

Social Psychology of the Paranormal

Olli at UNC Asheville
March 25th - May 13th, 2026

(Updated 1/4/2026)

This course takes a critical look at paranormal and pseudoscientific claims, and seeks to understand why so many people believe them.

INSTRUCTOR

Barry Markovsky is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, University of South Carolina. He publishes extensively in professional outlets, but is perhaps best known for his articles on hauntings, UFOs, superstitions, and related topics. He's the author of [*Everyday Extraordinary: A Scientist Ponders a Lifetime of Magical, Bizarre, and Paranormal Experiences.*](#)

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About the Course

DESCRIPTION

There are eight weekly 2-hour class meetings, each with a break in the middle. There are no prerequisites or fees for taking this course, but you must register through the [OLLI system](#).

Paranormal claims and pseudosciences are accepted as real and legitimate by millions in the U.S. and worldwide. We'll focus on a small subset of fringe claims, including ESP, UFOs, numerology, ghosts, astrology, faith healing, alternative medicine, and a topic chosen by group consensus.

We take a two-pronged approach to understanding these claims: (1) How to evaluate their validity, and (2) understanding why people believe them even when good evidence is lacking.

Our attitude combines open-mindedness and scientific skepticism. If we truly care about whether a paranormal claim is valid, we must consider the quality of the evidence for the claim and the availability of non-paranormal explanations.

Learning Objectives

After taking this course, students will have rudimentary tools to

- Identify and classify popular claims as pseudoscientific and/or paranormal
- Evaluate claims using scientific criteria
- Explain how physiological, psychological, and social factors contribute to false beliefs

Readings

REQUIRED

Markovsky, Barry. 2026. *Everyday Extraordinary: A Scientist Ponders a Lifetime of Magical, Bizarre, and Paranormal Experiences*. Prometheus Books. ISBN-13: 978-1493093793

Available March 17th @ [Malaprop's Bookstore](#) or the e-tailer of your choice (see [bmarkovsky.com](#))

OTHER MATERIALS

Optional readings will be available online.

Outline & Assignments

Each week's plan: (1) Review and discuss a primary claim. (2) Review tests and alternative explanations. (3) Discuss other related claims.

| Week | Topic | Assigned Reading |
|------|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Introduction | |
| 2 | ESP | Chapter 14, "ESP, Can it Be?" |
| 3 | UFOs | Chapter 5, "U.F. ...Oh?" |
| 4 | Astrology | Chapter 9, "Astronomy" |
| 5 | Faith Healing | Chapter 8, "He's Pulling Her Leg" |
| 6 | Ghosts | Chapter 16, "That's the Spirit!" |
| 7 | Numerology | Chapter 17, "Numbers Game" |
| 8 | Alternative Medicine | Chapter 18, "Are We Real Doctors?" |