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COMPARING COGNITIVE STYLES AMONG PSI RESEARCHERS, PSI BELIEVERS, AND SKEPTICS

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Background: Much research has explored factors that impact belief in psi, which is widespread but controversial. Examples of psi include extra-sensory perception, psychokinesis, and survival after death. Studies have shown that there are cognitive differences between people who believe in psi and those who don't, but much of this work has been done with lay believers. Among academics, psi belief varies as well, and some researchers have spent their careers studying psi phenomena, while others have criticized such efforts. Relevant to these endeavors are cognitive styles such as actively open-minded thinking (AOT), which measures one's willingness to consider a range of evidence when forming an opinion, including evidence that goes against one's beliefs. AOT is a disposition towards "good" thinking about evidence.

Aims: To assess differences in cognitive styles among psi researchers, lay psi believers, and skeptics of psi phenomena and research.

Method: We used online surveys to collect data on cognitive styles, belief in psi, and demographic characteristics in four groups. Academic psi researchers ($N = 44$) were recruited from research mailing lists in the field or by email invitation to known researchers. Academic or professional skeptics ($N = 35$) were recruited by email invitation to fellows of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and some academics who have been critical of psi. Lay psi believers ($N = 32$) were recruited from Facebook groups on paranormal interests and organizations focused on exploring psi. Lay skeptics ($N = 33$) were recruited via skeptical interest groups. We used ANOVA and ANCOVA to explore group differences in cognitive styles, including AOT, as dependent variables.

Results: Psi researchers and lay psi believers had significantly higher belief in psi than both skeptical groups. ANOVA revealed group differences in AOT scores ($p = .003$). Post-hoc tests showed no significant difference in AOT between psi researchers (4.5 ± 0.3) and academic skeptics (4.5 ± 0.3 ; $p = .91$) or lay skeptics (4.5 ± 0.4 ; $p = .80$). Lay psi believers had significantly lower AOT scores (4.2 ± 0.4) than the other three groups ($ps: .005-.04$). AOT was negatively associated with psi belief in the two skeptics groups combined ($r = -.29$, $p = .01$), but not in the believers groups ($r = -.03$, $p = .78$).

Conclusions: Psi researchers differ from lay psi believers, but not from skeptics, on actively open-minded thinking, suggesting that, despite their high belief in psi, they may constitute a distinct group in terms of psi belief formation. Psi researchers' commitment to good thinking about evidence is on par with skeptics.

Keywords: Cognitive styles, Belief in psi, Psi researchers, Skeptics, Parapsychology

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