Epistemological and conceptual problems in the scientific study of anomalous experience

Questões epistemológicas e conceituais no estudo científico da experiência anômala

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ABSTRACT
Anomalous experience is defined as an unusual experience and although it is experienced by a substantial number of people in a population, it differs from ordinary experience and thus from commonly accepted explanations of reality. It is essential to point out that there are reports of an enormous and complex variety of so-called anomalous experiences, encompassing a diversity of experiences, leading to a conceptual difficulty. To this end, we carried out a reflection, based on theoretical and bibliographical studies in the concept of anomalous experience, in order to explore the terminologies concerning the anomalous and to verify the reason for the difficulty of consensus about the theme. Exploring the existing terminologies in relation to the anomalous experience, a difficulty of clarity and conceptual systematization guided in its nature was identified in appropriation and conceptual use. In our discussion we explain certain historical-epistemological points of nomenclatures and areas of knowledge used in diverse experiences, specifically those linked to anomalies, such as the parapsychological experiences marked by Parapsychology and the religious experiences by the Psychology of Religion and Phenomenology of Religion; in order to problematize the difficulty that Anomalistic Psychology presents in the study and differentiation of these experiences.

Keywords: parapsychological experience, religious experience, phenomenology, psychology of religion, anomalistic psychology.

RESUMO
A experiência anômala é definida como uma experiência incomum e embora seja vivenciada por um número substancial de pessoas numa população, diferencia-se da experiência ordinária e assim das explicações da realidade que são comumente aceitas. É essencial ressaltar que se tem relatos de uma variedade enorme e complexa das chamadas experiências anômalas, englobando uma diversidade de experiências, levando a uma dificuldade conceitual. Para tanto, realizamos uma reflexão, baseada em estudos teóricos e bibliográficos no conceito de experiência anômala visando explorar as terminologias a respeito do anômalo e verificar o motivo da dificuldade de consenso acerca da temática. Explorada as terminologias existentes em relação à experiência anômala, identificou-se na apropriação e no uso conceitual uma dificuldade de clareza e
sistematisação conceitual pautada em sua natureza. Em nossa discussão explicitamos certos pontos histórico-epistemológicos de nomenclaturas e áreas do saber utilizadas em experiências diversas, especificamente aquelas ligadas às anômalas, como as experiências parapsicológicas demarcadas pela Parapsicologia e as experiências religiosas pela Psicologia da Religião e Fenomenologia da Religião; no intuito de problematizar a dificuldade que a Psicologia Anomalística apresenta no estudo e diferenciação dessas experiências.

**Palavras-chave:** experiência parapsicológica, experiência religiosa, fenomenologia, psicologia da religião, psicologia anomalística.

1 **INTRODUCTION**

There are many ways and means in which human beings experience the world and themselves, thus constituting a broad set of lived experiences. In this sense, the human being, by becoming aware of each one of these experiences, has been building up specific knowledge about it, such as religion, philosophy, art and science. One of these recognized experiences are the so-called "anomalous experiences" (EA) which currently constitute the subject of the study of "Anomalistic Psychology" (PA).

Psychological experience called "anomalous" is divided, depending on the studies of PA, into categories: unusual and irregular experiences, as well as psi-related experiences (psi-related experiences). His investigations go towards altered states of consciousness, dissociative states, religious and mystical experiences, development, maintenance and function of beliefs, false memories, self-deception, placebo effects, coincidences, hallucinations, paranormal claims, sleep-related disorders and cognitive biases related to abnormal experiences (FRENCH, 2010). The abnormal adjective, present in this area, derives from Greek, which "means irregular, different or unequal, in contrast to homalos, which means the same or common" (CARDEÑA et al., 2013, pp. 3-4). The meaning of irregular and different is distinguished in the characteristic and in the measure of common experiences and, of unequal for not receiving the same attention in the scientific milieu as regular experiences. Thus, anomalous experience is defined as an unusual experience that "although it is experienced by a substantial number of people in a population, it deviates from ordinary experience or from commonly accepted explanations of reality" (CARDEÑA et al., 2013, pp. 3-4).

Among the various types of experiences that the human being has, the EA is relatively daily and highly significant in the general population, even if it is considered unusual and
irregular (MACHADO, 2009; PERES; NEWBERG, 2013) arising already in early childhood (65.2%) and adolescence (23.5%), but in adult life there are only 11.3% of individuals. The most frequent AEs recorded are visual hallucinations, auditory hallucinations, "spiritual perception", "paranormal dreams" and out-of-body experiences. And, in decreasing order of frequency, we have clairvoyance, spiritual hearing, spiritual perception, abnormal dreams, out-of-body experience, forebodings, inexplicable loss of energy, incorporation, intuition, spiritual perception of smells, physical effects of spiritual cause, psychography, telepathy and spiritual healing (MENEZES et al., 2012).

Historically, PA's first book, "The Psychology of Anomalous Experience: A Cognitive Approach" (The Psychology of Anomalous Experience: A Cognitive Approach) was written by Canadian psychologist Graham Reed (1923-1989), published in 1975 and resulted in the first attempt to study abnormal experiences in Psychology. Reed concentrated on unusual, irregular, atypical, and opposite-usual experiences, focusing on subjective phenomena, whose knowledge depended on introspection and verbal reporting, as opposed to observable responses. Thus, he emphasized cognitive processes and the ways in which information was selected, encoded, organized, stored, retrieved and used (REED, 1975).

Although Reed contributed considerably in this area, PA was officially designated in 1989 by American psychologists Leonard Zusne (1924-2003) and Warren H. Jones (1921-1988) with the aim of offering explanations based on current scientific knowledge, especially psychological, without resorting to paranormal, supernatural or even occultist understanding (GOULART, 2014). They published Psychology: A Study of Magical Thinking (1989), written in which they addressed psychology in relation to beliefs in paranormal phenomena such as telepathy and clairvoyance, bringing a scientific approach to understanding beliefs and experiences that are outside the scope of conventional explanation. In this panorama, PA originated in the sense of distinguishing itself from paranormal studies, since it presupposes that there is nothing paranormal involved in such experiments (ZUSNE; JONES, 1989).

In addition to Reed, Zusne and Jones, we have the contributions of British professor David Luke (1921-2005) (from the Department of Psychology at Greenwich University), who through his notes, was "able to explain paranormal phenomena by means of current-psychological knowledge" (GOULART, 2014, pp. 72-73), as well as the explanation that parapsychology and PA are not identical, although there is an overlap between the areas.
Finally, it is also possible to mention the British researcher and psychologist Christopher French (1956-?), who created the "Investigation Unit in Anomalistical Psychology" (APRU) in the Department of Psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London, and admitted the possibility of the existence of EA as a hypothesis investigated by the established conventional biases of Psychology and Science (GOULART, 2014).

Notably, in Brazil, since 1972, the University of São Paulo (USP) has been opportunizing research for master's and doctor's degrees in this area. Currently, the researchers Wellington Zangari and Fátima Machado, in addition to developing research and guiding projects, have recently implanted disciplines linked to the PA in the "Laboratory of Psychosocial Studies: Belief, Subjectivity, Culture & Health (INTERPSI)\(^1\)\(^2\)\), located in the Department of Social Psychology and Work of the Psychology Institute of the aforementioned university. In addition, this research has contributed to the theoretical expansion of the area through translation, review and publication, mainly of the work *Varieties of anomalous experience: examining the scientific evidence*, organized by Cardeña, Lynn and Krippner (2013).

From the brief above, we realized that PA deals with reports of a huge and complex variety of EAs, leading to a certain difficulty in appropriation and conceptual demarcation. Such a question can be seen, for example, in religious and spiritual experiences that are often regarded as identical, similar; or, even, in mystical, spiritual, religious and anomalous experiences so distinct from each other, but categorized as belonging to the same mode of experience. According to the cartography itself carried out by Cardeña, Lynn and Krippner (2013), for example, which identifies the mystical and religious experiences as constituents of possibilities of EAs.

In this way, we have a certain appropriation and conceptual use of PA in diverse human experience, thus generating a certain lack of clarity and conceptual systematization guided in the nature proper to EAs. To do so, we resort to a historical-epistemological retrospective, carried out in the research published in printed book format, whose title is "From Psychic Research to Psychological Science: study of religious, parapsychological, psychic and anomalous experiences" of Stella Maris\(^2\) that characterized the history and nature of each one of these experiences, as well as their interactions and overlaps; evidenced the theoretical differences

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\(^1\) See: https://www.usp.br/interpsi/

\(^2\) The research was supervised by professor and researcher Dr. Tommy Akira Goto (Federal University of Uberlândia) and was financially supported by the Ministry of Education's Coordinating Office for the Training of Personnel with Higher Education (CAPES).
between classifications, theories and scientific discoveries, confirming the absence of unified descriptive clarifications in the scientific literature, especially psychological, in relation to the theme; and, demonstrated the making of a conceptual synthesis for parapsical experience ecological, religious experience and anomalous experience with the aim of clarifying the above three experiences in relation to epistemological and conceptual problems.

Having made these first considerations we move on to our objective of problematizing some terms used in PA, thus aiming to discuss the difficulties of conceptual consensus about the EAs, mainly in relation to the varied experiences, from a brief and organized study dealing with a historical-epistemological retrospective of the diverse knowledge in question.

2 METHOD

The present work was developed as a theoretical-bibliographic essay, following the method of qualitative research of the theoretical and bibliographic type (LIMA; MIOTO, 2007, p. 37-45), because we understand that it is from the conceptualizations that one can analyze the formulations of relevant theoretical knowledge, in order to compare and raise criticisms. Thus, "the essay needs to be used as a conscious and intentional option, that is, as the most appropriate way to understand something" (MENEGHETTI, 2011, p. 322) and "is characterized by its reflective and interpretative nature, different from the classificatory form of science" (MENEGHETTI, 2011, p. 322). Furthermore, the test is the way in which new scientific or pre-scientific knowledge is incubated. Also, "it is not an instrument of the identity between subject and object, but it is a means to grasp reality" (MENEGHETTI, 2011, p. 323). In other words, we resort to the essay as a means of analysis and to express the synthesis of what we learn from the reality of anomalous experiences in scientific literature.

3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From a bibliographical survey of the main authors and works, considered "classic" and conventional around the study in relation to paranormal and anomalous experiences, we identified that, since 1921, in meetings/congresses in Copenhagen, 1923 in Warsaw, 1927 in Paris, 1930 in Athens, 1949 in Sienna and 1953 in Utrecht (PERES; NEWBERG, 2013), there were discussions with the scope of standardizing the terminologies, because perceived the "lack of consensus in the use of the terms in a given area causes confusion by the possibility of
having/arising different meanings for the same term and/or different terms for the same phenomenon" (MACHADO, 2009, pp. 13-14).

As a result of such discussions, in 1953, at the International Congress of Parapsychology, held in Utrecht, the Netherlands, researchers Robert H. Thouless (1894-1984) and Bertold Paul Wiesner (1901-1972) proposed abandoning the term "parapsychological phenomena" to the detriment of "psi phenomena", which were subdivided into psi-gamma (corresponding to subjective phenomena) and psi-kappa phenomena to objective phenomena) (BORGES, 1992); and, with the contemporary update, we have a third element: the intervention of intangible beings, as Machado (MACHADO, 1997, pp. 31-45). Nonetheless, some researchers have still used the nomenclatures used by Joseph Banks Rhine and Louisa Rhine, such as "extrasensory perception" (extrasensory perception) (in reference to subjective phenomena), "general extrasensory perception" (in reference to objective phenomena) and "general extrasensory perception" (RHINE, 1953). It should be noted that the term "extrasensory perception" had already been employed by Pagenstecher (1924) and Sainville (1927) and that in 1908 Émile Boirac (1851-1917) had adopted the vocabulary "vital psychocinesia" with a similar meaning to Rhine's psychokinesis. In 1914, Henry Gartf Holt (1840-1926) also used the terminology "psychokinesis" to designate communication in a mediumistic way, i.e. communication with the spirits of deceased persons and physical alterations in the environment (ZINGRONE; ALVARADO, 1987).

Now, in relation to the mediumistic phenomenon, we have the nomenclature "mediumship", a term commonly used in Brazil and conceptualized as a form of paranormal (and religious, specifically Spiritist) communication originating from a source of dimension beyond the known physical reality (KLIMO, 1998). At the same time, there is the term "mediumistic", which refers to mediumship, mediumship and mediumship; almost synonymous with mediumship; relative to medium; quality or faculty of the medium (SAMPAIO, 2016).

In 1984, Heklminiak referred to ASs as "extraordinary experiences" as they promote "legitimate growth"; in 1994, McClenon presented ASs and parapsychological events as "wonderful events"; and in 1995, White considered them as "exceptional human experiences" after observing the potential to transform the lives of individuals (MACHADO, 1997, pp. 31-45). In harmony, they finally came to the term "anomalistic" to designate these experiences, because as we have seen, they have been moving away from the idea of paranormal (and
religious) phenomenon (WESCOTT, 1977). The study and understanding of this perspective provided object delimitation for the then-created Anomalistic Psychology (AP) (Anomalistic Psychology). Thus, according to the reference of PA, even though still under construction and rationale, they began to use the term "anomalistic phenomena" (anomalistic phenomena), which does not refer to a phenomenon properly extraordinary or exceptional, since "the only sense in which an event itself can be extraordinary is in the sense that its frequency deviates from a theoretically expected frequency" (ZUSNE; JONES, 1989, p. 2-3).

Explored the development of some of the terminologies adopted and existing in relation to EA and, although Cardeña, Lynn and Krippner (2013) have made a compilation of various perspectives of EA, our demarcation, mainly in the chosen literature, shows us some dispersion and considerable conceptual differences about the same experiences, since they are sometimes considered as psychic or paranormal - because they are frequent or unfrequent experiences; psychological characteristics, but may or may not have some relationship with the supernatural (religious) -, sometimes are considered anomalous, because they are occasional, irregular, and may be present in experiences considered as religious or religious even psychopathological.

Thus, the question raised in this article is that this distinction still seems to us to possess certain difficulties in understanding this type of experience, besides the various theoretical misencounters, misconceptions in diagnoses, often of patients in severe psychic suffering (psychopathology), and adoption of different treatments leading many times to the suffering of the individuals involved, topics that we will not treat here not to escape the objective. Therefore, in an attempt to better understand the field of this experience, we set out for a theoretical-bibliographic survey of other sciences, whose description and understanding are related to the EAs, being: Parapsychology, the Psychology of Religion and the Phenomenology of Religion, from a historical-epistemological retrospective, to later, seek to differentiate the nature of the experience in the Parapsychology of Anomalistic Psychology.

In search of an experiential delimitation and its areas of knowledge, it can be said that in parapsychological science the object of study is parapsychological experience, i.e. a different experience from psychological, being experiences coming from a human (psychological unconscious) and non-psychological (spiritual, spirits) "unknown intelligence", which are often present in certain religious beliefs and practices. Whereas in the Psychology of Religion, the object of study is religious content (cultural/spiritual) in psychological experience, thus
constituting an area dedicated to the study of the description and interpretation of psychological experiences of religious content. And finally, in the Phenomenology of Religion, the object of study is religious experience, but understanding it as an experience of its own, with specific characteristics that differentiate it from parapsychological and psychological with religious content. This is because Phenomenology comprises the legitimate experience/experience as the personal encounter with the transcendent, the absolute, the sacred, experience that is characterized by experience of mystery, infinity, peace, joy and salvation or out of control, anguish and with psychological, social and occupational disturbances.

Faced with each one of these approaches, possessing a distinct object of study and a specific theoretical and methodological reference, the consideration that PA makes for including and encompassing religious, mystical, mediumistic, parapsychological or psychic experiences as if they were similar or identical, whose sieve would be their unusual and irregular form, has been problematic. And why did they come up with a single term for such diverse experiences? It seems to us that the object is a function of the scientific method, that is, that it is possible to study scientifically (empirical-naturalistic) than the method according to the nature of the object.

Thus, how can one consider parapsychological experience as a constituent of the anomalous experience, according to Cardeña, Lynn and Krippner's cartography of 2013, since the epistemological-methodological historical period of Parapsychology differs from the contemporary times in which the PA investigations take place? It is worth remembering the division of the history of Parapsychology by Charles Richet (1850 - 1935), for example, which identified four phases: 1) Mythic Period ("beginning of humanity" - 1778); 2) Magnetic Period (1778 - 1847); 3) Spiritist Period (1847 - 1872); 4) Scientific Period (1872 - present day); and today include a 5) Anomalistic Psychology contemporary times, as expanded by Haynes (1982). Since the Scientific Period, psychic and parapsychological experiments have been studied by the experimental scientific method, marked by the intense and extensive research activities of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). However, with the improvement of the scientific method and techniques, these experiments have come to be called anomalous, precisely because of the limitation of natural science in capturing the nature proper to each one of these experiments, which led to the transition from the term "Parapsychology" to "Anomalistic Psychology" (CARDEÑA et al., 2013, pp. 24-25).
It is interesting to point out that the psychic or commonly called paranormal experiments, for example, whose investigations came to the fore in 1882, were studied with the intention of making explicit and evidencing the existence of the parapsychological phenomenon, but also in seeking to understand its nature and not only in identifying the mechanisms of action and/or the possible conditions of being replicated and demonstrated. The objective was to carry out systematic investigations for an apprehension and recognition of the phenomena of telepathy, clairvoyance, mesmerism and the phenomena commonly called Spiritists (CORREDATO, 2014), whose recurrent method was empirical and, later, experimental (HAYNES, 1982), as well as from reports of experiments and observations in the field (CORREDATO, 2014).

While the PA, in addition to the historical-temporal differences, of the most commonly used methods of study, due to the development of science and the new term, which is, anomalous experience, most of its studies do not aim to prove the existence of the anomalous experience, nor does it seek to understand its nature, since its theoretical reference is distinct and considers that the anomalous experience is a psychological experience pervaded or influenced by the cognitive and cultural aspect. Continuing, PA research moves toward altered states of consciousness, dissociative states, religious experiences and religious beliefs, development, maintenance and function of beliefs, false memories, self-deception, placebo effects, coincidences, hallucinations, paranormal claims, sleep-related disorders, and cognitive biases related to abnormal experiences (FRENCH, 2010).

Therefore, in view of these demarcations referring to the question of experience, we identify the appropriation and conceptual use of the various terms of PA in relation to the study of anomalous experience, a certain lack of clarity and conceptual systematization when categorizing all the aforementioned experiences in the course of the text as being only anomalous experiences. Although such experiences may not be studied materially and experimentally in real life, their idea, their underlying concept and their essence behind them - or whatever denomination we prefer to give - deserve to be considered by themselves, beyond their meanings. These experiences are diverse, distinguish themselves from each other and from all others that happen and are described by Psychology, Anthropology, Theology, etc. In other words, we understand that the most coherent, from the above, would be to maintain and clarify the terms "parapsychological experience" or "psychic experience" when we tune in or want to refer to the
reference of Parapsychology or Psychic Research, while it would also be more coherent to use the term "anomalous experience" when we tune in or want to refer to the reference of PA.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present work was developed as a theoretical-bibliographic essay, whose objective was to reflect the conceptual field of Anomalistic Psychology (AP), from a historical-epistemological retrospective, presenting the hypothesis that there is a lack of consensus about ASs, due to their relationship with the varied related experiences. To do so, we use the definition of PA in relation to anomalous experience and we perceive certain overlaps in relation to the description and conceptualization of other related experiences, such as parapsychological, religious psychological experiences and legitimate religious experiences, respectively described by other areas such as Parapsychology, Psychology of Religion and Phenomenology of Religion. We have seen how the characterization of the EAs has more relation to the naturalistic method than properly to the nature of each lived experience.

As mentioned, we have expounded some nomenclatures still used that indicate the overlaps of EAs with parapsychological experiences, demarcated by Parapsychology; religious psychological experiences, studied by the Psychology of Religion; and, with religious experiences, described by the Phenomenology of Religion. We insist on the permanence of these distinct but related areas, which have been trampled by the natural scientific understanding of "anomalous experience", seeking, as it were, to explain the mystical, religious and paranormal experience. We also insist on an in-depth examination of the essence of each one of these experiences, because we know that the more versatile the methods are in the approach a given field of experience, the better it will be in the production of a knowledge, because it will be able to penetrate in a deeper and more comprehensive way.
REFERENCES


