

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Northampton		
Unit of Assessment: 4: Psychology, Psychiatry & Neuroscience		
Title of case study: Wellbeing benefits of enabling a non-academic audience to make sense of anomalous experiences by providing a science-based understanding		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Chris Roe	Professor	2005 - present
Callum Cooper	Senior Lecturer	2012 - present
Rachel Evenden	Lecturer	2011 - present
Elizabeth Roxburgh	Senior Lecturer	2007 - 2018
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2013 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		

1. Summary of the impact

Professor Roe, Dr Cooper, Dr Evenden and Dr Roxburgh have undertaken research that demonstrates that ‘anomalous’ beliefs and experiences (also labelled ‘paranormal’, ‘spiritual’, and ‘psychic’) are very common among the general public, but are poorly understood, and academic psychology has provided little guidance concerning their ontology and impacts. Consequently, members of the public typically find them challenging to make sense of and are reticent to disclose them to others for fear of ridicule or even pathologisation, with documented adverse consequences for their health and wellbeing. **Roe** and colleagues have published research that maps these phenomena in accessible ways that enable the public to understand their experiences and their consequences, emphasising the importance of scientific epistemologies in making reliable judgements and differentiating normal from abnormal experience. This case study outlines the impacts for experiencers, as well as for national and international networks of practitioners.

2. Underpinning research

Roe and colleagues have conducted research into the occurrence and impacts of anomalous experiences (AEs). This research has confirmed that AEs are reported by a high proportion of people from a wide range of backgrounds, but may occur only rarely in any individual’s life [3.1]. The research is ontologically neutral and accepts that such experiences have a psychological reality with tangible consequences, irrespective of the ‘ultimate cause’ of the experience.

Research on anomalous experiences

The research has demonstrated that people who have AEs typically regard them as important, meaningful events that are existentially challenging [3.1, 3.2]. When AEs are taken seriously and valued by others, experiencers can derive psychological benefit from processing them in ways that enable personal reflection and growth [3.3]. **Cooper, Roe & Mitchell [3.3]** found that ostensible after-death communication experiences (ADCs) during bereavement could facilitate the bereavement process and foster feelings of hope for the future. In the largest survey of its type [3.1], **Roe** and colleagues asked 1,004 people with personal experience of ADCs about their circumstances, phenomenology and impacts, finding that 73% believed that the experience

Impact case study (REF3)

had brought them comfort / emotional healing and 68% found it was regarded as important for their bereavement process: 71% said that they treasured their experience, while a further 20% were glad to have had it. **Roxburgh** and **Evenden** identified that experiencers found AEs challenging to make sense of but when they attempted to disclose them during therapy they were often trivialised, being treated as inauthentic and inappropriate for therapeutic focus [3.2]. In a related study, **Roxburgh** and **Evenden** found that therapists felt uncomfortable about discussing AEs for fear of seeming to endorse delusional beliefs, a stance that they attributed to the lack of coverage of AEs in their initial training and subsequent professional development [3.4].

Research with Mediums and Healers

Roxburgh and **Roe's** research [3.5] with people who identify as mediums, and report regular AEs that might in other circumstances lead to a clinical diagnosis (for example, hearing things others cannot hear, having embodied experiences that are identified as non-self), has demonstrated that practising mediums exhibit greater psychological wellbeing than comparable groups and population norms, illustrating that AEs need not be distressing or socially maladaptive. Follow-up research suggested that positive wellbeing effects can be a consequence of adopting a spiritual framework to make sense of these experiences, especially in enabling access to psychological resources that make the experiences meaningful and personally controllable. This work also stresses the need for a scientific approach (e.g., evidence based, testing counter explanations, controlling for confounding factors) that focuses on identifying normal explanations for ostensibly paranormal experiences.

Research on Alternative Medicines

Roe and colleagues produced a meta-analysis of randomized control trial studies that investigated noncontact healing [3.6]. These findings have been used by the healing community to argue that healing practices based on intention or energetic processes can contribute to the wider healthcare eco-system and to lobby for a more sustained consideration of their potential benefits to public health. **Roe's** research provided explicit guidelines regarding methodological good practice for future clinical studies to improve the quality profile of research [3.6].

3. References to the research

[3.1] Elsaesser, E., **Roe, C.**, **Cooper, C.**, Parra, A., & Lorimer, D. (2019). *A Survey of the phenomenology and psychological impacts of perceived spontaneous after-death communications*. 48. Paper presented at International Congress in Spirituality and Psychiatry, Jerusalem, Israel. https://270e5019-b69a-43e9-bc19-6f07e100cf88.filesusr.com/ugd/349100_880a6e44c32b48f4a0a390d874d4e18e.pdf

[3.2] **Roxburgh, E.C.**, & **Evenden, R.E.** (2016a). "Most people think you're a fruit loop": Clients' experiences of seeking support for anomalous experiences. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 16(3), 211–221. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12077>

[3.3] **Cooper, C.E.**, **Roe, C.A.**, & **Mitchell, G.** (2015). Anomalous experiences and the bereavement process. In T. Cattoi & C. Moreman (Eds.) *The ecstasy of the end: Death and dying across traditions* (pp. 117-131). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

[3.4] **Roxburgh, E. C.**, & **Evenden, R. E.** (2016). 'They daren't tell people': therapists' experiences of working with clients who report anomalous experiences. *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling*, 18(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642537.2016.1170059>

Impact case study (REF3)

[3.5] **Roxburgh, E. C., & Roe, C. A.** (2011). A survey of dissociation, boundary-thinness, and psychological wellbeing in spiritualist mental mediumship. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 75(2), 279-299. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-02939-006>

[3.6] **Roe, C. A., Sonnex, C., & Roxburgh, E. C.** (2014). Two meta-analyses of noncontact healing studies. *Explore: the Journal of Science and Healing*, 11(1), 11-23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2014.10.001>

Research has been published in international peer reviewed specialist journals to raise awareness among practitioner groups that come into contact with persons who are struggling with AEs. Support for this work comes from a broad range of national and international foundations, including from practitioner groups themselves.

The research has been supported from competitive national and international research grants from the Confederation of Healing Organisations, UK (GBP20,200), the Bial Foundation, Portugal (EUR33,000), the Perrott-Warrick Fund, Trinity College, University of Cambridge (GBP235,000), and the Salvia Foundation, Geneva (GBP225,000)

4. Details of the impact

Increasing access to a scientific perspective to the practice and experience for spiritualists and mediums

Through collaborations with the Spiritualist National Union (SNU), the researchers have introduced the practitioner community and members of the public interested in mediumship to the principles of the scientific method as a means to critically reflect on their own experiences and the attributions they make to them. This provides a context within which to acknowledge the claims of mediumship made from formal peer reviewed empirical work, alongside consideration of conventional psychological explanations (e.g., in terms of error, misperception, or fraud) as the most appropriate account. This also introduces ways of empirically testing claims by controlling for those conventional explanations when designing in situ 'experiments'.

The team's outreach programme is built around applying scientific principles to lived experience and subjecting explanations to empirical test. As keynote speakers at a national 'Science Day' organised by the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU)(2013), **Roe** and **Roxburgh** introduced the spiritualist community to their mediumship research. The presentation offered practitioners strategies for adopting a more critical, evidence-based approach to understanding their own practice and experiences, with an emphasis on impacts for psychological wellbeing. The event was so popular that the SNU commissioned a series of workshops, beginning with a 'Science Week' (2014). This provided an opportunity for practising mediums to work with research methods that ranged from controlled experiments incorporating electroencephalography (EEG) measures to more qualitative approaches including questionnaires and interviews. Due to demand, eight further workshop programmes have been run under the auspices of the SNU between 2015 and 2019 (additional planned events have been postponed due to the coronavirus outbreak). Feedback from participants reflects the impact that this had on their own mediumship ability and experiences, for example:

- "I attended the AFC early on in my training very much a beginner at that point; having the benefit of the science sessions as a bonus to my course really helped me to feel less fearful about hiding my abilities from some aspects of my life on my return"
- "You and your team helped enlighten me as to what I can do to help validate what it is I do. The Science bit, although daunting and unexpected, helped enhance my learning on the course and it was a fascinating addition to an already exciting course. I wanted more sessions with the scientists"

- “To say we feel validated is an understatement”
- “An eye-opening and fascinating experience to have the opportunity to learn and take part in scientific studies and methods which can help to verify our abilities and normalise what are very real experiences for us” [5.1].

There has traditionally been antipathy and mistrust between the scientific and mediumistic communities. The ‘Science Day’ event showcasing ongoing research at the University of Northampton was instrumental in enabling a rapprochement that led directly to a change in policy within the SNU to encourage collaboration with academics [5.2]. A significant consequence of this policy change was to allow research to be conducted under their auspices, and the SNU’s National Executive Committee donated office space to establish a permanent science laboratory at the Arthur Findlay College site in order to conduct original research, host science workshops and lectures as part of events open to the public, and development programmes designed for practising mediums. The SNU is a national body responsible for 325 churches across the United Kingdom, but also has an established international reputation (running dedicated residential programmes for other nationalities, including Swedish, Italian, Swiss, North American, and Japanese weeks). The SNU President, and the SNU’s Science Officer were co-applicants on projects that resulted in joint funding (Roe, Saunders, Evenden, & Bruton, 2016, 2017, 2018) to refurbish the space and underwrite research costs. Matched funding has come from local Spiritualist churches, Friends of Stansted Hall, and a donations initiative, reflecting the groundswell of support among practitioners and lay members.

Increasing understanding of anomalous experiences among the wider public

Roe and colleagues’ research with mediums and on ADCs features extensively in the 6-part Netflix documentary series ‘Surviving death’. The programme focuses on investigations of anomalous experiences that are interpreted as evidence of survival of bodily death, such as apparitional experiences and communications provided by mediums. Coverage emphasises the need to consider conventional psychological explanations (error, fraud) as the most appropriate account, but also explores the psychological reality of such experiences and the consequences they can have, advocating a truly sceptical response that evaluates a claim on its merits rather than on prior expectations. The format, content and approach were directly affected by interactions between the research team and the series producers [5.3]. Feedback within Netflix has been very positive, and a second series has been commissioned. Roe is a consultant for series 2, advising on content and approach.

Increasing the acceptance and use of alternative healing in public health

Roe’s research on the efficacy of alternative healing contributed to increased discussion regarding the role of complementary therapies in public health. The researchers presented their findings to key members of the UK complementary therapy community, including members of the Parliamentary Group for Integrated Health (Feb, 2015). David Tredinnick MP, Member of the Commons Health Committee and Commons Science and Technology Committee introduced the event, which also featured Sue Knight, Chief Executive of The Confederation of Healing Organisations (CHO). The study features prominently on the CHO website: <https://the-cho.org.uk/research/two-meta-analyses-of-non-contact-healing-studies/> and prompted them to commission additional empirical work to inform the practice of their members, as well as leading the College of Healing to expand the coverage of controlled clinical research in their curriculum [5.4]. Additionally, the organisation has made use of the research in their public relations communications, and it has increased their standing as a ‘professional organisation’ leading to further opportunities for their practice [5.4]. It also formed part of the CHO’s submission to the Charity Commission consultation on the use and promotion of complementary and alternative medicine in 2017, which concluded that the vast majority of registered complimentary and alternative medicines (CAM) charities were meeting their obligation to establish the efficacy of

Impact case study (REF3)

the relevant treatment or to demonstrate that clear that benefit can be derived from the approach [5.4].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] AFC Workshops Participant Testimonials

[5.2] Testimonial Evidence from David Bruton, President of the SNU

[5.3] Testimonial from Jesse Sweet, Producer of the Netflix documentary, *Surviving Death*

[5.4] Testimonial from Sue Knight, Chief Executive of the Confederation of the Healing Organisations