

Publication

Associative processing and paranormal belief

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In the present study we introduce a novel task for the quantitative assessment of both originality and speed of individual associations. This 'BAG' (Bridge-the-Associative-Gap) task was used to investigate the relationships between creativity and paranormal belief. Twelve strong 'believers' and 12 strong 'skeptics' in paranormal phenomena were selected from a large student population ($n > 350$). Subjects were asked to produce single-word associations to word pairs. In 40 trials the two stimulus words were semantically indirectly related and in 40 other trials the words were semantically unrelated. Separately for these two stimulus types, response commonalities and association latencies were calculated. The main finding was that for unrelated stimuli, believers produced associations that were more original (had a lower frequency of occurrence in the group as a whole) than those of the skeptics. For the interpretation of the result we propose a model of association behavior that captures both 'positive' psychological aspects (i.e., verbal creativity) and 'negative' aspects (susceptibility to unfounded inferences), and outline its relevance for psychiatry. This model suggests that believers adopt a looser response criterion than skeptics when confronted with 'semantic noise'. Such a signal detection view of the presence/absence of judgments for loose semantic relations may help to elucidate the commonalities between creative thinking, paranormal belief and delusional ideation.

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