

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES FOR ADOPTING HETERODOX BELIEFS OR AN ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

The importance of extraordinary experiences for the process of adopting a heterodox belief system or an alternative religious world view is often neglected in the existing research literature. Scholars of religion commonly lay stress on the process of religious conversion characterized by different stages. Extraordinary experiences are, thereby, included as potential internal catalysts (e.g. mystical experiences or near-death experiences), but only among others. The particular quality of the extraordinary experience remains largely unconsidered. In our paper, we emphasise the personal extraordinary experiences of strongly subjective evidence as an important factor in the process of becoming a magical practitioner and adopting a heterodox worldview. Our examination is based on the interview data of three field studies with neoshamans, contemporary magicians, and German heathen (Ásatrú), conducted in German-speaking countries. First, we outline different functions of extraordinary experiences regarding the process. Second, we reflect on the process of converting the personal extraordinary experience into a narration (framing). Finally, we propose to distinguish between two classes of extraordinary experiences, with regard to their function in the process of adopting a heterodox (religious) worldview. Furthermore we address the methodological problem regarding the possibility of the reconstruction of factual/objective 'paranormal' events as potential catalysts of extraordinary experiences. This gives rise to the question of the validity of narratively embedded and processed extraordinary experiences. In this context, the German differentiation between *Erlebnis* (experience in the sense of a pure individual impression) and *Erfahrung* (social form of experience, based on shared knowledge) seems to be a crucial distinction.

### INTRODUCTION

It is indisputable that there is a close connection between the personal experience of uncommon, strange or even unreal events, and the individual worldview (or 'Weltanschauung') of a person. Experiencing things that one holds as 'impossible' may—though this impression is closely related to one's 'openness'—also validate or negotiate one's perspective on 'reality' as a concept of knowledge. In our interdisciplinary attempt to reconstruct the different meanings of certain types of 'extraordinary experiences' in adopting heterodox belief systems, we are transgressing the borders of social constructivism as psychological individualism in order to find indications which could help us understand better the connection between the phenomenality of certain extraordinary experiences and individual ways of 'making sense of it' within heterodox belief systems such as neopaganism, neoshamanism and ritual magic. In this paper we use the term 'extraordinary experiences' (hereafter EEs) as an *ideologically neutral, general* term. It includes concepts such as anomalous, extraordinary, magical, mystical, paranormal, parapsychological, psychic, spiritual, supernatural, transcendent, transpersonal, and the like. "Such experiences go beyond the scope of the usual frame of reference, and

seem to be unexplainable by, or explicitly contradictory with, conventional scientific models" as Hofmann and Wiedemer put it (1997, p.147, translated and emphasis by the authors). Obviously, this usage of the term indicates a 'Western' cultural perspective. Our examination is based on interview data from three field studies with neoshamans, contemporary magicians, and German heathen practitioners (Ásatrú), conducted in German-speaking countries between 2000 and 2008 (Gründer, 2008; 2010; Mayer, 2003; 2008a,b; 2009; Mayer & Gründer, 2010).

In the academic literature on religious conversion, such as on superstition, magical thinking and paranormal beliefs, the importance of EEs is often neglected. With regard to magical practices, scholars lay stress on the different well-known psychological and sociological mechanisms that explain the feelings of evidence by the practitioners, without challenging the rationalistic worldview of science; that is, errors in perception such as over-generalization, autosuggestion, errors in estimating chance, confirmatory bias, and the Barnum Effect (cf. Alcock, 1981, pp.90–104; Zusne & Jones, 1989, pp.70–87). With regard to religious conversions, EEs are mostly restricted to mystical experiences, which can be dealt with as a kind of spiritually connoted hallucination, explainable within a rationalistic framework of the neurophysiology of the brain (see, for example, Persinger, 1987). The main reason for this limited view taken by many researchers might be the omnipresent assumption that magic does not work, in a literal sense, and that the existence of so-called paranormal phenomena is based on illusions. This results in an over-generalized attitude towards EEs, disregarding the need for differentiation of these experiences, and of their effects on the experiants.

In her study of modern witchcraft in Great Britain, the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann puts forward the thesis of an interpretive drift towards the establishment of a magical worldview. It results from her observation that "people did not suddenly adopt magical 'beliefs', and they did not explain their practice as the result of sudden insight or (as a rule) a sudden transcendental experience" (Luhrmann, 1989, p.311). With continued magical practice, events and experiences are more and more interpreted in an alternative frame of meaning. Luhrmann's assumption, although criticised (see Mayer & Gründer, 2010), is a prolific approach explaining a fundamental psychical process in becoming a magical practitioner in modern society. Nevertheless, the findings from our field studies suggest that, in many cases, Luhrmann's approach does not adequately describe the psychical dynamics. Although she ascribes a huge importance to the aspect of practical experience for the process of establishing an alternative worldview, the challenging nature of particular EEs that can play a decisive role is ignored.

The following example from a German field study with contemporary magicians (Mayer, 2008a; 2009) may illustrate this role. The interviewee, a 40-year-old person, had been engaged in the study of magic since his early adolescence, and he had a lot of EEs during his first years of practice. It was primarily evidence from strange coincidences ('synchronistic' events) interpreted as meaningful, that made him a believer in magic. Some years later he joined the German section of the *Ordo Templis Orientis* (OTO). His initiation into this magical order was conducted by McMurtry, the former caliph of the

Californian branch of the OTO. McMurtry, who was at this time an old man and an invalid, performed an impressive ritual invoking the god Pan. He began to dance and went into an ecstatic trance—in no way fragile and weak. Then something extraordinary and ‘fierce’ happened: the neophyte observed suddenly, and without any guided imagery for introduction, an intensively glowing red ruby of an enormous size which appeared in the air, spontaneously “from out of nowhere”, as though it belonged to a second layer of reality which covers our everyday reality in a translucent manner. The interviewee reported:—

I felt such a fierce energy [ . . . ] I really had the feeling: there is someone who can deliberately invoke extraordinary energies . . . even ecstasy . . . and self-abandonment . . . and at the same time totally retain control of them. And that had an impact on me. I think the first thing I wrote in my diary after I had left: here and now [*knocking loudly on the table*] I truly realized for the first time that magic truly exists.

This quotation indicates two points: firstly, that magical beliefs and the experience “that magic truly exists” are not necessarily the same, and secondly, that there are qualitative differences between EEs with regard to their efficacy of providing strong subjective evidence for the existence of magic. The above reported EE gained a particular significance for the experient because it not only confirmed an already existing magical belief system, but turned the beliefs into certainty. With this initial example, an important function of EEs within the process of adopting and confirming ‘alternative’ beliefs and worldviews is addressed. Those functions of EEs are the subject of our next section.

#### FUNCTIONS OF EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES WITHIN THE PROCESS OF THE ADOPTION OF HETERODOX (‘ALTERNATIVE’) BELIEFS

We can observe different functions of EEs within the process of the adoption of heterodox beliefs. The first, obviously, concerns the *personal worldview* itself. But there are also functions concerning the *construction of identity* as well as the *religious self-localization*, and the *confirmation and further development of a ‘new’ religious system* itself.

##### *Personal Worldview*

EEs can provide subjective evidence for the existence of some kind of a ‘realm of transcendence’ beyond everyday experience and beyond the domain which is accessible to scientific exploration. This does not necessarily have to include the belief in a definite religious system or in a divine entity but can refer to paranormal beliefs which challenge the area of validity of the well-known and broadly accepted scientific models. Some of the interviewed magicians, for example, reported on spontaneous psychokinetic effects occurring in the context of magic rituals, such as exploding light bulbs, the dysfunction of electrical devices, or the unexplainable blowing aloft of folded and crumpled pieces of paper containing sentences of personal intention (*Willenssätze*) from a bowl placed on a ritual table. Those phenomena can be interpreted by a magician as strong evidence that it is possible to affect matter with the human mind by paranormal means. The preferred models of explanation may differ greatly with regard to how closely they are aligned to scientifically accepted models of physics. As our field study shows, some of the interviewees refer to chaos theory or the theory of morphogenetic fields (in

Rupert Sheldrake’s sense); others believe in models of subtle energies which are (as yet) unverifiable; others imagine the existence of alternate levels of reality which make paranormal phenomena plausible.

Of course, EEs can have crucial effects on religious beliefs too, as demonstrated by the next example. A 35-year-old woman with a traditional Catholic socialization described how she came in contact with Neopagan ideas which attracted her. She consequently developed an animistic worldview assuming the existence of other forms of non-human beings such as spirits of ancestors, elves and fairies—but not gods. Later on, a partner introduced her to Ásatrú polytheism. On the one hand, the woman had an aversion to the concept of Germanic gods—partly for political and ideological reasons—but on the other hand, her interest was stimulated by her partner, who encouraged her to experience ‘his’ Germanic gods. During an Ásatrú-Ostara ritual performed by him, she asked the gods to manifest themselves. Shortly after, she reported the occurrence of massive paranormal phenomena within her flat, such as fog inside the rooms, and the manifestation of strange animals running around. Her cats displayed very strange behaviour as well. At this point, a shift from her diffuse animistic Neopagan belief system towards a faith in the existence of Germanic gods was initiated by causal attribution of the paranormal phenomena to the power of these gods, and therefore as their evident answer to the request made during the ritual. She confirmed her new belief with further evidence gained during a Ouija board session—normally a typical spiritualist setting—with the deity Loki as a guest. The woman received a final confirmation when she met the Germanic god Wodan in her dreams. He encouraged her to try to revive the “better preserved roots of ancient Germanic religion” from the many rural customs and legends in contemporary Germany. This was her main reason for becoming an Ásatrú heathen.

##### *Construction of (Biographical) Identity*

This last example also touches upon a function of EE that goes beyond the domain of beliefs and personal worldview. It shows that they became an important part of the biographical construction of identity. This function is perhaps best known from the comprehensive literature on religious conversion and mystical experiences (for example, in the work of William James, 1902) and with regard to religious conversion (for example, Hood, 2005; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981; Rambo & Farhadian, 1999). This, however, is rarely examined in a systematic way. Schäfer (2008) conducted an interview study in Germany on the biographical meaning of EEs, using a methodological approach of the reconstruction of narrative identity (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2002). Her subjects were recruited from a normal population, without concern for a particular world view or a membership of a New Religious Movement. She detected three basic patterns of interpreting EEs with regard to the dimension of normalization versus specialization (‘Besonderung’). With the first pattern, one interprets EEs as evidence or expression of one’s own specialness. With the second pattern, one interprets EEs as a kind of desirable anomaly in an otherwise normal biography. According to the final pattern, EEs are interpreted as a possible expression of one’s own specialness which, however, has to be subject to renegotiation again and again.

In our interview data we found the first pattern to be predominant, particularly with regard to the magicians and the neoshamans. This is obvious in the case of neoshamanism because the myth of the figure of the shaman includes his specialness: the shaman is marked with the feature of being elected by the Divine, often expressed in an initiatory sickness (Eliade, 1974, pp. 33–64; Mayer, 2008b). Some common biographical features of the contemporary magicians interviewed in our field study are a strong individualism, uncommon interests during adolescence, a premature occupation with philosophical and ideological questions, and a moment of rebellion and non-adjustment (in different forms and to different degrees) (Mayer, 2008a, pp. 131–143; Mayer, 2009). Within neopagan groups of the Ásatrúar, the interpretation of EEs as signs of specialization is closely connected with the social role or function of a person within the ritual group. This means the ‘spiritual leaders’ of the Ásatrúar more often understand their EEs in this way while other members strongly highlight the collective meanings of EEs (Gründer, 2010).

However, not all of the interviewees connected their reports of EEs directly with a self-attribution of specialness. This may be partially due to a social desirability effect as some of them may fear that laying great stress on one’s own specialness could be seen as an expression of arrogance.

Regardless of the meaning of EEs on the aspect of specialization, they often mark important points in the biographical process of change on the path towards magical beliefs or a new worldview respectively. Luhrmann (1989) emphasizes this point with her thesis of an *interpretive drift* towards the establishment of magical beliefs, and Schäfer (2008, pp. 107–172) found in her above-mentioned study three different basic patterns of interpreting EEs as part of biographical processes of change. In two of them, EEs play a decisive role in the biographical narration: as starting points or triggers for the process of change, or as turning or climax points during a complex process of change consisting of different phases. We can confirm these findings with our own interview data.

#### *Religious Self-Localization and Confirmation*

Furthermore, another aspect is touched upon: the function of EEs as evidence for the authenticity of spiritual experience. EEs can confirm faith in a new adopted religion or spiritual belief system, and turn it into certainty. This can be illustrated by the report of a female German shaman who performed a so-called neoshamanic journey in order to help a client’s son with repeated psychical problems. She did not know further particulars and circumstances, nor the client or her son, who had been present during the ritual. The shaman reported her experiences combining images from her shamanic ‘journey’ with perceptions of phenomena which she located in her home environment:–

I went on the journey, and my power animal and my spirit helper went ahead, and I got to Haiti . . . to such a voodoo priest, huh? And I sat alone in my house [*where she performed the ‘journey’*]—I know, the house has beams, and when people are walking herein [*somewhere in another room of this house*] I perceive that well—I was alone in the house . . . and I came to this . . . house of this voodoo priest, and then . . . someone ran through the room, huohhhh [*she took a deep breath*], I already felt weak at the knees [*laughed*], and my power animal said to me immediately: turn around! turn around! Immediately away, huh? And I turned around, and away. And thereafter

I reported to the mother what had happened, and then she said to me that her son had married a woman in Haiti whose father is a voodoo priest . . . and he was totally against the marriage, and she also suggested that for that reason her son behaves strangely like this, huh? . . . that was once that I was frightened [*during a shamanic journey*] (. . .) but I immediately realized that my power animal protects me and says: you can go this far, turn around, no further, not one more step further (. . .), and it was quite unequivocal about it, that that involves a force which you are not able to handle (. . .) and therefore I totally relied on it (. . .) now I don’t get into such situations any more because I feel it already there in my bones, yes, and my power animal provides me protection, huh? I simply rely on it.

We find a pre-existing spiritual belief system which contains a more or less animistic (neoshamanic) worldview, and the belief in the efficacy of the communication with some personal spiritual entities based on former experience. In this particular journey, the shaman was confronted with darker sides of the so-called ‘non-ordinary reality’. The frightening quality of this experience arose, on the one hand, from the dark and powerful character of the voodoo priest himself, and, on the other hand, from the strange phenomena she perceived in her home environment which she interpreted as psychokinetic. She reported two forms of confirmation of her belief system, one through the warning and protecting reaction of her power animal during the journey into the domain of ‘non-ordinary reality’, and another through the statements of the client which ‘verified’ the validity of the images gained during the journey, and suggested an everyday-reality-based frame of interpretation. Experiencing the helpful and meaningful reaction of a spiritual entity within a critical situation during an altered state of consciousness may strongly deepen the faith in the spiritual belief system, and the reliance upon and certainness about the efficacy of the spirit communication.

According to interviews with Ásatrúars there is a close connection between aspects of being touched by the divine, religious self-localization and specialness within the narration of EEs. One interviewed Ásatrúar who wanted to have children explained how the coincidence between his sacrifice to the Germanic god Donar and the pregnancy of his wife two months after this validated and so strengthened his belief in the gods:–

these are such things where I say: there is an expression of divine intervention because it is (. . .) so intense that . . . there surely is something one can explain in a rational way if one likes to, but for me as a religious man there is a need to relate it to these divine powers.

Another common form of confirming a religious worldview is represented by experiences with synchronous weather phenomena in the context of Ásatrú rituals. At first this is in the sense of being touched by the divine and confirmation of the presence of his gods:–

I did sacrifices to Wodan and [ . . . ] I stood there, and it was a warm and windless day, and suddenly a light breeze came up and clasped me, and this is what I interpret a bit in a nature-mystical way as referring to the Gods.

But later on — within the context of a narration that rather indicates dimensions of specialization — he described how a very localized and short hailstorm crossed the ritual group just as he was taking an oath to the god Donar. In this broader context, the above-mentioned story attained a stronger emphasis on the impressiveness of the ‘effect’ of his acclamation of the god,

and the 'resulting breeze' was nearly transformed into a 'storm':—

People who took part in that ritual even today talk about it with a certain awe, like I told you about this oath, or even the thing with this, standing on a cliff on a windless day and calling on Wodan and suddenly came this storm, huh—storm, came this gust of air over me.

As we can see, such an EE related to a neopagan ritual can confirm a religious system where the 'forces of nature' are understood as gods and goddesses. This confirmatory aspect of EEs with reference to religious 'truth' forms the basis of most of their functions of EEs, and points to a main issue in neopagan religion: experiencing the gods is much more relevant than believing in them!

### Framing

The term 'experience' can be used in two different meanings: the lived, or immediate, experience can only be communicated by transferring it by means of a narration and becomes thus an interpreted event. This transfer process includes some peculiarities because the selection and composition of narrative elements to create the narration strongly depend on existing personal experiences, overbeliefs (in the sense of William James), and the social and religious context (see Stenger, 1993, pp.75–82 and 139–165, on the construction of 'occult' meaning on the basis of different sources of evidence generated by EEs which he called 'key moments'—'Schlüsselerlebnisse'). With regard to EEs, it manifests itself in a particular way because such experiences often are characterized as hardly communicable as they touch upon something that cannot be described in words. This property of EEs can give rise to the use of common narratives to form the lived experiences into communicable coherent experiences, disregarding their particularities. As a general rule, one can say that the (new) belief system determines the created narration. We will demonstrate this with some examples from our interview data.

A magician who experienced multiple incidents of malfunction of electrical devices during a phase of intensive magical practice reported that a colleague of his was convinced, according to his magical belief system, that these incidents occurred because an elemental spirit had been evoked during a banning ritual and then felt neglected by the magician, and chose that particular way to make his presence felt. The magician himself commented on this interpretation: maybe, maybe not. With his narration, he indicated on the one hand that he believes principally in the existence of paranormal phenomena and in the possibility that they can be evoked by means of magical practice. On the other hand, he demonstrated a critical perspective by leaving it open as to whether these phenomena were paranormal events or whether they were caused by normal means. He also indicated a distanced openness towards the possibility of his colleague's interpretation.

It is also possible to integrate past EEs into new adopted belief systems. Thereby, a retrospective biographical reinterpretation and adaptation of EEs takes place. This was the case with a neoshaman who talked about health problems which remain inexplicable to orthodox medical diagnosis. At the age of 18, a crisis situation occurred when, travelling through Italy, he suddenly lost consciousness and lapsed into a coma for some hours. Three years later he came in contact with neoshamanic practices, and then he gained insights which gave him an understanding of the 'real meaning' of the past events: the Divine

call which indicates the predetermination for the particular social role of the shaman, according to the (neo-)shamanic matrix. This is not the only example of our interview data which is not compatible with the widely adopted sociological thesis that such experiences can be had "only after one has accepted the ideas that make these experiences possible" (Spickard, 1993, p. 110).

The interconnection between shared knowledge (worldview) and (religious) experience within the Ásatrú context becomes evident by comparing the different reception of potential 'meaningful occurrences' or synchronicities within group-rituals. Within an ideologically right-wing-orientated group the blowing-out of a candle just in the moment while the leader cited a text about springtime-wind coming from the mountains was noted as a disturbing event but not as a 'sacred sign'. Within a strongly polytheist and more 'spiritual' group the upcoming of a very short but heavy rain-shower just after finishing the invocation of the gods was collectively understood as a sign of their presence, and it caused enthusiastic acclamations by all participants.

In both cases, possibly 'extraordinary' experiences became 'normalized', either by strategies of rationalistic ignorance, or by embedding them within a pre-existent religious worldview. Different forms of knowledge are framing even collective experiences as more or less important evidential signs of a heterodox concept of reality.

### CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

#### *Two Classes of Extraordinary Experiences*

According to our findings, we propose that two classes of EEs are distinguished with regard to their function in the process of adopting a heterodox (religious) worldview. The first class contains EEs of a basically *confirming* quality. They often occur within a religious context and, if this is the case, are interpreted as a kind of mystical/gnostic experience. EEs of the second class show a further feature that provides strong subjective evidence of being *scientific anomalies* ('paranormal' phenomena) which go beyond the frame of reference of a religious-magical context; that is, they are likely to be intersubjectively interpreted as anomalies, independent of a particular worldview. Whilst EEs of the first class remain generally within the experiential domain of everyday reality and gain their extraordinary quality on the basis of the subjective attribution of meaning and of the estimation of the probability of chance ('meaningful coincidences'), EEs of the second class concern incidents that transgress the borders of everyday reality.

However, one has to keep two things in mind: (a) we are dealing with experiences (the epistemic level), and not with phenomena (the ontic level), and (b) the two classes of EEs cannot be clearly separated because the characterization and categorization of a particular EE depends strongly on the personal interpretation by the interviewee as well as by the researcher. The last point implies that our thesis of the particular importance of second-class EEs for the adoption and establishment of magical beliefs, or a heterodox worldview, cannot be understood as a general causal principle.

#### *Experience: Erlebnis and Erfahrung*

The formation of two classes of EEs with reference to their power to provide feelings of subjective evidence—some may prefer to see it as two poles of a

continuum but that would not fundamentally affect the line of argument—must be supplemented by adding another crucial distinction. It concerns the conception, or understanding, of the term ‘experience’ itself. The German language provides the possibility of differentiating between *Erlebnis* (experience in the sense of a purely individual impression—immediate or lived experience) and *Erfahrung* (a social form of experience, based on shared knowledge—interpreted or coherent experience) (Junge, Suber & Gerber, 2008, p.17). For the researcher, it is important to keep this distinction in mind because he learns about an interviewee’s EEs in the form of *Erfahrung*, which consists of communicable narration and cognitive concepts. As we demonstrated in another paper (Mayer & Gründer, 2010), the verbally expressed EEs and biographical moments of evidence are often embedded in commonly shared narratives. In the case of neopagan religion, the so-called ‘coming home experience’ is such a widely spread narrative that has virtually gained the status of a theological principle, especially in Wicca. The ‘coming home experience’ is a particular kind of conversion narrative which refers to a feeling of not experiencing a religious conversion when joining a neopagan group, but rather finding something anew that has been already known for a long time. We could show that this narrative, with its serial character, has taken a life of its own as an ‘identity module’ narrative which, metaphorically speaking, ‘concretes over’ the individual narration, and/or its experiential character. Thus, the particular biographical moments of ‘experiences of evidence’ have often become obscured.

The problem that appears in this context also concerns interview studies on EEs in general. If the researcher is not only interested in the question of the knowledge of particular narratives that are applied to particular contexts, but also in the underlying personal (lived) experiences, and possibly even in the actual events that caused the EEs, he has to deal with this. The fundamental question is whether one is able to draw conclusions from the narrations of EEs with regard to immediate experiences, and the nature of actual events, or whether the narratively embedded and processed experiences are ‘unsuitable’ material in this regard? Despite the (radical) approach of scholars who—strongly influenced by the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy—more or less equate the narration with the experience or the event itself (with regard to religious conversion, see for example Staples & Mauss, 1987), we are of the opinion that this is possible, at least in a rudimentary way. A close examination of the communicated content can bring individual differences to light which provide insight into the personal aspect of those experiences. In this context, we want to distinguish between ‘narration’ and ‘narrative’. We use the term ‘narrative’ in the sense of a well-structured narration containing a set of determined elements as in, for example, the narrative of the ‘coming home experience’. In our use, a ‘narration’ is more broadly conceptualized: an individual narration of an experience is composed of a multitude of elements (schemata). With new combinations of those elements, one is able to communicate previously untold content. It is part of human creativity to find new solutions to communicate uncommon contents without resorting to predefined narratives (at least not primarily); and, likewise due to their creativity, human beings have the ability to understand (or to believe to understand) such genuine narrations. The use of the term ‘narration’ implies and stresses the constructive aspect of those accounts.

In the interview data, we can find narrations of EEs which strongly match common narratives, and which contain only a few individual elements. However, those narrations are of more scientific value, going beyond the well-known stereotypes and providing unique elements or new combinations of elements. Although we are not able to bridge the divide between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* and, thus, never can be sure of the nature of the underlying event, the aspects of singularity of the narrations can provide a part of the ‘auratic moment’ of this event. With this we can gain more knowledge of the world, and of the possibilities of its interpretation, by recognizing unknown relations through the uniqueness of the narration on the basis of well-known elements of meaning. One can scientifically study narrations of EEs without smoothing away their particular quality arising from their uniqueness. This is possible by closely examining the narrations using comparison and contrast. Thus, those structures become recognizable that, on the one hand, ‘concrete over’ personal experiences as common narratives, and, on the other hand, lie under these covering layers. The close examination of such narrations can be done on different levels of in-depth analysis—depending on the kind of questioning, and the particular kind of narrations elicited (biographical narrations, narrations focused on particular events or experiences, talk-in-interaction or primarily monologically structured narration, etc.).

With regard to the close examination of narrations of EEs, we will now point out two further methodological problems which are strongly interdependent: social desirability and social distinction as biasing factors and the communication of EEs in a ‘shielded mode’. As mentioned above, when dealing with EEs we must make reference to the dimension of normalization versus specialization. Both strategies can bias the narration for the purpose of self-styling: normalization as a means to avoid the impression of arrogance and specialization as an expression of one’s own special role and meaning as a person as distinct from ‘normal people’. These strategies are possible—and necessary—because of the particular nature of EEs. Schäfer points out that “in some interviews the conspicuous emphasis on his/her own normality . . . as well as the alternative emphasis on his/her own specialness, or a virulent narrative dealing with this question, indicate, that the telling of EEs always also implicates the necessity of self-positioning towards this ‘extraordinary’” (Schäfer, 2008, p.244, translation by the authors). This necessity can lead to the use of a specific, secure mode of speech which is a particular characteristic of reporting EEs to others, as Schmied-Knittel and Schetsche have demonstrated (Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche, 2005; Schetsche & Schmied-Knittel, 2003, pp.180–182). The authors termed this style a “shielded mode” of communication. It is characterized by different strategies such as the repeated assurance that one is neither crazy nor naïve, assuring that one’s powers of recollection are excellent, argumentatively eliminating other logical possibilities of conventional explanation, citing witnesses, and referring to (scientific) ‘experts’ of the paranormal. Such strategies don’t necessarily have to be explicit but can also be handled in the very construction of the narration (Childs & Murray, 2010; Lamont, 2007; Wooffitt, 1991, 1992).

These strategies, which occur in almost every narration of EEs, in part at least highlight the problem for the researcher: the narrators initially examine

the interviewer on his opinion towards the contents to be reported. The interviewees tend to form their narrations according to the anticipated expectations or attitudes. This is not new—Favret-Saada (1977) demonstrated it as early as the 1970s with her impressive field study—but, nevertheless, it is of major importance, as we experienced in our own field work. The impression the interviewee gets from the researcher, arising from his questions and general attitude, forms the narration the researcher will receive. Furthermore, and this is almost a methodological commonplace today, the phrasing of the interview questions and the manner of conducting the interview in general have a great impact on the 'outcome'. Thus, one always has to keep in mind that the interview data reflect the social (inter-)action tied to the particular context in which the interview has taken place and that this has to be accounted for (Childs & Murray, 2010).

Concluding with this point, we want to come back to the distinction between the two classes of EEs. Those of the second class are less frequent, but they represent experiences that consolidate the structure of magic or paranormal beliefs independently of the actual narrative or conceptual framing within a particular religious world view. They form, so to speak, high-intensity seeds of experience which push the development, or which—to use another image—build pillars piled into solid ground, stabilizing the building's base, which rests on a somewhat swampy terrain. They also tend to elicit unusual narrations because the common narratives are often not adequately suitable to them, and thus they are of particular importance for the research on EEs. To make EEs from the second class scientifically productive, however, requires an appropriate attitude to be adopted by the researcher, and an open-mindedness towards uncommon, and sometimes maybe odd, narrations.

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