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<title>Narrating Supernatural Experiences</title>

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<p>This essay explores how those who have experienced supernatural phenomena narrate their stories. The case study examines contemporary Finnish experiences with the supernatural. How do people process such experiences as they turn them into narratives? Why do they tell about their out-of-the-ordinary experiences? How do such narratives allow outsiders to build a picture of people telling about the supernatural, and how they fit in with other aspects of the culture? This chapter provides possible answers to these questions, but it does not attempt to explain what causes these supernatural experiences, nor does it argue for or against the existence of supernatural experiences outside the narratives.</p>

<h1>Finland</h1>

<p>Finland, located in Northern Europe, is often described as a technologically innovative nation, with secular, hardworking, and well-educated folk. This may be understood better when knowing that the modernization of Finland happened rapidly, from around the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. It included the constructions of projects, such as the elementary school system that promoted secularization and materialistic-scientific education, social activism aimed at enlightening ordinary people, rapid migration from the countryside to cities, and changing means of livelihood. </p>

<p>Thus, on the one hand, a scientific and secular world view is promoted in Finland. On the other hand, the Lutheran Church has affected Finland and Finnish mentality since the sixteenth century and still has a visible role in Finnish society. Finland has approximately 5.5 million inhabitants, and according to Ev.lut.kirkko's "Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko (2015), about 72 percent of them were members of Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. As José Casanova points out in *Are We Still Secular? Explorations on the Secular and Post-Secular* (2012), Nordic societies can be seen as postsecular. Even though the public sphere is secular and relies on the natural sciences, various religious activities have visible roles in the public and political life, making the society pluralistic. For example, a church service takes place right before the annual opening of the Parliament.</p>

<p>Supernatural experiences interrupt the order that the rational and scientific world view promotes. Furthermore, if these experiences occur outside of Lutheran Christianity, they do not get support from the religious sphere either. This wider context affects how people narrate their supernatural experiences.</p>

<h1>Asking People to Write about Supernatural Experiences</h1>

The way that supernatural experiences are told depends on why and to whom the story is told. That may sound simple, but there is a difference between entertaining your like-minded friend with a ghost story and trying to convince an unfamiliar researcher of the factual nature of your ghost experience. The narratives that are discussed in this chapter are written for the second purpose. They are replies to my research inquiry, in which I asked people to write to me and tell about their experiences of encountering supernatural beings. This chapter is based on that research. The inquiry included a set of questions, including the following: What happened, when, and where? What kind of a being did you encounter? Did it have a message for you? Why did the encounter happen? How did it feel when the encounter happened, and how does it feel now when you think about it? The inquiry was published in Finnish newspapers in 2003–2004 and also distributed by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society. Research requests yielded altogether 440 responses, in the form of letters and e-mails. Two-thirds of the respondents were women, and the largest group of narrators were between fifty-one and eighty years old.

In Finland, it is quite common to collect research material by asking people to write about certain themes; the act of this kind of writing is called thematic writing. Organizing one's life and particular experiences through thematic writing can be therapeutic, especially when the experiences are confusing, even scary. It may be encouraging and relieving to the writer to know that someone, the researcher at least, will read the writer's story. As Piret Paal points out in *Written Cancer Narratives* (2010), the motivation for composing (cancer) narratives for a research inquiry is the desire to receive responsive understanding from other people and institutions.

The process of narrating is different when writing to someone and when talking to someone. A dialogue between the listener and the narrator is characteristic of interviews and discussions. Face-to-face discussion offers a chance to ask for details, for more information on interpretations, and for others' reactions and feelings. When writing, the narrator may imagine the person to whom she is writing, but the actual dialogue is either missing or delayed.

## Defining Narrative

A key concept in this chapter is *narrative*. According to H. Porter Abbot's *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2008), narrative is the representation of an event or a series of events. Representation refers to the feeling that the story somehow pre-exists before the narrative, even though this may be an illusion. Event refers to the internal time sequence that is needed to create narrative continuity and coherence. Without an event, you may have a *description*, an *argument*, or a *lyric*. Finally, stories, narrative discourses, and narratives are different. *Stories* are events or sequences of events (the action). *Narrative discourses* are those events as represented. *Narratives* are the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse.

More than defining what narrative is, this chapter emphasizes what supernatural narrative does and what narrator does with supernatural narrative. According to Marie-Laure Ryan in "Narrative" (2005), inquiry into the nature of narrative can take two forms: (1) a descriptive approach, which asks what narrative does for human beings; and (2) a defining approach, which tries to define the distinctive features of narrative. This chapter applies the descriptive approach

and sees the narrative as a way of organizing human experience and as a tool for constructing models of and for reality rather than reality itself. Narrative provides means of creating and transmitting cultural traditions and building values and beliefs that define cultural identities.</p>

## <h2>Encountering Supernatural Beings</h2>

<p>What do Finnish people have to say about their supernatural experiences? What are the experiences, concerns, beliefs, and arguments that they want to share with the general public? A summary of the narratives addresses these questions.</p>

<p>In the research inquiry, some examples of supernatural beings were mentioned: angels, ghosts, guardian spirits, demons, and extraterrestrials. In addition to these beings, people talk about meeting God, Jesus, animals, identified or unidentified human shaped beings, unidentified flying objects (UFOs) with no reference to their travelers, and poltergeist phenomena. Among the supernatural beings, angels and ghosts are the most common, followed by unidentified human-shaped beings. Many narratives discuss supernatural experiences without supernatural beings involved. These narratives are about telepathy, clairvoyance, and omens that come true. It may be surprising to see how common the stories without supernatural beings are, given that the research inquiry was about encounter stories. This suggests that once narrators are given a ticket, a permission, to tell about the supernatural, they will use the opportunity and extend the topic focus.</p>

<p>Most commonly, people told about seeing the supernatural beings, but other senses were mentioned, too. More than half of the encounters occur when the narrator is awake. Although half of the encounters take place at the narrator's home, places where they spent their free-time also were common.</p>

## <h2>Communication between Humans and Supernatural Beings in the Narratives</h2>

<p>In addition to sensing a supernatural being, the encounter may include communication. The supernatural being can communicate to the human, the human can communicate to the supernatural being, and a dialogue can occur between the two. The interaction also can be physical, even sexual. In most of the cases in which communication was reported, the supernatural being communicated to the human. In one case, an angel told a name to a young woman who was pregnant. Later the woman regretted she did not give that name to the baby. When dialogue is involved, the human might not realize she is talking with a supernatural being. For example, a young woman told she had suffered from depression when her child was a toddler. They were walking on a street when they suddenly met an older, friendly woman who encouraged the young mother and talked nicely about the child—and then suddenly disappeared. The narrator interpreted the woman as an angel who came to support her when she was having a rough time. In a few cases, the human being communicated to the supernatural being. For example, an elderly woman wrote how she was quite afraid of a poltergeist spirit that caused mayhem in her home, and how she ordered the thing to leave. It did leave, banging doors as it went.</p>

<p>Narratives construct and share meanings, and answer the questions “Why did this happen?” and “What was the point of the experience?” In some narratives, this is easier to trace than in others. The encounter can function as a warning about something, and it can be an omen about

an event that happens later. The experience can provide support and comfort after a loss of a loved one, guidance in a difficult life situation or in decision-making, or evidence of another world, most commonly, life after death. The meaning can be about making things right, when the supernatural being appears to correct something gone wrong. The supernatural being also can save the narrator from danger, such as a car accident. The encounter can work as a sign of simultaneity, that something important to the narrator is happening elsewhere right at that time. The most common meanings in the narrative corpus to be discussed in this chapter are *support* and *omen*.

Evaluation of the experiences varies in the narratives, and not every narrative involves evaluation. Positive evaluation is related to positive emotions, such as joy, happiness, relief, peace, and positive consequences of the experience. It also can be a direct statement, such as “it was a wonderful experience.” Negative evaluation relates to direct statements about a horrible, bad, or frightening experience and about expressed emotions, such as fear, horror, and anxiety, felt during or after the encounter, or even a long time after. Around half of the narratives include an evaluation, and in most cases, it was positive.

## Making a Supernatural Narrative Believable

When people tell their supernatural stories, they have different motives for sharing their experiences. Some narrators are looking for answers to their out-of-the-ordinary experience, some say they have a message to spread, and others reflect their whole lives on the basis of having had a supernatural experience. What is common to these people is that they want to make supernatural experiences understandable to listeners and readers who may not have had that sort of experiences, and they wish to do it so that they sound reliable and level headed. These people can achieve this by utilizing certain narrative means.

## Taleworlds and Storyrealms

According Katharine Young in *Taleworlds and Storyrealms. The Phenomenology of Narrative* (1987), there are two ontological presentations of stories in conversation: taleworld and storyrealm. *Taleworld* includes the events in another space and time; the events the story is about. *Storyrealm* is the realm of discourse in the here and now, the situation of telling. It means the presentation of the events in a form of a story. Distance between taleworld and storyrealm ranges from realistic and near to extraordinary and distant. The greater the distance, the less demand there is for realistic ontology. Kaarina Koski, who has studied old Finnish belief narratives in *Kuoleman voimat. Kirkonväki suomalaisessa uskomusperinteessä* (2011), states that three aspects of distance are typical in belief narratives. The first aspect is concrete distance, which means that extraordinary things may happen far away and long time ago. The second is narrative distance in which the narrator presents the story so that the listener or reader understands that it is a story, not plain truth. The third aspect is normative, meaning that supernatural events take place in the margins of social order, for example, in graveyard at night.

It can be argued that this applies to contemporary narration as well. For readers or listeners, it is more plausible to hear or read extraordinary, uncanny, and marvelous events taking place in a distant taleworld rather than in everyday reality. When supernatural experiences take place in

everyday reality, it may leave the readers or listeners perplexed. When that happens, narrators need to express that they realize the distinction between the ordinary realm of everyday life and the supernatural realm and locate themselves in the ordinary realm of rationality at the end of the story, at the latest.</p>

## <h2>Narrating I and Experiencing I</h2>

<p>To locate oneself in a certain taleworld and to evaluate the experience, the narrator alternates between two voices, the *experiencing I* and the *narrating I*. In *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978), Dorrit Cohn has examined techniques for portraying the mental lives of fictional characters in the stream-of-conscious novel and discusses modes of self-narration. According to Cohn, the relationships between the narrating self and the experiencing self in first-person narratives can be placed on a sliding scale between dissonance and consonance. In the dissonant mode, the wise, distant, and discursive self, the narrating self (narrating I), can move back and forth in time; turn back to the past self or selves; contradict, explain, evaluate, and analyze the thoughts, statements, and actions of the experiencing self (experiencing I, the I as character); and add information and opinions regarding past events. For example, when telling a story about encountering a deceased relative, the narrator may reminisce about the common past and contemplate how loss of a close person may cause such experiences. In other words, the experiencing I speaks in the taleworld and the narrating I speaks in the storyrealm.</p>

<p>Opposite to this dissonant self-narration is the consonant self-narration in which the narrating self reports what happened while adopting a vantage point that is proximate to the experiencing self. In this case, it can be difficult to distinguish between the experiencing self and the narrating self at all. Events may be narrated exclusively through the experiencing I, leading to a nearly complete back-grounding of the narrating I. In this case, people tell about supernatural experiences that they have not processed yet and are still figuring out what happened and whether it is worth telling. Although differentiating between narrating I and experiencing I may sound straightforward, it seldom is the case because narrators switch between tenses and quote their thoughts and speech during the past events.</p>

## <h2>The Traditions of Belief and Disbelief</h2>

<p>Gillian Bennett suggests in *Alas, Poor Ghost! Traditions of Belief and in Story and Discourse* (1999) that discussion regarding supernatural experiences includes two competing sets of expectations and explanations: *rationalist traditions of disbelief* (first discussed by David Hufford in his 1982 article “Traditions of Disbelief”) and *supernaturalist traditions of belief*. Bennett, for example, found out that some women whom she interviewed about supernatural experiences made derogatory assertions about people having supernatural experiences. They were said to be manipulative, emotional, confused, or muddled. Opposite to traditions of disbelief are traditions of belief, manifested in arguments that are based on human testimony, on evidence drawn from personal experience, and on the stories of friends and relatives.</p>

<p>What is going on in many narratives about supernatural experiences is a debate between the supernaturalist and rationalist traditions. Narrators are aware that the audience may challenge them using arguments drawn from the rationalist set. Thus, according to Bennett, they answer to those challenges by employing certain narrative strategies. *Accusing I* presents challenges, such

as social and philosophical challenges, and answers them. *Calling to witness* means using other people's voices to support the experience. *Evidential scene-setting* carries weight because the reliability of the narrator will be assessed by the completeness and accuracy of the memory of the circumstances. Finally, the same effect can be achieved by replaying part of or the entire story in accumulated layers of exposition, a strategy called *overlays*.

## Paranormal Debate and Discourses

People differ in their opinions as to whether the paranormal is real, and they are prepared to defend their opinions against those who would disagree. These disputes, carried out in various forums throughout Western society, refer to what Jeremy Northcote calls paranormal debate in his book *Paranormal and the Politics of Truth: A Sociological Account* (2007). Characteristic to the debate is that it includes factors that prevent reaching a consensus in the debate. Opponents, for example people having UFO experiences, are seen as ontological, moral, and social threats to the *proper* order of things.

Koski, when examining the contemporary Finnish public discussions about the supernatural in "Discussing the Supernatural in Contemporary Finland: Discourses, Genres, and Forums" (2016), suggests that the same tendency can be seen in Finnish discussions. She writes that there are five discourses that create and maintain attitudes and opinions about the supernatural: First, a science-orientated discourse has the basic assumption that science explains and defines reality. Second, one can find mental discourse that seeks the origin of the experiences in the characteristics and reactions of the human mind. Third, popular Christian discourse allows flexible ways to interpret Christianity and to integrate non-Christian spiritual experiences within the religious frame. Fourth, fundamental Christian discourse considers supernatural experiences real but associates them with demonic powers. Fifth, an alternative spiritual discourse, an open interpretative frame, welcomes influences from various spiritual sources. The research material used in this chapter includes narratives that either oppose or support four of these discourses. The first two discourses usually are questioned and the third and fifth are supported

## Normalizing Paranormal

When telling stories of paranormal experiences, people have to demonstrate the factual nature of the experience, and they also have to show that they are sane, rational, normal people having thoughts that any normal person would have. Robin Wooffit suggests in *Telling Tales of Unexpected: The Organization of Factual Discourse* (1992) that this is done using a format that he calls the *X/Y format*. See also Jonathan Potter *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction* (1996), discussing Wooffit's study. In brief, the format means expressing that "I was just doing a very mundane thing (X) when an extraordinary thing (Y) happened." This is one way to normalize the extraordinary event. The form works as a contrast pair, contrasting the normal with the paranormal. Another means is to use quoted speech. Active voices can be used to demonstrate that the phenomenon was observable by others, to reveal that the consequences or effects of the phenomenon were observable by others, and to confirm that the experience was really anomalous.

# Encountering a Supernatural Being

## A Horrible Experience

Bearing in mind the analytical tools presented earlier, it is time to explore what and how people tell about their supernatural experiences, how they defend the factual nature of the event, and how they categorize themselves in the category of normal. The first narrative that is examined is written by a woman born in the 1960s. All narratives discussed in this chapter are written in Finnish and translated into English by the author of this article.

A supernatural being that I met. A notice about the research in Kotimaa magazine on September 26. A nightmare in March 1998, around 4 am. A being, around 120–150 centimeters tall, stood next to our bed. The being wore a skirt, but it was neither a woman nor a man. Its face was swollen into a huge lump. It smiled a horrible, empty smile. It emanated something like a thirst for power and greed for gain, and sarcasm, but the feelings coming off of it cannot be compared to any human emotion. I woke up and shivered in horror for several hours. My husband and I went to the emergency room, and I got sedatives. We decided that if this event happened again, we would move to another apartment, but it did not happen again. It was the most horrible night of my life.

### Convincing the Reader of True Horror.

Although the narrative is short and concise, it presents a fruitful case to examine how experience is processed into a narrative and made convincing. The taleworld in which the event takes place is concretely near as the event happens at the narrator's home, only few years before her writing about it. Yet, the taleworld becomes distant when the supernatural realm actualizes in sleep as a nightmare. Narrating I begins and ends the narrative, and evaluates it as "the most horrible night of my life." Experiencing I, which dominates the narrative, reports the event in a distant mode, noticing the frightening elements and the consequences, but not staying in the event to evaluate them. Narrating I and experiencing I are consonant, as they both see the event negatively and because there is no later pondering on why the experience happened. Thus, it can be suggested that the narrator is still processing the experience. The narrator returns to the ordinary realm by waking up. Still, the supernatural has left its trace, which affects possible future decisions in the ordinary realm (i.e., the decision to move if the event happens again).

The story has a brief but detailed temporal scene setting. The being is described in a detailed way, too, and the supernatural traits are compared with human ones, specifically in cases in which they are similar (e.g., the clothing, the smile resembled human emotions) and in cases in which they differ (e.g., no gender, swollen face, smile is not human in spite of the resembling). There is a calling for witness in the story as the narrator refers to her husband and the hospital. I-voicing changes to we-voicing when the narrator talks about the consequences of the event. The event had emotional and physical consequences (horror, shivering) that were observable to others (husband, hospital), that were treated (sedatives), and that affected the narrator's and her husband's thinking (decision to move if it happens again). All these are narrative strategies to combat possible arguments stemming from the traditions of disbelief.

Eventually, the narrator gives an impression of a normal person responding to an irrational, unorthodox, unordinary, unexpected event in a human, goal-oriented way: She relies on the support of her husband and the help of health care, and she takes control over the supernatural by deciding her escape (i.e., from the apartment) if she deems it necessary. The story is effective

because it calmly describes the horrible event and its negative consequences, leaving further interpretation to the reader.</p>

## <h2>A Shocking Yet Enjoyable Experience</h2>

<p>The next narrative that is written by a boy who had his experience when he was twelve years old</p>

<ex><p>Hello! You asked about supernatural experiences in Kotimaa magazine on September 26. Here is one. I was around 12 years old (in the early 1980s). My family and I lived in the parsonage in [place], right next to a medieval stone church and a graveyard. Only a small village road ran between our house and the graveyard. The parsonage house was built in the 1950–1960s, and it was really gloomy and big. I had a room of my own, and so did my sister and my parents. My room was located between my parents’ room and my sister’s room. All the rooms were located on the same side of the hallway. The kitchen, bathrooms and sauna were on the other side of the hallway. Between my room and my parents’ room there was a wardrobe with an access to both rooms.</p>

<p>When I was little, I was afraid of ghosts. Also, both my mother and I had a weird feeling in the house. We lived there around four years, until (early 1980s). I was a light sleeper, and I often woke up when my dad came to my room to wish me good morning. I often walked to school with my dad.</p>

<p>One night I woke up when someone came in to my room through the hallway door. I was under the blanket, my face against the wall. I thought my dad had come in, and I turned around toward the door. I was just about to say good morning to my dad, when I noticed the misty figure standing next to my bed.</p>

<p>(Even now, after many years, I get cold shivers down my back when writing this mail.) The figure had a clear shaped head and shoulders but no face. I don’t remember seeing arms either, and from the shoulders down, the figure got thinner. It was ice cold in my room, too, even though I had the blanket on. Naturally, I got awfully frightened, and I ran through the wardrobe to my parents’ room and jumped between them. My dad didn’t really wake up, but my mom asked what was wrong. I replied, “I saw it.” My mom asked what I saw, and I said “the ghost.” My mom said she believed me, and unfortunately for my parents, I never slept in my room or alone in that house again.</p>

<p>[Part of the narrative excluded by the chapter author.]</p>

<p>The experience was really shocking to a little boy, but nowadays I enjoy having had that experience. I haven’t told my kids about it, but I have told many grown up friends of mine. People are used to trusting me, and no one has ever questioned my story. That would be difficult, because the experience was real to me, whether it was a dream or a real ghost. I believe it was a real one, because in my opinion I was awake when I turned around in the bed. If you want to have more background information or ask more, you can always call me.</p></ex>



### <h3>Pondering between Two Interpretations.</h3>

<p>This story has an appropriate scene setting for a good old conventional ghost story using generic conventions: a big, gloomy parsonage is located next to a medieval stone church and a graveyard; a hallway has several rooms and a wardrobe; and the young boy and his mother share a weird feeling in the house. The supernatural event is thus set inside a taleworld that is distant in concrete narrative and normative ways. In addition, the narrator describes himself as a light sleeper and afraid of ghosts. Thus, it does not surprise the reader when reading that the boy, in fact, encounters a misty figure standing next his bed. If the reader is still confused about the nature of the supernatural being, she soon gets an answer from the narrator: “My mom asked what I saw, and I said, ‘the ghost’.”</p>

<p>The supernatural realm breaks into the everyday realm in the taleworld and manifests itself as a being that has a head but no face and that has shoulders but no arms. Furthermore, the air in the room turns ice cold. There is no communication between the supernatural being and the narrator. Both the experiencing I and narrating I agree that the encounter is frightening. The experiencing I is consonant in the expressed emotions; he is afraid and frightened. In addition, the experiencing I normalizes the reaction by stating that getting awfully frightened is natural. The narrating I expresses dissonance: on the one hand, he acknowledges what a shocking experience it was to a young boy, and he gets cold shivers when writing about the event, but on the other hand, he enjoys having had that experience.</p>

<p>It can be argued that the point of the story is that the supernatural is real: it is not dream or fabrication. What narrative strategies does the narrator use to convince the reader of this? He uses the X/Y format and writes that he was just about to greet his father when he saw the figure. He calls for witnesses; he says his mother had the same weird feeling in the house that he had. His mother believes him when he sees the ghost. Finally, he says he has told the story to many people, and he has not been questioned.</p>

## <h2>A Revolutionary Experience</h2>

<p>This narrative is written by a woman who born in the 1930s</p>

<ex><p>I saw your notice in Karjalainen newspaper on September 20, 2003, and I’m happy to reply to your inquiry. I’m a female, born (in 1930s), I live in [place], and I’m a retired (profession), (education level) by my education.</p>

<p>My peculiar and unexpected experience took place around twenty years ago. I had been abroad with my children to celebrate my fiftieth birthday, and when I got back home, I had so much work to do that for couple of weeks I spent all my evenings preparing for classes, grading exams, and doing housework. In the evenings, once I got to my bed, I fell asleep immediately.</p>

<p>One evening, I decided to go to bed a little bit earlier, since I had eight classes the following day. Yet, I couldn’t fall asleep. I was worried and kept thinking about the classes the following day and my busy schedule in general—all the things that I had to do and the order in which I had to do them. It was 9:30 pm, and I was annoyingly awake. I was frustrated, as I was losing valuable time while waiting to fall asleep, and so I decided

to start reading. I turned around in my bed to reach the lamp. Right at that moment, I saw the figure of my mother around one and half meters from my bed. She wore a brilliant white, almost dazzling, dress, maybe some sort of a gown, and she looked very young and beautiful. Her hair was longer and darker than I remember it ever being, and she had a warm and beaming smile. She had her arms open, and there she held a huge bunch of the most wonderful, big flowers, which she handed to me. I had never seen a display of colors like that. My mother did not say anything, but in some incomprehensible way she communicated to me that she was there to congratulate me for my fiftieth birthday. She was radiating amazing warmth and love, and thus I did not get frightened, even though I have always been horrified even by the theoretical possibility of having this sort of an experience.</p>

<p>[Part of the narrative excluded by the chapter author.]</p>

<p>I want to emphasize that I had always been afraid of “ghosts” and I never, for any price, wanted to come face to face with a ghost. Even the mere thought of it was horrible. I had not wished to see her. Psychologically thinking, this experience could be seen as a fulfillment of an unconscious wish, as an appearance of a loving mother to fulfill my infantile needs. Yet, I consider this explanation unsatisfactory. I had not been thinking of my mother for years, and she was not even particularly close to me. I was grown up, and she belonged to my past. I cannot understand the possible physiological explanations either. I have not had any other experiences like this, even though I have hoped to. I would be ready for experiences such as this, but no one has appeared, not to congratulate me or for any other reason.</p>

<p>The event had a revolutionary effect on me. I felt much more emotionally close to my mother, whereas our relationship before her death had been distant. I became convinced there is life after death, and all my fears of death disappeared. I am joyfully waiting for the moment when I get to see all my beloved ones who have passed away. I have been thinking that it is a great favor to have an experience like this, because I have lived in peace ever since then, believing and trusting in the future. I have had nothing to be afraid of.</p>

<p>I have told about this experience to several people. Many of them consider it ridiculous, interpreting it as a hallucination, dreaming, or purely a physiological phenomenon. Anyway, I know myself well enough, and I have a strong sense of reality, and thus I have the courage—paradoxically enough—to say I experienced something truly real. But no one has to believe it, and there is no way to prove it either. I have a feeling it is my duty to tell this story. It is like I have been given a gift that I need to pass on even in this form, as a story of my own experience. Perhaps this way, someone could believe in life after death and thus find meaning in his/her existence. This is why I’m replying to your inquiry. It is good that you are doing your dissertation research on this topic. Maybe someday people will have more courage to talk about these things.</p></ex>

<h3>Using Comparisons and Contrasts.</h3>

The narrator skillfully utilizes different sorts of comparisons and contrasts to emphasize that “[t]he event had a revolutionary effect on me” and thus stress the factual nature of the event. The most important difference she points out is that between her life before encountering her mother and after the experience. She begins her letter by first explaining how worried she is about her busy work schedule. Second, she stresses that she has always been afraid of ghosts, and is frightened by the possibility of even seeing one. Third, she writes that she had not wished to see her deceased mother. Fourth, she states that she had had a distant relationship to her mother. After seeing her mother’s ghost, her life changed. She writes that she is living in peace and trusts in the future; she is ready for additional experiences like this and actually has been hoping to have them. Finally, she shares that the experience made her emotionally closer to her mother. In addition to these comparisons, she compares her mother’s ghostly, young, appearance to the way her mother looked at her old age.

The supernatural realm opens and coexists with the ordinary realm for a purpose, and the supernatural being, the ghost of the mother, has a plausible reason to appear: She appears to the narrator to congratulate her. The supernatural being looks human, has human expressions, and communicates with the narrator. Even the action of bringing flowers was something typical of the narrator’s mother. Thus, even though the experience was unexpected and peculiar, it had familiar traits as well making it easier for the reader to see the inner logic of the taleworld.

### Debating between the Two Traditions.

This story demonstrates well the debate between the traditions of belief and the traditions of disbelief. It is also a good example of the narrative use of the accusing I. The narrator challenges her experience by suggesting that maybe it was a case of a fulfillment of an unconscious wish to see her mother. Yet, she denies this possibility convincingly. She also abandons the physiological explanations, and denies the interpretations of the experience as a hallucination or dreaming. This exemplifies how a narrator recognizes and combats the stigmas related to a supernatural experience. In this story, it takes place in the storyrealm and is presented by the narrating I. The experiencing I focuses on describing the event and the being, and the positive feelings the being emitted, on the one hand, and the positive feelings the experiencer felt, on the other hand.

Negotiation of the stigmas attached to supernatural experiences challenges the narrator to evaluate the limits, value, and ways of knowing. What matters to her is that she knows herself, and she knows what is real. That gives her self-confidence to state that she has experienced “something truly real.” Yet, the nature of the paradox to which she refers is not completely clear. Maybe she is marveling at her courage to contest the socially accepted reality. Maybe she is still trying to define what is real or what is reality—or the possibility that there is more than one reality. She does make clear that there is no way to prove what she has experienced and that no one has to believe it.

Finally, this narrative presents the reader with a narrator who has a strong inner call to tell her story: she has a mission. Understanding that there is nothing to be afraid of in life, and that there is life after death, is a gift she wishes to forward “even in this form, as a story of my own experience.” The researcher to whom she is writing is possibly an ally on that journey and that is why she is writing.

# <h1>Stigmatization of Abnormal Experiences</h1>

<p>The research material used for this chapter provides several examples of narrators worrying about accusations, such as being drunk, mentally ill, stupid, or lacking education. These anxieties are shaped by everyday Finnish understanding of what it is to be a modern, normal Finnish person, and how to avoid getting stigmatized. The most influential definition of *stigma* is provided by Erving Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) who described stigma as an attribute that is so discredited by the society that a person who has that attribute is rejected.</p>

<p>The stigmas that the supernatural experiences carry become visible when experiences are described as stupid, narrators as mad, and listeners as suspicious, and laughing. Some narrators defend themselves by saying that they do not care what other people think. Others may express certain wariness in talking about their experiences. Finally, the fear of the negative response may prevent some people talking about the experience.</p>

<p>Narrators have several reasons to be worried that they are not being taken seriously when they tell about supernatural experiences. Listeners and readers may interpret supernatural experiences as hallucinations, which is a false perception characterized by a distortion of real sensory stimuli. It may be caused by using substances that alter the state of consciousness and it also may occur during extreme physical or mental stress. Other scientific explanations of supernatural experiences include illusions, which are abnormal perceptions caused by a sensory misinterpretation and actual stimulus.</p>

## <h2>Stigma and Mental Health</h2>

<p>The biggest worry deals with the shattering of mental health, and this fear is well grounded. According to research carried out by the Finnish Central Association for Mental Health (Mielenterveyden keskusliitto 2013), an association for people dealing with psychiatric problems, people suffering from mental disorders are not considered fully competent members of society. Mental health care professionals, people suffering from mental disorders, relatives of those with mental disorders, and the general public were included in the research. Research results show that one-fourth of the general public does not want to have anything to do with people suffering from mental disorders. Furthermore, more than half of the relatives of those suffering from mental disorders, when interviewed, said that their family member had been stigmatized. When people suffering from a mental disorder were asked whether they had been stigmatized, more than one-third answered, “yes.” The mental health care professionals considered the situation worse: more than half said that patients are stigmatized for their mental disorders.</p>

<p>How do people then address stigmatization in their narratives? It can be argued that they take a stance of normalcy by denial of stigmas or stressing the attributes of normalcy. Denial of stigmas is expressed, for example, by saying that drugs, alcohol, or medication have nothing to do with the experience, or that they are not really interested in the supernatural or do not believe in it. This kind of response is a negative confirmation of normalcy or ideal. Positive confirmation occurs when narrators say, for example, that they are healthy, educated, working, and have their feet steadily on the ground. These narratives also include truth claims, which are direct

statements such as “these experiences are true, they really happened.” These strategies can be called the attributes of normalcy, and some narratives employ both strategies.</p>

## <h1>Emotions and Supernatural Narratives</h1>

<p>Supernatural experiences cause a wide range of emotional reactions in the narratives. Some people are scared to death, others are calm and comforted, and some express excitement and joy. Emotions are discussed in half of the narratives. The most commonly mentioned emotion was fear, followed by comfort.</p>

<p>Emotions, their origins, and their expressions can be approached from several directions—for example, biological, neurophysiological, philosophical, and cognitive. The social-constructionist approach is fruitful when discussing supernatural narratives. According to this approach, culture determines what emotions can be expressed and what kinds of expressions are acceptable. In addition, culture influences which situations lead to particular emotions. According to P. N. Johnson-Laird and Keith Oatley in *Cognitive and Social Construction of Emotions* (2000) the social-constructionist approach to emotions does not reject the idea that at least some component in emotions is innate, but it emphasizes that each culture has its own evaluations that call forth emotions and its own emotions that match its social practices.</p>

## <h2>Emotion Discourse</h2>

<p>From the social-constructions perspective, emotions should not be thought of merely as physiological reactions to stimuli nor abstract entities, but as actual moments of emotional feelings and displays in a definite cultural setting. As Rom Harré and Grant Gillett write in *Discursive Mind* (1994), each vocabulary expresses a local taxonomy and theory of emotions, an emotionology (i.e., the way people identify, classify, and recognize emotions). Emotion displays and feelings are discursive acts, based on bodily reactions but meanings defined by their role in the discursive interactions of members of particular culture. Thus, according to Derek Edwards, “Emotion discourse is an integral feature of talk about events, mental states, mind and body, personal dispositions, and social relations” (1997, 170). Edwards notes that no clear distinction is made between emotion *discourse* and emotions *themselves*. What emotions are is relative to what emotions are taken to be, how they are conceptualized, talked about, and interpreted. Emotions *themselves* are socially and historically defined.</p>

<p>As was argued earlier in this chapter, supernatural experiences are stigmatized, and narrators recognize that. Catharine Lutz in *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and Their Challenge to Western Theory* (1988) and Geoffrey White in “Emotions Inside Out: The Anthropology of Affect” (1993) have noted that in Western discourses, emotions too have been considered (1) irrational, (2) unintentional and uncontrollable, (3) dangerous, (4) physical, (5) natural, (6) subjective, (7) female, and (8) value-laden. When constructing a narrative about one set of devalued experiences (the supernatural), why mention another devalued category (the emotions)? Perhaps because they were asked in the research inquiry? Still, would not it be better to brush aside the irrational, the emotion descriptions? Edwards reminds us in *Discourse and Cognition* (1997) that descriptions of emotions can provide a contrast to rational thought but also a rationally sensible story of coherent and understandable reactions.</p>

<p>The fact that the narrators chose to share their supernatural experiences with a researcher can be viewed as a decision to enter the public realm and the public debate on the reality of supernatural experiences. Both the emotions felt during the event and afterward are portrayed as coherent and understandable reactions to supernatural experiences. The construction of emotions becomes the proof they offer up to the debate. For it is one thing to argue against the reality of a supernatural vision, but it is quite another to contest someone’s emotional reactions to such an experience. </p>

## <h1>Why Do People Narrate Supernatural Experiences?</h1>

<p>Why did people respond to the research inquiry? Recall the following narratives:</p>

<ex><p>I experienced something truly real. But no one has to believe it, and there is no way to prove it either. I have a feeling it is my duty to tell this story. It is like I have been given a gift that I need to pass on even in this form, as a story of my own experience. (A woman, born in the 1930s, writing about seeing her deceased mother.)</p>

<p> I saw your inquiry, and you are looking for people who have “supernatural” experiences. I have had a need to talk about my experience for a long time. Some people know about it, but it is difficult to say what they really think about all this. . . . I would like to know if other people have similar experiences. It was a good experience. I have a deeper understanding of the nature and life in general. It felt good to tell this after a long time. I don’t know if you figured the right order of the events, but this is how it went. (Woman, born in the 1950s, telling about seeing unidentified lights.)</p></ex>

<np>When responding to the research inquiry some said they felt it was important that someone conduct research on the supernatural and that they wanted to take part in the research. Some respondents were seeking explanations for their experience, and many expressed the wish to share their experience with others. The answer to this question was explicit only in seventy responses. The reasons given most often were to take part in academic research and to share the experience. Few narrators were looking for an explanation for the experience. Women expressed the wish to share the experience more than men, whereas for men, it was relatively more important to ask for an explanation and take part in academic research.</np>

<sum>

<p>This chapter examines the variety of ways in which people who have experienced paranormal phenomena narrate their stories. What and how did they write to me, an unfamiliar researcher, about their experiences? What were the supernatural beings, events, and emotions they saw worth writing about?</p>

<p>First, even though supernatural experiences are not considered characteristic of modern Finns, people still talk about them—despite the risk of being stigmatized for sharing those experiences. Second, people have various reasons for telling their stories. Some feel they have a gift to share, others are looking for people with similar experiences, and yet others are asking for explanations. Third, writing and reviewing one’s life can be therapeutic. What is common to all is that they want to make supernatural experiences understandable and they want to sound

reliable. To do this, people employ various narrative strategies: they express that they realize the distinction between ordinary realm and supernatural realm; they use different narrative voices; they normalize paranormal; and they defend themselves against arguments drawn from rationalist traditions. Fear of stigmatization should not be overemphasized, as supernatural experiences carry positive meanings as well: they can bring comfort and sense of harmony, and make the narrator feel special for having such extra ordinary experiences. Encounter experiences range from terrifying to exciting and life altering. So, too, do emotions as narrators describe a wide range of emotions, from fear to peace and joy.</p>

<p>The case study featured contemporary Finnish experiences, but the methods used in this chapter can be used to examine how other narratives can create and sustain religious belief. Narratives indeed things: they organize human experience and provide tools for constructing models of and for reality. In this case, the supernatural encounter narratives widen the boundaries of the Western, modern ordinary world, spark discussions and debates, and invite us to ponder the nature of reality itself.</p>

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