

IRONSIDE, R. 2021. The self and the supernatural. In vom Lehn, D., Ruiz-Junco, N. and Gibson, W. (eds.). The Routledge international handbook of interactionism. Abingdon: Routledge [online], chapter 10, pages 122-133. Available from: <https://www.routledge.com/9780367227708>

The self and the supernatural.

IRONSIDE, R.

2021

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Routledge international handbook of interactionism on 27/5/2021, available online: <http://www.routledge.com/9780367227708>.

The Self and the Supernatural

Rachael Ironside, Robert Gordon University

Supernatural experiences continue to be a feature in our everyday lives. Indeed, research suggests that over two fifths of the population in Britain have reported a supernatural experience and one-quarter of Americans claim to have felt or sensed a presence. They are encountered in many different ways, however, most commonly they are reported as subjective experiences including feelings, the sense of a presence, out-of-body experiences, or paranormal dreams. These subjective experiences are often encountered *on* or *in* the body, and the source of the experience rarely has a visible source. As a result, sharing these experiences with others can pose interactional challenges due to the lack of a visible, shared reference. This chapter will introduce the nature of supernatural experiences and their subjective qualities, drawing upon examples to illustrate a typical event. It will then explore the interactional challenges posed by these experiences, and investigate how individuals use talk and gesture to communicate and share their embodied experiences with others. In doing so, this chapter will provide an introduction to the role of the Self during supernatural encounters, and explore how the body is used to not only communicate and share experience, but also to transpose and validate extraordinary claims.

Keywords: supernatural, experience, self, body, interaction

Introduction

In this chapter I explore supernatural experiences and the role of the self in managing, sharing and interpreting such encounters. Supernatural experiences, by their spontaneous and subjective form, present certain challenges when reporting and sharing them with others. They also pose a potential threat to how the self is represented due to a wider cultural scepticism surrounding them. To manage this, individuals draw upon interactional resources, such as embodied talk and action, to manage how they account for and disclose experiences.

The study of supernatural experiences from an interactionism perspective is limited. Instead, wider research has often focused on questions of its' ontological importance, and wider social and cultural concerns such as 'are supernatural experiences real?', 'who believes?' and 'why?'. However, this focus is potentially restrictive because it views 'truth' as something that can be examined through an objective lens and ignores the potential social constructions that may inform such accounts. In 1992, Professor Robin Wooffitt, published *Telling Tales of the Unexpected*, which marked the first significant study to apply an interactionism perspective to supernatural experiences. By applying discourse analysis to examine how people disclose unusual (or supernatural) events, Wooffitt revealed that individuals draw upon interactional resources to manage how they present and account for their extraordinary claims. Following this earlier study, subsequent research has applied interactionism frameworks to examine the different ways that individuals and groups disclose (Childs & Murray, 2010; Woods & Wooffitt, 2014), understand (Ironsides, 2018), and share (Ironsides, Woods & Wooffitt, 2015) supernatural experiences. In applying an interactionism perspective, these studies have made a significant contribution to understanding how we communicate, understand and share these experiences with others.

In the following discussion a definition of supernatural experiences and the challenges these pose to interaction studies will be explored. In this chapter, I focus predominantly on one of the most reported supernatural phenomena, ghostly experiences, and the interactional strategies employed to report, share and manage these encounters will be examined.

What are Supernatural Experiences?

The term supernatural is familiar in its use during casual conversation and popular culture. It is often used to describe or represent things that are deemed strange, unusual or out-of-the-ordinary. However, the use of the term supernatural is often entangled with terminology such as paranormal,

spiritual, and anomalous and, as such, it is useful to spend some time exploring what I mean by a supernatural experience in the context of this discussion.

Émile Durkheim proposed that the 'supernatural' refers to 'all sorts of things that surpass the limits of our knowledge; the supernatural is the world of the mysterious, of the unknowable, of the un-understandable' (1915, pp. 39). In a society predominantly influenced by scientific knowledge and understanding, the supernatural is a departure from these norms. Commonly what we might refer to as supernatural would include ghosts, UFOs, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness monster, magic, and abilities such as fortune-telling and communicating with the dead. Supernatural experiences, therefore, are instances where individuals (or groups) encounter a 'phenomena that appears to defy scientific explanation' (Macdonald, 1994, pp. 35). Often the term supernatural is used interchangeably with the term paranormal and whilst arguably distinctions do exist, both of these terms will be used in this chapter to accurately reflect their use in the studies mentioned.

Supernatural experiences have been reported throughout human history, however, regardless of a shift towards a more scientific based society, supernatural experiences and belief are still common (Castro, Burrows & Wooffitt, 2014). The most commonly reported experience is the perceived encounter with a ghost. As reported by Waskul and Waskul (2016), experiences with ghosts continue to feature in our everyday and extraordinary lives. The Gallup Poll of 2005 reported that 37% of respondents believed that houses could be haunted, and more recent studies suggest that nearly half of all Americans believe in ghosts (McCarriston, 2017). This continued interest in ghosts is often attributed to the rise of supernatural popular culture (Hill, 2010), the commercialisation of ghosts as a form of tourism (Ironside, 2018), and a movement away from secularised forms of religion (Eaton, 2015). Indeed, the desire to encounter ghostly experiences has given rise to subcultural groups often referred to as ghost hunting or paranormal investigation groups that seek out these ghostly experiences (Ironside, 2016).

Supernatural experiences are by their nature commonly subjective in form. They are often reported as sensory experiences including visions, smells and feelings (Drinkwater, Dagnall & Bate, 2013; Ironside, 2018). For instance, it is not uncommon for people to report smelling a familiar perfume of someone who has passed on, seeing shadows that have no obvious source or feeling like they are being watched when no one is present. Individuals may also experience auditory phenomenon such as disembodied voices, or experience physical sensations such as touching, scratching or being pushed by an unseen force. Supernatural experiences are incredibly varied and whilst they may retain some common cultural features (see for instance, the Old Hag phenomena described by

Hufford, 1989) are individual to those that encounter them (Waskul & Waskul, 2016). These variations in experience are also interpreted in different ways. For some, supernatural experiences may provide comfort and be perceived as a positive, whilst for others the experience can be extremely negative, fearful and traumatic in nature (Drinkwater, Dagnall & Bate, 2013; Waskul & Waskul 2016). An account from one individual who I interviewed about her encounter with a ghost, is presented below:

“Suddenly a movement under the bed caught my eye, I could see a black mass forming and felt the hairs on my neck stand up...I started to get a bit worried and a bit scared because logically it didn’t make any sense. I said to my daughter “can you see that” and she said “yes I can”. It began to roll towards me in a black wave, by now I was quite scared and shocked by something which I couldn’t logically understand. It seemed to have a very dark evil presence about it. I jumped up from the stool, and shouted abuse at it at which point it seemed to fragment and dissipate. The experience was frightening, shocking and unbelievable as it couldn’t have logically happened and to have two people experience a paranormal event and both see the same thing at the same time. It was horrible.”

Whilst these experiences are relatively common they are often stigmatised in mainstream society. Indeed, belief in supernatural experiences have been attributed to cognitive deficiencies including low IQ (Smith, Foster & Stovin, 1998) and a lack of scientific education (Otis & Alcock, 1982). They have also been linked to the social marginality hypothesis (Tobacyk, Miller, Murphy & Mitchell, 1988), fantasy proneness (Perkins & Allen, 2006), and hypnotic suggestibility (Irwin, 1993). As a result, demonstrating belief in the supernatural, or that an experience is supernatural in nature, carries with it potentially troublesome attributes. There is a cultural scepticism (Wooffitt, 1991) towards the supernatural, and those that believe they have experienced supernatural phenomena may be perceived as having a ‘naive gullibility’ (Childs & Murray, 2010). Reporting experiences can, therefore, pose a challenge to the self and, as the following section will discuss, requires individuals to draw upon interactional resources when presenting such accounts.

Managing the Self and the Supernatural

In the face of these challenges, a number of studies have examined how reports of supernatural experiences are managed by individuals. As Lamont (2007) suggests when reporting supernatural experiences individuals participate in a process of ‘belief maintenance’ in which avowals of belief follow a statement of initial scepticism towards the event. For instance, a person may state that they

used to be sceptical of the existence of ghosts, but after a particularly vivid supernatural encounter, became a believer. Earlier Alcock (1981) made a similar claim stating that:

In our society, individuals are expected to act in a critical manner when evaluating evidence for a claim. Even the strongest proponents of paranormal claims often preface their remarks by reference to their initial scepticism about the reality of the phenomena, scepticism which supposedly was overcome by the weight of confirming empirical evidence. (Alcock, 1981, pp. 48)

In presenting an initial 'sceptical self' which has been transformed into a 'believing self' through the supernatural event that occurred, individuals mitigate against potential judgements of gullible naivety or irrationality. Likewise, other studies have shown how reports of supernatural experiences are managed 'in particular ways to achieve particular functions' (Childs & Murray, 2010, pp. 24). In his study of people reporting supernatural experiences, Wooffitt (1991) discusses how individuals draw upon their memories of mundane activities when accounting for strange events. As Wooffitt discusses, these mundane activities are not memorable in their own right (for instance, washing the dishes) but when included in the narrative of a supernatural experience infer uncanny qualities towards them. As he discusses when presenting accounts of supernatural experiences individuals regularly draw upon the device 'I was just doing X when Y'. For instance, someone might state "I was just sitting on the couch watching the television, when I heard a strange sound". Wooffitt argues that this device is intentional and aids in achieving certain interactional goals. The uncanny qualities of the event are implied by virtue of the fact that they interrupted a mundane activity. In addition, by stating the circumstances at the time individuals demonstrate that their memory and alertness of the event enabled them to perceive the phenomena clearly. Thus, mitigating against the potential for others to perceive their experience as being caused by 'explainable' factors (for instance a loss of sentience). Both Wooffitt (1992) and Childs and Murray (2010) have also explored the 'not-naming phenomena' that appears prominent in supernatural reports. As they discuss, labelling experiences as supernatural may imply implicit belief in the existence of the phenomena, and speakers 'cannot be seen too readily to accept the existence of the phenomenon they believe they have encountered' (Wooffitt, 1992, pp. 114). Instead, speakers use oblique references towards the experience such as 'it', or they draw upon contrast structures such as 'paranormal or not paranormal' to display an ongoing awareness of the potential for a sceptical assessment. When reporting accounts of supernatural experiences individuals do, therefore, seem aware of the cultural scepticism towards events and draw upon interactional devices to manage how their disclosure may be seen by others.

These studies suggest that individuals adopt strategies to preserve how they are seen by others in reporting a supernatural experience. These reports are often provided in hindsight, however, research also suggests that self-management strategies are evident as experiences occur ‘in the moment’. This is illustrated in Woods and Wooffitt’s (2014) study of UFO encounters. As they observe, the participants in the YouTube videos examined draw upon abnormal features of the experience they witness to apply transgressive qualities towards it. For instance, on observing lights in the sky the witnesses determine that they do not appear to move in the same manner that would be expected from a plane, and as such imply that it could be something else (i.e. a UFO). The implication that an event may have transgressive properties is also observed in the first noticing of a supernatural experience. As I explore later in this chapter, the first noticing of an event is often formulated as a ‘that’ based question (i.e. ‘what is that?’). As Ironside, Wooffitt & Woods (2015) argue in a similar manner to the ‘not-naming’ phenomena discussed, ‘that’ based references are used as a resource to draw attention to something unexplained in the environment whilst avoiding the explicit categorisation of it as supernatural.

As illustrated, the reporting and experiencing of supernatural events is, therefore, governed by strategies to manage how they are seen and assessed by others. These studies suggest that individuals are aware of a culturally embedded scepticism towards the supernatural, and draw upon interactional resources to mitigate the judgement and labelling that might be associated with disclosing their own experiences or belief about the events they have encountered. However, beyond the self-management strategies discussed, sharing and interpreting these events are also subject to additional challenges. These will now be explored.

The Trouble with Supernatural Experiences

The supernatural by its very nature is often *invisible* or without physical substance. This is particularly true of ghostly experiences where the ethereal nature of spirits means that they are rarely, certainly collectively, experienced as a physical object in space. Instead, reports of supernatural encounters often involve sounds, feelings, or environmental changes that seem uncanny at a particular moment in time. For instance, an unusual knocking sound may be experienced in a room where no one or no thing is accountable for such a noise. Apparitional encounters, where a ghost is actually seen, do occur but these are often witnessed by one individual, lacking substance, fleeting or unable to be captured physically on camera. Likewise, even encounters with UFOs which assume a more physical quality are often experienced with vagueness

(for instance strange moving lights in the sky) and leave little trace of their presence behind. The 'invisible' quality of supernatural events presents interactional challenges in sharing an experience that has no physical form to reference.

The subjectivity of supernatural experiences presents further interactional challenges as each individual may encounter an experience in a slightly *different way*, or may not share in the experience at all. In the extract provided above, the witness describes seeing a dark mass, feeling the hairs on her neck raise and sensing an evil presence. Whilst the mass is reportedly seen by the witness's daughter the feelings described are individual to the person reporting them.

Communicating not only what was experienced, but where and how, requires individuals to carefully consider how to present their own encounter in a way that can be experienced, interpreted and understood by others.

In addition, despite the way supernatural experiences are portrayed in Hollywood films, the reality is that the majority of paranormal events are fairly *mundane* in character (Waskul & Waskul, 2016). They are experienced as brief moments of uncanniness, rather than chandeliers rocking and apparitions floating down the staircase. As such, the supernatural qualities of an event are not always initially obvious. For instance, a strange knocking sound may be heard coming from the room next door. However, further investigation will likely be needed to establish if this is supernatural or simply the wind blowing against an open door. Supernatural events, therefore, are *not always obviously supernatural* and require a degree of work on behalf of the individual, or group, to categorise them as such.

Finally, supernatural experiences are *spontaneous*. As Inglis and Holmes (2003) observe, ghosts rarely appear on cue. People often experience the supernatural when it is unexpected and unintended, and as such there may not be the opportunity to share the encounter with others. Exceptions to this do exist, and the increasing popularity of activities such as paranormal investigations do provide opportunities for the evocation and purposeful seeking of collective experiences to occur (Eaton, 2015).

Supernatural experiences are, therefore, notoriously difficult to share with others. However, collective supernatural experiences can help to mitigate against some of the sceptical assessments that may be attributed towards them. Experiencing an event with others assigns the event a level of objectivity as something that occurred 'out there', and minimises the potential for it to be rationalised by others as a product of 'normal' psychological or environmental factors. As discussed

by Childs and Murray (2010) being able to account for the collaborative and objective nature of an event enables those reporting them to minimise the negative associations that may be attributed to such events, like gullibility or irrationality. For the remainder of this chapter I will explore how individuals draw upon bodily resources to overcome some of these challenges. To do so, I will draw upon data collected from paranormal investigation groups. Paranormal investigation groups provide a unique opportunity to examine collective supernatural experiences that are often difficult to access due to their private and spontaneous nature. These groups which are formed with the purpose of seeking supernatural experiences regularly film their activities for the purpose of collecting evidence. This does, therefore, provide a rich corpus of naturally occurring data of supernatural experiences taking place (Ironsides, 2016).

The Body and Experiencing Ghosts

In this chapter, I focus on a specific type of supernatural experience – experiencing a ghost (or spirit). By ghostly experiences I am referring to those instances where individuals report coming into contact with a person that is believed to be deceased. These experiences, as discussed, are often subjective in form manifesting as feelings and sensations that occur either *in* or *on* the body. These embodied feelings may be reported as a drop in temperature, a feeling of being touched or extreme emotions. As noted previously, the private nature of these experiences presents certain interactional challenges in both presenting and interpreting these events as supernatural in form. The body acts as an important resource to overcome some of these challenges and provide an interpretative landscape to communicate, express and position these experiences for others.

Making the invisible visible

One of the significant challenges presented by supernatural embodied experiences is how these events can be shared and communicated with others, particularly given their private and invisible form. If for instance someone reports being touched by a ghost there is rarely a visible sign that the event has taken place. Likewise, even experiencing a drop in temperature may be a private experience attributed to a ghostly presence rather than a notable drop in temperature within the room. Due to the lack of a visible reference for the event, highlighting and sharing supernatural embodied experiences is challenging and individuals draw upon a range of embodied actions to achieve this.

To explore how this occurs an example of a supernatural embodied experience is presented below. In this example, a paranormal investigation group involving three people are participating in an Ouija Board session. During this session the planchette on the Ouija Board has moved several times and has spelled out the name ‘Munthob’¹. We join the group in this extract just as they vocalise the word Munthob, at which point the Gauss Meter starts to generate an increasingly loud sound². As the Gauss Meter starts to increase, participants A and B look towards each other, and in line 82 C states ‘Its definitely Munthorb’ (suggesting that the Gauss Meter was in response to the name of the spirit being called). It is at this point that B lets out a long breath and exclamatory statement ‘jesus’ whilst leaning towards the table and closing her eyes (83 and 85). This attracts the attention of the other participants, A and C.

Extract 1

```

78   B      H[ello Munthob
79           [Munth^ob^
80           [(Gauss can be heard increasing in the background)
81           [(B and A look at each other. B bites bottom lip)
82   C      Its define[tely Mu[nthorb
83   B                        [hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh jesus
84           [(B and A look at C)
85           [(B Leans in towards table, closes
86           [eyes and exhales. A and C look at B)

```

Following this activity, participant C asks if B is ‘alright’ (87) and B, still with her eyes squinted and leaning forwards, comments that her eyes are watering (89).

```

87   C      [You alright
88           [(B's eyes squinting still leaning forwards)
89   B      [Yeh, i think my eyes watering (3.0) jesus::
90           [(B turns head to left and closes eyes briefly)

```

In this example, B appears to be in some discomfort displayed through the verbal exhale, closing of her eyes and leaning forwards towards the table. Whilst she does not explicitly state the cause of her discomfort the timing of the talk about her bodily experience and her embodied gesture appear to be connected to the ongoing activity of the Gauss Meter and vocalisation of the name Munthob.

Following this the Gauss Meter sound continues to escalate until it eventually stops, and C asks B

¹ An Ouija Board is a device used by some paranormal investigators to attempt communication with spirits. It consists of a board with the letters of the alphabet inscribed and the answers ‘Yes’ and ‘No’. Investigators will ask the spirit questions whilst placing their hands on a movable pointer called a planchette. If the planchette moves this is considered communication with spirit, and the planchette may move to relevant letters on the board to answer the questions posed.

² A Gauss Meter is a device used by paranormal investigators to measure electromagnetic fields, and is believed amongst these groups to detect spirits. The Gauss Meter generates a high pitched sound when it detects an anomalous electromagnetic field, which according to paranormal investigators may indicate the presence of a spirit.

why her eyes were watering. B then continues to state that ‘it was really strong did you not feel that’ (124).

122 C [Why are your eyes watering?
123 [(A looks at B. B starts wiping eyes again)
124 B It was really strong [(2.0) did you not feel that? it-
125 [(A looks at OB. B continues wiping
126 eyes)
127 B was like ((unknown))

In this example, the embodied experience felt by B is communicated to both A and C through talk and gesture including her shift in body and facial gestures. Whilst the nature of the embodied experience is unknown at this time, B’s description of the event as ‘*it* was really strong did you not feel *that*’ indicates a significant bodily experience, while the lack of categorisation infers an unknown or uncanny quality towards it. In doing so, B is able to highlight her internal private experience to others, illicit further interaction enabling her to disclose her experience and infer that it may be linked to the broader unusual events occurring in the environment.

The use of the body as an interactive display to express embodied experience is common during supernatural experiences. In producing embodied action, individuals are able to elicit others to not only notice their experience but respond to it. As such, these experiences become part of a larger interactive framework in interpreting supernatural experiences. In this instance, B’s experience contributes to the ongoing activity of the group. Her experience further illustrates the uncanny qualities of the event which have not only impacted upon the external environment through the sound of the Gauss Meter, but have also produced physical and unexplainable effects on her body. By displaying these experiences B invites others to see her experience in the context of the wider activity taking place, and thus infers supernatural qualities towards it. Displays of supernatural embodied experiences do more than just react to internal subjective feelings but are ‘produced in the light and presence of others’ (vom Lehn, 2006, pp.1352). In doing so an essentially invisible phenomenon is made visible and shared with others through these actions. In eliciting further interaction through displays of embodied experience individuals also shift the experience from an individual private event into an interactive space where it can be jointly understood and interpreted (Ironsides, 2018).

Becoming supernatural

Earlier in this chapter the ‘not-naming’ phenomenon is described as a common feature in reporting

supernatural experiences. As previously discussed, Ironside, Wooffitt and Woods (2015) also observed that this is common when ghostly events occur in the immediate environment. In their study, they highlight that individuals use the term ‘that’ to refer to uncanny events. As they determine, the use of the term ‘that’ most often positioned in a question (i.e. ‘what is that?’ or ‘did you hear that?’) has interactional importance. The use of the demonstrative term *that* acts to highlight an event and is often accompanied by a shift in gaze towards a space in the local milieu. However, the choice of the term *that* when referring to an ambiguous event in the environment (for instance, an unusual knocking sound) has inferential qualities. It creates an interpretive landscape through which the event, by not naming it, is implicitly categorised as having transgressive properties. In doing so, it invites further exploration of the event while predisposing others to the possibility that the event may have uncanny qualities. Categorising events as supernatural is, therefore, rarely immediate or conclusive. Instead, when supernatural experiences occur with others they are invited to discover and interpret them collectively. The interactional resources used to facilitate this will now be examined.

Empty Spaces and Supernatural Inference

In addition to displaying supernatural experiences through embodied conduct individuals also use the body as a resource to locate experiences in certain spaces. In the context of a supernatural experience the locating of events in certain spaces has inferential qualities. For instance, if a voice was to come from a space in the room where someone was standing, this would infer a very different explanation to a space where no one was standing. As such, where an experience is positioned in space has the potential to determine its supernatural potential.

During collective supernatural experiences the body is used as an interactive resource to position events on the body and in the local milieu, and thus imply uncanny qualities towards them. In the example below, a paranormal investigation group are taking part in an Ouija Board session when one of the group members feels like he has been touched on his left arm. Initially he looks towards the space to his left, and then grabs his arm and looks around the group (see Figure 1³).

³ The images in this chapter have previously been published in the authors former research which can be viewed in *The Journal of Pragmatics and Text & Talk*.

77 C [No like it was right-[it was up on my arm right[there
78 D [hh
79 [(C looks towards A and touches behind his left
80 shoulder)
81 [(B looks at C)
82 [(D
83 looks towards E)

In displaying his experience in this manner, C uses his body to position the event in a space away from the cats (a ‘normal’ explanation) and instead positions it in an ‘empty space’. In doing so he implies that the cause of the poke is unexplained.

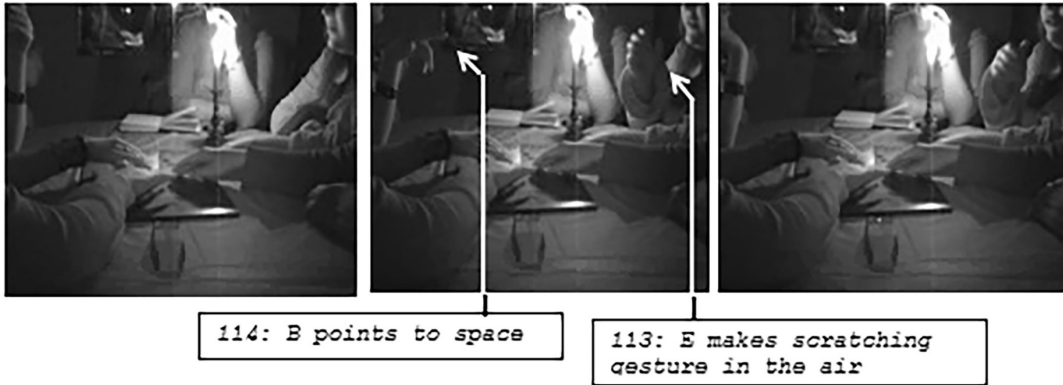
The use of the body to highlight points in space where experiences have taken place is common in collective supernatural experiences. Individuals regularly use deictic gestures such as pointing and touching their own, and others’ bodies, as a way of positioning the event in the local and embodied environment. These embodied gestures aid in making visible an essentially invisible event, and by positioning these events in ‘empty space’ implying uncanny qualities towards them.

Bodily Gesture and Supernatural Features

Beyond positioning events in space individuals also use their bodies to determine the features of supernatural experiences. Similar to positioning an event in empty space, determining the features of an experience can aid in the interpretation of potentially uncanny qualities. If, for instance, an experience such as a sound can be determined to exhibit features that are not ‘normal’ in the local environment this could infer a supernatural potential towards it.

This is illustrated in the following example in which a paranormal investigation group have been asking out for a spirit to make a noise. Shortly afterwards two of the group members indicate that they have heard a strange scratching sound. Initially the group question one of the other group members and ask if she scratched her clothes. When the group member questioned states that she did not scratch her clothes, B points towards a space to the right of E and states that it sounded like a dog scratching. At the same time E starts to describe the sound suggesting that it was instead a ‘high pitched chu chu chu chu’. As she describes this E moves her whole hand in a scratching motion (see Figure 2).

B: n[ɔ it wasn't that it was like a dog you right your right
E: [no it wasn't that it was a [high pitched chu chu chu chu



The hand gestures and accompanying talk produced by B and E develop an interpretative framework for the sound. B's hand point towards the right of E suggest that the sound came from an empty space in the local milieu. E's iconic hand gesture in the air, rather than on her own clothes, and the use of her whole hand implies that the sound is not likely to have been caused by a person in the room (who have their hands positioned on the planchette) but an unknown source. In doing so, the positioning of the event (in an empty space) and the character of the experience (a dog scratching) imply that the event is unexplainable.

In addition to this, the embodied gesture and talk produced serves another purpose. They illustrate the character of the experience in such a way that it can be seen and understood by others. In this example the transgressive nature of the experience and its unknown source become visible to the rest of the group (a strange scratching sound that came from an empty space) through the hand gestures of the two speakers. Sharing the features of these experiences through embodied gestures aids in communicating the transgressive qualities of the event in a visible manner that can be seen and understood by others. Embodied gesture can therefore not only help to make visible supernatural experience, but also transpose the uncanny qualities of them to others.

Conclusion

Supernatural experiences are common in our contemporary society. However, as explored in this chapter these experiences pose challenges in sharing and managing how these events (and those that experience them) are seen and interpreted by others. The cultural scepticism that surrounds supernatural belief and experience is noticeable in the interactional strategies employed by individuals when disclosing their own encounters. When reporting supernatural experiences

individuals structure accounts to demonstrate rationality and integrity, and they avoid categorising events as paranormal. To facilitate sharing collective supernatural experiences, individuals draw upon embodied action to make visible internal experiences, position events in certain spaces in the environment and establish the features of these events. In doing so, the uncanny qualities of these experiences are displayed, shared and interpreted socially. Individuals are, therefore, aware of the challenges that disclosing supernatural experiences present to how the self is perceived by others, and through talk and embodied action act to mitigate and manage these concerns.

The study of interaction and supernatural experiences can reveal valuable insights into how events which are subjective, or without visible form, can be brought into the environment to be noticed, discovered and categorised. Importantly, it highlights that collective supernatural experiences are not immediately regarded as extraordinary, but are interpreted as such through socially organised action. At current, there is limited research into supernatural experiences from an interactionist perspective. However, further studies have the potential to reveal valuable insights into how we interpret our extraordinary, and ordinary, experiences in the world. This chapter provided a case study into ghostly experiences, however, it would be interesting to examine a broader range of supernatural experiences. Are the same interactional resources drawn upon to discover and interpret extra-terrestrial, religious or psychic experiences? Furthermore, research in this field has predominantly focused on talk, however, as highlighted in this chapter individuals draw upon a wider range of resources including the body, tools and the environment during interaction. Future studies should take account of this broader framework of interaction to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of our bodies in shaping our own experiences, and the experiences of those around us.

References

Alcock, J. (1981). *Parapsychology: Science or magic?* New York: Pergamon.

Castro, M., Burrows, R. and Wooffitt, R. (2014). The paranormal is (still) normal: The sociological implications of a survey of paranormal experiences in Great Britain. *Sociological research online*, 19(3), 1-15.

Childs, C., & Murray, C. D. (2010). "We All Had an Experience in There Together": A Discursive Psychological Analysis of Collaborative Paranormal Accounts by Paranormal Investigation Team Members. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 7(1), 21- 33.

Drinkwater, K., Dagnall, N. and Bate, L. (2013). Into The Unknown: Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis To Explore Personal Accounts of Paranormal Experiences. *The Journal of Parapsychology*, 77(2), 281-294.

Durkheim, É. (1915). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.

Eaton, M.A. (2015). "Give us a sign of your presence": Paranormal investigation as a spiritual practice. *Sociology of Religion*, 76(4), 389-412.

Hill, A. (2010). *Paranormal media: Audiences, spirits and magic in popular culture*. Routledge.

Hufford, D. (1989). *The terror that comes in the night: An experience-centered study of supernatural assault traditions* (Vol. 7). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Inglis, D., & Holmes, M. (2003). Highland and other haunts: Ghosts in Scottish tourism. *Annals of tourism research*, 30(1), 50-63.

Ironside, R. (2016). *Interactional dynamics and the production of collective experience: the case of paranormal research groups* (Doctoral dissertation, University of York).

Ironside, R. (2018). The Allure of Dark Tourism: Legend Tripping and Ghost Seeking in Dark Places. In Dennis Waskul and Marc Eaton (Eds.) *The Supernatural in Society, Culture and History*, (pp. 95-115). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Ironside, R., Wooffitt, R., & Woods, C. (2015). The transgressive that: Making the world uncanny. *Discourse Studies*, 17(6), 703-723

Irwin, H.J. (1993). Belief in the paranormal: A review of the empirical literature. *Journal of the american society for Psychical research*, 87(1), 1-39.

Lamont, P. (2007). Paranormal belief and the avowal of prior scepticism. *Theory & Psychology*, 17(5), 681-696.

MacDonald, W. L. (1994). The popularity of paranormal experiences in the United States. *Journal of American Culture*, 17(3), 35-42.

McCarriston, G. (2019). Belief in ghosts is on the rise. YouGov. Retrieved from <https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2017/10/10/belief-ghosts-rise>

Otis, L.P., & Alcock, J.E. (1982). Factors affecting extraordinary belief. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 118(1), 77-85.

Perkins, S.L., & Allen, R. (2006). Childhood physical abuse and differential development of paranormal belief systems. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 194(5), 349-355.

Smith, M.D., Foster, C.L., & Stovin, G. (1998). Intelligence and paranormal belief: Examining the role of context. *The Journal of Parapsychology*, 62(1), 65-78.

Tobacyk, J., Miller, M., Murphy, P., & Mitchell, T. (1988). Comparisons of paranormal beliefs of black and white university students from the southern United States. *Psychological Reports*, 63(2), 492-494.

vom Lehn, D. (2006). Embodying experience: A video based examination of visitors' conduct and interaction in museums. *European Journal of Marketing*, 40(11-12), 1340 – 1359.

Waskul, D. D., & Waskul, M., E. (2016). *Ghostly encounters: The hauntings of everyday life*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Woods, C., & Wooffitt, R. (2014). Telling the moment: Seeing a UFO. *Narrative Inquiry*, 24(2), 239–258.

Wooffitt, R. (1991). 'I was just doing X... when Y': Some inferential properties of a device in accounts of paranormal experiences. *Text-Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Discourse*, 11(2), 267–288.

Wooffitt, R. (1992). *Telling tales of the unexpected: The organization of factual discourse*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf.