

Extrasensory Perception and Sense of Self

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of extrasensory perception (ESP)'s impact on sense of self and invites further research on the matter. The aim of this research is to consider if ESP can extend a person's sense of self beyond the physical realm. The sense of self is examined through a multidisciplinary approach, providing a diverse framework to look into the subject. A historical review and debate on the reason for the lack of scientific investigation offer an understanding of ESP's background. Quantum models will be used to suggest the existence of paranormal phenomena and the possibility of ESP's influence. The discussion concludes by presenting counterarguments and inviting further investigation into both ESP and its impact on sense of self.

Extrasensory Perception and Sense of Self

The investigation into the question “who am I?” is fundamental to human beings. The sense of self has been a subject of intense study across disciplines. APA Dictionary of Psychology defines sense of self as “an individual’s feeling of identity, uniqueness, and self-direction” (<https://dictionary.apa.org/sense-of-self>). It is the sense of “I” that experiences the world, recognizes oneself, and defines personal identity. There have been theories, empirical research and debates going on in psychology, neuroscience and philosophy trying to understand the nature and development of sense of self. Theories of self connect the self with cognitive, affective, physiological, behavioral representation or conscious experience of an individual.

Despite extensive research in the field, gaps remain in understanding the relationship between extrasensory perception (ESP) and sense of self. As a paranormal phenomenon, ESP often receives skepticism and disinterest from the mainstream scientific community. Nevertheless, academic research has supported the existence of such paranormal experiences as near-death experience (NDE) and past life memories, both of which operate beyond the five sense’s world. These experiences often share a recurring theme involving extrasensory perception and a form of consciousness beyond conventional time and space boundaries. Given the established presence of these paranormal phenomena, this paper invites academic exploration into the impact of ESP on sense of self.

The invitation is important for several reasons. First, there is no academic research concerning ESP’s impact on sense of self. The controversy of ESP phenomenon prevents investigation into the relationship. Second, exploring this relationship can bring new insight to human consciousness. As ESP opens a reality beyond physical limitation, it blurs the lines between self and others, creating an interconnected sense of self. Third, the new knowledge can reshape models of identity and agency. An individual’s self is not confined within a personal

boundary but expands toward collective consciousness. This perception shift replaces personal judgement with intuitive energy connection, reduces egotism, and allows individuals to see themselves as an integral part of the whole. Finally, the study of this subject pushes scientific frontiers and holds transformative potential for human growth. Human beings' psychic abilities, which have been associated with negative traits spiritually and culturally, could be scientifically studied and effectively applied without fear. Thus, this research not only contributes to scientific advancement, but also holds applicability in diverse domains.

My claim that extrasensory perception allows a person to access information beyond the physical world, thus expanding his/ her sense of self beyond physical limitation begins with an outline different perspectives on sense of self. A review of academic development in ESP will be offered, along with an examination of reasons for the lack of study in the field. To explore the possibility of extrasensory perception's impact on sense of self, I will discuss paranormal phenomena connected with ESP experience in academic research. Quantum theory is employed to explain the mechanism of those phenomena. I will also demonstrate how these parapsychological phenomena, including ESP, influence a person's sense of self. Finally, I will summarize key insights and invite further academic research.

Sense of Self Historical Understandings

Psychological Approach

From a psychological perspective, sense of self is formed through different dimensions, including self-reflection, behavior awareness, social interaction and unconscious impulse. In cognitive theory, sense of self is associated with internal mental processes and frameworks like self-schemata, "cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience" (Markus, 1977, p. 64). Regarding behavioral dimensions, self-perception theory explains how a person perceives himself by observing his own behavior and the context in which it occurs (Bem, 1972).

When internal cues are unclear, an individual attributes his understanding of himself to his behavior around circumstances (Bem, 1972). Social psychology explains the identity as an “extension of the self beyond the level of the individual” (Brewer, 1991, p. 476). According to social identity theory, individuals identify with their social group membership, creating a collective identity, which preserves and enhances the sense of self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Looking-glass self theory added that individuals develop self-concept by imagining how they appear to others (Cooley, 2017). The sense of self is not only an internal experience but also socially constructed. Psychodynamic theory contributed another dimension to the sense of self, centered on the unconscious conflicts and latent desires. Sigmund Freud believed that “self” was developed during the early years through the interplay of primitive urges (id), rational thinking (ego) and moral conscience (superego). Through the psychological lens, sense of self is a complex concept with dynamic nature shaped by various individual aspects.

Neuroscientific Approach

The neuroscientific approach seeks to uncover how brain activity and neural mechanism shape a person’s experience of selfhood. From a neuroscientific viewpoint, self-referential process is linked to certain brain regions and neuron networks. The cortical midline structures (CMS) theory suggests that processing of self-referential stimuli in CMS is a fundamental component in generating a model of the self (Northoff and Bermpohl, 2004). Besides, the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) involves self-referential processing and the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC) as well as precuneus work together to form a stable sense of self. Thus, self-processing is directly linked to dynamic processes and coordination in the brain. According to the default mode network (DMN) theory, “The DMN acts to coordinate network integration to influence the body's response to events, thereby supporting flexible, adaptive behavior in complex environments. It is from this activity – which creates ‘a center of narrative gravity’ – that our

sense of ourselves emerges.” (Davey and Harrison, 2018, p. 279). By continuously processing, linking various cognitive and emotional processes, DMN plays a crucial role in self-awareness. Based on these discoveries, neuroscientific theories demonstrate that our sense of self doesn’t come from only abstract concepts but also emerges from the physiological mechanism of the brain itself.

Philosophical Approach

Different schools of thought see sense of self differently. Some view it as only mind or continuity of consciousness, others consider it as a total of perception, a sum of actions or even an illusion. Rene Descartes “contends that he, or his mind, is really distinct from his body” (Thomas, 1995, p. 83). Descartes viewed himself as the mind only, separate from the body. His idea was further deepened by the influential philosopher of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant. Sethi, 2024, asserted that “Kant is said to be the first to distinguish between consciousness of oneself as the subject of one’s experiences and consciousness of oneself as an object, which he calls transcendental and empirical apperception, respectively” (p. 78). According to Kant, the inner self (transcendental self) and the outer self (perceived by normal senses) are the two components that unify to give human consciousness. Another philosopher, David Hume, described the sense of self as “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perception, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (<https://davidhume.org/texts/t/1/4/6>). For Hume, self is an illusion, a collection of perception, thus, “fiction or imaginary principle of union” (<https://davidhume.org/texts/t/1/4/6>). Together with Hume’s deconstruction of a consistent sense of self, Jean-Paul Sartre, the 20th century phenomenologist and existentialist, “frequently characterizes human beings in terms of the idea of nothingness” (Rowlands, 2011, p. 175). Sartre believed that human beings’ consciousness was contentless, yet intentional (Rowlands, 2011) and that the sense of self was actively created

through one's behaviors and choices (Sartre, 1956). As discussed above, philosophers create more abstract frameworks to understand sense of self compared to psychology and neuroscience. Each approach provides a unique perspective contributing to the understanding of self, a vast area with much still to be discovered.

Extrasensory Perception

Overview

Extrasensory perception (ESP) is a subject of parapsychology which studies paranormal psychic phenomena. According to Zahran, 2019, "Extrasensory perception (ESP) is perception that occurs independently of the known sensory processes" (p. 24). The term "was coined to describe telepathy [thought transfer], clairvoyance [clear vision], and precognition [future knowing]" (Kennedy, 1952, p. 513). The definition describes a human's ability to gain information without using the five normal senses or cognitive processes. Other than the above types, psychic abilities also include recognition (past knowing), clairsentience (clear physical feeling), clairpathy (clear emotion feeling), claircognizance (clear knowing), clairsentancy (clear touching), clairsalience (clear smelling) and clairgustance (clear tasting) (Zahran, 2019). Through these abilities, human beings are supposed to directly receive energetic information from invisible realms beyond the physical world. Mysterious as it is, the phenomenon started to receive academic attention over a century ago.

The study of ESP was initially supported by the rise of the Spiritualist movement in the 19th century. High interest in spiritualism and psychic phenomena during this period led to the establishment of the London Society for Psychical Research, the first organization to conduct scholarly research on the paranormal human experiences that challenge traditional scientific models. Its founder, Frederic Myers conducted extensive research on psychical subjects, many of which were neglected due to their challenge to scientific orthodoxy (Alvarado, 2009). Another

pioneer of modern parapsychology was William James (Schemeidler, 1993). Understanding the criticism of the academic community, he depicted the field with precision and developed strict guidelines for research methods (Schemeidler, 1993). In the 1930s, the first experimental method in the field of parapsychology was applied by Joseph Banks Rhine at Duke University. He conducted a statistical and laboratory-based study using Zener cards to test telepathic and clairvoyant abilities. Later, he summarized the work in his book entitled *Extrasensory Perception*, concluding that ESP was real and verifiable event (Gulliksen, 1938). Since then, ESP has gained more attention from academic institutions with experiments conducted by researchers like Charles Honorton and Daryl J. Bem. Despite progress in methods over the years (Morris, 1996), mainstream science still keeps a skeptical attitude toward ESP.

Obstacles to ESP Study

Western Culture Barriers

Materialism as a dominating paradigm. Western culture has a long history of materialism theories, originated by the most influential philosophers and physicists in the 5th century BCE. The view that matter is the fundamental substance of reality, and everything arises from material interaction shapes all mainstream thought. This view opposes any anomalous experience which is the nature of ESP and thus discourages any study in the subject. From ancient Greek philosophers like Democritus and Leucippus, to the early modern philosophers such as Pierre Gassendi and Thomas Hobbe, materialists asserted that everything in the universe was made of indivisible particles of matter within empty space. The dominance of this paradigm has restrained the growth of research on paranormal phenomena, including ESP. Together with atomic materialism, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in the 19th century allowed causation in the physical world to explain all nature's life origins. The development of biochemistry and physiological psychology in the 20th century supported the theory even more. The fact that ESP

operates beyond physical laws is a hindrance to investigative interest and funding sources.

However, “contemporary materialist theories purporting to account for experience are seriously flawed, for they fail to accommodate the full range of human experiences, especially paranormal experience” (Betty, 2004, p. 373). This failure to reflect all aspects of human existence signals a need for serious study from different perspectives for paranormal phenomena like ESP.

Christianity’s relationship with the occult. It is not uncommon in western culture to associate ESP with occult practices. As a result, stigma and resistance have developed toward ESP research in academia. As an event “beyond the range of ordinary knowledge” and “disclosed or communicated only to the initiated” (Truzzi, 1971, p. 635), this idea of mystery and secret does not easily accommodate the mainstream Christian authority. Kasih et. al., 2024, stated that “the tension between Christian doctrine and the allure of occult practices has persisted throughout history” (p.1). Institutional churches have often condemned esoteric traditions as a threat. Many traditional Christians believe that paranormal phenomena, including ESP, don’t come from God but from manifestations of demonic forces to lead people astray (Blank, 2009). Roelofse (2016) considers occult practices as the inverse of Christianity. Though certain denominations have integrated esotericism in their tradition, the suspicion toward all paranormal phenomena has contributed to the marginalization of ESP research. The resistance from both secular and religious communities discourages the public from learning and understanding about the subject, hindering its growth.

Eastern Culture Hindrance to ESP study

Religious obstacles. There are two opposite religious views originating from the two biggest civilizations in the East, both of which discourage ESP study. Though ESP has been culturally accepted and deeply integrated in traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism, extrasensory perception is viewed as a supernatural ability achieved by deep meditation and life-

long spiritual practice only. In Indian tradition, these abilities are “referred to as siddhis, or supernatural powers (Singh, 2024, p.1657). Singh (2024) stated that “succeeding waves of inner awakening will continue sharpening the faculty of discernment, leading toward these siddhis” (p.1657). As a result of inner awakening, these abilities are not for common people. Another influential philosophy spreading from China, dominating neighboring cultures like Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, has a completely different attitude toward paranormal phenomena. Confucious, the founder of Confucianism, ignored any supernatural phenomenon, “focusing almost exclusively on ethical and political solutions in real-world politics” (Yi, 2019, p.2). Personal ethics and morality achieved through the virtue of ren (humanity) are the two most important emphases. Due to this pragmatic approach, any paranormal inquiries are not favored. Topics like ESP are sidelined even in the religious context.

Other Constraints

Ethical considerations. Ethical consideration is an obstacle to acceptance of ESP’s existence. As ESP allows people to operate in the energetic world where there is no limitation of knowledge, there is risk of privacy violation and fraud activities. The misuse of ESP can lead to financial or psychological exploitation. People also fear that paranormal studies can cause false beliefs, mind control or psychological warfare. With all these concerns, it is difficult for ESP to receive a warm welcome from mainstream academics. These ethical risks can make scientists avoid the field for reputation and funding. Despite these challenges, this field of human consciousness needs rigorous scientific investigation. To address these fears, it is important to have strict ethical guidelines, scientific methods, high standards, and interdisciplinary dialogues in the study.

Funding constraints. As academic institutions are heavily influenced by funding from both private and public sources, it is a challenge to study such an impractical subject like ESP.

“Funding streams or sources often have goals that influence what type of research can be funded” (Thelwall et. al., 2023, p.6092). Therefore, research priorities are typically focused on areas that receive support. The mainstream scientific community prefers empirical science to align with global standards, remaining dismissive of ESP. Topics like clairvoyance or precognition could be considered unscientific and irrational. This hesitation of the scientific community is supported by the fact that there has been reported misuse of ESP. In an attempt to gain credibility, scientists have tried to distance themselves from skeptical subjects. The lack of funding prevents those who are interested from spending resources on the field.

ESP Impact on Sense of Self

Existence of Paranormal Phenomena

NDE has been a subject of scholarly investigation as the experiences “are reported by about 17% of those who nearly die” (Long, 2014, p. 372) from all walks of life. Long (2014) presented nine lines of evidence from NDE research conducted by Near Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF, nderf.org). Studying 3700 NDEs posted on the NDERF website in over 20 different languages, Long (2014) concluded that “the combination of all of the presented nine lines of evidence provides powerful evidence that NDEs are, in a word, real” (p. 379). The fact that NDE people have experiences while being “generally unconscious or clinically dead” (Long, 2014, p. 378) suggests the existence of some perception faculties beyond the five normal senses. Another phenomenon that has been studied scientifically is past life memories. Moraes et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis on a database of 1784 studies using a final sample of 78 studies of different global regions and claimed that “the phenomenon of people who claim past-lives memories has been pointed to as a cross-culture phenomenon” (p. 376). This phenomenon indicates that consciousness may persist beyond physical condition of the brain and that perception is not solely based on the five senses. There exist metaphysical

events incomprehensible by mainstream science. The evidence from these extraordinary experiences invites an open and unbiased inquiry into extrasensory perception associating with these events yet lacking scientific proof to confirm the existence.

Proposed Model for Understanding ESP

Quantum model provides a scientific basis for understanding ESP. Describing the behavior at the scale of atoms, quantum model proposes that particles remain instantaneously connected through spacetime. Below the particle scale, Hobson (2013) proposed that the fundamental constituents are “excitations of spatially unbounded field” or “ultimately disturbances in a few universal fields” (p. 221). The non-locality of a continuous field allows information to travel beyond space-time constraints. Instead of entanglement between discrete particles, each individual is an instantaneously connected point of a large consciousness field. This explains phenomena such as remote viewing (clairvoyance), mind reading (telepathy) or future knowing (precognition). Extrasensory perception, gaining information without the use of the conventional senses, might be one way that the non-local entanglement-like connections manifest (Patrizio et. al., 2010). ESP helps to drop the veil between invisible and physical world, expanding an individual’s perception of self and others. Quantum model is a compelling model for studying such a controversial conscious phenomenon as ESP. Nevertheless, more specific research is needed to give accurate knowledge about extrasensory perception.

A Sense of Self Beyond the Physical Body Exploration

If we accept that ESP exists and self has elusive nature, then it is highly likely that ESP can influence a person’s sense of self in an unexplored way. ESP allows consciousness to tune into the energy aspect of reality. In such an experience, a person can access information beyond conventional perception. It also happens in paranormal events where ESP parallelly occurs. The experiences “include a perception of seeing and hearing apart from the physical body, passing

into or through a tunnel, encountering a mystical light” (Long, 2014, p. 372). Long commented that “it is remarkable that NDEs often occur during only minutes of unconsciousness yet commonly result in substantial and life-long transformations of beliefs and values” (Long, 2014, p. 378). Possibly, these transformations shift NDE people’s sense of self and the world beyond physical body. Other out-of-body experiences (OBEs) can “occur spontaneously while falling asleep, following severe accidents, or during surgical operations” (Metzinger, 2005, p. 59). In this state, “the experiencing person undergoes the untranscendable and highly realistic conscious experience of leaving his body” and perceives visually his/ her own body from a third-person perspective (Metzinger, 2005, p. 59). This perception comes from the clairvoyance of ESP, the ability to see in ethereal level. This type of self-awareness extends beyond physical boundaries. The way ESP transcends the sense of self is another topic deserving a deep study.

Conclusion

Extrasensory perception is considered a paranormal ability that hasn’t been studied enough. Many people have never heard of the extrasensory concept, never considered it or have already rejected it. People’s skepticism is supported by the fact that many studies fail to prove the existence of ESP. Rhine’s work was criticized as having methodological flaws, lack of replication and potential bias (Gulliksen, 1938, p. 631) while Bem’s findings cannot be reproduced (Muhmenthaler et al., 2024). Besides, materialists may argue that the only thing that exists is the thing seen by eyes, heard by ears and perceived by the rest of physical organs. It is not favorable to prove the existence of something outside the physical world. Nevertheless, the phenomenon exists globally as a state of human consciousness. Further inquiry is necessary.

A person’s sense of self is formed from many aspects. People may argue that cognition, emotion and real-world experiences are more reliable sources for sense of self than ESP. They

may also argue that relying on such an unverified phenomenon as extrasensory perception to broaden sense of self can lead to falsehood or misunderstanding of self-perception. The connection between extrasensory perception and a person's sense of self is reasonably questionable. Do these paranormal abilities really contribute to broader sense of self or is the claim an illusion? Another challenge is how to prove it scientifically. Nevertheless, exploration of the topic will bring more benefit than not.

My claim that extrasensory perception may broaden a person's sense of self beyond the limitation of bodily experience needs to be further studied and verified. It opens a new direction for future study in the field.

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