

Mysticism

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Abstract

Mysticism and related concepts have appeared in a variety of academic and nonacademic contexts. We begin by narrowing our focus to several general definitions that emphasize properties that have proved to be of interest to social and behavioral scientists. In such contexts, mystical knowledge typically refers to a special kind of positive, life-changing sense of comprehending the universe, and a mystical experience is the physical and psychological state in which such knowledge is acquired, and during which the experiencer feels “at one” with the universe and/or a higher power. We review some of the earliest work on mysticism in psychology and sociology, primarily attributable to William James and Max Weber, respectively. More recent work in psychology has focused mainly on the development of mysticism scales, and research in neuropsychology is focusing on, among other topics, how structures and processes in the human brain produce mystical experiences. Sociological research has been relatively meager; however, we do note the potential contributions that sociological perspectives might offer. We close with a discussion of some methodological and theoretical issues that seem to hinder progress in the area, and note several promising lines for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Mysticism most often refers to forms of purported knowledge and understanding frequently deemed life-changing, and whose very nature renders them impossible to communicate in their full depth and breadth. Closely related is the so-called mystical experience: a state of mind and body, usually lasting between several minutes and several hours, through which mystical knowledge and understanding are purported to be acquired. In more extreme cases, mystical knowledge seems to the experiencer to have a very special nature that is far removed from the realms of logic, language, the senses, or any of our normal ways of apprehending the world. The knower regards it to be highly profound, yet indescribable. Estimates of those who have had an experience that minimally qualifies as mystical range from one-third to one-half the population (Wulff, 2000, pp. 406–410), depending on how the term is defined.

Despite their ineffable nature, innumerable authors from dozens of perspectives have tried to describe, dissect, induce, and explain mystical experiences. Mystics, neuroscientists, and all manner of others in between have written voluminously on the subject, bringing to bear a variety of preconceptions, rhetorical devices, introspection, and metaphysics in attempts to communicate the incommunicable. In many of these writings, but not all, the experiences are associated with religious beliefs. They are frequently, but not necessarily, seen as stemming from restful, meditative states. They sometimes, but not always, entail the sense of a perfect oneness with the universe, or of a fundamental connection or unity among all things, or of a connection with a singular god or other spiritual entity. Feelings of mystical insight are achievable for some only as the result of years of self-inflicted pain and deprivation. Others appear to conjure them up through simple meditation techniques or floating in a sensory deprivation tank. (See Bishop, 1995; Cox, 2005; and Foreman, 1999 for discussions of varieties of mysticism and their cultural/religious associations.)

The term *mysticism* has so many definitions, and is so multidisciplinary and multifaceted, that a short review can only scratch its very broad surface. We can only acknowledge the existence of vast non-scientific literatures on the varied historical roots of contemporary forms of mysticism, and on their many philosophical and theological ramifications. For curious readers looking for scientific treatments of this fascinating phenomenon, these literatures will seem quite disheveled and impressionistic. Fortunately, approaches that view mystical phenomena through the lenses of the behavioral and social sciences are *sometimes* more coherent and systematic. Even in these fields, however—perhaps owing to the subject’s many facets spread across so many disciplines over so many years—one is hard-pressed to locate a foundation, core, or cutting edge.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

It is difficult to pinpoint the “foundation” of something that manifests hardly any structure. Such is the case with the conceptualization and study of mysticism. Narrowing our focus on the social and behavioral sciences, however, we find work that is at least *temporally* foundational, that is, where topics made some of their earliest appearances in the field.

Attempts to characterize mystical experiences for purposes of systematic investigation go back more than a century to William James (James, 1985[1902]; see also Barnard, 1998). His early attempts to answer key questions set the stage for much of the work that followed: What is the *nature* of the mystical experience? Is it a manifestation of culturally defined categories, contact with a higher power, or self-delusion? Where is the

boundary between the experience itself and one's interpretation of it? James was not the first to ask such questions, but he was the first to call for integrative answers involving drawing from what was then believed to be true about the mind and brain, culture, and transcendent reality.

Not long after James' work was published, one of sociology's classical theorists wrote about mysticism as one component of a two-by-two typology of religions. Weber (1978[1922]) saw mysticism and asceticism as both related to religious salvation. However, asceticism, for him, was a set of procedures enacted for purposes of achieving salvation, mysticism was treated as a state of illumination, as in this passage (p. 544): "For the activity of contemplation to succeed in achieving its goal of mystic illumination, the extrusion of all everyday mundane interests is always required." Crossing the asceticism/mysticism distinction is an "inner-worldly/other-worldly" dichotomy, that is, whether the religious practitioner is oriented toward evoking change in the world versus whether s/he has no interests one way or the other in worldly affairs. Ascetics would appear to have inner-worldly tendencies, with mystics favoring other-worldly concerns.

Although writing over a half century later than James, philosopher Walter T. Stace's conceptualization of mysticism was seminal. Although not himself an empirical researcher, his categorization scheme for mystical experiences (Stace, 1960) eventually was adapted by psychologists in measures of reported mystical experience (see later).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Research on mysticism in the social and behavioral sciences is somewhat diffuse and sporadic, much of it motivated by philosophical debates rather than by the explanation of human behavior. Most of the research is on psychology, drawing on Hood's (1975) mystical experience scale (e.g., Caird, 1988; Chen, Zhang, Hood, & Watson, 2013, and Reinert & Stifler, 1993). The scale sought to determine core properties of mystical experiences. Some of the applications also make sociologically relevant comparisons between various populations, religions, and social norms. For instance, gender orientation was found to moderate the tendency to interpret an event as a mystical experience (e.g. Mercer & Durham, 1999), and the mystical experiences reported by Iranian Muslims and American Christians are comparable on some dimensions of the scale but not others (Ghorbani & Watson, 2009; Hood *et al.*, 2001). (Alternative scales have been developed by Lange & Thalbourne, 2007; Kohls & Walach, 2006; and Thomas & Cooper, 1978).

There are at least several lines of sociological work that bear directly on mysticism. Bourque (1969) measured the social correlates of those who reported having mystical experiences. She concluded that religious and

secular respondents both reported transcendental experiences; however, each identified a different source of their qualitatively similar experiences. Campbell (1977) observed that, while mystical religions do not generate organizations and groups the way traditional religion does, they do lead to “collectivities”—groups of people who share common values and norms—and may be a factor in cult formation. Fox’s (1992) research used data from a single General Social Survey question: “[Have you ever] felt as though you were very close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself.” He found that, among other paranormal experiences, mystical experiences had unique response patterns that were stable across time.

Some of the most interesting and sophisticated work on mysticism have been on neuropsychology and are described by such labels as religious experiences and God beliefs. The best known of this work is by Persinger (1987; Persinger, 1999), for whom these phenomena fall squarely within the realm of the so-called mystical experiences addressed by other scholars. As he described it in the 1999 documentary film *A Question of Miracles*,

In the laboratory we have reproduced every aspect of the God experience ... from the rising sensation to the feelings of ecstasy, to the feelings of a sensed presence, to the feelings that you’re at one with the universe. ... all of the depth of emotions and compelling propensity to want to spread it to the world and to share, often, with sincere emotion, their experiences. That’s basically the residual of just a few seconds of electrical activity within the normal human brain.

This is accomplished by stimulating the temporal lobes and the limbic system with complex electric fields. Several alternative theories and lines of research are emerging still (see Biello, 2007; Wulff, 2000).

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

THEORY

Unresolved definitional problems most likely are hindering progress in mysticism research. Before any phenomenon can be usefully investigated, an explicit provisional definition must be rendered. This means establishing a term to which is assigned a set of abstract and general properties that reliably excludes phenomena not possessing those properties, and reliably identifies phenomena that possess them. It is essential to keep this in mind when dealing with terms such as “mystic,” “mysticism,” and “mystical experience,” each of which has been used in many different ways in different literatures, usually without explicit definitions.

Theoretical definitions are neither right nor wrong, but certainly more or less useful—or biasing—insofar as directing attention toward some phenomena and away from others. Shermer (2002), p. 20) defined mysticism as “... basing conclusions on personal insights that elude external validation.” Radin (1997), p. 10), in contrast, defined it as “the direct perception of reality; knowledge derived directly rather than indirectly.” Shermer, a renowned skeptic of the paranormal, emphasized the scientific invalidity of mystical insights, contrasting them with *rationalism*: “... basing conclusions on external validation.” Radin, an ardent proponent of parapsychology, used his definition to *downplay* the difference between mysticism and rationalism: “In many respects, mysticism is surprisingly similar to science in that it is a systematic method of exploring the nature of the world.” Clearly, Shermer and Radin may use the same terms, but they do not seem to be talking about the same thing. In such a case, the relative values of theories employing one or the other (or some alternative) definition must be assessed with care. Different theories may benefit from different versions of “mysticism”; however, nobody benefits unless the phenomena to which one is referring, or not referring, are identifiable.

METHODS

With key terms under-defined or having too many definitions, and with relevant phenomena so unpredictable, it is not surprising that methods for studying mystical phenomena have seemed problematic. As Wulff (2000) noted, for example, mysticism questionnaires tend to be open to varied interpretations by respondents. This may, however, be a case of the bad golfer blaming his clubs for his poor performance. Advances in the methodological tools available to researchers are of little value unless they are very clear about what is it they need to measure, and toward what theoretical end. Although some scholars (e.g., Stace, 1960) argue that the nature of mysticism places it beyond the reach of rational inquiry, at least some of the conceptualizations that we have reviewed refute such a claim and, at least in principle, should permit measurement at high tolerances.

LINGERING EFFECTS

There is very little systematic research on the lingering effects of mystical experiences. Anecdotal evidence suggests some possible common threads, such as the intuition that the more potent experiences are more prone to altering world-views and behaviors in significant ways. Unfortunately, the unpredictability and ineffability of such experiences have made them resistant to documentation and analysis. On the other hand, people seem to

very much enjoy sharing their experiences with others and are motivated to articulate them. Given the explosion of Internet forums for self-revelation, it seems that there may now be useful data that was unavailable as recently as a decade ago.

PSYCHOLOGY

In recent years there has been a notable absence of rigorous and sustained theory development and research on mysticism in the major subdisciplines of psychology such as personality, developmental, cognitive, and perceptual. Developments cited in Wulff's (2000) thorough review occurred primarily in the 1970s and 1980s. Again, part of the problem may be due to the elusiveness of the phenomenon itself. It may be argued that psychology's greatest strides in the last century have occurred in areas where it has been possible to gather data from large numbers of cases, and/or to conduct controlled laboratory experiments, and/or to gather responses using reliable and well-validated questionnaires. Naturally occurring mystical experiences are too transient to study using traditional methods, and there are many problems—theoretical, methodological, and ethical, to mention a few—with the prospect of inducing such experiences artificially.

NEUROPSYCHOLOGY

The various dimensions along which mystical experiences have been typed may appear noteworthy to the experiencer or researcher, but represent identical underlying brain functions filtered through the lenses of idiosyncratic experience or social context. Currently there are no agreed-upon biological markers for mystical experiences (Wulff, 2000, pp. 405–406), making this a potentially crucial area for future research. At the same time, neural imaging methods have advanced, and researchers continue to investigate correlates between religious/mystical experience, psychological states, and neurophysiological processes. (See Biello, 2007; Booth, Koren, & Persinger, 2005; Harris *et al.*, 2009; Kapogiannisa *et al.*, 2009; Urgesi, Aglioti, Skrap, & Fabbro, 2010). There has been so much new activity in this area that new subdisciplinary labels are emerging, such as “neurotheology” and “spiritual neuroscience.”

SOCIOLOGY

Perhaps owing to its strong psychological component, mysticism has received relatively meager attention by sociologists. This is despite the early attention from Max Weber, one of sociology's “founding fathers.”

There are many avenues for potentially fruitful research and theory. The sociology of religion is a vibrant subfield with some prior history of mysticism research (cited earlier), and a logical home for further developments. In addition, every major sociological topic—status, power, gender, class, occupation, inequality, family, institutions, deviance, social movements, and more—potentially intersects with mystical experiences, either as precipitating conditions or as contexts where the impacts of such experiences may be traced. As sociologists ourselves, we could bemoan the lack of sociological involvement in such a vibrant topic. On the other hand, this also means that sociology holds great potential for offering new insights not likely to emerge from other fields.

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