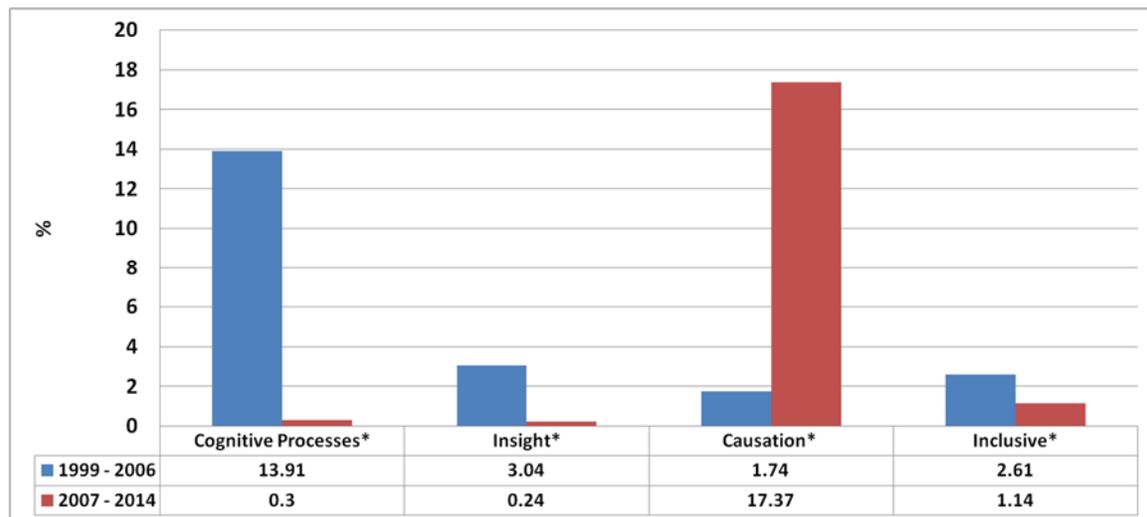
The two graphs below represent some of the more interesting results from LIWC analyses of the Investigation Request text from Groups 1 and 2.



* $p < 0.0002$, z-ratio test (two-tailed)

**A z-ratio cannot be calculated for these values.

In the graph above a significant decline in words associated with positive emotions and a general increase in words associated with a range of negative emotions including anxiety and sadness are apparent. There are also significantly more references to health (e.g., ‘pain,’ ‘injury,’ ‘illness,’ ‘headache’) and religion (e.g., ‘spirit,’ ‘demon,’ ‘god’) in the more recent group.



* $p < 0.0002$ z-ratio test (two-tail)

In the graph above, significant decreases between the temporal groups in language associated with cognitive processes (e.g., ‘consider,’ ‘think,’ ‘maybe,’ ‘could’), insight (e.g., ‘wonder,’ ‘question,’ ‘aware,’ ‘prove,’ ‘define’), and inclusiveness (e.g., ‘we,’ ‘with’) are seen. In addition, there is a significant increase in language associated with causation (e.g., ‘made,’ ‘because’).

Discussion

While strong conclusions cannot be drawn from these data, it seems that (1) reports of the paranormal are now more associated with negative experiences and (2) experiencers are thinking less critically about their paranormal encounters and assigning some type of cause to them. A qualitative analysis of these data sets would probably be helpful in exploring these themes in more detail.

So, what happened between 1999 and 2007 to cause these changes? A lot. The world is a complex place and trying to pin down simple causes would be naïve. Two possible factors, however, seem to have played roles: (1) the

explosion of paranormal-themed reality entertainment television shows and (2) the way we now use electronic media to communicate.

Paranormal-themed entertainment is by no means new. I remember watching *In Search of...* with Leonard Nimoy when I was a kid, but the “embedded” unscripted style of modern paranormal shows has taken the genre to an entirely new level, effectively blurring the lines between factual accounts and storytelling. According to my quick search of the Internet Movie Database (www.IMDb.com), between the period of 1999 and 2006 (the range of the Group 1 data set), six paranormal themed reality TV shows premiered in the US, including the break-out show *Ghost Hunters* (2004-2016). *Ghost Hunters* would go on to create the template for ghost hunting shows and paranormal investigation groups for the length of its run and beyond. In the period between 2007 and 2014 (the range of the Group 2 data set), 26 ghost-related reality TV shows premiered. This newer batch includes a host of long-running and popular shows such as *Paranormal State* (2007-2011), *Ghost Hunters International* (2008-2012), *Ghost Adventures* (2008-), and *The Haunting of...* (2012-2016).

Thinking about the evolution of these shows, the first two seasons of *Ghost Hunters* (October 2004-May 2006) seemed to focus heavily on the interplay between the investigators with some unexplained paranormal activity sprinkled in to keep things interesting. However, by the start of the third season (October 2006-November 2007), the team was finding ghosts at almost every location they visited. By this time *Paranormal State* was also kicking off. The show focused on disturbing and allegedly demonic paranormal encounters. It could be argued that this show is what flipped the public’s paranormal switch from viewing encounters as something that could be studied and understood to brushes with evil that need to be feared and eliminated.

It could be said that the increased number of sensationalized shows has implied that the paranormal is around every turn and has created unrealistic expectations and primed people to immediately experience even mundane events as paranormal. In addition, the prevalence of these shows may have created a climate of fear and done a disservice to those who study and experience actual paranormal events. Conversely, others might say that the proliferation of paranormal themes in the popular media has gone a long way towards normalizing these encounters and, as a result, provides people with the courage to reach out for help.

Another trend I have observed over the years is a change in the general style of the Investigation Request. In the Group 1 data set, the email

messages tended to be longer. Most were formatted as polite, professional correspondence. These messages often included an introduction, descriptions of the activity, and questions about the investigation process and paranormal activity in general. They often ended with a formal closing and a thank you. The Group 2 messages tend to be shorter and more demanding. As the analysis shows, the Group 2 messages tend to convey fear and anxiety and an expectation of an immediate response and a solution to their problem.

This shift could simply be the result of the evolution of on-line communication. In the early 2000s, people typically composed email messages from their desktop computers, and many followed the conventions of typed or written correspondence. Today, in the age of Twitter and micro-blogging (e.g., Facebook posts), people are used to simply tapping out and sending a short message from their mobile devices. In addition, the idea of paranormal encounters and the processes used to investigate them are now, most likely, part of the popular culture, so deep inquiry or engagement is no longer necessary. Simply posting, “I have a evil ghost in my house thats hurting me and U need to come here and get rid of it now!” to a Facebook page is all that is needed. This is the new normal for paranormal investigations.

To continue with line of research, I’m currently planning the following: (1) a more finely granulated LIWC analysis of the requests on a year-by-year basis in order to more precisely track when these linguistic changes occurred; (2) detailed qualitative analyses of investigation requests to identify specific common themes; and (3) on-going collection of investigation requests to track any future changes.

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