

EXPLORING APHANTASIA AND EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES

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Background: Imaging ability is implicated in memory, daydreaming, dreaming and creativity and may play a role in consciousness and exceptional experiences (ExE), including extrasensory perception (ESP). Aphantasia (a lack of voluntary visual imaging ability) and its association with ExE is understudied.

Aims: We explored 1. how aphantasia and imagery vividness relate to different forms of exceptional experiences (ExE); 2. How synesthesia interacts with aphantasia and ExE and 3. how people with aphantasia experience their mental life and ExE, using a phenomenological approach.

Methods: A survey including the VIVIQ, a synesthesia question, L.E.Rhine's 4 types of ESP, the PExE-II and an open-ended question were answered by 384 participants. Ten aphantasics participated in in-depth interviews, analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Results: Hyperphantasics scored the highest on all 4 subscales of ExE. Hyperphantasics also had higher frequencies for realistic and unrealistic ESP experiences and intuitive experiences. There was no association between the VIVIQ and hallucinations. ExE and synesthesia are reported among those with aphantasia. The IPA resulted in 5 themes, including understanding aphantasia in relation to self and others; an organized "higher order" cognitive system; emotions as memory tags; role of the physical world, and exceptional experiences.

Conclusions: ExE are strongly connected to vividness of mental imagery. ESP as hallucinations were unrelated to imagery. ExE are reported among a subset of people with aphantasia. The IPA suggests a different cognitive style that reflects direct higher order knowing where information is experienced directly, and without visual details. Emotions, a sequential cognitive style and information experienced in dreams play roles in some ExE.

Keywords: Vividness of mental imagery, Aphantasia, Synaesthesia, Exceptional experiences, Extrasensory perception, Higher order thinking

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