

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES AND SELF-ESTEEM:

A Study of the Correlation Between Personal Mystical Experiences and the Demonstration of Positive Levels of Self-Esteem in an Agricultural Population Over the Age of Sixty

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Throughout time, individuals have described experiencing states of consciousness that extend far beyond their ordinary perceptual consciousness. Such experiences can change the individual's view of the world forever. These experiences tend to be ineffable, intense, and deeply moving. This study was designed to examine whether individuals over the age of sixty, who have been involved in farming or agriculture, have experienced a significant mystical event and whether this event is correlated with positive self-esteem. The sixty subjects included in this study were drawn from a population in rural Kansas. The Rosenberg Scale was administered to establish levels of self-esteem. Questions used to ascertain the occurrence of a significant mystical experience were taken from the 1974 National Opinion Research Center (NORC) survey of 1,500 American adults. In addition to completing the Rosenberg Scale and the mysticism scale from the NORC, participants were given the opportunity to talk about a mystical or significant experience in their lives. These interviews served as anecdotal evidence of the way participants are interpreting a mystical event and the type of mystical events experienced. Results indicate that 43% of the participants in this study experienced a mystical event as defined by the NORC question. There was no significant correlation between reporting a mystical experience and having positive self-esteem. However, there were several significant correlations between reporting a mystical experience and experiencing descriptor items related to classical descriptions of mystical experience.

The Review of Literature examines the literature available on mystical experience and the various traditions for studying mystical experience. Since mystical experiences are by their very nature ineffable, the major dilemma in the study of mystical experience has been to define such experiences in ways that are measurable. A review of the literature surrounding mystical experience quickly leads to the conclusion that this is a term that lacks consistent definition. Many of the studies on mystical experience refer to "classic religious mysticism" or provide religious examples for what is meant by mystical

experience. The great spiritual traditions equate mystical experience with the direct experience of God or the Divine. This study does not purport to measure classical religious mysticism. The purpose of this study is to examine self-reported mystical experiences among a group of people who were selected based on age and environment, rather than for any special propensity for religious or mystical attainments. Mystical experience is by its very nature personal and subjective. It is a subjective, or inner experience, which can only be known to the person having the experience. The difficulty lies in defining what constitutes a “mystical experience” in a way that provides meaningful results. For the purposes of this study, mystical experience was defined as a positive response to the NORC question, “Have you ever felt as though you were very close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?” This measurement was used because it has been used with thousands of subjects in large cross-sectional studies and has shown remarkably reliable results. Two large studies done in the United States, and another done in Great Britain, have yielded results where approximately one-third of those surveyed reported having a mystical experience as defined by a positive response to this question. In addition, it has been shown that subjects reporting a mystical experience as defined by the Greeley question have been shown to report a high level of psychological well being as measured by the Bradburn Balanced Affect Scale. This correlation suggested that this measure of mystical experience might also be correlated with increased levels of self-esteem.

Methods used for this study include having the subjects answer the initial survey question regarding mystical experience, respond to a number of descriptor items typically correlated with mystical experience, and participate in an interview about their most significant or mystical experience. Participation required that subjects be sixty years old or older, live in Kansas, and have spent a portion of their life involved in farming and agriculture. Participants were recruited at rural community gatherings, senior centers, and cattle auctions. The demographic data did not differentiate between which segment of participant’s lives had involved farming and agriculture. Therefore, some subjects grew up on a farm and spent their childhood and adolescent years involved in farming, while others retired into farming and spent the most recent portion of their lives in agriculture. The average amount of time spent in agriculture was thirty-seven years.

Results show that of the sixty subjects questioned 43%, slightly higher than the national averages obtained in the large cross-sectional studies, reported having a mystical experience. Given the size of the sample studied and the breakdown of demographic factors, it appears that this population falls within the expected response rates for reporting a mystical experience. There are a number of demographic factors including age, education, and social class that are traditionally correlated with increased reports of religious experience. Other studies have also found correlations between increased reports of mystical experience and Protestant religious affiliation and subcultures that

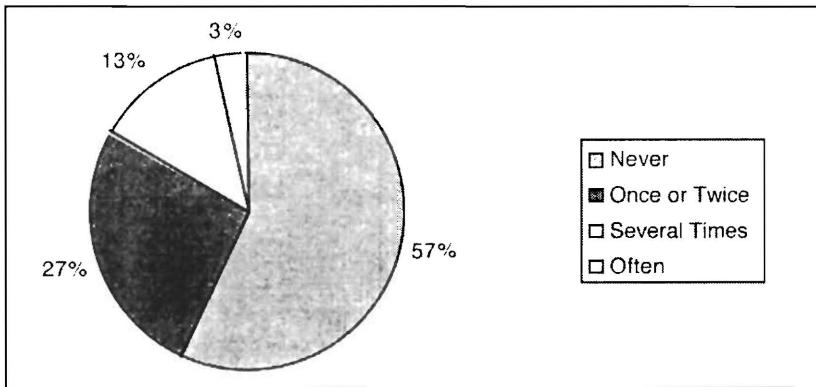


Figure 1. Frequency of numinous experience.

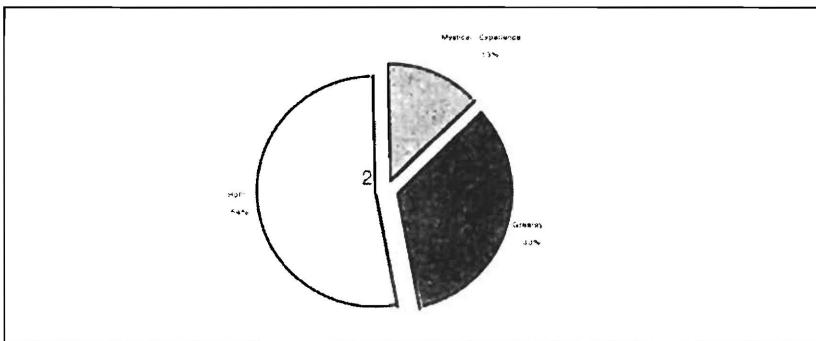


Figure 2. Correlation between positive response to the Greeley question and the mystical experience question.

Table 1
Descriptor Items Correlating with Greeley Question

	Pearson Correlation	2-Tail Sig
A feeling of deep and profound peace	0.287	0.026
A feeling that I couldn't possibly describe what was happening to me	0.26	0.041
Personality has been taken over by something much more powerful than I am	0.32	0.013
A sense of being alone	0.275	0.033
A feeling of desolation	0.263	0.042

encourage intense experiences. The population of this study is defined in part by being at the upper parameters of groups in terms of age. In contrast, this population is at the lower parameters for education and Kansas farmers are traditionally lower on demographics such as social class and income. This study did not collect data on religious affiliation. However, many of the participants are likely to be Protestant based on the overall demographics of the population. This study also did not collect data on ethnicity or cultural identification. Again, however, the population being studied consists primarily of white Americans who would not typically associate themselves with any other religious ethnicity and who are part of a culture that does not encourage intense experiences.

The other measurement used in this study was the Rosenberg Scale of Self-Esteem. It was hypothesized that frequency of reporting a mystical experience in a population where such experiences weren't generally accepted might be related to having a positive level of self-esteem, such that a subject would have enough self-confidence to both interpret an experience as being spiritual or mystical and then to report this experience to an outside investigator.

The conclusion of this study is that rural farmers over the age of sixty are likely to report mystical or numinous experiences. The language and interpretation of these experiences are related to the background of the people who have the experiences. However, those who reported having a mystical experience consistently talk about that experience as being ineffable and life changing. These experiences are moments that stand out in their memories and shape their lives. When people are asked to report whether they have experienced any of the classic descriptors of mystical experience or to tell about their most significant or mystical experience, results exist in a range. This study supports the findings of almost every researcher who has attempted to study mystical experience. The conclusions show that farmers over the age of sixty are as likely as the general population to report a mystical experience. While various factors may affect the likelihood of a person reporting a mystical experience, it appears that these experiences are common and whether or not they are reported has a great deal to do with how the question is defined and where on the continuum a subject defines an experience as "mystical" rather than "ordinary."

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