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Trickster-Like Experiences While Documenting the Paranormal: Rasch Analysis of an Initial Survey

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ABSTRACT

This online study explored anomalous, trickster-like events reported by researchers while writing about ghostly episodes. A convenience sample of 167 participants (seven credentialed frontier scientists and 160 amateur paranormal investigators) retrospectively endorsed 15 items spanning both subjective experiences (e.g., unusual dreams, emotional shifts) and objective events (e.g., missing files, device malfunctions). Subjective experiences occurred 1.6 times more often than objective events, with endorsement rates ranging from 7% to 30%. Rasch analysis revealed a unidimensional hierarchy of 14 coherent items with strong internal consistency (KR-20 = .87) and minimal gender-related response bias. The reported anomalies could largely reflect psychological mechanisms such as memory reconstruction, source-monitoring errors, or cognitive load, but their clustering and symbolic framing suggest deeper epistemological vulnerabilities—what we call a "trickster chain"—when preparing paranormal themed works. These findings may generalize to other emotionally charged or liminal writing contexts where narrative coherence is vulnerable to psychological or transpersonal disruptions, offering a novel lens on how altered states, symbolic processes, and creativity intersect in scholarly work. Our novel "Trickster-Like Experiences Inventory" therefore offers a promising tool for metascientific inquiry and invites further research into both conventional and parapsychological interpretations of anomalies or disruptions in academic contexts.

KEYWORDS

artifacts, experimenter effects, hitchhiker effect, liminality, Rasch scaling.

This preliminary study was motivated by an unexpected event involving several of the present authors. In particular, a colleague alerted one of us to a "phantom citation" in Massullo et al.'s (2025a) technical report on their fact sheet about ghostly episodes, i.e., recurrent anomalies often attributed to apparitions, haunts, or poltergeists (personal communication to J. Houran, 22 June 2025). In particular, their statement—"Watt et al. (2015) noted that 12% of respondents had encountered unusual physical events they interpreted as poltergeist activity" (Massullo et al., 2025a, p. 2)—was flagged for its unfamiliar statistic and erroneous source.[1] A subsequent inspection of the authors' article notes indeed revealed that the sentence was meant to read as: "Some averaged statistics (Ross & Joshi, 1992; YouGov, 2022) suggest that approximately 12% of survey respondents have had encountered unusual physical events they interpreted as poltergeist activity."

The statistic therefore was accurate but not its supporting reference as later clarified (Massullo et al., 2025b).

The colleague speculated that the erroneous citation could be a "hallucination," or when an artificial intelligence (AI) program generates false or misleading information that looks plausible but is not based on real data (Maynez et al., 2020, p. 1906; cf. Alkaissi & McFarlane, 2023; Augenstein et al., 2024; Ji et al., 2023). This suggestion sounds reasonable given that Massullo et al. (2025a) used Large Language Models (LLM)—i.e., advanced AI systems trained to understand and generate human-like text—to help substantiate the content validity of their fact sheet. However, (a) the erroneous reference did not derive from their AI cross-referenced literature task, and (b) none of the authors either recall seeing this phantom reference during the writing and publishing process or can definitively trace its origin at this point. This situation somewhat echoes the Mandela Effect in which a large group of people share a false or distorted memory of a past event, often with high confidence, despite evidence to the contrary (cf. French, 2018). Still, we deemed the citation anomaly sufficiently puzzling to scrutinize potential explanations. Two main possibilities, though not mutually exclusive, are explored below: (a) ordinary human error and (b) anomalous "trickster" forces.

CONFOUNDING FORCES: FROM HUMAN ERROR TO TRICKSTER PHENOMENA

Errors or discrepancies may reflect deeper, more enigmatic dynamics that undermine the reliability and interpretation of historic documentation or field investigation reports in this domain. Human error, such as memory distortions, cognitive biases, or observational inaccuracies, is a well-documented factor in the recording of extraordinary events (Chabris & Simons, 2010; Drinkwater et al., 2019; Loftus, 2005). Such errors are particularly prevalent under conditions of heightened emotional arousal or ambiguity, where the limitations of human perception and memory are most pronounced (Kahneman, 2011). "Murphy's Law" is another pitfall involving everyday physics (e.g., Bloch, 1977). Matthews (1997) explained that events like toast landing butter-side down or the ubiquity of odd socks follow predictable probabilistic and dynamical laws rather than cosmic spite. By recognizing these mathematical certainties, we can reframe many disruptions to scholarly writing as inevitable outcomes of combinatorial probability and rigid-body dynamics rather than supernatural interference. In contrast, the concept of trickster effects offers a metaphorical framework to understand the unpredictable and paradoxical nature of certain confounds. Rooted in Jungian psychology and cultural anthropology, the trickster archetype embodies disruption, ambiguity, and boundary-crossing behaviors (Hyde, 1998). Within parapsychological contexts, trickster effects suggest that anomalies or disruptions associated with researchers' processes of documentation may not solely result from human fallibility but could also emerge from the interplay of psychological, social, or environmental factors that defy a straightforward or definitive interpretation (Hansen, 2001). Together, these two perspectives highlight the multifaceted origins of unexpected anomalies concomitant with writing practices and their implications for research in this domain.

Ordinary Human Error

Before adopting esoteric interpretations of anomalous experiences, researchers should obviously consider conventional psychological, physiological, or environmental explanations (Cardeña et al., 2014; French & Stone, 2013; Houran et al., 2026). For instance, in the present context many authors claim that nearly every published paper contains at least one typo or minor mistake despite multiple rounds of review and proofing (e.g., Academia Stack Exchange, 2021). Table 1 shows that these anecdotes are often affirmed by data on the prevalence of typographical, statistical, and other types of errors in scientific publications. In particular, a bibliometric analysis of seven high-impact emergency medicine journals over two decades found that 1.3% of published articles had corrections issued, with 62.5% of those related to simple typographic mistakes. Notably, 7.2% of the corrected errors were severe enough to potentially impact the study's conclusions (Vural et al., 2022). Likewise, Bhatt et al.'s (2014) study of 8,910 articles in five imaging journals found a 1.77% errata rate, with the majority involving typographical or image-related issues and 0.11% classified as major errors.

Errors with statistical reporting are no less problematic. One analysis of 157 radiology articles, for instance, found that only 10 were error-free, as well as 66% exhibited mistakes in summarizing data (Günel Karadeniz et al., 2019). Another study of 3,788 papers found that 93.3% (28/30) of the nursing journals contained incorrect representation of *p*-values (Wu et al., 2020). Citation and quotation errors are also common. A meta-analysis of quotation accuracy across medical literature found that 25.4% of references contained errors, with 11.9% being major (Jergas

Table 1. Prevalence of Error Types in Scientific Publications.

Error Type	Estimated Prevalence	Reference
Typographical or errata	High but unquantified	(Academia Stack Exchange, 2021; American Psychological Association, n.d.)
Statistical or data reporting errors	26%–96% of articles	(Diong et al., 2018; Nieminen, 2020)
Quotation or reference errors	~25% of citations	(Jergas & Baethge, 2015)
Duplicate publication (self-plagiarism)	14.2% of retracted papers	(Fang et al., 2012)
Significant-figure inaccuracies	Common but unquantified	(Morral, 2018)
Statistical inconsistencies	10%–15% of reported results	(Bakker & Wicherts, 2011; Nuijten et al., 2016)
Plagiarism	~9.8% of retracted papers	(Fang et al., 2012)
Image or data manipulation	~3.8% of biomedical papers	(Bik et al., 2016)

& Baethge, 2015). In the psychological sciences, analyses using tools like *Statcheck* (Nuijten & Epskamp, 2024) revealed that approximately 50% of articles contained at least one *p*-value inconsistent with reported test statistics (Nuijten et al., 2016). About 15% of statistical errors were serious enough to potentially change a study's conclusions (Bakker & Wicherts, 2011). Additionally, image manipulation and duplication pose concerns for research integrity. A large-scale screening of over 20,000 biomedical articles found that 3.8% contained inappropriate image duplication, with some instances indicating potential misconduct (Bik et al., 2016). These findings collectively highlight a troubling level of errors across various scientific domains, with implications for research transparency, reproducibility, and editorial practices.

Errors and omissions in private medical records are also widespread (Jacobs et al., 2007). For example, Healthwatch England's survey found that nearly 23% of patients in England identified inaccuracies in their medical records (Campbell, 2025). These included incorrect personal information, medication lists, and diagnostic labels. Among those who encountered errors, 10% received inappropriate medication and 12% were refused treatment as a direct consequence. Similarly, a cross-sectional audit of primary care medical records (Khoo et al., 2012) revealed many documentation issues, including incomplete histories and diagnoses. Additionally, 53% of records included management errors such as incorrect drug dosages and unnecessary investigations, indicating systemic weaknesses in clinical documentation practices. In the United States, a survey conducted across three health systems (Bell et al., 2020) reported that 20% of patients who accessed their electronic health records discovered at least one error. Of these, more than 40% were deemed serious by the patients, typically involving errors in medical history, diagnoses, or medication information. Errors are equally prevalent in clinical research data and administrative record. For example, Chan et al. (2008) examined the accuracy of clinical research databases and found error rates ranging from 2.3% to 26.9%, primarily due to data entry mistakes and misinterpretation of source documents. This result highlights the variability and potential unreliability of datasets used in clinical decision-making and research synthesis.

Anomalous Trickster Forces

A more provocative interpretation is that Massullo et al.'s (2025a) phantom citation was a classic "trickster" event—a concept long recognized in anomalistics and now increasingly scrutinized in parapsychology as a lens for understanding the disruptive or paradoxical features of anomalous experiences and their aftereffects. Across cultural and psychological traditions, the trickster figure appears as an archetype of disorder and contradiction who embodies mischief, chaos, ambiguity, transformation, and the unpredictable forces that destabilize established systems (Babcock-Abrahams, 1975; Hyde, 1998; Hynes & Doty, 1993; Radin, 1956; Tucker, 2020). In Jungian psychology, the trickster symbolizes the collective shadow—the disowned and inferior aspects of the self that disrupt the ego's carefully constructed image (Hyde, 1998). Tricksters therefore thrive in liminal zones—between identities, roles, or realities—where they upend conventional norms and expose unconscious tensions.

This framework characterizes trickster experiences as unpredictable, contradictory, or disruptive events that compromise the reliable observation, replication, or interpretation or documentation of anomalous phenomena (Tucker, 2020). These occurrences can simulate intelligent interference, defy systematic inquiry, and blur distinctions between authentic anomalies and psychological or environmental artifacts. Empirically, such effects have been documented in the laboratory and field both in the phenomena themselves and in the investigative process (Hansen, 2001; Kennedy, 2001, 2004, 2024; McClenon, 2024; Storm, 2023). Anomalous activity may cease in the presence of investigators (Roll, 1977), data may go missing or research equipment may malfunction (Gauld & Cornell, 1979; Houran & Lange, 1998; McClenon, 2024), or percipient behavior may shift in unexpected or erratic

ways (e.g., Houran et al., 2002b; Terhune et al., 2007), as partly influenced by social and contextual variables (Childs & Murray, 2010; Drinkwater et al., 2019; Eaton, 2019; Ironside & Wooffitt, 2021). Investigators themselves may even become unwitting participants in anomalous episodes, further dissolving the boundary between observer and the observed (e.g., Houran et al., 2022; McClenon, 2024). These phenomena frequently resist traditional scientific controls and evoke a familiar impression among researchers of being "toyed with"—a hallmark of the trickster motif.

Arguably, trickster dynamics also include so-called "paranormal contagion" or the hitchhiker effect (see e.g., McCue, 2022; Ritson, 2021). This refers to anomalous experiences at a specific "hotspot" that follow witnesses or investigators after they leave the location. Rather than remaining confined to the original site, ghosts, poltergeist activity, UFO sightings, or cryptid encounters are said to reappear at a percipient's home or travel destinations, sometimes even affecting their friends or family members. Knapp and Kelleher's (2005) extensive investigation at Skinwalker Ranch is a classic case study of contagion effects. Military and scientific observers reportedly documented several instances in which orbs, poltergeist-type disturbances, and canine cryptids appeared in their own residences after returning from the ranch. Some witnesses also reported sustained medical or psychological effects linked to these follow-home incidents, suggesting that ostensible contagion effects can persist episodically and sometimes escalate in intensity or variety of manifestations.

Empirical studies have long implicated the role of contagious processes in ghostly episodes and other anomalous experiences (e.g., Houran & Lange, 1996; Houran et al., 2022; Lange & Houran, 1999, 2001; Laythe et al., 2017). However, such "snowballing" perceptions are often explained via standard psychology such as fear responses or suggestion effects (for a review on emotional, perceptual, and behavioral forms of contagion, see Houran et al., 2025). Other times, clusters or flurries of anomalous experiences may result from Lange and Houran's (2021) "enchantment-psi loop" model. In particular, situational-enchantment is a mental state defined by a sense of dissonance and ontological shock, which is produced when one's normal waking experience is disrupted by a sudden and profound awareness that seeds a transcendent feeling of connection to an ultimate reality (Drinkwater et al., 2022).

People often become "enchanted" when delighting in art, experiencing nature, or participating in other kinds of immersive experiences that markedly alter people's perceptions or notions of reality (e.g., Lamont, 2017; Lange et al., 2022; van Elk et al., 2016). Importantly, Lange and Houran (2021) found that enchantment is not only an aftereffect of anomalous experiences but also a facilitator of successive events. Specifically, repeated path analyses of questionnaire data confirmed a self-reinforcing loop between situational-enchantment and anomalous experiences, as mediated by paranormal belief and transliminality (i.e., a "hypersensitivity to psychological material originating in (a) the unconscious, and/or (b) the external environment:" Thalbourne & Maltby, 2008, p. 1618).

Some researchers interpret trickster-like anomalies or disruptions as symbolic or liminal processes unfolding within the psyche (Tucker, 2020). Recurrent themes—such as narrative contradictions, improbable coincidences, equipment failure, and data anomalies—have long intrigued parapsychologists. While some attribute such events to a mischievous or destabilizing agency (e.g., Haraldsson, 2009), others propose more grounded psychological interpretations. Storm (2023), for instance, viewed such patterns as emergent manifestations of the trickster archetype—a projection from the collective unconscious that arises when psi research unsettles the boundaries of conventional science.

Specifically, Storm (2023) argued that the trickster "acts out" through failed replications, uncanny synchronicities, or ambiguous results that collapse the distinction between subjective observation and objective measurement. Moreover, Parker (2013) discussed cases in which an experimenter's unconscious psi presumably influenced participant outcomes, producing distinctive patterns such as mirror effects—where control-group scores are suppressed while experimenter scores are elevated—and scree-jump distributions, marked by sudden leaps just beyond statistical thresholds. This forensic-parapsychology perspective contrasts with more familiar experimenter-belief effects, in which expectancy subtly shapes performance (e.g., Watt & Ramakers, 2003; Wiseman & Schlitz, 1997), by suggesting the role of a deeper, psi-mediated mechanism rooted in the investigator's own influence (cf. Smith, 2003).

Rather than adopting the broad mythological figure of the trickster, Kennedy (2024) argued that we must translate that image into concrete, testable hypotheses about the human and cultural factors that underlie psi's apparent capriciousness. He warns that leaving "trickster" undefined risks substituting poetic appeal for scientific clarity. Instead, he proposed focusing on the well-documented roles of expectation, belief, and motivated reasoning—factors that can readily be modeled, measured, and controlled.

The preceding shows that some authorities view the trickster as a symbolic key to understanding the deep ambiguity of paranormal phenomena; others see it as a rhetorical device that deflects attention from parapsychology's more serious methodological shortcomings (e.g., Wagenmakers et al., 2012). Notably, field investigations—especially those involving poltergeists or recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK)—often unfold in "liminal" environments characterized by emotional volatility, ambiguous social roles, or personal marginality (Lange & Houran, 2001; Maher, 2015; Roll, 1977; Tucker, 2020; Ventola et al., 2019). Such conditions are certainly fertile ground for both symbolic projection and cognitive distortion.

Ultimately, trickster-like phenomena seem to illuminate the epistemological and methodological fragility of studying phenomena that are transient, emotionally charged, and deeply context-dependent. Whether viewed through symbolic, psychological, or critical lenses, trickster-like experiences invite a deeper reckoning with the limits of inquiry into the anomalous—and with the provocative possibility that the act of investigation itself may catalyze or co-create the very effects it seeks to map and understand (cf. Parker, 2013). Kennedy (2024) thus cautioned against treating the psi-trickster as an autonomous spirit-agent. Instead, he framed it more as a "mirror" of parapsychology's own unexamined biases, tensions, and assumptions—an invitation to turn a scientific lens back on our motivations, expectations, or methodological blind-spots

THE PRESENT STUDY

This preliminary survey and analysis explores both subjective (*S*) and objective (*O*) forms of trickster-like phenomena without testing specific directional hypotheses. Rather, we sought to describe the range of anomalies or disruptions that researchers report while writing about ghostly episodes and determine whether they form a probabilistic incidence hierarchy along a single latent continuum per the Rasch (1960/1980) model. This latter result would mirror the phenomenology of *S/O* anomalies that characterize percipients' narratives of ghostly episodes (e.g., Houran & Lange, 2001; Houran et al., 2002b, 2019a). Our study defines "trickster-like experiences" strictly as unexpected or anomalous events which are experienced during paranormal-themed writing sessions and that may disrupt reliable documentation, replication, or interpretation—over and above ordinary typos or data-entry slips. This working definition guided both our item-generation and our interpretation of survey responses below.

To immediately clarify, Rasch item hierarchies have the property that for two occurrences X and Y that are reported with probabilities P(X) and P(Y), and P(X) > P(Y), this relation holds *regardless of the number of other trickster-like experiences that individuals reported*. Moreover, P(X) > P(Y) holds across all subgroups of respondents (e.g., Men vs Women, Older vs Younger respondents, etc.). The Method section explains Rasch scaling in more detail. However, we use it here not just as a measurement tool, but also as a way to uncover the underlying patterns in *how* researchers experience certain trickster-like disruptions and anomalies (cf. Moustakas, 1994).

As demonstrated in other contexts (e.g., Houran et al., 2019a; Lange, 2017; Lange et al., 2004), Rasch scaling can illuminate meaningful connections among these reported experiences and offer an empirically-grounded framework for improved recognition and documentation of such phenomena, hypothesis generation, and theory development. Specifically, Rasch scaling creates a hierarchy of events that indicates the order in which trickster-like experiences are likely to occur. Beyond issues of measurement, we also consider how trickster-like experiences may function as transpersonal signals—episodes during which ordinary cognitive boundaries loosen, enabling contact with symbolic, archetypal, or transrational dimensions of experience. Accordingly, Rasch modeling may reveal not only the structural phenomenology of these events but also point to stages within a potential transformative process.

METHOD

Transparency and Openness

Our survey administration and analysis protocol was not pre-registered, but it was approved by the Ethics Committee at Integrated Knowledge Systems and adheres to the Journal Article Reporting Standards (Kazak, 2018). Accordingly, we specify the research samples, data exclusions (if any), research questions, applicable manipulations, and all measures and data abstractions.

Participants

We used a global outreach campaign on social media combined with direct email appeals (described below) to recruit a convenience sample (N = 167, M_{age} = 51.94 yrs, SD = 8.84, range = 21–79 yrs.) of paranormal-oriented researchers comprising 68 men, 95 women, and four "other" ("I prefer not to say" = 2 and "non-binary or gender-fluid" = 2).

Respondents were segmented by (a) Paranormal Investigators (i.e., amateur scientists or self-styled "ghost-hunters") (n = 160) and (b) Credentialed Scientists (i.e., professionally trained researchers) (n = 7). This sampling difference is not unexpected considering the ratio of "citizen scientists" to active parapsychologists in this domain (cf. Hill et al., 2019).

The participants met our inclusion criteria if they reported having had any trickster-like experiences during periods of active writing about the paranormal. This included preparing research reports or case files, book chapters exploring psychological theories of poltergeist phenomena, articles about patterns in ghost reports, documentary scripts interpreting evidence for media projects on haunted landmarks, conference presentations, or popular magazine features on well-known hauntings and associated controversies. Even so, these varied contexts arguably all involve a psychological state involving strong attentional focus or narrative immersion.

Our recruitment efforts primarily targeted participants in the US and UK, but "Country of Residence" information was intentionally omitted to prioritize perceived respondent anonymity and to streamline participation. As our initial focus was to explore general trends and patterns rather than conduct cross-cultural analyses, demographic granularity was deemed non-essential at this stage. Avoiding country-level data collection also minimized potential privacy concerns and encouraged broader engagement from respondents who might be sensitive to location disclosure. This approach supports the exploratory nature of the research, allowing for efficient data collection while laying the groundwork for more targeted demographic analysis in future phases.

Measures

Participants specified their Age and Gender, as well as completed two measures in a standardized order:

Cognitive Self-Check. This single binary (*Yes/No*) item screens for psychological risk factors: "Have you either (a) used an illegal drug or misused a prescription medication within the past year, and/or (b) been diagnosed with or received professional treatment for a serious mental illness or condition?" (cf. Lange & Houran, 2024; Smith et al., 2010). Based on prior research linking substance use and comorbid psychiatric disorders to disruptions in cognition and written expression (e.g., Saunders et al., 2007; Smith & Borden, 2020), we used this index as a control variable to help account for these potential sources of trickster experiences when researchers are actively engaged in the writing process.

Trickster-Like Experiences Inventory (TEI). We developed this first-generation, content-corroborated pool of 15 binary True/False items (see Appendix) as an exploratory instrument, without a claim of final construct validity. Accordingly, no prior information on its psychometric quality are available. The items derived in part from anecdotal reports provided to us by colleagues, as well as drawing on strange events that typify ghostly episodes (cf. Houran et al., 2019a, 2019b). In particular, the items reference various *S/O* anomalies or disruptions that respondents mark if they occurred "at least once in a memorable or unusual way" while writing about ghosts, hauntings, poltergeists, or other encounter-type experiences. The rating statements do not imply a paranormal origin or interpretation for the *S/O* phenomena, consistent with other measures that distinguish between anomalous experiences vs percipient attributions (e.g., Houran et al., 2019a; Irwin et al., 2013; Lange et al., 2019). The KR-20 reliability of the raw person sums in our sample was 0.87, indicating excellent internal reliability (Kline, 2000), and we describe in the "Response Bias (DIF) Effects" section below that the TEI's Rasch scoring has a mean = 50 (SD = 10).

Procedure

We emailed invitations to a select group of professional scientists in this domain that were personally known to the authors As well, a parallel social media campaign was launched that targeted the broad community of amateur paranormal investigators (cf. Hill et al., 2019). Both approaches contained a brief description of the study and a link to the online survey. After accessing the link, participants reviewed an informed consent statement and provided consent by proceeding with the survey.

The survey was administered using Google Forms (Google, n.d.), a web-based survey tool that enables secure and accessible online data collection. Respondents completed the survey at their convenience using personal devices, and no personally identifying information was collected. The data (available on request to qualified researchers) were automatically stored on the survey platform's encrypted server and downloaded for analysis upon survey closure. Data analysis was conducted primarily by the second author, who is independent from Massullo et al. (2025a).

Rasch Scaling Primer

As detailed by Lange (2017; Lange et al., 2019), Rasch scaling places items and persons along a common latent dimension in a Logit metric. Customarily (Linacre, 2025), items' (*i*) locations are referred to as their difficulty (D_i) and persons' (*j*) trait levels are referred to as T_j. In other words, *items with higher Logit values represent content that are more difficult as indicated by their lower endorsement rates*. For Items' *p* and *q* with "difficulties" D_p and D_q, respectively, whenever $D_p < D_q$ the Rasch model (cf. Wright & Masters, 1982) Item *p* has a greater probability of being endorsed or selected than does Item *q*. Moereover, this property holds for all respondents *j*, *regardless of these respondents' trait levels (T_j).*

The binary Rasch model describes the probability P of items' endorsement as:

$$ln\left(\frac{P_{ij}}{(1-P_{ij})}\right) = T_j - D_i \quad (1)$$

The quantities *T* and *D* are estimated here via Linacre's (2025) *Winsteps* Rasch scaling software. The items' fit to the Rasch model is quantified here by their "Outfit," which represents the Mean-Square difference between the empirical responses and the responses entailed by the model. The theoretically expected Outfit value is 1.0, but values between 0.7 to 1.4 are generally deemed acceptable in practice (Linacre, 2025). The Rasch dimension is assumed to be unidimensional, which can be tested via a factor analysis of items' residuals, i.e., the differences between the empirical responses and the responses entailed by the model. We refer readers to Bond and Fox (2015) and Lange (2017) for general discussions of different Rasch item types.

Rasch scaling requires that across different sub-groups of respondents items' D maintain the same spacing. The particular spacing of a test's items is also referred to as its item hierarchy, an example of which is shown later. When the item hierarchy differs between two or more subgroups, items are said to exhibit differential item functioning (DIF) or response bias. In the case of two subgroups g_1 and g_2, Item *i*'s DIF is quantified by the difference $D_i^{g1} - D_i^{g2}$. For example, it might be the case that item *i*'s difficulty is 1.2 Logits for men but only 0.7 Logits for women, meaning that the item is easier for women than for men. Statistical tests exist (Linacre, 2025) to assess the significance of DIF effects, but differences under 0.25 Logits—even when statistically significant—often are of little practical importance. Also, note that item DIF often cancels across items and thus its overall impact on respondents' survey ratings or test scores may be minimal. The distortion in the estimation of subgroups' trait levels can be determined by comparing the raw-score to Logit translations across the subgroups.

By its very nature, the Rasch (1960/1980) unidimensional model is designed for constructs that follow a stable, ordered progression—akin to measuring height or ability. Trickster-like disruptions, by contrast, may be inherently erratic or multifaceted. As such, the hierarchy we report below should be viewed as an initial exploration of possible ordering versus definitive evidence of a single "trickster trait or variable."

RESULTS

Descriptive Preliminaries

The participants collectively endorsed all 15 trickster-like experiences, with percentages ranging from 7% to 30% across all participants. The most frequently reported occurrence across the full sample was "unusual sleep patterns or vividly thematic dreams" (30%), while "erratic computer behavior" was the least endorsed (7%). These extremes highlight the prominence of internal, dream-related effects versus the relative rarity of overt technological or tangible anomalies.

When classified by anomaly type, *feeling*-based *S* experiences—including vivid dreams, meaningful coincidences, intense attraction or repulsion to materials, emotional unsettledness, time distortions, physical sensations, and perceptions of an unseen presence—were endorsed by 14% to 30% of participants (mean ≈21%). In contrast, *fact*-based *O* anomalies such as audio corruption, device interruptions, missing files or notes, spontaneous text alterations, computer malfunctions, disappearing work, and reports of odd phenomena by others received endorsements between 7% and 21% (mean ≈13.5%). Overall, *S* trickster experiences occurred nearly 1.6 times more frequently than *O* events.

Credentialed Scientists overall endorsed nine of the 15 trickster effects (60%), primarily reporting tangible disruptions such as missing or misplaced files and disappearing or altered text (each at 29%) while preparing written work on ghosts, hauntings, poltergeists, or kindred phenomena. In contrast, Paranormal Investigators endorsed all fifteen items (100%), with the most frequent experiences involving themed dreams (31%), meaningful coincidences like odd noises or spontaneously playing media (26%), and a strong emotional response to their materials—either attraction or repulsion (26%). This disparity suggests that

professionals tend to encounter a narrower, more concrete subset of trickster phenomena, while amateurs report a broader range of *S* experiences.

A closer look at the response patterns reveals that Credentialed Scientists concentrated on *O* disruptions: 14% cited the erratic word-processing behavior, another 14% indicated work vanishing or failing to save, and an equal share described time distortions or emotional unsettledness. Paranormal Investigators, meanwhile, reported a more balanced mix of *S/O* anomalies. These included vanishing work (16%), device interruptions (18%), marked dreams (31%), emotional agitation (19%), and unexplained physical sensations such as chills or tingling (16%). Moreover, certain device and environmental anomalies—such as equipment malfunctions (14%), lighting or phone disruptions, and odd experiences by other people nearby (13%)—were almost exclusively reported by Paranormal Investigators.

Finally, note that 12% of the Paranormal Investigators (n = 19) responded "Yes" to the Cognitive Self-Check item, whereas none of the Credentialed Scientists endorsed it. This result aligns with previous findings that link ghostly perceptions to a history of psychological adversity or diminished mental well-being (e.g., Houran et al., 2002a; Lange & Houran, 2024; Ventola et al., 2019). Despite these collective investigator-related differences, the broad range of endorsement rates and the absence of floor or ceiling effects across the *S/O* phenomena confirm sufficient variability for Rasch scaling analyses. This distribution ensures reliable calibration of item difficulty along the latent continuum of trickster-type experiences when writing about the paranormal.

Rasch Scaling Outcomes

Table 2 shows the Rasch scaling results for the total sample. Linacre's (2025) *Winsteps*® software indicated that Item 3 ("Text altered without intent") had a very poor fit (Outfit = 1.80) to the Rasch model, and it was therefore omitted from all following analyses. Rather than exclude Item 3 from the scale, we have retained it in the Appendix for subsequent research, as it may uniquely identify the rarer, ostensibly inexplicable disruptions that warrant dedicated study. Incidentally, this item corresponds to the authors' own trickster-like experience as detailed in the Introduction. The remaining 14 items exhibited acceptable Outfit values, ranging from 0.64 to 1.32 Logits, i.e., below the maximum acceptable Outfit value of 1.4. Items' difficulty parameters ranged from –1.25 to 1.53 Logits, a range of 2.78 Logits. This Rasch dimension is essentially unidimensional as our factor analysis of the items' residuals found that the first (and most important) factor explained only about 9% of the residual variance.

The Rasch Logit values define a clear continuum running from highly accessible, inward-focused experiences ("thematic dreams" at –1.25 Logits; "coincidences and topic attraction/repulsion" –0.77 Logits) through a mid-point of borderline phenomena ("audio distortion and time/emotion shifts" near –0.4 to –0.2) to increasingly rare, outward-facing anomalies ("saved work vanishing" at +0.16 Logits up to "erratic computer behavior" at +1.53 Logits). In other words, *S* trickster experiences cluster at "easier" (or more probable) thresholds, while *O* disruptions require progressively stronger overall "trickster intensity" to manifest.

Moreover, the zero-Logit threshold neatly bisects internal and external events, revealing two sub-tiers: minor equipment oddities (Logits ≈ 0) and substantive data or device failures (Logits > 0.6). This bifurcation suggests a pragmatic hierarchy for further research, i.e., vivid, low-threshold experiences for early detection and the high-threshold anomalies as more robust indicators of trickster dynamics, all the while recognizing they inhabit a single, graded landscape of cognitive-environmental interplay.

Response Bias (DIF) Effects

The DIF tests reported in Table 3 indicate that the Rasch hierarchy of trickster experiences is stable across the subgroups of respondents' defined by Age (divided by the

Table 2. Items Frequency Distribution and Summary of Rasch Scaling Analyses Across Total Sample (N = 167).

	Item	Sample Count	Logit Value	Outfit
1	Erratic computer behavior	12	1.53	0.78
2	Missing or misplaced files	20	0.64	0.96
3	Text altered without intent	14	-	1.80#
4	Audio files distorted	35	–0.43	1.23
5	Devices acting strangely	28	0.02	0.66
6	Saved work vanished	26	0.16	1.20
7	Coincidences during writing	42	–0.83	1.28
8	Sensed presence in room	24	0.31	0.77
9	Thematic or vivid dreams	50	–1.25	0.97
10	Time felt distorted	32	-0.24	0.98
11	Emotion shifts while writing	32	–0.24	0.79
12	Unexplained physical sensations	26	0.16	0.69
13	Device malfunctions nearby	23	0.39	0.64
14	Others sensed odd events	21	0.56	0.97
15	Strong pull or aversion to topic	41	–0.77	1.32

Note: Computed using all 15 items. All other Outfit values cover the 14 items that remain when Item 3 is removed.

median age), Researcher Group (Paranormal Investigator vs. Credentialed Scientist), and the Cognitive Self-Check index (i.e., mental health/substance use history or not). No item varied between the respective subgroups by more than 0.25 Logits while also being statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). However, Item 4 ("Audio distorted") occurred 1.65 Logits higher for men than for women, meaning that women were *more likely* to report audio distortion than were the men with equal trait levels. This item's DIF nevertheless had a negligible effect on the estimation of respondents' overall trait levels, so we retained the item.

Table 3 also reports the differences between the various DIF subgroups referred to above. None of the four DIF variables (i.e., Age, Gender, Researcher Type, and Cognitive Self-Check) showed statistically significant differences between the subgroups, although the difference for respondents endorsing the Cognitive Self-Check item was associated with higher overall mean scores (by 0.97 Logits, $p < .02$). Note that the absence of DIF effects on the scale level implies that the differences shown in Table 3 are essentially unbiased.

Given the absence of notable DIF effects, we used the 14 Rasch items to create a "Trickster-Like Effects Inventory" with an interval-level of measurement ($M = 50$ and $SD = 10$). Table 4 gives the translation of raw sums (using 0 vs 1 for No vs Yes, respectively) to Rasch scaled scores, together with the scaled scores' standard errors of estimate (*SE*) and the percentage of respondents for each raw score. The median raw sum score is 1 approximately as most respondents reported 0 or 1 anomalous events. Thus, the distribution has a strong positive skew. While a higher median is desirable, we offer this new measure as a methodological advance to support future research on trickster-like phenomena in the context of scholarly documentation.

CONFRONTING TRICKSTER DYNAMICS

Our results suggest that Massullo et al.'s (2025a) "mysteriously appearing" text is not an isolated event but rather indicative of a larger mosaic of associated manifestations. Table 5 further implies that many trickster-like experiences—including document-related anomalies or unexpected disruptions while writing about ghostly episodes—often can be understood as context-sensitive psychological reactions involving cognitive bias, memory distortion, attentional priming, absorption-dissociation, or the misattribution of coincidence. Indeed, the Rasch estimates in Table 2 ostensibly map onto the real-world error dynamics in Table 1 in interesting ways, though the correspondences are illustrative versus exact.

The lowest-difficulty trickster experiences (e.g., narrative lapses or fleeting perceptual slips) occur most often, loosely paralleling the high-frequency, low-impact errors tabulated for published papers (e.g., typographical or formatting mistakes; minor citation inaccuracies). Mid-range Logits—reflecting subtler cognitive-environmental anomalies such as audio distortions or temporo-emotional shifts—qualitatively resemble common methodological or analytical oversights (e.g., statistical reporting errors; quotation inaccuracies; significant-figure misuse). At the upper tier of the hierarchy, rarer trickster effects (e.g., persistent computer malfunctions) occupy thresholds analogous to infrequent but more severe publication failures—such as inappropriate image duplication (~3.8%) (Bik et al., 2016), plagiarism among retracted articles (9.8%) and duplicate publication (or self-plagiarism) (14.2%) (Fang et al., 2012).

Note that Tables 1 and 2 should not be compared directly. For instance, Table 1's "Plagiarism" and "Duplicate Publication" estimates derive from analyses of retracted papers rather than of all published articles, and the percentages in Table 1 span multiple disciplines and error type. By contrast, the Logit values in Table 2 represent scaled probabilities from the current survey. Accordingly, Logits should not be compared to prevalence rates. Rather than implying direct quantitative equivalence, this cross-walk serves as a heuristic: more improbable trickster experiences tend to align with thresholds occupied by progressively rarer

Table 3. Summary of Response Bias (DIF) and Main Effects.

		DIF		*M* difference
DIF Factor	**Groups**	**No of items with DIF > 0.5 & < .01**	**Item (Logits)**	**(Logits)**
Gender	Men - Women	1	4. Audio distorted (1.65 Logits)	0.13*
Age	Older - Younger	0	-	−0.52*
Group	Amateur - Scientist	0	-	0.68*
Cognitive Check	Yes - No	0		−0.97**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .02$.

and more consequential publication errors. Future investigations could strengthen this comparison by calibrating Rasch thresholds against error-type prevalences drawn from the same corpus or by developing a unified scale that explicitly maps anomaly probabilities onto publication-error rates.

We suggest that the perceived anomalous quality of these trickster experiences might be fueled in part by emotionally charged or liminal writing environments, especially when dealing with paranormal themes. Moreover, these processes often operate outside conscious awareness (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999), which explains why their effects can feel spontaneous, surprising, or externally generated—even though they stem from normal cognitive functioning shaped by the contextual demands of the paranormal domain. For example, one of the most pervasive mechanisms is reconstructive memory. Authors naturally impose narrative structure, causal links, and dramatic emphasis onto their experiences—often unconsciously—leading to selective editing, omission, or embellishment (Bruner, 1993). Drinkwater et al. (2019) directly spoke to these and other psychosocial influences in their VAPUS (i.e., Versatility, Adaptability, Participatory, Universality, and Scalability) model of ghost narratives. These changes are not typically experienced as falsifications but rather as truthful representations that *feel* accurate. When discrepancies are later discovered—by the author or others—they may appear anomalous or mysteriously inserted, reinforcing a trickster-like impression.

Metacognitive blind spots can further complicate this process. People frequently overestimate the accuracy and coherence of their memories and writing, especially under emotionally arousing or cognitively taxing conditions (Koriat, 2007). As a result, inconsistencies or subtle errors may go undetected until much later. When these lapses surface, they seem to lack a clear origin—appearing inexplicable or "externalized." A closely related explanation is source monitoring error, which occurs when individuals

Table 4. Raw sum-to-Rasch Scaled Score Conversion Table for the Trickster-Like Experiences Inventory (M = 50, SD = 10).

Raw Sum	Rasch Score	*SE*	Freq %
0	40	10.4	38.9
1	47	5.9	13.2
2	52	4.4	13.2
3	55	3.8	9.6
4	57	3.4	6.0
5	59	3.3	4.2
6	61	3.2	3.0
7	63	3.1	3.0
8	65	3.2	1.8
9	66	3.3	1.8
10	68	3.5	1.2
11	71	3.8	1.2
12	74	4.4	1.2
13	78	5.9	0.6
14	85	10.4	1.2

Table 5. Conventional Explanations for Trickster Experiences in Writing Contexts.

Trickster-like Experience	Potential Psychological Explanation	Reference
Erratic computer behavior	Expectancy bias; attention bias; misattributed coincidence	(Koriat, 2007; Risen, 2016)
Missing or misplaced files	Inattentional error; dissociation; confirmation bias.	(Lynn et al., 2008; Sweller, 1988)
Text altered without intent	Autosave/version confusion; source monitoring errors; memory distortion.	(Johnson et al., 1993; Lynn et al., 2008)
Audio files distorted	Device limitations; attentional bias; selective perception during playback.	(French & Stone, 2013; Lange & Houran, 2001)
Devices acting strangely	Priming effects; salience of ambiguous stimuli; attribution error.	(Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Brugger, 2001)
Saved work vanished	Cognitive overload; dissociation; misperceived user error.	(Lynn et al., 2008; Reason, 1990)
Coincidences during writing	Apophenia; attentional priming; probability neglect.	(Brugger, 2001; Koriat, 2007)
Sensed presence in room	Absorption; heightened suggestibility; priming.	(Blanke et al., 2004; Persinger, 2001)
Thematic or vivid dreams	Emotional carryover; REM intrusion; thematic salience in dream content.	(Domhoff, 2001; Lynn et al., 2008)
Time felt distorted	Flow state; absorption; altered time perception due to arousal or focus.	(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Eagleman, 2008)
Emotion shifts while writing	Emotional contagion; cognitive-affective resonance with material; arousal effects.	(Bruner, 1993; Lynn et al., 2008)
Unexplained physical sensations	Psychosomatic response; autonomic activation.	(Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Houran et al., 2002a)
Device malfunctions nearby	Expectancy bias; chance events.	(Kaptchuk, 2002; Lange & Houran, 2001)
Others sensed odd events	Environmental suggestion; shared attentional focus; emotional contagion.	(Asma, 2009; Houran & Lange, 1996)
Strong pull or aversion to topic	Emotional salience; cognitive dissonance; absorption; arousal-biased memory encoding.	(Bruner, 1993; Lynn et al., 2008)

misattribute the origin of a memory, e.g., mistaking something imagined or inferred for something directly experienced (Johnson et al., 1993). Given that paranormal investigations often involve imagination, suggestion, and ambiguous stimuli, the stage is set for false recollections that feel authentic but are in fact narrative constructions. These distortions remain invisible to the writer until reencountered as oddities. Priming and expectancy effects are also highly relevant. When researchers anticipate anomalies—or have internalized the trickster motif as a guiding narrative—they may unknowingly attend more to irregularities, overlook mundane explanations, or remember ordinary disruptions (e.g., lost files, technical glitches) as paranormally significant (cf. Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Drinkwater et al., 2019). These effects operate automatically and shape both perception and memory without conscious intent.

Another plausible common mechanism is cognitive load. Writing about complex, ambiguous, or emotionally intense phenomena—such as hauntings or poltergeist activity—might overload working memory and reduce attentional bandwidth (Sweller, 1988). This would increase the likelihood of unnoticed omissions, contradictions, or disjointed narrative flow. Such shortfalls often mirror the memory disruptions reported in individuals with elevated transliminality. Dissociative-type experiences, including psychological absorption and compartmentalization, can further contribute to these disruptions. Under conditions of emotional arousal, overstimulation, or fatigue—not uncommon states during field investigations or periods of reflective writing—authors may encode memories in a fragmented or discontinuous manner (Lynn et al., 2008). These disjunctions can later seem uncanny or intrusive when encountered during report review.

Importantly, while many trickster experiences might be explained via established psychological principles, their convergence in emotionally charged and meaning-rich contexts raises intriguing questions. In some cases, trickster phenomena may hint at unknown mediators or moderators, including potential parapsychological factors not yet fully understood. One key consideration here are contagion effects—i.e., clustered or snowballed perceptions—as exemplified by percipients who experience an increase in *S/O* phenomena following a prior anomalous experience (Appelle et al., 2000; Greyson, 1983; Lange & Houran, 2021). For instance, the Psychic Opening hypothesis asserts that spiritual emergencies (i.e., temporary psychological crises sparked by overwhelming spiritual experiences that can lead to deep personal transformation) can trigger a sudden or intensified emergence of psi abilities (e.g., Storm & Goretzki, 2020, 2021). Other authors argue that biological correlates of anomalous-altered experiences are mediators not etiologies of transpersonal modes of perception (e.g., Woollacott & Weiler, 2025).

But germane to this paper, contagion also could involve so-called "error chains." This term denotes situations in which one initial slip or lapse triggers a cascade of subsequent failures, magnifying risk and often precipitating more serious consequences (Reason, 1990). In complex systems—whether in aviation, healthcare, or everyday tasks—latent vulnerabilities align with active errors in what Reason (1997) famously described as the "Swiss cheese" model, i.e., holes in multiple defenses line up, allowing a single mistake to perforate all safeguards. Psychological research has unpacked key mechanisms driving error propagation. For instance, unintended actions such as slips and lapses often arise from attentional breakdowns or overreliance on automatic routines; if undetected, they impose extra cognitive load, undermining monitoring processes and increasing the odds of further errors (Norman, 1981).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Our preliminary findings must be interpreted with caution. Most notably, our use of the trickster moniker could be criticized for being overly broad and imprecise. That is, branding every odd event or disruption in academic writing as a "trickster experience" might risk diluting the concept into a vague, catch-all label. The survey's explicit framing along these lines may have further attracted respondents predisposed to the trickster concept or fueled confirmation bias with the *S/O* phenomena, potentially inflating endorsement rates and limiting generalizability (Tourangeau et al., 2000). The over-reporting of certain perceptions or symptoms is a well-known confound in many areas of social scientific and biomedical research, and notably in the context of non-ordinary experiences (Lange et al., 2019; Maraldi, 2020; Merckelbach et al., 2017). Conversely, those who found the trickster term irrelevant or pejorative may have opted out, introducing a degree of selection bias.

Respondents also did not specify the full context, frequency, or disruptiveness level of their anomalous experiences, and we did not assess relevant perceptual-personality variables such as transliminality (Evans et al., 2019), paranormal belief (Dean et al., 2022), ambiguity tolerance (Houran & Williams, 1998), or aberrant

salience (Irwin et al., 2014)—all of which are likely to modulate perception or attribution. For instance, higher transliminality correlates with aberrations in short-term memory (Houran & Thalbourne, 2003) and proneness to cognitive load (Evans et al., 2019). Future studies should therefore examine these and other potential covariates to clarify the role of individual differences. Likewise, the emotional strain and liminality inherent in writing about anomalous phenomena may itself generate both routine errors and vivid subjective experiences; distinguishing liminality-driven effects from any distinct "trickster" dynamic is therefore a key goal for future comparative research.

Although our survey built in some controls (i.e., cognitive self-check scores and credentialed vs citizen scientist groups), we did not compare trickster experiences across paranormal versus non-paranormal writing contexts or sample a wider array of comparison groups (cf. Houran, 1997; Houran & Brugger, 2000; Schumacher et al., 2023). Other types of topics or liminal creative fields as reviewed in the Introduction might also be similarly conducive for anomalies or disruptions. Specifically, ethnographic memoirs, trauma narratives, or creative nonfiction might also bring about trickster experiences, such as missing archival documents in oral histories or unexplained emotional leaps in memoir drafts. Focused cross-disciplinary applications would therefore be beneficial for testing the TEI's robustness and revealing whether the hypothesized dynamics are universal across immersive writing types.

Education and expertise may further shape how investigators interact with trickster dynamics. Novices may overattribute anomalies due to inexperience, while experts may rationalize biases through narrative overfitting or resistance to disconfirming evidence (Kennedy, 2024). This suggests that expertise may promote rather than eliminate certain cognitive distortions. Table 6 outlines additional variables—such as emotional investment, disciplinary norms, and collaboration dynamics—that warrant systematic investigation. Fresh studies might also explore if these effects manifest only in the field versus the office or otherwise exhibit different Rasch hierarchies across various settings similar to Houran et al. (2019a) who found distinct "haunt hierarchies" for *S/O* phenomena reported under spontaneous, primed, lifestyle, fantasy, and deceptive reporting conditions.

Similarly, the view that "liminality" is anti-structure (e.g., Hansen, 2001; McMahon, 1998) might predict that the frequency or intensity of anomalous trickster experiences (as measured by TEI scores) will increase in more rigidly controlled research or writing protocols. And lastly, the Rasch hierarchy of trickster phenomena might differ when considering an investigator's lived experience during single research or writing project versus an investigator's lifetime inventory of such experiences when writing about the paranormal. We likewise recommend that future studies, in addition to measuring the individual differences noted above, also assess for researchers' psi-conducive or inhibitory dispositions to flag potential experimenter-psi effects (e.g., Parker, 2013; Smith, 2003).

Despite these limitations, exploratory surveys like ours offer strategic benefits. They can reveal directionality, establish potential effect sizes, test recruitment feasibility, and generate foundational data for instrument refinement and hypothesis development (Leon et al., 2011). Our TEI, though preliminary, provides a promising metric for quantifying trickster-like anomalies that are reported within certain contexts. Future work should test its comprehensiveness and applicability across varied writing or related environments to sharpen its reliability and theoretical grounding.

The Rasch-based alignment with known publication errors is illustrative rather than definitive, but it affords a starting heuristic for contextualizing some trickster-like experiences. Because genuinely anomalous "trickster" events are likely rare and heterogeneous, our one-factor Rasch solution may instead be capturing the more common variance of routine errors—carelessness, attentional lapses, or normal memory distortions. Thus, studies should explore multi-factor solutions (e.g., separate "Error" vs. "Anomalous" subscales) to check for a distinct parapsychological component after accounting for the probable occurrence of ordinary mistakes. Yet, the trickster-like experiences considered in this study were not independent but rather predictably interrelated irrespective of researcher Age, Gender, or Type. Trickster dynamics therefore might involve a systematic phenomenon of escalating anomalies or disruptions—what we call a "trickster chain" —whatever its underlying cause(s). This speculative idea is explored further in the Discussion section below.

Finally, future studies should also examine whether the kinds of trickster experiences considered here coincide with transpersonal indicators—such as mystical-type experiences, ego dissolution, or heightened compassion—and whether such clusters predict lasting shifts in worldview or self-identity. These research outcomes would clarify whether certain disruptions function purely as cognitive noise or as liminal openings consistent with processes of spiritual emergence (Grof & Grof, 1989), shadow integration, or other transformative pathways recognized in

Table 6. Future Research Questions About Trickster Experiences in Academic Publishing.

Variable	Guiding Question	Rationale	Reference
Age of Investigator	Does age correlate with susceptibility to narrative distortion or memory confounds in scholarly writing?	Explores whether cognitive aging influences source monitoring or embellishment tendencies.	(Zacks et al., 2000)
Writing Expertise	How does writing proficiency affect the clarity, accuracy, and susceptibility to trickster-like effects?	Assesses whether skilled writers are better at avoiding bias—or more adept at masking it.	(Kellogg, 2008)
Disciplinary Norms	Do publication conventions in different academic fields foster or suppress trickster effects?	Investigates how disciplinary expectations shape narrative framing and data presentation.	(Becher & Trowler, 2001)
Emotional Investment	How does personal attachment to a topic influence selective reporting or interpretive bias?	Examines the role of affective involvement in distorting scholarly objectivity.	(Kunda, 1990)
Career Stage	Are early-career researchers more prone to trickster effects due to pressure or inexperience?	Evaluates how professional incentives and expertise levels interact with cognitive bias.	(van Dalen & Henkens, 2012)
Publication Pressure	Does the pressure to publish novel findings increase the likelihood of narrative embellishment?	Investigates systemic drivers of distortion in academic storytelling.	(Fanelli, 2010)
Cognitive Style	Do individual differences in cognitive style (e.g., intuitive vs. analytical) predict trickster susceptibility?	Explores psychological predispositions that may shape how data are interpreted and reported.	(Epstein et al., 1996)
Collaboration Dynamics	How do team-based writing processes influence the emergence or suppression of trickster effects?	Assesses whether collaborative authorship mitigates or amplifies bias through group dynamics.	(Wuchty et al., 2007)
Experimenter - Psi Profile	Can a researcher's psi-conducive/inhibitory profile predict trickster chain intensity?	Tests whether individual writer dispositions drive documented anomalies beyond human error.	(Parker, 2013)

transpersonal psychology. Such a program would allow the TEI to serve not only as a metric of anomaly and disruption but as a potential tool for mapping transformative potential in liminal research contexts. The measure is therefore freely accessible for researchers to incorporate into future studies, provided appropriate attribution is given.

DISCUSSION

We have no independent, empirical indicators to suggest that the phantom "Watt et al. (2015)" citation is anything other than an untraced author error (Massullo et al., 2025b). Such mistakes are ubiquitous in academic writing but rarely undermine scientific validity, as journals routinely publish *errata* (concerning production errors) and *corrigenda* (concerning author errors) to correct the record. Authors can still significantly reduce the final error count via careful preparation and proofreading, ideally by multiple reviewers, and AI-powered editing tools. Houran and Laythe (2024) further outlined seven author strategies to support more efficient and accurate scientific publishing. Yet, author or production mistakes alone might not explain for all trickster phenomena. Some researchers have even proposed transpersonal aspects of scholarly or occupational activities (e.g., Anderson, 2015; Anderson & Braud, 2011; Bache, 2025; Braud, 1998; White, 1998), perhaps hinting that certain cognitive or environmental conditions can occasionally foster parapsychological outcomes. One survey participant's experience possibly underscores this idea:

> Only one odd thing happened to me (it was indeed quite odd and remains so)…thus I only checked one box as 'true.' It's very simply that during or perhaps just after some writing I did a year or so ago, my author's copy of a book I wrote (which I had referenced) outright disappeared. I know precisely where I placed it, and it wasn't there—nor has it been found anywhere else after a year (personal communication to J. Houran, 14 July 2025).

This account eerily resembles commentary by Arthur B. Myers (1917–2006)—a prolific American author, journalist, and investigative reporter known for his deep interest in the paranormal—who wrote in one of his introductions:

> Whenever I write these books…psychic things start happening around me. My notes disappear and then reappear, a film roll disappears from plain sight never to appear again, strange things happen to tape recordings while I'm interviewing people. Sometimes their voices don't appear on the tapes, or mine doesn't, or the talk is all backwards. Now I'm having problems with photos… Now why should this happen? I had not touched the camera's adjustments. All the photos on the roll were taken under the same conditions, outside in bright sunlight. I think spooks were gumming up the works…Oddly enough, when I finish a book

> on the parapsychological and start working on more mundane projects, these things quiet down (Myers, 1990, pp. xi–xii).

But regardless of their underlying sources or mechanisms, our study offers the first systematic quantification of trickster-like experiences that occur when researchers write about ghostly episodes. It is unfortunate that it has taken this long for any research to address the observations and insights from Houran and Brugger's (2000) original commentary and proposals in this area. Curiously, those two authors also experienced several unexpected computer crashes during the preparation of their own paper (cf. Footnote 2, p. 40). The present participants, on the other hand, reported a broader spectrum of *S/O* anomalies and disruptions, and Rasch analysis indicated that 14 of the 15 items cohere on a unidimensional continuum, exhibiting high person and item reliability with only one modest gender-related DIF. These findings support the TEI's construct validity and highlight its viability as a measurement tool for both parapsychological and non-parapsychological research contexts.

The trickster framing spotlights the mysterious, though most anomalies align with established cognitive processes. Memory reconstruction and source-monitoring errors can explain phantom citations, while attentional biases, priming, and cognitive load account for misplaced files, text alterations, and perceived device malfunctions (Johnson et al., 1993; Lange & Houran, 2001). Casting these lapses through a trickster metaphor underscores the epistemological vulnerabilities researchers face under ambiguity, uncertainty, and heightened expectation or emotional arousal. The dynamic and socially charged nature of ghost-related narratives (Eaton, 2019; Hill et al., 2018; Ironside, 2024) may amplify these cognitive-environmental interactions. Emotional investment, shared expectancy, and narrative reconstruction can collectively engender experiences that feel externally driven yet arise from normal perceptual or memory processes. Thus, many trickster phenomena probably emerge from the confluence of psychological predispositions, environmental ambiguity, and the immersive-like storytelling demands of parapsychological writing.

Practically, our results imply that some trickster-like experiences comprise a single, underlying construct. This conceptually replicates previous one-factor (Rasch) solutions found for *S/O* phenomena commonly reported in ghostly episodes (Houran & Lange, 2001; Houran et al., 2002b, 2019a). Therefore, researchers would seem to be contending with a general trickster *dynamic* as opposed to discrete *experiences* per se. Kennedy (2024) might nonetheless remind us that any statistical hierarchy is only as useful as the underlying theory that grounds it. As such, before positing a single trait, we must first develop explicit, falsifiable models of the cognitive and motivational processes—rather than a catch-all "trickster force"—that tie those experiences together. That said, to mitigate inadvertent cognitive confounds, investigators should adopt rigorous documentation practices—systematic proofreading protocols, independent cross-checks, and, where feasible, blinded control conditions—to distinguish routine memory or attention lapses from genuinely unexplained anomalies. Studying trickster dynamics in research and reporting contexts therefore enriches our understanding of human behavior under conditions of ambiguity, emotional arousal, or symbolic resonance.

The robust clustering of *S/O* anomalies somewhat mirrors the hitchhiker or contagion effects discussed by other authors. From a parsimonious standpoint, an initial glitch—such as a missing file—heightens vigilance and expectancy, might trigger an error- or trickster-chain in which each subsequent lapse validates the paranormal narrative and primes further lapses under cognitive load (e.g., Norman, 1981; Reason, 1990). From this viewpoint, contagion effects reflect the metacognitive artifacts of trickster dynamics rather than a trans-contextual paranormal process. Illustratively, Matthews (1997) noted that if a shopper faces *N* checkout lines, the chance of picking the slowest is exactly 1/*N*, and that the narrow "Murphy Zones" on maps—along edges and folds—paradoxically cover more than half the total area despite their slim appearance.

In the same way, the proffered trickster chain model perhaps suggests that minor writing anomalies or disruptions (e.g., lost files, themed dreams) predictably accumulate under cognitive load according to simple probabilistic and dynamical laws—producing a sequence of events that feels mischievous but is, in fact, mathematically foreseeable. Nevertheless, non-ordinary mechanisms remain a tantalizing possibility. Lange and Houran's (2021; cf. Houran et al., 2024; Lange et al., 2023) idea of an enchantment–psi loop suggests that a solitary, but salient, anomalous event can instigate a self-reinforcing cycle of heightened transliminality and further psi-conducive states, eliciting successive anomalous experiences.

Our "trickster chain" concept aims to describe the patterned sequence of *S/O* anomalies that unfold during the process of writing about paranormal topics. Unlike

expectancy chains, which are primarily driven by suggestion and cognitive priming (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Drinkwater et al., 2019), or paranormal contagion effects, which involve the apparent transference of anomalous phenomena across time or location (Knapp & Kelleher, 2005; McCue, 2022), trickster chains are marked by their disruptive ambiguity and apparent escalation in intensity or improbability. We hypothesize that these sequences often begin with a low-threshold anomaly or disruption—such as narrative lapses, emotional agitation, or vivid dreams—that sensitizes the researcher's attentional field and primes a heightened receptivity to further anomalies (cf. Koriat, 2007; Lange & Houran, 2021). Subsequent events may include increasingly concrete disruptions (e.g., missing files, equipment malfunctions) that seem disproportionate to situational factors and resist clear attribution.

Hill et al.'s (2018) VAPUS model further provides an explanatory bridge to these cascading sequences. In particular, some of the present trickster effects might exemplify the Participatory Nature of ghost narratives. These low-threshold, ambiguous disruptions—vivid dreams, coincidences, and sudden emotional shifts—act as participatory cues that recruit the writer's attention and invite interpretive engagement, thereby reinforcing narrative salience; the model's elements of Versatility and Adaptability explain how these subjective cues map easily onto existing cultural templates and are reshaped to fit differing audiences and media, increasing their transmissibility. Scalability amplifies small, locally experienced anomalies into wider contagion chains through sharing, revision, and social retelling, while Universality makes such signals broadly resonant across diverse readers and investigators, which in turn biases source monitoring and expectancy during drafting and review. Together, these VAPUS dynamics clarify how routine cognitive-environmental processes can become self-reinforcing narrative engines that both produce and legitimize trickster-like sequences in paranormal writing.

From a transpersonal perspective, such escalating sequences also could be viewed as liminal process dynamics in which destabilization precedes integration. Comparable patterns are described in spiritual emergency models (Grof & Grof, 1989) and in archetypal psychology, where the trickster signals a confrontation with shadow material and a potential reorganization of consciousness. In these frameworks, *S/O* anomalies are not merely malfunctions or cognitive errors but may function as symbolic enactments of inner transformation—catalyzed by the thematic and emotional intensity of the writing process itself. Some trickster chains may reflect normal psychological mechanisms such as source-monitoring errors (Johnson et al., 1993) or cognitive load (Sweller, 1988), but others could be embedded within a "liminal cognitive ecology," i.e., a destabilized meaning-making space in which *S/O* disruptions converge and amplify. In this context, trickster chains blur the distinction between artifact and anomaly, and may reflect recursive feedback between belief, environment, and the emotionally charged act of paranormal narration. Recognizing and systematically measuring these ostensible chains, as enabled by our TEI measure, offers a novel framework for understanding the epistemic fragility and symbolic dynamics that can emerge in contexts of documenting topics of high-strangeness (Hansen, 2001; Kennedy, 2024; Storm, 2023). The tool serves as a structured springboard for mapping writing-related anomalies, but we do not treat it yet as a fully validated measure of trickster dynamics. Instead, it is a starting point for qualitative interviews, cross-discipline comparisons, and further psychometric testing.

Should some hitchhiker or contagion-like patterns indeed persist in tightly controlled settings—or align consistently with psychophysiological markers—this could bolster an anomalous interpretation. Future work should incorporate temporal diaries, randomized control conditions, and psychophysiological monitoring to disentangle expectancy-driven error chains from putative psi-related contagion effects, thereby advancing both methodological rigor and our understanding of trickster-like experiences. Such controls also can be supplemented with forensic parapsychology methods. The psi-source diagnostics outlined by Parker (2013) might help to disentangle writer-generated anomalies from genuine text-based disruptions, reinforcing double-blind cross-checks. We are actively scoping out research protocols along these lines and likewise encourage other investigators to pursue similar efforts. In this way, we might discover consistent support for adding the trickster phenomena outlined here to the comprehensive inventories of haunt-type anomalies published by Dullin (2024) and Houran and colleagues (Houran et al., 2019a, 2019b).

Interpreting unexpected disruptions through the trickster archetype sharpens our awareness of epistemological fragility across qualitative and experiential fields. Narratives in ethnography, trauma studies, and parapsychology often unfold nonlinearly or fragmentedly, underscoring the need for methodological reflexivity and safeguards against overconfidence in report coherence (Drinkwater et al., 2019; Koriat, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather than

dismiss paradox or resistance as "noise," the trickster motif invites researchers to treat such disruptions and anomalies as diagnostic markers of deeper complexities in knowledge construction. Trickster-like events thus serve as a powerful lens for metascience, highlighting observer influence, paradigm limits, and the provisional nature of scientific claims (see e.g., Heisenberg, 1930/1983; Rosenthal, 1966).

Modeling trickster-like experiences within a Rasch (1960/1980) framework transforms fleeting anecdotes into quantifiable phenomena and delivers the first empirical model and associated tool for probing *S/O* anomalies (or artifacts) that manifest when researchers write under liminal conditions, such as describing ghostly episodes or related topics. The TEI tool therefore paves the way for diary-based, blinded, and psychophysiological investigations that can help to tease apart conventional error chains from potentially parapsychological-rooted contagion effects. In Kennedy's (2024) view, the psi-trickster is not simply an experimental nuisance but a signal that our standard assumptions are insufficient. Accordingly, the trickster is perhaps more than a confound to be managed; it is also a potential teacher inviting deeper reflexivity and transformation.

Transpersonal and clinical parapsychological approaches thus encourage us to meet such moments with both methodological discipline and openness to the possibility that the very act of inquiry can alter the consciousness of the inquirer. In this sense, experimenters themselves may unwittingly act as tricksters. Embracing the trickster archetype as a diagnostic lens likewise reminds researchers to adopt rigorous proofreading, independent cross-checks, and transparent reporting; practices that sharpen epistemic humility and reinforce the provisional nature of scientific activities and claims. Accordingly, we can deepen our understanding of the challenges and paradoxes at science's fringes and chart a more robust, replicable path forward for exploring the unknown—as well as whatever forces or dynamics might happen to interfere with this endeavor.

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END NOTES

1 The phantom citation was: "Watt, C., Wiseman, R., & Tierney, I. (2015). Paranormal belief and perceptions of deceptive behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *6*, Article 1516. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01516." Massullo et al. (2025b) also corrected six other untraced citation errors, though none affected the scientific the scientific conclusions of their article.

2 Item 3 (#) is retained for use in future research, though currently it is not scored.

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APPENDIX

"TRICKSTER-LIKE EXPERIENCES" SURVEY – WRITING ABOUT THE PARANORMAL[2]

Instructions: Please indicate whether any the following events have happened to you while writing research reports or books, or otherwise preparing written work specifically related to ghosts, hauntings, poltergeists, or any similar encounter-type experiences. Mark all that apply.

Mark "True" if the event happened to you at least once in a memorable or unusual way; otherwise, mark "False":

1. O: My computer or word processing program has acted erratically in ways that seemed unexplainable while working on such topics.
2. O: Files, notes, or key reference materials have gone missing or appeared misplaced without logical explanation during the writing process.
3. O: Written text in a document has disappeared, altered, or reappeared without my conscious intent.
4. O: Audio recordings, drafts, or voice memos related to the writing have been corrupted or contained unexpected distortions.
5. O: I experienced interruptions from devices (e.g., printers, phones, lights) behaving oddly or turning on/off while engaged in writing.
6. O: Completed work has failed to save or mysteriously vanished despite following standard precautions.
7. S: I've encountered meaningful coincidences (e.g., strange noises, relevant media playing) that occurred exactly as I was writing specific content.
8. S: I've felt as though an unseen presence was observing, influencing, or interfering with the writing process.
9. S: While writing about ghosts, haunts, or poltergeists, I experienced unusual sleep patterns or vivid, disturbing, or thematically related dreams.
10. S: I've noticed time distortions (e.g., lost time, time passing unusually quickly or slowly) while working on these topics.
11. S: I've felt emotionally unsettled (e.g., anxious, irritable, inexplicably euphoric) in ways that seemed connected to the writing process.
12. S: I've experienced physical sensations (e.g., chills, pressure, tingling) without clear cause while writing about these subjects.
13. O: Electrical or mechanical devices near me (e.g., lights, speakers, monitors) have malfunctioned or behaved unusually during writing sessions.
14. S: Others in my environment (e.g., housemates, family members) reported odd experiences while I was actively engaged with the material.
15. S: I've felt unusually drawn to or repelled by the material in a way that felt beyond ordinary interest or discomfort.