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A RELIABLE WITNESS?

by Christine Phillips

In many cases the only access investigators have to anomalous phenomena are the reports of witnesses. In an attempt to circumvent the known limitations of untrained observers faced with unexpected situations, we might try to 'see it for ourselves' where possible. But even in the controlled situation of the 'vigil', where everyone is well prepared and well equipped, we are still 'only witnesses' acting within the limits of human perception and understanding.

Introduction

It strikes me that contemporary parapsychology is in much the same situation as nineteenth century sociology. As the discipline of sociology emerged, its proponents quite rightly felt, that if it was to survive in a world whose grand narrative of truth was science, it must justify itself as a science. Indeed, it was the main aim of one of the founding fathers of sociology, Emile Durkheim, to prove that his subject was a science in just the same way as the natural sciences. And this is what I feel I must do in order to bring groups like ASSAP into the mainstream.

As the cornerstone of his argument, Durkheim introduced the concept of the social fact. His argument was that the natural sciences could never explain the whole world. While biology and physics can explain how people are made and how they breathe, it could not explain how people operate when they are living together. Durkheim pointed out that all humans organise themselves in similar ways: humans always have formed and will form societies which operate in basically the same ways. For example they all exist in family structures, they all create and enforce laws, etc. All of these things are social facts. And this, he stated, should be the subject matter for the sociologist; not only should we explore the existence of these facts, but we should explore the nature of the relationship between the individual and society. Durkheim analysed society; he asserted that a society exists independently of the sum of its parts - even to the extent that it can coerce its members and exert control over them (this is how we know it is real). While the biologist examines the parts, the sociologist studies the society. So by asserting society as a real thing, he could justify sociology as a natural science.

I feel that we are faced with the same challenge as Durkheim in ASSAP today. We must develop stringent scientific methods in order to validate findings and earn some degree of credibility, as Maurice Townsend pointed out in *The Gold Standard (Anomaly, Volume 17)*. However I would suggest that Durkheim's efforts have been wasted on ASSAP, as we seem to neglect the realms of social explanation.

As a member who has recently joined ASSAP, I have been very impressed by its commitment to rigorous, scientific research. In this essay I would like to contribute something to that. I feel it has been a tendency common throughout the canon of literature on the paranormal to look for explanations in two areas. When phenomena emerge, it strikes me that explanations are offered from two broad disciplines; we quite rightly look for explanations in the realms of what can be explained through the natural sciences. However, when scientific explanations have been exhausted, there has been the tendency to jump to paranormal explanations.

Whatever happened to research of the social phenomena which may be involved - the area of Durkheim's social facts? I feel that this may be a fruitful area of exploration which has long been neglected.

I am not proposing that ghosts may be explained by looking at social facts, or by the things that people who experience them have in common: this would be far too simplistic; neither am I challenging the existence of the paranormal. However, I am suggesting that we may have more influence on encounters with the paranormal than has ever been credited to us. I would even go so far as to say that social facts underpin all phenomena to a greater or lesser extent, simply by virtue of the fact that it is people who encounter and report purportedly paranormal phenomena. People are not neutral, unbiased witnesses. They are influenced by a multitude of factors purely because they live in the world.

Investigators have a tendency to concentrate on the phenomena described, establishing theories and scientific facts about those phenomena, and while we are all too aware that the witness may not be objective, little emphasis has been placed on the role that we play in actively experiencing and reporting the paranormal. In fact, as I will go on to discuss, we do not simply observe and report phenomena, but we actively re-define, label and categorise everything we perceive. It is vital, then, that we pay some attention to the way these processes take place.

Let me offer the following to highlight the importance of considering sociological factors in research. I would like to describe a situation which, I am sure, we will all be familiar with, indeed so familiar that it is mostly unchallenged. It is also a phenomenon that would, by definition, fall into the category of Durkheim's social fact.

You are on a vigil, in a room with three or four other people. One person experiences something, whether it be a sighting, a noise, a smell, or even a temperature change. However, not everybody in the room experiences this. The rest of the group may experience nothing at all.

If I may pause here for a moment, this fact is, by its own right, a phenomenon that cannot be explained scientifically. According to natural law, everybody in the room should have experienced exactly the same thing. Of course, it is sometimes the case that everybody may experience precisely the same thing; I would suggest, however, that this does not happen in the majority of cases. Indeed, it is as much a phenomenon as the apparition itself, but there is no need to jump to paranormal explanations. I would suggest that this variation in what is perceived is not a 'paranormal' phenomenon eg. 'Did the ghost have a message for the specific witness?', it is rather a social phenomenon, eg. 'Why has one person perceived what they have seen to be paranormal?'

When we consider the frequency with which the above situation occurs it becomes obvious that witnesses have some kind of influence on sightings, the precise nature of which is, as yet, unclear. What I am suggesting is that, given further research, it is possible to be in a position where we can predict, based on social and psychological factors, who, if anybody, will be more predisposed to experience a paranormal phenomenon and who will be the first person on a vigil to witness something.

In this essay I am not challenging the existence of the paranormal, far from it. What I am trying to do is to redress the balance of previous work by suggesting some of the ways that witnesses play an active part in perceiving and defining paranormal experiences.

I would like to outline some areas which I feel play a part in the likelihood of an individual's encountering the paranormal. Further research may tell us more about the nature of these factors; for now, however, it is enough to outline them and be aware of them.

Perception

The process of observation is in no way as objective as it may seem. Yet its objectivity is completely unchallenged. How often do we hear cynics say 'they will believe it when they see it', taking their perception to be completely objective and trustworthy. However, what exists in the outside world and what we 'see' may be quite separate things.

An object in the external world that is observed projects an image on the retina of the eye, and effectively this is where any objectivity in perception may cease. Once the image is received on the retina, the brain takes this visual information and attempts to make sense of it by categorising it according to what it already understands through experience.

Thus it can be seen that what a psychic person perceives to be a ghost, a sceptic may perceive to be simply a grey light. While both 'see' exactly the same effect they perceive entirely different things.

It may be seen then, that what one 'sees' depends on a whole range of factors, such as one's personality type, background, family, education, religious belief, least of all the actual object in the external world. An individual recognises things according to what he or she has been exposed to in the past, what he or she is used to or what he or she expects to see in the circumstances.

To one person, a drop in temperature may signify a paranormal event. This person may be well versed in the literature of the paranormal and may be familiar with this phenomenon, indeed he or she may even be knowledgeable on the history of phenomena relating to this particular place. To another person of a different, perhaps more scientific background, it may simply be a drop in temperature.

It may be seen that the way we perceive underlies any experience of the paranormal. Indeed a group may all experience the same thing. However, only one person may perceive it to be paranormal, while the others may draw other conclusions depending on their backgrounds and even their different personality types.

Similarly, if they believe that they have psychic ability, they may be more likely to experience something purely because they expect to. They

may perceive what they see or hear to be paranormal more readily than someone who does not think he or she hold any such ability. And this effect would be independent of any real psychic ability.

Following on from this point, this could also be defined as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as mentioned previously. People who believe themselves to be psychic are more likely to experience something they define as paranormal before any other in the group. Because they expect to experience something, this will actively shape the perception process. This phenomenon may be enhanced if the individual is in a group where others are aware of this purported psychic ability, because the others would have certain expectations of the individual.

Labelling Theory

Effectively, ghosts are only ghosts because we label them as such. As such, we actively perceive and create phenomena. I would like to use sociological labelling theory to suggest some of the social implications of this.

To explain the theory using a simple example, a labelling approach to deviance would suggest that there is no actual difference between a criminal and a 'law-abiding' citizen, because to some extent every person has broken a law (whether it be speeding or 'borrowing' tea bags), which makes them by definition a 'law-breaker' or 'criminal'. The difference between a normal person and a 'criminal' lies not in the act itself but in the social processes which take place once a person is 'caught'. This involves a process of labelling where the individual is identified as a criminal publicly, is put in prison and effectively begins a criminal career; the individual's whole identity is transformed, or rather subsumed under this new primary label.

As we have seen, a 'ghost' is only defined to be so if a witness perceives and translates the information received to the brain as such. What happens then is a process of labelling, whereby the phenomenon, whatever it may be, is labelled as 'paranormal' and this becomes the primary label which determines and shapes all further treatment of it.

Once the label is applied, the original evidence for the definition is reshaped in the memory; it often becomes exaggerated or distorted and sensationalised to such an extent that its origins become obscured. All of the evidence is re-worked to confirm the label. And once this primary

label is applied, it is almost impossible to see the phenomena as anything else. The evidence is documented and analysed, and this may serve to define and shape all further encounters.

So it can be seen that we have a far more active part in encountering the paranormal than merely observing. We play an integral part in the process of actively perceiving and defining the paranormal, in some cases, even to the extent that we unconsciously create the paranormal.

Immediate Situation

I would suggest that an individual's immediate environment plays a significant part in affecting his or her chances of having a paranormal experience. And by this I do not mean that if you are in a reputedly haunted house you are more likely to encounter something! What I am suggesting is that certain factors in one's immediate environment play an important part.

If a person feels comfortable in the area, it will make them relaxed and calm and so less likely to react hastily to any change in the environment. An individual who is comfortable is more likely to respond only to fairly substantial evidence. Conversely, if an individual is on his or her first vigil in a purportedly haunted house, it is easy to become agitated and tense or caught up in the imagination and mood of the place, understandably increasing the likelihood of encountering 'something'.

An individual's state of mind plays a crucial part in the likelihood of experiencing the paranormal. Beyond feeling nervous or tense, it should also be noted that feelings such as tiredness, coldness, boredom or fear will also affect one's chances of perceiving the unexplained.

Similarly, factors outside the immediate environment may work to induce certain states of mind that will affect perception in the ways outlined above. If one is stressed at work or unhappy at home, these may play lesser or greater parts in the way the individual will perceive things. This may also act in the way of a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby individuals on a vigil are expecting to experience something. This will in turn affect and shape what and how they perceive, as I mentioned earlier.

It is also possible that members of the group work to influence one another in perceiving what they encounter. In 1956 an American

psychologist named Asch carried out some experiments that illustrate the influence other members of the group can have on an individual. It is particularly relevant for this discussion. Asch placed a subject in a group of nine confederates (unknown to the subject). They were asked to complete a simple perception exercise, reporting back their answers in front of the group. The subject was placed last and watched in dismay as all the others in the group reported back the obviously wrong answer. When his turn came, he conformed with the group response, even though he had initially thought it to be incorrect.

It was more important for the subject to conform with the group than to give what he had thought was the correct answer, moreover, a consensual group decision was enough to make him actually disbelieve what he had seen. What Asch illustrates is the power of group pressure.

While it is doubtful that a group would mislead each other in this overt way under normal circumstances, it is undoubtedly possible that what an individual perceives may be in some way shaped by the experiences of the rest of the group.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to outline some of the ways in which our nature as humans and social beings may affect what and how we perceive. A great deal more work about the precise nature of these factors can only benefit future research.

For too long the role of the witness has been unquestioned, concentrating on the actual phenomenon itself. However, by doing this we assume the witness to be entirely unbiased and value-free. This is not the case. An investigator cannot separate himself from his own beliefs, values, personality and knowledge when he comes to a vigil, nor should we want him to. However, in a scientific world it is easy to consider ourselves to be as objective and unbiased as the tools we use.

Even if it were possible, I do not propose that we should attempt to become more objective or scientific. Rather, I would prefer that, when conducting research, we were aware of some of the factors that can affect what we experience. We should then actively consolidate and allow for these factors in our research.

Indeed, if we accept and embrace the way we perceive and respond both psychologically and socially, it can only add depth to investigation, leaving scientific measurement to our equipment.

A SCHOOL HAUNTING

by William J Eyre

Often investigators only experience anomalous phenomena 'second-hand' - through the testimony of witnesses. Even on vigils it is seldom that truly inexplicable events are experienced at first-hand. But in this case strange things started to happen even at the interview stage.

Stories of strange happenings stretch back a number of years at Penbury School, Donwick [pseudonym], but events came to a head during the first half of 1996 with a report coming to ASSAP's attention of regular haunting-type phenomena, some of them allegedly violent, occurring in the caretaker's flat, which is built into the school. The case proved to be particularly fruitful as phenomena occurred each time ASSAP investigators visited the school.

The Interview

On 7 June 1996, Elizabeth Elliott and I visited Penbury School in order to allow Mrs Powell [pseudonym], the caretaker's wife, and Graham Powell [pseudonym], the caretaker's 22-year old son, to describe what had been happening and to ask relevant questions to throw light on whether the goings-on were really of a paranormal nature.

Graham said that he sometimes saw images or shadows in their flat; once, while in the lounge, he had seen an apparition through the glass panel of the door leading to the hall. On another occasion he claimed to have seen the apparition of a woman and child in the school. He also saw images on a television screen, even though it was switched off. He had experienced the sensation of sudden unexpected temperature changes and of attempts by something to control the right-hand side of his body. His body built up a lot of static electricity; sometimes a blue spark appeared when he touched objects.

Graham explained that the most worrying phenomena occurred in bed. In January 1996 some furniture had been moved from one of the classrooms and stored in a corridor just outside Graham's bedroom. There was a fireplace on Graham's side of the wall adjoining the corridor. Since that time, on a number of occasions, something had either tried to pull Graham by the legs out of bed or pushed him and, on occasion, tried to strangle him. Sometimes he sensed some sort of presence approaching him, coming from the direction of the fireplace. His most frightening experience had occurred about a week before the interview. On that occasion he had seen a haze with eyes in it approaching his bed and then had his legs pulled in an attempt to drag him out of bed. He was so alarmed that he ran next door into his parents' bedroom to wake his mother. Over the next few minutes, a red mark developed on his right knee, accompanied by a burning pain. Over the next few days the mark turned into a blister and this was shown to the investigators. Coincident with this attack on Graham, one of the family's dogs, a West Highland terrier, which had been lying at the foot of Graham's bed, spontaneously bled from a spot by its left ear.

Mrs Powell explained that she had, on occasion, seen a haze in her bedroom and had her ankles tugged while in bed. She could sometimes feel herself being sexually groped by someone other than her husband (who tended to sleep like a log during these occurrences). She claimed to have woken up with black eyes once after one such attack. While she was awake, but in the flat, it sometimes felt to her as if someone was moving their hand through her hair.

As a result of the frightening nature of the phenomena taking place in the bedrooms, the family had taken to sleeping together in the lounge. To some extent, the phenomena followed them there. For example, one night, while sleeping on the bed-settee, Graham was woken up by someone pressing down on his chest. He saw a child sitting on the back of the bed-settee, pressing her legs down on him. For a while, he felt paralysed. Then, when was able to, he got up and the child laughed at him. Other occasional minor psychokinetic effects were also reported. It was established that the family had no interest in, and no knowledge of, the paranormal.

During the interview, Elizabeth saw something dark near the floor close to where she was sitting, and at the same time Graham could see an image of a woman in the same corner of the room. Shortly after, an anomalous breeze was detected, being felt by Elizabeth, myself and Mrs Powell in that order as it moved around the room, starting at that corner.

Mrs Powell and Graham experienced bodily temperature changes. Later in the interview, the dog stood in the middle of the room, staring at something invisible in the opposite corner of the room. Its hair stood on end and it started bleeding near its left ear for no apparent reason. When the blood had been wiped away, there appeared to be no sign of a cut.

MEDIUMS IN CASES

by Maurice Townsend

Mediums are frequently involved in paranormal investigations. Some even direct such investigations themselves. ASSAP investigators often ask whether they should involve mediums in their research or not. This article is intended to provide some practical advice on the subject.

The intention of this article is to act as a guide to investigators in the field concerning the involvement of mediums in their research. These comments refer to mediums' involvement in cases of spontaneous phenomena rather than in laboratory-style research. These notes are directed primarily toward active ASSAP investigators whether, trainee or accredited.

Mediums can get involved in spontaneous cases by several routes, so it is important to know how to manage any situations that could arise beforehand. A medium could, for instance, be an ASSAP investigator! Another example is where witnesses demand the involvement of a medium as a precondition to investigating a case. Certainly some witnesses expect such involvement as a result of reading reports in the popular press. Indeed, a medium may have already been brought in by the witness before ASSAP arrives. Alternatively, the investigators may themselves be expected to produce one (in which case contact the NIC for further advice).

What is a Medium?

Before going any further we should perhaps define what is meant here by the term 'medium'. Any such definition will inevitably sound clumsy and even naive but should nevertheless be attempted so that we all know what is meant. A medium is someone who can apparently gain information or impressions from routes other than the normal conventional human senses. Whether one accepts that certain people have such faculties is not the issue here. Even if you are sceptical of such

apparent abilities, a medium's affect on a case of spontaneous phenomena can be profound, as I believe will become clear.

An important first point to make is that mediums are an anomaly themselves! People claiming mediumship have been studied as paranormal phenomena in their own right for some time. There is, as yet, no scientific consensus about the validity or otherwise of their faculties. Many mediums hold perfectly honest beliefs in their abilities and these should be respected, whatever your private thoughts on the matter. Some mediums make no claim to understand their apparent faculties, while others attach firm belief systems to them. The former attitude is perhaps to be preferred in case work, assuming you get the choice. That some people can consistently gain information which would seem to be unavailable to them is not in doubt. What has not been settled is how that information is obtained. By introducing a medium into a case you could be adding another 'unknown factor' into a situation already full of uncontrollable variables.

There can be little doubt that people have at times set themselves up as mediums when they were little more than frauds. We are not concerned with such people here. It is to be hoped that ASSAP investigators never have to suffer the attentions of such charlatans. It is further to be hoped that investigators can detect when such chicanery is being attempted. The people we are considering here are those who genuinely believe, through experience, that they are privy to information through unusual channels.

Information can be obtained in many ways beyond the conventional everyday methods, without even considering the possibility of the paranormal. Some people are, for instance, good 'natural' detectives. By analysing circumstantial evidence (the appearance of a person - their clothes, voice, build - or a place) they can deduce a great deal. Similarly, much can be deduced from body language. A great deal can also be found out from even the briefest of 'structured conversations', without the witness even being aware that they are in fact being purposefully interviewed. One could thus build up an argument that some people may imagine themselves to be mediums when in fact they are simply very good at 'reading' their environment and other people. Apparently mediumistic material can also be obtained through cryptamnesia, where someone remembers something while not consciously realising they ever knew it. It is easy to see how such people could believe themselves psychic. This might be particularly easy if they already had a belief system that supported such ideas (eg. believing that direct contact with the dead is possible). If you get a chance to work with a medium, you

should always check for the possibility that such 'information leakage' might be a source.

On the other hand, there are good cases where information has apparently been obtained in extraordinary circumstances. How can one explain some of the amazing cases where, working with the police, psychics have located objects or people involved in crimes with little more than a name to go on? Even more importantly, there is a reasonable body of laboratory evidence to make a case for the existence of ESP (though the effect is slight). I do not wish to go into that particular debate here, because for the purposes of case work it does not make any difference whether the faculty of mediumship is real or imagined.

Involvement in Cases

Now consider what happens if you, as an investigator introduces, someone as a medium to a witness in a case you are investigating. Any respect the witness may accord to your expertise is likely to enhance the credibility of that medium in the witness's eyes. This is quite independent of how 'good' the medium really is or how they gain their information. Anything the medium reports is highly likely to be taken seriously by the witness. Indeed, many people would probably be far more interested in what the medium has to say than your own conclusions about the case! Clearly this could change the opinions of one of your primary sources in the case. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that witnesses could subconsciously alter their memories of earlier case incidents to make the mediumistically obtained information fit better. Witnesses are often desperate for an explanation for their highly disturbing experiences, and mediumistic evidence can often fit the bill well. The entire outcome could thus be altered. As you will no doubt appreciate, it makes no difference whether the medium really has the faculties they think they have or not.

Mediums frequently believe they are in contact with the dead (or indeed other discarnate entities). This may or may not be the case, but you should always bear in mind alternative possibilities. Any information presented to the living as proof of contact with the dead must be known by the living to be acceptable as evidence. The assumption is that the medium could not possibly have access to such, often highly personal, information by any other method. The very fact that the information exists, whether in the mind of the witness or possibly written down somewhere, means that it is accessible to the living. It could therefore

have been picked up by conventional or extra-sensory perception of some kind (assuming, for the sake or argument, that such a faculty exists). Thus the possession of such information by the medium cannot prove that he or she is indeed in contact with the dead. This is one of the central problems with all attempts to verify apparent contact with the dead.

All of this is important during cases, because people often give greater credence to information which supposedly comes from the dead (or other agencies beyond the plane of normal existence). Even if such information DID come from a dead person, we could not necessarily assume it was invariably correct. As has been pointed out, even if dead people can communicate with the living, their memory may be no better than when they were alive! As it is, we cannot at present decide exactly where such information has come from. Indeed, the source may vary from case to case. Simply because a portion of the mediumistic information is found to be correct, do not assume other uncheckable information from the same source is also true - wherever you believe it has come from!

So, how should one proceed with mediums in investigating cases?

Firstly, if there is no obvious reason to introduce mediums to a case, which is usually true, the best advice is not to bother. If you do introduce mediums, try to bring them in at a late stage in the case. Only introduce mediums once all conventional methods of investigation have been exhausted. You should always try to assess mediums before inviting them into a case. You might try to find out what success or otherwise they have had in the past. In particular, you should try to get them to volunteer information that you can check out personally to assess their reliability (irrespective of how you think that information may have been obtained). It is important to manage the involvement of mediums in cases. In particular, do not let mediums 'take over' the case - some have powerful personalities and belief systems that can overwhelm anyone involved, especially the witnesses.

All information obtained in a mediumistic way should be separated in written reports from evidence obtained by more conventional methods. You should record your efforts to verify the mediumistic material. You should never change the way you conduct a case on the basis of unverified information, whether mediumistic or otherwise. If one of the case investigators is a medium, you should highlight that fact in your report. Unverified information from mediums should not be considered when drawing conclusions about a case.

Try to avoid mediums' feeding ideas directly to witnesses. Try not to be forced into a situation where exorcism or similar exercises are demanded. ASSAP does not offer such services and cannot vouch for them. Stress management is often far more effective, in any case, in dealing with situations where such things have been demanded. Try to keep the expectations of witnesses realistic. We are researchers and do not 'get rid' of things. Our research is required to form a greater understanding of the phenomena. Through such an understanding we might indeed, in future, be able fully to control the phenomena. Until then, we must try to relieve the situation using known psychology rather than unproven parapsychology.

Visits by Tim Grinold

As this case had come to ASSAP's attention via Tim Grinold, he also visited the school. Each time he did so, he experienced phenomena. While in the school nursery, he felt what seemed like a sharp pencil being stabbed into his forearm. While walking along the ground floor corridor of the school, he felt a child holding his hand. In the lounge of the flat he saw the apparition of a woman with long hair through the glass door leading into the hall.

The Vigil

The foregoing had led the investigators to the conclusion that paranormal phenomena were indeed happening, and so it was decided to hold a vigil in an attempt to throw further light on the matter. This was held on 15 June and the ASSAP investigators (Elizabeth, Tim and I) were joined by Colin Lowe and Vernon Myers of CPSG (Chesterfield Psychic Study Group). In order to simulate the conditions prevailing when the main phenomena took place as closely as possible, Graham joined the investigators for the vigil, which was timed to encompass the hours of 12 midnight to 4 am. The areas covered were the two bedrooms of the caretaker's flat. Some of the watches were held in relative or total darkness.

The vigil was divided up into five watches of 45 minutes each, separated by 20-minute rest periods. Team 1 consisted of Tim, Vernon and Graham. Team 2 consisted of Elizabeth, Colin and myself. The two teams alternately occupied the two bedrooms.

At 11.30 p.m., just as the first watch was about to begin, Mrs Powell called from the lounge, where she and Mr Powell were just about to go to sleep, to point out that the left ear of the dog, which was in the lounge, had spontaneously started bleeding again. The dog's hair was standing on end and the dog appeared distressed. Video footage of the bleeding was attempted but did not come out very well because of the dim lighting. The area of the bleeding seemed to be hot.

During the first watch Graham (in his own bedroom) felt a cold draught round his right-hand side and felt as if something were holding him around the neck. Tim saw two separate sets of dancing white lights near the ceiling. Then the right-hand side of Graham's neck went numb; it felt as if it were being pushed. He reported seeing a light repeatedly going

around the room. Tim felt something that felt like icicles playing with the back of his neck. Then his legs went ice cold, while the rest of his body still felt warm. The thermometer still registered 18/C. In Mr and Mrs Powell's bedroom Elizabeth also felt extremes of temperature.

During the second watch, in the parents' room, Graham saw a light along one of the walls. He reported seeing a cat jump onto the bed and run across it. Both Tim and Graham felt an 'unnatural coldness' coming on. Graham then felt something poke him in the right eye, causing it to become bloodshot.

Part way through the third watch, Graham (lying on the bed in his own room) saw it go hazy around the window. He felt a presence grab his ankles; it then moved onto his knees. The haziness moved from the window to behind him, at which point it pushed him most of the way off the bed. The experience frightened him and left him shaking. Coldness was experienced by both Tim and Graham but not by Vernon or the thermometer, which registered 19/C. Although Vernon had a camcorder, he was unable to film the proceedings because that particular watch was held in darkness.

To simulate the conditions of the phenomena occurring in Graham's bedroom during the third watch, Elizabeth lay on the bed in that room during the fourth watch. Again there was darkness. She felt extreme cold but no 'pushing' sensation. The other investigators and the thermometer were within a metre or so of the bed but they felt a normal temperature and the thermometer recorded 19/C again.

In the final watch Tim lay on the bed that seemed to be the focus of activity and, like Elizabeth during the previous watch, felt extremely cold but no 'pushing' sensation.

Mediumistic Intervention

Subsequent to the vigil, the phenomena became so violent that the Powells bought a small, second-hand caravan. They parked it in the schoolyard and took to sleeping in it, as they were too frightened to sleep in the flat at night. Although outside ASSAP's remit, the CPSG independently arranged for medium Peter Hawksworth to carry out a 'spirit rescue' because the phenomena were causing the Powells such a serious problem (see box).

WHAT THE MEDIUM REPORTED

On 1 July, Peter Hawksworth (a medium and member of CPSG) visited the school accompanied by his wife Lynda and myself. Peter and Lynda spent a period of time in Graham's room. Peter mediumistically sensed the presence of a very tall man, not bad-looking but with a nasty and strict nature, who used to work in the building. He had carried out one or more thefts from the school and had been lingering around the school since his death. The man had a back problem. The description of this entity tallied with that of an apparition seen by Graham. Other entities were also sensed in the school and flat but, unlike the 'tall man', those were not thought to be of a malevolent nature. Lynda picked up a smell of cooking in Graham's room (other people had previously reported a smell of bacon and eggs cooking there).

On his second visit Peter sensed a different male presence. Peter felt this entity was unconnected with the building and thought Graham might perhaps be subconsciously attracting entities to himself.

Subsequently the violent phenomena ceased. With conditions returning to something approaching normality, the family resumed sleeping in the flat. About two months later the Powells reported a resumption of some night -time phenomena so a second 'spirit rescue' was carried out by Peter. Again, the phenomena largely died down.

The latest contact with the Powells was in January 1997, and the general picture was that things had largely quietened down, though Graham still sometimes had odd experiences.

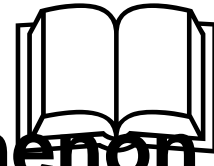
Some Deductions

Sleep paralysis is an obvious explanation to consider in any case involving strange experiences happening in bed. However, it does not fit the bill in this particular case as the 'bed' phenomena were experienced by two different people. Also, the phenomena sometimes persisted after any paralysis had worn off and some phenomena were experienced by both subjects and investigators when everyone was wide awake.

It seems quite obvious that Mrs Powell and, to an even greater extent, Graham Powell are highly sensitive to the phenomena at the site (they experienced things that investigators present did not). Assuming that the paranormal history of the school is to be taken at face value, the two people may have interacted with something that was already in existence at the site. This might have caused a 'low level' haunting to flare up into something much more dramatic. If so, it might add an interesting clue to

the fascinating question of how people and sites interact to produce anomalous phenomena.

BOOK REVIEW



The Poltergeist Phenomenon

by John and Anne Spencer

Published by Headline (hardback).

Reviewed by Maurice Townsend

Books seem to go out of print so quickly these days, such is the nature of the modern publishing trade. With the recent upsurge in interest in the paranormal, it is difficult to recommend worthwhile texts to newcomers when so many of the best are out of print. So, with no obviously useful book about poltergeists in the shops at the moment, I had high hopes of this new one by John and Anne Spencer. I was not disappointed.

As with most subjects, there seem to be two kinds of author. One type is the professional author who researches a field new to them and then writes a summary for the benefit of readers. The other type is someone who is active in a field, perhaps for many years, before deciding to write a book about it. The many active researchers in ASSAP will no doubt share my bias towards the latter. I ought to say, in passing, that I do not deride well-written books by professional authors from outside the subject. Often they can bring a refreshing new angle to things that insiders have taken for granted for years. They can provide a 'grandstand' view that close involvement will never provide. Nevertheless, there is nothing to substitute for reading the experience of someone who has actually 'been there'.

Poltergeists are a particularly important subject to cover at the moment. With the huge current interest in anomalous phenomena, there is a great deal of material appearing in print right now. Inevitably some of it will be regarded as dubious by seasoned researchers. It would be a pity if newcomers to the field were to be put off by some of the more sensational, poorly researched claims. In the subject of poltergeists we have a phenomenon in which even the most jaded and sceptical researchers see some merit. There can be little doubt that the

phenomenon known as the poltergeist exists. The only real questions are, what exactly does it represent and how is it caused?

The Spencers' book introduces the subject with some typical cases. They then go on to examine particular facets of this bizarre phenomenon, illustrated with more examples, some drawn from their own investigations. Many of the typical and difficult-to-explain points are emphasised. These include the ability of the phenomenon to communicate, its apparent intelligence and telepathic and clairvoyant abilities. Other points equally well examined are the 'childishness' or aimlessness of its behaviour as well as the precision typical of its acts.

A particular theme that runs through the book is that, despite appearances, poltergeist cases can always be interpreted as an outbreak of spontaneous psychokinesis (PK) rather than a discarnate external entity. Most serious researchers have accepted this point for a long time, but newcomers might find their initial ideas challenged by this point. The authors examine some of the possibly psychological conditions that may turn someone into a 'focus' of poltergeist activity. The person-centred nature of poltergeists is perhaps their most enduring property.

As well as treading ground familiar to experienced researchers, the Spencers' make some possibly novel observations. One point they mention is the tendency of poltergeists to use symmetry in their placement of objects. This is not simply laying objects out in patterns, but even positioning single items in perfect symmetry with their surroundings. Another neglected topic is the role of the investigator in the development of a case. The authors brought poltergeist foci and researchers together to discuss this matter. There certainly seems to be evidence that researchers can influence a case by actually goading the poltergeist to produce more dramatic phenomena. Witnesses are usually, needless to say, less than keen on this process as it disrupts their lives and can engender fear. To the witness, researchers are often brought in to get rid of the phenomenon, not study, or worse, encourage it.

Other (probably) new thoughts include the idea that the range and magnitude of a poltergeist's antics may be limited only by the 'boggle-threshold' of witnesses and researchers present. The poltergeist may do something if those present can at least accept it as a possibility. Researchers often expect more than witnesses because they have read books and know what poltergeists are capable of. Presumably with each case an individual researcher goes on, his or her 'boggle-threshold' is

likely to be raised. Is there any evidence of investigators attending steadily more and more spectacular cases?

One topic explored perhaps more thoroughly than in previous books on the subject is that of foci. Poltergeists are person-centred in that the activity usually only occurs when a particular person is around. In addition, activity often follows the focus about. The authors try to find common features between the foci involved in many cases, and with some success. One feature that occurs repeatedly is that the focus is usually subject to some kind of frustration in their life.

Another major theme of the book is the relationship between poltergeists and cases of haunting. A poltergeist may be seen as a sudden, often dramatic, episode of physical disturbance, usually associated with a particular person. A haunting, on the other hand, is centred on a geographic location and generally involves a much lower level of physical activity. The question is: are the two things really one and the same phenomenon? Gauld and Cornell did a study that suggested they were distinctive entities. The Spencers speculate that the physical phenomena of a haunting may derive from 'low level' foci visiting what are often public places and interacting with something there. Anomaly readers may be aware of my own musings on the topic of hauntings. I speculated in the last issue that, if we assume apparitional cases are some sort of 'recording' (ghosts usually tend to repeat the same actions again and again while showing no consciousness of their surroundings), the accompanying physical effects might also be a recording of motion instead of just light or sound. It remains to be seen whether future evidence will support either of these possibilities.

As in previous books on poltergeists, there is a final section looking for explanations. The authors look, not unexpectedly, towards PK to offer an answer. The parallel with table tilting and, in particular, physical mediumship which has a focus, the medium, is striking. All of these phenomena involve physical disturbances which seem to rely on the presence of people, the location being immaterial. Physical mediumship could perhaps be regarded as a kind of controlled poltergeist. Perhaps wisely, the authors do not attempt a scientific explanation of PK itself. When previous books have attempted this it is usually in terms of whatever physical theory happened to be fashionable at the time. These come and go and quickly date a book.

I would thoroughly recommend this book to newcomers to the subject, particularly in its scientific, neutral approach. Even old hands might find something here they had never thought about. Why not try it and see?

LETTERS



The subject of ASSAP's involvement in education continues to stir great interest. Two letters here continue the debate originally started by Tony Wells.

From Andrew Homer

I have been following with interest the education issues raised by Tony Wells and subsequently taken up by Jason Braithwaite. While not wishing to go over ground already covered, I would like to add some thoughts to the debate.

I work as a full-time lecturer at Dudley College and as such am aware that the recent reorganisation of further education (FE) colleges into independent corporations has made them generally much more amenable to new ideas for courses, if they can be made financially viable. For example, courses under the general heading of Adult Education (both evening and day classes) are run by colleges and schools alike simply on the basis of there being enough paying students. Many of these courses are of the leisure-interest variety and, properly led, could provide an ideal opportunity to raise the general awareness of paranormal research. ASSAP could 'approve' tutors on the basis of, say, success in academic courses such as that being prepared by Jason Braithwaite (Volume 19) or equivalent and perhaps provide guidelines for potential tutors. Incidentally, most colleges offer the City and Guilds 7307 course for teachers in further education, which may be taken by anyone contemplating teaching on a part-time basis.

However, for a course to be more than just a leisure activity, there must be an element of accreditation. An organisation such as ASSAP, in common with many professional societies, could produce 'off-the-peg' courses leading to, say, certificate and diploma accreditation with perhaps associate and corporate membership levels. Unfortunately, it has to be said that the amount of work involved in managing such a scheme would almost certainly be prohibitive to an organisation which is, I assume [*quite rightly - Ed.*], entirely staffed by volunteers. There is the further problem of 'selling' such courses to the education-providers and

setting up some form of external verification to ensure common standards throughout. Also, FE colleges receive funding from the Further Education Funding Council only for 'recognised' vocational courses, so there is the added problem of obtaining such recognition.

An alternative would be to make use of an existing accreditation system which already has Further Education Funding Council approval. Such a system is the Open College Network (OCN) which has member Access Federations in most parts of the country. For example, our local one is OCN West Midlands, which covers all of the Black Country and Birmingham areas. Access courses are for adults only and are made up of units of accreditation at specified levels. The levels start at very basic education and go right through to university entry. Each unit is approximately 30 hours of work and consists of a number of learning outcomes together with associated assessments. The actual course content and materials can vary from centre to centre as long as the prescribed learning outcomes are met. The interesting part is that, in theory at least, units covering a variety of relevant topics could be written and approved by ASSAP and then presented to any Access Federation panel in the country to accredit college-based courses or local authority evening classes. OCN credits are nationally recognised, transferable from area to area and can be delivered in a variety of different ways.

Another idea may be to look at the various modular degree programmes on offer (particularly part-time) and suggest a combination which meets ASSAP approval. I have not done much work on this, but someone following, say, an Open University programme could collect ASSAP-'approved' credits in psychology, research methods, statistics, history and so forth. Collection of sufficient approved credits, together with something along the lines of the present investigator training, could then lead to an academic award given by ASSAP itself. ASSAP would only need to approve a programme of study on an individual basis, which would remove much of the hassle involved in running or overseeing its own courses, while still having an input at diploma and / or degree level.

Another thought which may interest ASSAP members is to institute a form of recognised and recorded individual development. Examples might include undertaking specific research activities, organising vigils, attending courses / conferences, etc., the whole point being to officially recognise and record individual development in as professional a manner as possible. This could be independent of, or included in, the kind of credit-accumulation scheme mentioned above.

Inevitably, if ASSAP is to pursue any of these or similar routes, some kind of forum of interested members will be necessary if standards are to be maintained and an on-going programme is to succeed. Quite how all this could be organised with, presumably, interested members spread out all over the country is yet another issue to be addressed, perhaps through the Internet.

My personal view is that, if organisations such as ASSAP are seen to be operating in a professional manner as regards education, then there will be a knock-on effect which will eventually raise awareness of paranormal research not just within the media and the general public but also, most importantly, in the educational system itself.

PS: I am pleased to receive e-mail at: andrew.homer@dudleycol.ac.uk

From Paul Rogers

(Paul assists the NIC with investigator training)

A correspondence course intended to improve our own scientific knowledge for use when investigating anomalous phenomena is a marvellous idea. Enhancing the scientific knowledge of not only our investigators but also other members could bring many benefits to the quality of research currently being undertaken and should be promoted within our organisation. Personally, I shall be one of the first to enrol on the [Jason Braithwaite] course, as I feel it may offer me a better insight into the phenomena I may be called on to investigate.

The issue of increasing the level of investigator accreditation is a valid one and I think everyone will agree that any organisation is only as good as its members. Nowhere is this more relevant than in investigations, but we must think carefully about the implications of this action on the organisation as a whole. We must look at exactly what ASSAP is and the implications of enforcing a specifically required 'qualification' to the role of active research.

ASSAP is a collection of individuals who have chosen to study paranormal phenomena from a scientific angle, rather than from, say, a religious or spiritual perspective. It is true to say that some members are scientifically qualified and add the benefits of their expertise to the association; however, the majority are not, but still have significant input to make in a research role. While to some members the activities of ASSAP are an extension of their own professional duties, we must

appreciate that to the majority it is a hobby, though taken no less seriously. Asking members to dedicate potentially a lot of time in order to achieve a standard with which they can progress is entering into an elitist culture. We must appreciate that membership of ASSAP and the ability to become an ASSAP investigator is open to all as we can all contribute. If we are to set quite demanding standards within the group we must review our current structure and possibly the basis of what we are trying to achieve.

To many new members, ASSAP offers the chance for people from a variety of backgrounds to become investigators with one common aim: research into anomalous phenomena with a scientific leaning with like-minded people. Indeed, the prospect of potentially becoming an investigator and contributing to the understanding of our chosen subject is one of the most appealing features for any new member. I feel that increasing the requirements on trainee investigators to achieve accreditation on top of the existing course and project will deter many talented people who do not have the time to dedicate to such a demanding syllabus.

The current accreditation process requires trainees to attend a course and then complete a project connected with the process of paranormal investigation. The aim of the course is to pass on tested techniques which form the common stages of an investigation. The project shows the individual trainee's ability to research and analyse a particular subject, and as part of this I offer guidance where needed. I feel that these standards are totally effective in establishing whether an individual is proficient and, indeed, intending to operate within the standards ASSAP has set.

We must appreciate that there are many stages to an investigation and in turn, many stages to the analysis of the reported phenomena. The scientific analysis is only part of that process, and to exclude anyone whose skills lie in other areas from contributing to the whole process is unjustifiable. I believe it is more appropriate to introduce a list of preferred science-based reading as part of the training course and then suggest that undertaking the correspondence course is for individual benefit. I hasten to add, these would not be binding elements. I think that encouraging investigators to pursue the answers to all questions that are raised in the process of investigations through their own study and through questions to qualified members of the scientific community is equally valid. This will not only provide them with the answers they

require, but will also act as an effective part of their own personal development within the subject that they have chosen to study.

Editors Note: *There are no plans to change the current system for qualifying as an ASSAP Accredited Investigator. Jason's course is seen as a valuable voluntary extension for personal development.*