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Due to the overlap in features, researchers are increasingly aware of the difficulties that arise when studying religious, paranormal, mystical, anomalous, or psychotic experiences as if they were natural kinds. Although some researchers attempt to circumvent this problem by stipulating definitions of the presumptively distinct experiences that they want to study, this risks artificially categorizing experiences that share common features both within and across cultures. Others have argued that appraisal processes play a central role in distinguishing not only culture- and tradition- specific experiences (Taves 2009, 2016), but also mysticism and psychosis (Underwood, Kumari, and Peters 2016). Although appraisal theories initially focused on emotion, similar processes have been studied under the rubric of framing in sociology and attribution in social psychology. A meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies (Ashar, Chang, & Wager 2017) suggests that appraisal-related processes converge on the default mode network to produce a "system ... adapted for representing schemas or situations, including representations of one's goals and well-being in the context of events and stimuli." If we conceive of experiences as events (Taves and Asprem 2016) and goals as collective as well as individual, we would expect to see differences in appraisals between cultural groups and religious traditions as well as between individuals.

The Inventory of Non-Ordinary Experiences (INOE), comprised of 76 generically worded experience items adapted from various measures followed by appraisal and contextual queries, was designed to explore the relationship between (a) the frequency and clustering of experiences and (b) appraisals of their meaning and significance across cultures and between traditions. Analysis of an initial cross-cultural sample of 1564 adults from the US (n=843) and India (n=721) recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk revealed differences in the frequency with which experiences were reported, the clustering of experiences, and the meaning and significance ascribed to them within and between the two cultures. Although there were some experiences that were very frequently reported in both cultures (Lucid Dreaming, Meaningful Coincidences, and Love/Compassion), there were also significant differences across cultures on items such as Unity/Oneness and Connectedness, and between religious sub-groups on items such as Inner Peace, Revealed Messages, and Guided by a Power. Differences in the way the experience items clustered, if they hold up under further testing, suggest that associations between experiences differ markedly in the two contexts. There were also striking differences in the appraisal of experiences. Love/Compassion was among the most significant spiritual experiences for all US groups, but not for the majority of Hindus. Conversely, Connectedness, which was not rated as highly significant by the US groups, was highly spiritually significant for most Hindus. Based on significance alone, all US groups and no Indian groups reported "loss" as among their most significant experiences even though it was equally common in both cultures. We can account for many, if not most, of these differences in light of the relative influence of various religious and psychiatric traditions, practices, and concepts in the two contexts