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All in the Mind?

by Paul Chambers

The human brain is a far more extraordinary organ than most of us imagine. It is quite capable of manufacturing 'experiences' that have no basis in consensus reality. Sadly, for paranormal researchers, some of these effects resemble the kind of phenomena we are attempting to study. Unless we are aware of this possibility our effort may be wasted on purely natural phenomena.

The degree to which the human brain assists in the generation and understanding of paranormal experience has been a hotly debated topic for over a century now.

Sceptics would argue that all paranormal experiences are generated by the scientific workings of the brain and are therefore not 'paranormal' but simply cases of misinterpretation. Parapsychologists generally believe that the brain is capable of producing completely unknown powers, such as extra-sensory perception and psychokinesis, which may be involved in a range of paranormal phenomena such as crisis apparitions and poltergeists. Those of a religious or Spiritualist nature will more commonly believe that many paranormal phenomena are generated totally outside the brain through the intervention of discarnate entities such as spirits of the dead, angels or demons. It was partly to try and understand where the seat of such paranormal experience lay that organisations like the Society for Psychical Research and, more recently, ASSAP were founded.

In recent decades the use of technology such as EEGs (electroencephalograph - an instrument that measures brain electrical activity), CAT (computerised axial tomography - a method of producing a detailed cross-section of internal organs

such as the brain) scans, computers and sleep laboratories, has allowed the science of psychology to move away from the more theoretical days of Sigmund Freud into an era of measurement and understanding of the way in which the mind and brain work and interact. This process has uncovered a number of now very well documented sets of psychological conditions and disorders that, under the right circumstances, can make a person believe that they are undergoing a paranormal-type experience when in fact they are not.

While psychology cannot explain most of the wide range of strange phenomena that has been documented throughout human history, it can explain some of them. As part of their duty to the understanding of a person's paranormal experience, it is vital that any investigator be aware of the symptoms and causes of those psychological conditions that can mimic unexplained phenomenon. It is the objective of this section to briefly introduce the investigator to the more commonly encountered of these psychological conditions so that they can be recognised in the field.

This article can only hope to introduce these topics in the briefest of terms. Please use the recommended references for more in-depth reading.

The Common Causes

Sleep Paralysis (The Old Hag)

Symptoms: This disorder is probably responsible for more mistaken reports of the paranormal than any other and it is the most likely to be encountered by ASSAP investigators.

During an episode of sleep paralysis a person will wake to find themselves unable to move any part of the body except, sometimes,

their head. This can be accompanied by the feeling that there is somebody else in the room. In extreme cases the person will actually see, hear, smell or even feel a bedroom intruder which normally takes on the form of a supernatural entity from the culture of the victim. Thus sleep paralysis victims in Africa will see demons, those in Europe will see ghosts and Americans will see aliens. The bedroom invader, which is a form of hypnopompic hallucination, can seem very real indeed and may even get into bed with the victim or, more rarely, be reported even to assault them. In conjunction with these hallucinations can come a feeling of immense tightness in the chest area that is commonly described as being like having a heavy weight pressing down on them or like being strangled. It is this description of being pinned to the bed by a weight that is most readily recognisable in supernatural reports that can be attributed to sleep paralysis. After a few minutes the feeling of paralysis, and the supernatural entity, disappear.

Causes: Sleep paralysis was first identified at the end of the last century and has since been induced and studied numerous times under laboratory conditions. Between 15 and 18% of the population have had an attack of sleep paralysis (myself included), normally in their teenage years or in periods of stress, although not always with the associated 'presence in the room'.

The condition is caused by disruptions to the normal sleep patterns, most particularly the shortening of dream sleep cycles. During dream cycles the body's muscles are paralysed by the brain to stop people from damaging themselves by acting out their dreams in bed. In the case of sleep paralysis the brain becomes conscious but the paralysis mechanism has not been turned off. The associated feelings of a presence in the room stem from the intrusion of dream sleep into waking consciousness (see *Hypnagogic Hallucinations* below).

Paranormal Phenomena it Resembles: The symptoms of sleep paralysis can commonly be seen in cases of supernatural assault (including sexual assault), OOB (out-of-body experience) and alien abduction.

Historically, cases of nocturnal assault by demons (succubi and incubi), vampires, ghosts and witches can all be seen to be derived from sleep paralysis. Some psychologists call sleep paralysis 'the Old Hag' after the medieval and Newfoundland traditions of a witch who would paralyse people and sit on their chest during the night. The modern term 'nightmare' is derived from the old Germanic word *mare* meaning incubus.

In the modern world the supernatural entity said to assault the sleep paralysis victim is derived directly from their cultural traditions. Americans get assaulted by aliens, Africans by demons, Europeans by ghosts, south-east Asians by spirits and Newfoundlanders by the Old Hag itself.

The following are accounts of sleep paralysis attacks:

Examples: An ex-nurse from Liverpool claimed to have been sexually molested by a ghost for a period of ten years between 1984 and 1994. She described the attacks as occurring at night and that she would wake up paralysed to find a hooded figure with grey wrinkled skin on top of her. She says that she felt the figure pressing down on her and that she was unable to even scream to attract the attention of her husband sleeping next to her.

A Zanzibar farmer was raped by a local demon called Popobawa. He awoke one night to find himself paralysed. He said:

'At first I thought I was having a dream. Then I could feel it. Something pressing on me. I could not imagine what sort of thing

was happening to me. You feel as if you are screaming with no voice. It was just like having a dream but then I was thinking it was this Popobawa and he had come to do something terrible to me, something sexual. It is [much] worse than what he does to women.'

The following is a quote from 'Jerry', an alien abductee patient of Professor John Mack:

'She [Jerry] woke up terrified and remembered pressure in the abdomen and the genital area and that she could not move. "In my head I was screaming," Jerry remembers, but does not know if any sound came out.

"Somebody was doing something," she recalled, but it was "something alien." Although she recalls wondering to herself, "Is that how sex is done?" she knew with great certainty that "it wasn't a person."

In the years that followed, Jerry had a number of "nightmares" in which she would awake paralysed, hear "buzzing and ringing and whirring" noises in her head, and see humanoid beings in her room.'

Further Reading: Hufford (1982); Blackmore (1996, 1998); Chambers (1999).

Hypnagogic/Hypnopompic Hallucinations

Symptoms: Hypnagogic/hypnopompic hallucinations occur in the few seconds/minutes before and after sleep. The person will awake, often with a start, to find that they can see, hear, feel or smell something in the bedroom that either disappears or is later found not have happened. The most common hallucinations are: thinking that a name has been called out or that the phone is ringing; bright or dark amorphous blobs that hang in mid-air and slowly fade; a feeling that somebody has touched the face, feet or hands; the appearance of a person by the bedside who rapidly disappears.

Causes: The hypnagogic state is the period when the brain is falling asleep after being awake, while the hypnopompic state is the period when the brain is waking up from sleep. Hallucinations occur, like sleep paralysis, in the confused period of time between sleeping and consciousness when the brain is neither fully asleep or awake. During this time the dream state can intrude into our waking world, producing hallucinations through all the senses. Our brain can also misinterpret signals it receives from the senses and create hallucinations from these as well. For example, a shirt hanging on a wall can, in the first few moments after waking, be misinterpreted as a human figure.

Paranormal Phenomena it Resembles: Hypnagogic/hypnapompic hallucinations are most likely to be misinterpreted as being various types of ghostly phenomena. The paranormal investigator should make a conscious effort to look for reported cases of strange phenomena occurring to people who have just woken up or who are very relaxed or falling asleep.

The chances of seeing a ghost are greatly enhanced if the person is sitting or lying down and in a relaxed state. Similarly, a majority

of the several hundred cases of crisis apparition collected in *Phantasms of the Living* occurred to people who had just woken up. This is not to say that there may not be a paranormal element in some of these cases (eg. telepathy), but the link with hypnagogia/hypnopompia is quite unmistakable.

Examples: Bob is a person, encountered by the author, who has a severe fear of spiders. He does not interpret his experience as being in any way paranormal and recognises it as a hallucination.

'I woke up suddenly and saw a massive spider run across the top of my duvet and onto my pillow. I sat straight up in bed and shouted.... Although I knew it wasn't real [he has had a similar experience on a number of occasions] I still had to strip the bed back to its mattress and wake up my flat mate to check the room.'¹

'On the second night, at about 4.00am when I was almost fast asleep, I heard a loud purring noise and felt a pawed animal walking across my chest and abdomen, like a heavy cat. I was mostly asleep, so I convinced myself that it was part of a dream and did not open my eyes to look.'²

Absorption

Symptoms: A person is concentrating on something so hard that they may become totally unaware of anything else that is going on around them. This can occur, for example, while driving a car, watching television, reading or any other single-minded task. In the absorbed state a person may be so engrossed as to be completely unaware of passing time or of the actions of others around them. Once the concentration is broken, the person may be surprised to find out what has happened during their absence. For example, a motorist may not remember large sections of a car journey he has just undertaken. Many complain of a feeling of lost

time. Absorption can also be associated with certain drug states and with repetitive tasks such as rhythmic dancing.

Causes: Absorption is a function of the mind's ability to devote itself solely to one task to the exclusion of all others. It is also the ability of the mind to 'switch-off' during repetitive actions.

Paranormal Phenomena it Resembles: Many of the results of absorption can be seen in UFO encounters involving motorists late at night. Alien abductees commonly report that they have missing periods of time when driving home and that they may suddenly 'wake-up' to find themselves several kilometres from where they can last remember driving. Both these are common results of periods of absorption which, combined with the human tendency to underestimate the length of time a journey will take, can make it feel like a journey has taken longer than it should and that sections of it have been erased from the memory. Linked with this is what Jenny Randles has called the 'Oz factor' where, during a paranormal encounter, all external stimuli seem to disappear, eg. birds stop singing, other traffic disappears from the road, etc. This, too, has the hallmarks of absorption.

Laboratory tests have found that a capacity for absorption varies considerably between people. High absorption capacity has been linked to a tendency for fantasy proneness, something else that may strengthen this condition's link to the paranormal.

Examples: The following case, which happened to Elsie Oakensen of Northamptonshire in November 1978, has many hallmarks of absorption. Elsie was on the busy A5 road in daylight when she saw some lights in the sky and then a UFO.

'When I got off the A5 the electrics of the car started to play up. I was able to travel a little further, until I passed under some trees.

When I came out from under the trees I suddenly found myself in darkness, absolute pitch black darkness. As I sat in the car I could not see the road, buildings, trees or anything else.

As I sat there, a circle of brilliant white light about a yard in diameter shone onto the road to the left-hand side of the car. It went off and it was dark again.' This occurred several times before Elsie suddenly found herself '...in normal daylight about thirty yards down the road, driving normally in third gear as I had been before this started. I travelled for about a hundred yards without being in control of the car. I think it was probably being driven by remote control.'³

Folie à Deux (Contagious Insanity)

Symptoms: Two or more people, who are often related to one another or share some aspects of their lives together, may develop shared delusional beliefs, suspicions or paranoia.

Causes: In cases of folie à deux there is normally one very dominant person who imposes their psychotic beliefs onto the other person(s). This often happens in conditions where the people have, deliberately or otherwise, isolated themselves from normal human contact. Many psychologists have studied this disorder in an effort to understand how madness can spread from person to person.

Paranormal Phenomena it Resembles: Folie à deux is a relatively rare condition that is unlikely to be encountered by many ASSAP members. Its greatest effect has been seen in cults where a charismatic leader can impose his beliefs and laws onto his congregation sometimes, as with the Heaven's Gate cult, with disastrous consequences. It has been postulated that a minor form of folie à deux could be operating in situations where multiple witnesses have observed a paranormal phenomenon. For example,

C. D. B. Bryan⁴ carries examples of multiple-alien abductees who have, through over-analysis of a probable example of absorption, convinced each other that a shared paranormal event had taken place.

Examples: A French convent in the early nineteenth century had an outbreak of mewing nuns. The trouble started when one nun began to continuously mew like a cat. She was soon joined by other nuns until practically the entire convent would spend their entire day standing in the courtyard mewing. There are many, many other historical examples of such convent madness including, most famously, the Devils of Loudun. Convents, by their isolated communal living and devotion to routine, are ideal candidates for folie à deux.

The Sense of Presence

Symptoms: A person on their own will become aware that they are not alone. They may believe that they are being followed, that they are being watched or that the atmosphere around them has become oppressive and unpleasant. Accompanying this may be perceptions that the environmental conditions around them have changed, eg. they may believe it has become suddenly dark, cold or quiet.

Causes: The individual causes of a person's believing they are not alone are manifold, but it is essentially a mild form of paranoia brought on by the person's being uneasy about the location they are in. In such circumstances it can be easy for the mind to convince itself that its worst fears are coming true.

Paranormal Phenomena it Resembles: A sense of presence sometimes forms a large part of reported cases of paranormal phenomena where very little is actually witnessed. Many haunted houses are designated so by virtue of an owner or visitor, who will normally

claim to be sensitive to such things, feeling that there is an 'atmosphere' about the place. Sometimes entire reports can consist of nothing but a feeling of unease by the witness (see below). It is also possible that the perceived drop in temperature or uneasy quietness associated with hauntings could be related to this condition. Some first-hand examples of phantom hitchhikers also consist of little more than a feeling of a supernatural presence in the car or, in some cases, on the back of a motorbike.

Examples: 'A reporter of the *Marlborough Times* whose home was in Ogbourne St. Andrew was in the habit of travelling to and from Marlborough each day. He noticed when he came to a certain spot in his journey he always felt very cold, regardless of the weather and also felt some "presence" in the car... At a certain spot it left the car, after which the temperature returned to normal.'⁵

'When this man went to see his girlfriend, he had to walk through a swamp to get to her house. One night he stayed rather late, and when he came back through the swamp, he heard something following him along the edge of the road. When he looked he could see nothing, and when he walked it walked, and when he ran it ran. He said that when he got to the edge of the swamp, the sound stopped in some weeds at the edge of the road. He picked up a rock and threw it into the weeds, but no sound came from the side of the road.'⁶

Diminished Input (Sensory Deprivation)

Symptoms: People who are on their own for long periods of time, or who are performing repetitive tasks, can suddenly find themselves experiencing hallucinations that resemble paranormal phenomena. Most common are the sudden arrival of 'spectral companions' or of solid-looking people. However, voices, tactile feelings, smells and tastes can also result.

Causes: Psychological researchers have long recognised the value of diminished input to the paranormal. Some laboratories believe that depriving people of key senses like sight and sound can help enhance the psychic senses. The Ganzfeld experiments use a mild form of sensory deprivation and have allegedly produced significant positive results in tests for extrasensory perception.

Diminished input, in the form of isolation from other human beings, is also capable of producing false sensory information that resembles paranormal phenomena. The sense of presence discussed earlier is a mild form of this; a stronger reaction is the hallucination and pseudo-hallucination (a hallucination that is realised to be unreal by the perceiver).

Hallucinations can come in a wide variety of forms of differing intensity. They can be auditory, tactile, visual, olfactory or any combination of these things. They can be produced by a massive range of conditions, not just diminished input, and are also associated with drugs, illness (physical and psychiatric) etc. - these latter causes are beyond the scope of this article.

Diminished input in the form of loneliness, hunger, tiredness, repetitive tasks and illness can lead to altered states of consciousness in which day-dreams and hallucinations can seem very real indeed. Total sensory deprivation, in the form of isolation tanks, can lead to much more extreme hallucinations involving wild flashing lights, whole imaginary landscapes and the appearance and disappearance of spectral people and/or supernatural beings.

Some religions utilise diminished input to induce paranormal-type phenomena. For example, social isolation (eg. hermits), starvation, repetitive tasks (eg. chanting, ritual prayer, counting), rhythmic dancing or meditation. All these can induce altered states of

consciousness in which the person believes they are having a divine experience.

Paranormal Phenomena it Resembles: Pseudo-hallucinations are a common side-effect of diminished input, particularly in conjunction with tiredness. Those people who spend long periods of time on their own (eg. deep-sea divers, lone explorers, long-distance drivers, hostages, single-handed yachts-people, mountaineers, etc.) are particularly susceptible.

A large proportion of paranormal phenomena occur to individuals who are on their own. Lone drivers are particularly susceptible, and there is a whole range of phenomena that are associated with people driving on their own at night - phantom hitchhikers, spectral jaywalkers and alien abduction to name but a few. Lone walkers also report encounters with black dogs, 'white ladies' and other ghostly phenomena. Solo mountaineers, divers, yachts-people, explorers and hostages sometimes find themselves with very solid-looking companions whose existence they know is not real.

Examples: 'The lone sailor Joshua Slocum was smitten with seasickness in the middle of the South Atlantic and could not leave his cabin for several hours. When a storm blew up, a phantom helmsman appeared and took control of the vessel. Slocum had a long conversation with him, and was told that his visitor was the pilot of one of Christopher Columbus' ships.'⁷

Scuba instructor Ian Skinner was diving off Malta when '..I saw a light ahead of me and was drawn towards it both by curiosity and what seemed like an unknown force. Over the next ridge and very much further down I saw a very beautiful young woman, tall and slim, with a lovely figure, standing at the entrance to a large cave... I thought I must be suffering from nitrogen narcosis... then she

spoke: "Hello, I have been waiting for you, do not be afraid, with me you are safe." I backed away but she smiled, walked towards me and held out her hand. It felt warm, sensual and safe, and my fear disappeared.

"When you return to me I will be waiting for you, then you will stay with me for ever. I have a gift with you." She handed me a small jar shaped like an amphora. As I ascended, I saw her waving as she slowly faded from view.'⁸

Autoscopy (Doppelgänger)

Symptoms: A person will see a life-sized mirror image of themselves standing just beyond their reach. This image will often replicate the living person's movements but is normally transparent, blurry or lacking any colour. Such encounters normally take place during the night or at dawn. The very rare negative autoscopy involves people who cannot see their reflection in mirrors, etc. Most encounters are of only a few seconds' duration.

Causes: Autoscopy is associated with periods of stress, tiredness or mental illness. Its study is not well documented and most examples of it have been associated with schizophrenia, delirium or epilepsy. It can also be experienced by people not suffering from these mental illnesses, where it is normally associated with diminished input or extreme forms of stress, including migraine headaches.

There may be a comparison between autoscopy and the 'phantom limb' syndromes suffered by amputees and also the 'Alice in Wonderland' syndrome where people's perspective about the shape and size of parts of their body becomes confused.

Paranormal Phenomena it Resembles: Autoscopy is synonymous with the paranormal tradition of the doppelgänger, where a person has

an encounter with their own ghost (sometimes called a fetch). The term *doppelgänger* was taken from the German folk-belief that seeing your own double is an omen of death. The association of autoscopy with severe brain injury and brain tumours may well be the cause of this myth. People can also see images of their own body during near-death and out-of-the-body experience, although these are not traditionally classified as examples of autoscopy.

Negative autoscopy, or the inability to see one's own reflection, is rare (so rare that I have not encountered any examples of it in the literature!), but there is an obvious resemblance to the lack of reflection attributed to vampires. Whether there is any relationship or not is not known.

Examples: 'On the 15th March, 1978, at 10 o'clock at night, I saw an apparition of myself. I was alone... One of the children was sleeping restlessly; I took the lamp to see if anything was wrong. As I drew back the curtain which shut off the bedroom, I saw two paces from me the image of myself stooping over the end of the bed, in a dress which I had not been wearing for some time: the figure was turned three-quarters away from me, the attitude expressed deep grief...'⁹

Beyond the Scope of this Article

There are some extremely complex and contentious psychiatric conditions with paranormal implications that cannot reasonably be covered here. I would urge those interested to familiarise themselves with the following:

Dissociation of the Personality

People suffering from multiple personality disorder (also called dissociative identity disorder) can apparently have several different personalities living within the one body. Each of these personalities may be of a different age, sex and temperament to the others. Although its existence is still very hotly debated, patients with this disorder show a remarkable resemblance to the multiple personalities displayed by Spiritualist mediums and those possessed by spirits.

Cultural-Bound Disorders

There are a number of psychiatric conditions that are integrally tied into the religious or cultural beliefs of the individual. Speaking in tongues (glossolalia) is almost exclusively restricted to evangelical Christian communities. Koro, where the patient believes his penis to have retracted into the body, is a Chinese cultural belief (although it has recently occurred in West Africa). Latah is a southeast Asia condition where a person exactly mimics the actions and movements of another.

Cryptomnesia (Hidden Memories)

There is a strong belief among some psychiatrists that the brain can deliberately hide memories of violent or abusive episodes in a person's life. These memories are frequently recovered using

hypnosis and have been used on occasion as evidence of physical and sexual abuse in court cases.

The scientific value of such techniques has become increasingly doubtful of late and there is considerable evidence that, instead of recovering memories, hypnosis actually implants them, leading to so-called false memory syndrome. The value of evidence obtained through hypnosis is now uncertain, which has implications for the testimonies found in examples of past-life regression, alien abduction, Satanic ritual abuse, multiple personality disorder and others.

Paranoia

Paranoid delusions of grandeur and persecution can become complex and unpleasant affairs. Overlap into the paranormal can occur when the paranoid delusions are fixated upon conspiracies in which the individual is at the centre of a plot by larger organisations such as governments, religions or big business. Paranoid people may be predisposed to believe in conspiracy theories, and there are several extreme delusional states, such as Capgras Syndrome (illusion des sosies), in which it is believed that objects, close relatives or whole societies have been replaced by sinister carbon copy replicas.

Fantasy Proneness

Although a commonly used term, fantasy proneness is actually poorly defined. It is apparently possible to define people's fantasy proneness using a series of psychological tests. Those with a higher fantasy proneness index are liable to have imaginary childhood friends and to have lived in make-believe worlds. Fantasy prone people are statistically more likely to report having paranormal experiences and have an increased capacity towards absorption

and hypnosis. Near-death, out-of-the-body, UFO and ESP experiences have all been linked to fantasy proneness, as have mediumship and religious visionary experiences.

Conclusion

This brief article has been designed to introduce the most commonly encountered psychological and psychiatric disorders that may be mistaken for a paranormal experience. This list is not by any means definitive and each topic has only been covered in the scantiest of detail - those who are interested should consult some of the books in the further reading list or try searching the Internet.

When reading about peoples' paranormal experiences, or interviewing them in person, some of the above symptoms may become apparent. Pay particular attention to paranormal experiences that occur to people when in bed, when driving at night or when alone in a potentially 'spooky' location (eg. an empty house). These are just the conditions that are liable to produce an anomalous experience through optical illusion, hallucination or other cognitive means. Although it is good to be aware of these conditions, it is irresponsible to try and make amateur diagnoses of genuine psychiatric and psychological disorders - something to bear in mind for those ASSAP investigators that will have to interview people about their experiences.

We can only ever hope to try and understand peoples' strange experiences through painstaking investigative work and through a thorough understanding of both the workings of psychology and parapsychology. Often these experiences are explicable in rational terms. However, sometimes a rational solution is not possible and the experience can be considered genuinely paranormal. At this point science will normally turn its back on such experiences and

it is then left to organisations such as ASSAP to make sense of them.

Seeing Small

A bizarre but seemingly quite natural effect was recently reported in *New Scientist* (July 1999). Strangely, it has never been studied scientifically. It is the phenomenon of suddenly perceiving everything miniaturised. It might be likened to looking at the world through a pair of binoculars from the wrong end. The suggested explanation is that the mechanism that the brain uses to scale objects suddenly gets it wrong. This perfectly natural mechanism is the one that makes a moon on the horizon look much bigger than one overhead. The brain compares the size of the moon on the horizon with terrestrial objects like trees and decides it is bigger. Such an effect, which appears spontaneously and suddenly, could easily be misinterpreted as paranormal (as an OOB for instance).
Ed.

Paul Chambers would like to hear from anyone who has had, or knows someone who has had, first hand experience of any of the phenomena described in this article. Please email him with reports on: pmc@atlantis.simplyonline.co.uk

Further reading

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Notes

¹. From an interview done by the author.

². *The Paranormal Review*, Issue 10, p.30, 1999.

³. Spencer, J. *The UFO Encyclopedia*. Headline, 1997. p.268-9.

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⁷. Reed, G. *The Psychology of Anomalous Experience*. Prometheus Books, 1988.

⁸. *Fortean Times*, Issue 92, p.51.

⁹. Parish, E. *Hallucinations and Illusions*. Scott, 1897. Quote taken from Evans, H. *Visions, Apparitions, Alien Visitors*. Thornsons, 1984. p.62. NOTE: the 1978 date, which is reproduced from Evans, does not tally with the year of the original book which was published in 1897.

Crop Circle Effects

by Michael Lewis

Crop circles have had a rather bad press in recent years. Attempts are continuing, however, to show that at least some formations are not the work of hoaxers. Michael Lewis decided to test for himself the claim that circles can be dowsed.

During the summer of 1998 I was able to participate in two tours of crop circles and had the good fortune to gain first-hand experience of some of the anomalies associated with crop circles which have been reported on many occasions.

The first tour was organised in connection with the Glastonbury Symposium on Crop Circles and visited the formations known as the Silbury Hill Julia Set, the Seven-Fold Snowflake at the famous East Field, Alton Priors, and the Lockeridge Dragon Larva. The Silbury Hill formation was only two days old and I was interested in testing the claim that strong dowsable energies persisted in newly made formations. Although I do not claim to be an expert dowser, I quickly found that the rods moved to and fro as I crossed the formation. Other members of the party had similar experiences. Moving on to the Lockeridge formation, which was two weeks old, I was quite unable to get any reaction from the dowsing rods and it appeared that the energies had dissipated in the intervening weeks. The final visit of this tour was to the Snowflake formation at Alton Priors. I was assured that this was a particularly powerful and significant formation, as it represented seven-pointed geometry. And so it proved! Despite its being over two weeks old, I was able to dowse energies at several places. A particularly interesting feature was that the rods reversed direction as I crossed the formation, indicating energy flows in opposite directions. I repeated this exercise with my eyes shut, in order to guard against

unconsciously influencing the rods in response to observed changes in the direction of the lay, with the same result. I also carried out a control experiment by standing still for a period of time to see whether the rods would move anyway, but they did not.

Comparing notes in the coach afterwards, one participant observed that his camera had gone dead while in the Lockeridge formation, but functioned again when he got back on the coach. Another reported that his quartz watch had lost two to three minutes while he was in the same formation; he knew that it always kept faultless time as he was in the habit of checking the time on his notepad computer with it, and there was never any disagreement. Yet another participant became unwell and the coach had to make a stop.

The second visit, organised by the London branch of the Centre for Crop Circle Studies, also took in the Silbury Hill and Alton Priors formations, as well as the Beckhampton Stingray and the Lockeridge Flower of Life formations. On this occasion the weather was less kind and I had to carry out some field tests from underneath an umbrella during a thunderstorm! Although the Silbury Hill formation was now nine days old, it was still possible to dowse the energies. Some of the party claimed that the energies were so strong that they had difficulty walking against the flow of the lay. I put this to the test and, whereas there did seem to be something in the claim, the sloping nature of the field prevented me from reaching any firm conclusions. On reboarding the coach the organiser discovered that the batteries in her camera had drained, and the spare batteries which I always carry on these occasions were put to good use! At Alton Priors the energies were still dowsable, and some participants felt the energies were so powerful that they remained on the periphery and did not walk

across the formation. Afterwards one member of the party reported that the formation had given her a splitting headache.

Although the Beckhampton formation was ten days old, the energies which my dowsing rods detected were the strongest of the day. An interesting feature was that strong energies could be detected in all the small circles which formed the lengthy tail except the first two; there seemed to be a dead zone just outside the main formation. It was in the tail that a most interesting anomalous effect occurred. Aware of reports of battery draining and electrical malfunction in crop circles, I had taken the precaution of ensuring that both of my camcorder battery packs had been recharged beforehand, and checked the previous night. According to the "remaining time" indicator on my camcorder I had been filming for only ten minutes when the battery warning indicator appeared and the camcorder went dead! I was using the ninety minute battery pack but it had failed after only ten minutes! Another interesting feature of this formation was the difference between the wheat in the centre which was still standing, and that which had been flattened. The grains of flattened wheat were hard as if they had been baked, whereas those from the standing crop were much softer. Samples were taken for laboratory analysis. Further evidence of the microwave energy which some researchers have postulated is involved in the production of formations?

The remaining formation, the Lockeridge Flower of Life, was more than two weeks old and the wheat was beginning to recover. Filming took place using my spare camcorder battery, and nothing of note occurred.

On arrival home I decided to discharge the failed battery pack to see how much power was left. It was still discharging after forty minutes when I went to bed, indicating that there was still quite a bit of power left. The day's investigations were noteworthy in that

it was the first occasion when I had had to use all my spare batteries!

My observations support the reports of anomalous effects which crop circles seem to generate. It may be that in crop circle anomalies we are close to achieving the scientific criterion of repeatability, although one obstacle is of course the problem of determining whether a formation is genuine or a hoax (some would claim that this does not matter for the production of anomalous effects, but if that is so then the phenomenon is even more complex!).

Dowsing Energies

Dowsing is about obtaining unseen information. If a dowser is looking for underground water they may walk across a field thinking of water and waiting for a reaction. If they want to know how deep the water is they may stand still and ask their pendulum or rods some 'yes' / 'no' type questions. For instance, is the water deeper than 10 metres? In both types of use the dowser has in mind the question he wants answered.

Some times a dowser may walk around an area just looking for a reaction with nothing in particular in mind. If there is some kind of reaction it could have come from anything. Dowsers often call the source of such a non-specific reaction 'energy'. It is a general-purpose term which does not mean the same as the thing as the scientific dictionary definition of the word. Ed.



The author dowsing in crop circles.

Letters

From John Radford

J

The Survival Joint Research Committee Trust announces (ASSAP News, November 1998) a project to investigate the age-old question of whether we survive death. I think myself this is most unlikely (to put it no more strongly) for the following reasons.

The primary reason is that an individual personality cannot be said to exist without mental faculties. The simplest case is memory. Without a memory from instant to instant, there could not be a personality, an identity, something recognisable as 'I'. The same applies to thoughts, wishes, feelings and so on. But research shows unequivocally that such mental operations do not and cannot exist without a physical substrate, the brain and body. Destroy significant parts of the brain, and you destroy significant parts of the personality. Destroy all the brain, and the personality ceases to exist. Such destruction happens at death or soon after.

This is not the same as the ancient philosophical body-mind problem, although it is relevant to it. It is simply the empirical finding that the substrate is a necessary condition of individuality. Without a brain, there is no mind. Nor does it mean that we are 'nothing but' machine-like automata. It means we are functioning wholes, and we exist, and cease to exist, as such wholes. Some may argue that there is something further, a 'soul' or the like. It is this that survives. But the same argument applies. Unless the soul is conceived of as a completely anonymous 'essence' of some kind, a sort of *élan vital*, it must have an identity, a mind, and therefore depend upon a brain. And of course there is no reason to suppose that any such an essence exists.

Secondly, if this were not the case, and a mind could exist independently of the body, we would have to suppose that the human brain, the most complex living organ we know of, had evolved accidentally and unnecessarily. For why bother with a brain, if we can think, feel, experience and so on without one?

Thirdly, consider the case of those whose brain and mind have both already deteriorated before death. We see such tragic cases in Alzheimer's Disease and CJD (Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease). When sufferers die, the personality has already been destroyed. They are not like those with a dose of flu, who will return to normal when the virus has run its course. What, then, can survive death? One would have to suppose a magical survival of some previous state of the personality. But then which? For while we have a continuous identity, we are also constantly changing, with new memories coming in, old ones being lost, changing feelings and attitudes, and so on. This, in fact, applies in principle to nearly all cases of natural death: there is some deterioration beforehand.

Fourthly, and from a quite different angle, if human beings survived death in any recognisable form, surely after tens of thousands of years we would have incontrovertible proof of it. The much shorter, but still extensive, history of attempts to find such proof has provided, as far as I know, no scientifically acceptable evidence whatever.

If this is so, we may ask why there remains a persistent belief, held perhaps by most people in at least some vague way, that we do survive physical death. My own feeling is that the answer probably lies along the following lines, although I cannot prove it. The urge to survive is probably the strongest we have. This is ensured by evolution. Those individuals that survive are the most likely to have offspring, and those that strive hardest (I don't mean

necessarily consciously) to survive are the most likely to do so. It is entirely to be expected that a fundamental urge to survive is represented, in humans, as a belief in survival. There is reason to think that such a belief is very old, since the earliest societies appear to have made provision for the dead. The belief is reinforced by several other very general drives. One is grief at the loss of those close to us. Another is the hope of something better to come after the difficulties of this life (it is comparatively rare in history to find life other than a fairly basic struggle, and this remains true of vast numbers today).

In our society we largely take scientific knowledge for granted, even if we have a very hazy grasp of it. But it is, in fact, a very late and so far rare phenomenon. The vast majority of human beings, in trying to understand themselves and the world, have had to rely on guesses, tradition, folklore or magic. In more advanced societies these have been codified into religions, which moreover have developed complex systems for regulating society. Without some such systems most individuals find it hard to function. Most major religions have, for various reasons, involved a belief in survival after death in some form, and have lent their immense weight of authority and sophisticated theorising to that belief.

It should be remembered that until a few hundred years ago it had always been generally thought that the earth was flat. After all, you can see it is flat, which is more than you can do for survival. A few individuals reasoned that it must be round, and Eratosthenes of Alexandria worked out the diameter to within 80km or so. It was left to Magellan's expedition in the sixteenth century to test the idea. Now we have pictures from satellites and many other sorts of evidence. There may be flat-earthers left, but they are not obvious. I think we are about at the post-Magellan stage in respect of survival of death. Of course the actual research methods are far

more sophisticated than his navigation, which was largely guesswork. But anyone who looks at the facts must find it hard to maintain the ancient belief, whatever its attractions and however great its authority.

Of course I may be wrong and evidence of survival will be found after all these aeons. If so, I just hope it is before I die.

From Jason Braithwaite

It is an often overlooked fact that ASSAP is an educational charity and as such is committed to furthering our understanding of anomalous phenomena via serious academic research. I have recently benefited from, and contributed to, this important aim. In the summer of 1997 I embarked on a year-long research project, as part of my degree studies, into the cognitive neurosciences and psychology of visual cognition and consciousness.

In the study, I explored contemporary advances in the neuro-cognitive processes of vision, imagery, memory, brain chemistry organisation and function. I examined their relevance to a comprehensive scientific model of strange experiences, paying particular attention to out-of-body and near-death experiences. This project resulted in a 20,000 word dissertation entitled '*Anomalous Cognition : Psychologically modelling specific paranormal experiences as instances of anomalous cognition. Implications from and for the contemporary cognitive neurosciences*'. This research has given rise to a publication in the academic mainstream and in ASSAP soon. This would not have been possible without the help and support of some rather special people who deserve a mention of thanks at the very least.

Firstly, I would like to thank everyone who has helped with the project. I would particularly like to thank Maurice Townsend and the ASSAP Committee for all their continued support and financial assistance. ASSAP funded my inter-library loan account, which enabled me to obtain a much wider range of articles and papers, making the literature search an extensive and somewhat less painful one. Many thanks, London!! Such support has allowed me to ask much more functional questions based on a comprehensive framework which will, I hope, lead to more exciting research. I would also like to thank Dr Susan Blackmore for her continued, helpful correspondence, advice and bibliography. Also, Canon Michael Perry gave me full access to his fellowship's library and, although I did not need to draw on his kind offer, it was certainly a welcome one.

Vicki Purewal and June Cameron deserve a special mention for suffering my endless phone calls. I know the week I received my grades I was particularly unbearable and smug. Thanks also, June, for the computer-graphic assistance with the scanned images. Also thanks to Hilary Evans who responded to my article asking for help to obtain literature: it was and is greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank my University supervisor, vision neuroscientist, Dr Ed Chronicle, and all the Psychology Department staff at Lancaster University and all at the inter-library loans section. Finally I would like to thank Janet Clements who handled all literature financing with our ASSAP Treasurer. ASSAP has contributed to a research program that is helping to unravel the brain/mind mechanisms involved in constructing such strange experiences while also expanding current theories of the neural substrates of conscious visual experience. I would encourage other members to contribute to this important and vital aim. These are indeed exciting times. Once again, many thanks everyone!

Editor's Note: Jason has subsequently embarked on a PhD in neuroscience.
So he may soon be Dr Jason!