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Subjective Experiences of Sitters in Public Physical Mediumship Séances	225
<i>By Helané Wahbeh, Juliette Gallo, Oteja Lightheart, & Sarah Rodrigues</i>	

<i>The Ghost Brush</i> Installation: A Case-Centered Primer on Psychological Contagion Effects	252
<i>By James Houran, Malcolm B. Schofield, & Rachael Ironside</i>	

RESEARCH NOTE

Sceptical of Survival—An Appraisal of the Counter-Advocate Position	279
<i>By Chris Roe</i>	

BOOK REVIEWS

<i>Parascientific Revolutions: The Science and Culture of the Paranormal</i>	295
<i>By Roger Luckhurst</i>	

<i>Beyond Time and Space: How Science Studies the Power of the Mind and its Possible Survival of Bodily Death</i>	299
<i>By Michael Prescott</i>	

<i>Grand Manuel de Parapsychologie Scientifique [Grand Manual of Scientific Parapsychology]</i>	303
<i>By Charles Emmons</i>	

<i>Hanussen: Aufstieg und Fall des Illusionisten [Hanussen: Rise and Fall of the Illusionist]</i>	307
<i>By Richard Hatch</i>	

OBITUARY

Kenneth Graham Drinkwater	311
<i>By Callum E. Cooper</i>	

CORRESPONDENCE

Letter from Robert A. Charman	315
Letter from Richard Wiseman	319

NOTICE

Annual General Meeting 2027	320
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SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF SITTERS IN PUBLIC PHYSICAL MEDIUMSHIP SÉANCES

BY HELANÉ WAHBEH, JULIETTE GALLO, OTEJA LIGHTEART, & SARAH RODRIGUES

ABSTRACT

Physical mediumship, often described as communication between the spiritual and physical realms, has been recorded throughout US history and worldwide. Typically conducted in darkness, these séances involve the invocation of a spirit in physical form, and may produce extraordinary apparent phenomena, including materialization, ectoplasm, direct voice mediumship, and apports. For participants, such events can be both memorable and deeply personal, often transforming their lives. This qualitative study examines the experiences of individuals attending public séances, focusing on observed phenomena, interpretations, and broader meaning-making. Participants were recruited following séance attendance, yielding in-depth interview data from twenty-one individuals describing experiences across multiple séance events conducted between February and July 2024. Semi-structured interviews provided additional depth, capturing physical, emotional, and cognitive impacts. Qualitative analysis identified fifteen themes within three overarching categories: 'A. Nature of the experience,' 'B. Structure and context of the séance,' and 'C. Mediumship mechanics and interpretation.' These findings indicate that sitter reports reflect a dynamic interplay between expectation, interpretation, and observation. Although the authenticity of reported events cannot be established, physical mediumship séances appear capable of eliciting profound meaning, emotional impact, and personal transformation, while simultaneously prompting doubt and critical reflection.

INTRODUCTION

Physical mediumship refers to a purported form of spirit communication involving observable physical phenomena, such as levitation, telekinesis, audible spirit voices, materializations, ectoplasm, and apports (Braude, 1996). Ectoplasm is typically described as a semi-physical substance that emanates from the medium's body and is manipulated by spirits to produce effects (Nahm, 2016), while apports refer to objects that appear unexpectedly in the séance room, sometimes seemingly emerging from the medium's body or from thin air, and are interpreted as evidence of spirit intervention (Nahm, 2019; von Ludwiger & Nahm, 2016). Materializations, in turn, involve the apparent formation of physical forms such as hands, faces, or full figures, often associated with ectoplasmic emissions (Nahm, 2023). These phenomena are typically

reported in dim or dark séance rooms under ritualized environmental and procedural conditions (de Oliveira Maraldi, 2023; Nahm, 2014; Vandersande, 2008). Unlike mental mediumship, which involves internal impressions (e.g., thoughts, images, or emotions), physical mediumship is characterized by collective, tangible manifestations that can, in principle, be directly perceived by all sitters present (Nahm, 2019; Richet, 1923/2024).

Historical research focus: evidence and fraud

Interest in physical mediumship surged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it became a central focus of early psychical research. Prominent investigators such as Sir William Crookes (1889; Crookes et al., 1885), Frederic Myers (1903/1961), and Charles Richet (1923/2024) conducted hundreds of sittings with renowned mediums under increasingly controlled conditions, aiming to assess whether these phenomena could be attributed to non-ordinary causes. Some of the most extensively documented cases included Daniel Dunglas Home, whose séances in full light reportedly produced levitations, object movements, and partial materializations (Crookes, 1889; Fontana, 2005; Katz, 2023; Lamont, 2005), and Eusapia Palladino, whose phenomena prompted extensive cross-European investigations (Alvarado, 2014; Katz, 2023). Other well-documented examples include Minnie Rose Harrison, whose trumpet movements, materializations, and apports were well documented (Vandersande, 2008, pp. 121–137).

Yet even in these cases, tensions between evidence and credibility persisted. While some investigators endorsed mediums' abilities, critics noted weaknesses such as dim lighting, loose restraints, and restricted opportunities for verification (Hall, 1963; Lamont, 2004). Allegations of fraud, sometimes substantiated, undermined the credibility of the field. By the mid-20th century, scientific interest had waned, partly due to the difficulty of replicating phenomena under rigorous experimental control (Braude, 2003, 2014; Nahm, 2014). Importantly, historical and modern accounts alike reveal that fraud and authenticity may not be mutually exclusive. Some mediums may have produced striking phenomena under certain conditions, while also resorting to trickery at other times (Braude, 2014, 2016; Nahm, 2016, 2018). The possibility of 'mixed mediumship' complicates categorical judgments of authenticity, reflecting the nuanced historical reality.

In addition, accounts of fraud in physical mediumship encompass both deliberate deception and the possibility of unconscious enactment, expectancy effects, or dissociative processes on the part of mediums and participants. Contemporary discussions emphasize that such mechanisms need not be mutually exclusive and may coexist within the same séance context, further complicating efforts to disentangle intentional misconduct from psychologically mediated effects (Silva et al., 2023). From a sitter perspective, this ambiguity was reflected in interviews that simultaneously expressed

trust, doubt, and uncertainty, rather than definitive judgments about authenticity.

Contemporary practice and ongoing challenges

Today, physical mediumship continues in private, long-term development groups such as home circles (e.g., Stewart Alexander; Kean, 2018) and in public séances conducted by traveling mediums (Hunter, 2013; Katz, 2023). One of the most widely publicized late 20th-century examples was the Scole Experimental Group in England (1993–1998), whose séances were attended by researchers and lay sitters alike and generated considerable discussion regarding both the richness of reported phenomena and the methodological challenges of evaluation (Katz, 2023; Keen, 2001; Keen et al., 1999).

Concerns have also been raised regarding the potential psychological and emotional harms that may arise when sitters later come to believe that a séance was deceptive, particularly for individuals attending while grieving the loss of a loved one. Ethical analyses of contemporary mediumship practice identify bereaved sitters as a vulnerable population, and caution that insufficient attention to grief sensitivity and consumer protection may result in psychological–emotional harm (Zemel & Wahbeh, 2025). Related discussions of fraud and credibility in public séance contexts further underscore the ethical seriousness of deception in emotionally charged settings, even when empirical adjudication remains contested (Nahm, 2016).

Public demonstrations today often prohibit the use of intrusive observation and recording equipment, which limits opportunities for independent empirical verification (Nahm, 2016). Modern research has been further complicated by high-profile cases of alleged fraud, highlighting enduring concerns about credibility (Braude, 2016; Nahm, 2016). The conditions of most séances, including complete or near-complete darkness, reliance on subjective witness testimony, and restricted access to the medium, continue to pose substantial methodological challenges for researchers (Braude, 2016; Nahm, 2014, 2016, 2018).

Given this context, the literature has remained disproportionately focused on authenticity and fraud detection, with relatively little systematic attention paid to the subjective experiences of séance attendees themselves. Historical reports sometimes mention sitters' emotional reactions or meaning-making, but these were rarely primary research objectives (de Oliveira Maraldi, 2023). Contemporary research similarly grapples with the challenge of balancing participant experience with empirical verification.

Despite methodological controversies, séances continue to attract participants, both first-time attendees and seasoned sitters. Many report motivations that extend beyond questions of proof, including spiritual development, personal healing, and the search for meaning (Katz, 2023). These observations suggest that the persistence of physical mediumship cannot be

explained solely by claims of evidence but also by the powerful experiential and emotional significance it holds for participants. This persistent appeal raises a compelling question: What motivates individuals to participate in contexts that are both experientially profound and epistemically fraught? Addressing this question requires a shift from studying only the veracity of the phenomena to examining the lived experiences of those who witness them.

Limited modern research on sitter experiences

In recent years, a small but growing number of qualitative studies have explored subjective experiences related to mediumship. For example, Beischel et al. (2017) analyzed mediums' self-reports of their mediumistic and psychic experiences. Roxburgh and Roe (2011, 2013) also evaluated the mediumistic process and various self-report measures of psychological well-being in spiritualist mental mediums. Drinkwater et al. (2022) used reflexive thematic analysis to examine how individuals with self-ascribed paranormal abilities interpret their unusual experiences. In addition, Bauder (2019) conducted a survey-based study of séance attendees in German-speaking contexts, examining motivations, expectations, and subjective interpretations of physical mediumship experiences. These studies demonstrate the feasibility and value of applying rigorous qualitative methods to anomalous experiences, yet none of them focuses on the perspective of sitters in contemporary physical mediumship settings. However, with the exception of Bauder's work, prior research has largely focused on mediums themselves or on individuals reporting anomalous experiences, rather than on in-depth narrative accounts from sitters attending contemporary public physical mediumship séances.

The present study

Building on this body of work, the present study offers an in-depth qualitative investigation of sitter narratives drawn from contemporary public physical mediumship séances. Whereas Bauder (2019) employed a survey-based approach to characterize sitter perspectives, the current study focuses on extended semi-structured interviews, allowing for a more detailed examination of how attendees describe, interpret, and make meaning of their séance experiences over time. By examining how attendees describe and interpret their experiences, this work addresses a critical gap in the literature, shifting the emphasis from the verification of phenomena to the meaning-making processes of those who witness them. Consistent with prior research, the study does not attempt to adjudicate the objective authenticity of reported phenomena; instead, it centers on participants' subjective experiences and interpretations within specific social, cultural, and ritual contexts.

This study employs a qualitative design centered on semi-structured interviews to examine sitter experiences at public physical mediumship séances. Survey data were used to support recruitment and contextualize interviews but

were not analyzed as outcomes. The study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What phenomena do sitters perceive through the five senses?
- (2) How do these experiences shape emotional and cognitive responses?
- (3) What role do belief and skepticism play in interpretation?

By centering first-person narratives and the interpretive frameworks activated in ambiguous, emotionally intense contexts, this study sheds light not only on physical mediumship itself but also on broader human responses to anomalous phenomena and how belief, perception, and emotional resonance may coalesce in these unusual experiences.

METHODS

This mixed-methods study investigated the experiences of attendees at public physical mediumship séances held between February 10, 2024, and July 11, 2024. Data were collected between February 10, 2024, and August 13, 2024. All study activities were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS; IORG#0003743), and informed consent was obtained from all participants. A detailed description of all study procedures, survey instruments, and interview protocols is available in the Supplemental Materials (Figshare <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31837552>). A summary of the methods is provided below.

Participants and recruitment

Adult volunteers were recruited through multiple methods, such as IONS newsletters, the IONS network, and word of mouth, but primarily through séance organizers and physical mediums. Inclusion criteria included adult volunteers who attended a physical mediumship séance, had understood and signed the research consent form, and had the technological means to complete the survey on a smartphone, tablet, or computer. Exclusion criteria included children aged seventeen years or younger, and those who did not understand the research consent form, or who could not complete the survey. Eligible participants completed a brief online survey after attending a séance that served to document basic contextual information and to identify individuals willing to be contacted for an in-depth qualitative interview. From this recruitment process, a subset of participants agreed to take part in semi-structured interviews, which form the primary dataset for the present qualitative analyses. Participants received no direct compensation but were eligible for entry into a \$250 raffle as compensation for their time.

Study setting

The events attended by participants varied in format, and included traditional physical mediumship séances as well as ceremonial healing gatherings drawing on Lakota spiritual traditions. Physical mediumship séances typically involve

groups of participants seated with a medium in dim or darkened conditions while purported phenomena such as raps, voices, movements of objects, or other manifestations occur. In contrast, the Lakota healing ceremonies described by participants were conducted as communal ritual gatherings focused on prayer, healing intentions, and spiritual communication within an Indigenous ceremonial framework. Attendance at these events generally involved fees charged by organizers, consistent with the common practice of public séance events.

Study procedures

Following each séance, participants were directed to a SurveyMonkey link to review and agree to a consent form and complete an approximately fifteen-minute survey (see Supplemental Materials for the full survey, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31837552>). The survey documented prior experience with mediumship, general belief and skepticism, perceived authenticity of the medium, and salient phenomena observed during the séance. Open-text items allowed participants to note experiences they found particularly meaningful and to provide contextual detail. Survey responses were used to support recruitment and to inform subsequent qualitative interviews rather than for inferential analysis. Follow-up interviews explored these experiences in greater depth using a semi-structured format.

If participants opted in for an interview, they received a phone call or email from research staff to schedule an interview at a convenient time. Each online Zoom interview was recorded and lasted approximately fifteen to one hundred and fifty minutes, depending on their availability, the amount of detail they shared, and if the interviewee was describing multiple séances. The semi-structured interview process was designed to explore participants' experiences in physical mediumship séances in greater depth. Interview questions were informed by participants' survey responses but were not limited to them, allowing them to further describe their séance experiences. This semi-structured format allowed a natural flow of conversation, guided by the rapport between the interviewer and the participant. Because the aim of this study was to examine how individuals who attend physical mediumship séances interpret their experiences, the sample should be understood as representing an experiential community of séance participants rather than a population intended to represent broader public attitudes toward mediumship.

Qualitative analyses

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and data entered into an Excel spreadsheet with the following columns, organized by interview questions: 'Environment,' 'Number of sitters,' 'Sight,' 'Hearing,' 'Touch,' 'Taste,' 'Smell,' 'Sixth sense,' 'Healing,' 'Other,' 'Field of expertise,' and 'Commentary.'

Interview transcripts constituted the primary analytic dataset, and were analyzed using an inductive qualitative approach. The dataset was imported into Dedoose (v.10.0.34, SocioCultural Research Consultants, Los Angeles, CA) for qualitative coding. In the initial round, three researchers independently reviewed and open coded the transcripts without restrictions on the number or type of codes applied. Coders noted emerging ideas, phenomena, and contextual details in person, ensuring that the full range of experiences was captured. The research team then met to review and discuss the preliminary code lists, identifying overlaps and redundancies.

The principal investigator consolidated the codes, merging redundant entries and clarifying definitions. This revised codebook was reviewed in a subsequent team meeting, during which consensus definitions were finalized. Using the finalized codebook, the interview records were divided among the coding team. For each record, one researcher conducted the initial recoding, and a second researcher reviewed the assigned codes for accuracy and completeness. Any discrepancies were discussed among the team until consensus was reached, ensuring consistency and reliability in the final coded dataset. Coding emphasized both sensory categories (aligned with interview prompts) and thematic dimensions arising from the data.

In addition to the formal coding process, the research team conducted a collaborative thematic synthesis to identify broader experiential patterns that extended beyond the sensory structure of the interview guide. Through iterative team discussions, fifteen overarching themes were developed, encompassing domains such as belief versus skepticism, emotional impact, and the influence of séance settings. These higher-order themes were then mapped onto the final codebook for cross-reference (see Supplemental Materials, Table 1, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31837552>).

RESULTS

Sample derivation

One hundred and sixty-six respondents consented to the study and began the survey. Of those, twenty did not enter any other information. An additional seventy-seven did not list a physical medium, séance location, and/or séance date, or the séance date was prior to February 2024 ($n = 10$). Records from past séances were excluded, due to the likelihood of poor recall of distant events. Nine other respondents did not include any information about their séance experience. We received sixty completed surveys from thirty-nine unique individuals. Ten participants completed more than one survey representing different séances (i.e., five completed two surveys, four completed three surveys, and one completed nine surveys). From this group, twenty-one participants consented to and completed in-depth semi-structured interviews, and constitute the analytic sample for the qualitative findings reported here. Survey

data were used to support recruitment and to provide contextual information for interviews, and are not presented as analytic results. The demographic characteristics of the twenty-one interview participants are summarized in Table 1.

The findings presented here are derived from semi-structured interviews with twenty-one participants who attended public physical mediumship

TABLE 1.

Participant characteristics (n = 21)

Measure		Value	
		<i>n</i> or mean	% or <i>SD</i>
Gender	Female	17	81.0%
	Male	4	19.0%
Age		61.4	13.5
Racial identification	Native American	1	4.8%
	Latin American	1	4.8%
	European	19	90.5%
Education years		18.2	4.5
Country	UK	1	4.8%
	Canada	3	14.3%
	USA	17	81.0%
Why did you decide to come to this physical mediumship event?	Develop spiritually	15	71.4%
	Expand my consciousness	17	81.0%
	Experience it first hand	17	81.0%
	Curiosity	13	61.9%
	Connect with a loved one	11	52.4%
	Evidence of life after death	11	52.4%
	Someone else convinced me to come	1	4.8%
Past experience	Have you ever attended a physical mediumship séance before? (Yes)	18	85.7%
	Approximately how many physical mediumship séances have you attended?		
	1–5	3	16.7%
	6–10	4	22.2%
	>10	11	61.1%

Note: The table summarizes the characteristics of participants who completed semi-structured interviews. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to missing data or multiple selections.

séances during the study period. Interviews focused on participants' subjective experiences, interpretations, and emotional responses to séance phenomena. Analyses emphasized recurring experiential patterns rather than frequency estimates or comparisons across events or mediums. The results below are organized thematically, drawing on participants' narratives to illustrate the range and depth of reported experiences.

Interview sample

Twenty-one séance attendees participated in semi-structured interviews describing their experiences across multiple séances. Many of the interviews described sittings with the same physical medium on different dates, and in some cases on consecutive days as part of multi-day events. Accordingly, the interview corpus reflects recurring experiential contexts rather than a set of independent observational units. This structure is consistent with the study's qualitative aim of identifying shared experiential patterns rather than estimating prevalence or making comparisons across mediums or events. Thematic convergence across interviews was interpreted as reflecting either repeated experiences reported by the same participants or shared features of séance settings and practices, rather than as evidence of frequency or generalizability.

Qualitative analysis

Analysis identified three overarching thematic categories: 'A. Nature of the experience,' 'B. Structure and context of the séance,' and 'C. Mediumship mechanics and interpretation,' encompassing fifteen distinct themes. These themes emerged through inductive coding and were aligned with the structured codebook (see Supplemental Materials, Table 1, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31837552>), capturing the nuances of sitter perceptions and interpretations. Together, they reflect not only the sensory and evidential elements of the séances but also the emotional, interpersonal, and contextual factors that shaped participants' experiences. A description of each theme, along with representative quotes, is provided below, followed by the participant number and séance number (e.g., P14 is participant 14, and S12 is séance 12).

A. Nature of the experience

1. Belief vs skepticism vs fraud. Participants ranged from deeply moved believers to cautious observers and skeptics. On the belief side of the spectrum, a first-time sitter, who grew up in a different country, reported:

We have not very good feeling if someone is touching you too close, touching your hand or something. The first thing I thought, when someone was trying to do something to the ring finger of my left hand, was, "Oh my God! They're going to steal my rings ..." but when I saw the palm of the hand, and it was not trying to get something off my finger, I was not nervous about it or anything. I thought, okay. ...

[the materialized entity put an extra ring on her finger]. I said thank you. There was definitely a change in my attitude from fear to this was nice. (P02, S01)

An experienced sitter shared, “It was right up there with some of the best phenomena, healing and spiritual experiences that I’ve ever experienced or witnessed” (P14, S22). Others described the séance as providing compelling personal evidence of spirit communication: “I felt a full materialized hand on my hand and it was at that point that I felt an impression of somebody. I thought it was my husband. ... The love that I felt when that hand came around mine, it was him” (P05, S15). A Spiritualist medium and teacher reported:

It was interesting. I had not seen that kind of séance before ... she [circle leader] had two different lights [flashlights]. Sometimes she used a white light and sometimes she used a red light. When there was ectoplasm, I was surprised she did white light because everything I’ve ever read said white light isn’t good for ectoplasm. (P17, S24)

At the same time, healthy skepticism was expressed. Another sitter shared her insight:

My husband was completely speechless. The next day he was like, “I can’t believe it, I don’t even know what to say.” Normally he says, “This was impossible, this could have been faked, this was fishing line ...” and this time it was [not] like [that]. You know it can be scary for people, even when they’re believers, when it’s so unexplainable. I think it really freaks people out and it’s exciting because they think, “Wow, it’s really, really true,” but I think it scares people too. So he didn’t even really want to talk about it all night. (P18, S21)

Fraud (i.e., deliberate, conscious cheating) was alleged by one participant, where fraud was claimed to occur throughout two séances with the same medium:

The tent lifted a little bit, zipper was closed. There was what we were told was supposed to be ectoplasm. This was in red light. I saw fabric and it had seams from a sewing machine. I was asking myself “If this is ectoplasm, why does it have stitches?” It was not convincing at all ... it was moving in ways that were very non-intelligent from what I’ve been told about ectoplasm. (P03, S13)

Together, these accounts reveal a continuum of interpretation, from reverent conviction to critical doubt, highlighting how personal, cultural, and experiential factors shape the meaning participants ascribe to séance phenomena.

2. Emotional impact. Participants frequently described powerful emotional responses to the séance, ranging from awe and wonder to a deep sense of healing. For some, the séances evoked profound conviction through intimate encounters: “When the little girl spoke, we were all crying, it was just so beautiful. ... For this child to be talking to her mommy and for the mom to be talking to her daughter in their voices, it was incredible” (P16, S19). Others emphasized the intensity of the apparitions, with one recalling, “The detail

on these apparitions is just stunning and they're way away from the cabinet, like ten feet away, and they're looking around and they're touching everybody. It's just amazing" (P09, S99). Sitters also described a sense of release and transformation: "One person was selected to come forward and hold the materialized hand and that person believed he was holding his mother's hand. For him it was a very emotional event. There were some unresolved issues and he felt they resolved them in that moment" (P05, S15). A self-conscious sitter felt uncomfortable being singled out: "I had a hard time in that (3rd) séance because they [entities] said they wanted to give something special to me. I was like a deer in the headlights, but I try not to think about that" (P19, S21).

3. Healing. Healing, whether emotional or physical, is an integral part of many séances. Some sitters expressed being deeply moved on a personal level and felt they had been healed in some way, such as one recalling a materialized hand making the sign of the cross on her forehead with a scented oil in lighted conditions (P13, S22). Another in the same séance recalled, "While spirit was going around the circle, each person was given an anointing of an oil and each of the oils was a different scent for everybody" (P12, S22). In another séance, a participant described an extraordinary physical experience:

The man was 6'8" or 6'9". He went up to the cabinet for a healing and he felt a hand by his neck and on his head that were much larger than his hands. When his head was leaned back up against the discarnate healer, the discarnate healer was taller than him. He said he felt the top of the spirit's shoulder at the top of the back of his head. This was incredibly unusual for him because he is usually the tallest guy around. ... During the healing, he was having some issues with his neck and his back and he felt warmth and tingling. The pain did not go away completely, but the pain level went from a 7 when it started to a 2 when it was finished. He experienced a significant healing. (P05, S11)

One participant shared, "I feel this spider go over across my cheek, over my nose, and across my other cheek and then just go away. My sinuses were completely cleared. ... I experienced a healing" (P05, S17). In Lakota tradition, Iktomi is a spirit who can present as a spider. A psychologist and mental medium, attending a table-tipping séance, shared:

I had on two shirts, a heavy black corduroy shirt and another outdoor corduroy shirt on top of it. I was getting very hot, trying to get the outer shirt off and I couldn't ... when the lights came on, I saw that the top shirt had been buttoned to the bottom shirt's two buttons ... [My guides] said it was a code. It was done by a spirit named Iktomi, the spider, who is also a trickster. Iktomi is also the healing spirit. I had been struggling with a health issue for several weeks, had even been at the Emergency Room. ... I thought I was just going to have to live with it. The next day I realized it had completely healed. The code about the buttons ... gave me information about the healing and the body. Validation is a huge thing for people and is very personal. (P15, S21)

4. Sensory and subjective phenomena. Participants described a wide range of multisensory experiences that often blended visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory perceptions with more intuitive impressions. For some, the most compelling moments were those that combined physical sensation with a felt sense of presence or recognition. These layered sensory and intuitive experiences often strengthened participants' interpretations of the séance as genuine spirit contact, even when the phenomena were ambiguous.

Visual impressions were striking, as one sitter recalled: "The ceiling disappeared completely and I was looking at the night sky. ... It was incredible. And then I heard a bird. It was the sound of a raven. The people on either side of me also experienced the room disappearing" (P05, S17). Another sitter shared, "When the trumpets and the hula hoops (because they had glow tape on them) started flying around the room from the ceiling, we were encouraged to verbally cheer and encourage, and thank them [spirit operators]" (P16, S19).

Auditory phenomena were equally compelling: "Immediately you could hear the trumpets moving. The drum was beating, rattles shaking, you could hear the instruments moving around the room. I also heard the voice of [two different entities] speaking through the trumpet. ... They were taking turns" (P03, S01).

Tactile and olfactory impressions were also reported: a sitter, in a prior séance with the same medium, put her hand on the materialized hand coming from the cabinet. A second hand was placed over hers, and she put her other hand over it, "then a third hand came out and there were three hands on mine. I know he [medium] was the only one in the cabinet" (P05, S15).

Also, "[Ectoplasm] smelled musty. It smelled similar to what I've experienced with ectoplasm in other scenarios, but this was warm instead of cool. It smelled like a penny" (P08, S11).

Beyond the five senses, participants sometimes described a 'sixth sense' or intuitive knowing, for instance recognizing a spirit by its energetic quality or the feeling of a familiar touch: "Sense of presence of grandparents on mother's side and other spirit energies in the room" (P20, S11).

5. Apparent phenomenal evidence. Participants described a variety of occurrences they interpreted as tangible evidence of spirit activity, including breezes in sealed rooms, voice phenomena, levitation, ectoplasmic forms, and the sudden appearance of physical objects known as *apports*. A sitter described someone near her being moved, and recalled a previous séance when the same thing happened to her:

I am not a light person and the chairs were metal folding chairs. I was holding onto the people next to me. ... wondering, "do I let their hands go? I'm halfway out of the circle" so I just let their hands go. I don't remember the chair being dragged. I was being moved. I weigh 200 pounds, so for one person to pick me up would be extremely difficult. I was moved into the center of the circle and I was tipped back and then forward, and then they touched me and touched my shoulder, my back, and

my legs. It was like, “Oh my God, this is insane—is it really happening?” I was blown away ... until the day I die, I will remember that. (P12, S22)

Experienced sitters, who attended ten or more séances, gave detailed descriptions of apparent ectoplasmic phenomena:

We saw ectoplasm briefly and were allowed to go [up to cabinet to] see it. The red light shone upon it. Ectoplasm starts out one way and then changes. In this case ... it was no longer dark, but starting to get white in color, changing in appearance and texture. At first, when the cabinet was opened, it was starting to get on the medium's chest, like a fabric perhaps, but when the cabinet opened up the second time it looked like floss, or angel hair. It was starting to glisten, to have some sparkle in it. Like strands or gossamer. It was also starting to go towards the floor then spreading across the floor ... it almost looked like smoke, or steam, as it was changing its form. ... It started to pulse as if it were breathing, pulsing in and out like a heartbeat or something. Like an animated life energy, getting it ready where the spirits may be able to utilize it, so the scientists could utilize it for their experiments. [The spirit control] said there was someone in spirit that wanted to make themselves known to someone in the room and they were going to try to project their image into the ectoplasm. (P15, S21)

Apports were among the most compelling because (1) they were observed appearing in lighted conditions; (2) participants questioned how an object could emerge from the body (e.g., mouth, eyes) without harm, highlighting the tension between what was observed and what seems biologically possible; and (3) their surprising, awe-inducing nature prompted participants to deeply question their assumptions about reality. An engineer recalled:

I saw [the medium] in the red light ... was reaching up and pulling down from the ether and he kept pulling and pulling and then suddenly CRACK this bright blue flash happened and then we heard THUD and there was a gigantic red crystal sitting five feet in front of him ... three inches in diameter. It was incredible. (P08, S09)

Similarly, one sitter marveled, “There were crystals materializing out of [medium's] eyes” (P10, S99). Another reported, “At the end of the séance [the medium] ... stood up, and then the apports came out through his mouth. ... There were coins and small stones. I received a clear faceted crystal about an inch big. ... The apports came out in the white light” (P05, S10). These accounts highlight the powerful evidential value that apports carried for sitters, contrasting their lasting, physical presence with more subjective sensory phenomena, prompting many to reconsider the boundaries of what they believed possible.

6. Reported encounters with nonhuman or disembodied beings. Participants described a range of perceived entities, including guides, loved ones, well-known deceased figures, ascended masters, animals, nature spirits, and extraterrestrials. A sitter reported:

Now he's [medium] got [a new entity] this ET head that they're working on to make it show ... a visual of your dead loved one ... the hair on this head actually did change to a long feminine hair. The face didn't work out, but the head actually did change so, I mean, eventually, they're going to be able to do that. It's fascinating. (P09, S99)

Another sitter relayed, "One of the folks speaking through [medium] said something about ETs helping to create this portal to bring these stones from somewhere on the other side of the galaxy is my understanding" (P10, S99).

Accounts of organized spirit teams. Several sitters described entities with defined roles associated with a given medium. In these accounts, a main control was said to entrance the medium and direct events: "There was a channeled message (trance). [The spirit control] came through and ... spoke sometimes before, sometimes in between phenomena" (P20, S09). Other entities were described as taking on specific tasks, including purported appearances of famous people whose voices were recognized by sitters: "[The medium] was producing a voice box outside of his body and the woman came through to sing. ... Debbie [friend] was told that the woman who sang was Judy Garland ... her role evidently ... is to get that voice box to work" then "[another entity] came through and he is very lighthearted and was bringing through children" (P16, S19).

Perceived repeatability across sittings. Some participants reported that particular manifestations seemed to recur across séances, with occasional additions framed as experimental. One attendee of two consecutive séances noted, "Yes, more or less the same thing" (P03, S15). A physician and epidemiologist shared, "Now everyone can shake a hand from the cabinet and the cabinet is giving you a hug. It's progressed so much" (P09, S99).

Sitters describe rapport forming. Several accounts depict conversational exchanges in which entities address questions, take requests, or acknowledge individuals. "I love how (spirit entity) and the spirit teams always know what we're thinking and answer our questions before we ask them." (P14, S22). Also:

His [medium's] speaker came through and said hello, and everyone responded. ... From there, [the spirit communicator] says, "what's on your list? Who wants to participate or see or experience what?" People. ... shouted out what they were interested in. "I'd like to experience my father's presence," or "I'd like to see some kind of proof of spirit," or "I'd like to see voices coming through the trumpet." ... He says, "Okay, we'll see if we can do that ... okay, on the list, on the list, on the list ..." and I have to say I've never been disappointed. You're going to see some stuff that really is amazing. (P13, S22)

Examples offered as evidential by participants. Some sitters interpreted specific events as personal proof or as indications of agency behind the phenomena:

The edge of the tent lifted up and a foot came out. The medium's feet were visible [zip tied to the chair]. They lifted up the tent [a second time] and there were two feet sitting there and then it went back. A corner was unzipped and a whole leg came out. (P08, S11)

Also:

We had amazing ectoplasm ... the spirits allowed us to draw close and see ectoplasm manifesting through [the medium] and the color changing as well ... [The medium] was leaning forward in deep trance. ... The ectoplasm changed colors and then we could see it retract and go back into the body ... the lights in the room did not change color. (P07, S99)

Attributions of intelligence and intent. In several narratives, sitters inferred purposeful action aimed at providing evidence, facilitating contact with loved ones, or promoting healing:

[The spirit control] said there would be a healing light. It was very bright, like the flash of a strobe, above the cabinet. [The spirit control] asked everybody to look at it, to let it go into your eyes. It was this incredibly bright, white light that should have been very painful to look at, but everybody said no, it did not hurt the eyes at all and there was no afterimage. If we look at the sun and then look away, we still have this afterimage that blinds us, but it did not blind us in any way. (P15, S21)

Accounts also include descriptions of matter through matter. “The hula hoops were linked like a chain at the end of the séance—you couldn’t pull them apart. I had seen them before when they were separated” (P16, S19). From a sitter’s survey:

Someone was called to approach the cabinet, unzip it, and check on the medium. The light was red and low. The participant looked in the cabinet and saw that one of the medium’s legs seemed to disappear. The curtain was closed, then the participant again checked on the medium, and the leg was back.

From the follow-up interview:

[The spirit control] explained that the leg was never gone. It’s just a perception that spirit is able to create that you don’t see, even though it’s still there. At a prior séance with him [medium], at [another location], he had both legs disappear, and a participant went up to the chair, was feeling the chair leg, went up to the hip area and still could not feel the leg. (P05, S15)

B. Structure and context of the séance

7. Collective vs individual experience. Although sitters often described highly personal encounters, these occurred within a shared group setting, and the group dynamic shaped emotional responses. Sitters reacted to each other’s experiences, cheering, crying, or silently holding space, which reinforced a sense of shared journey. One participant recalled how “one by one, everyone in the entire room went up and experienced their loved one” (P11, S13). At times, sitters described simultaneous reactions across the circle: “Everybody was describing their phenomena as it happens and people across the room were describing being touched while I was also being touched” (P14, S22).

8. Repeated attendance and experience. Participants' responses often reflected their level of familiarity with physical mediumship. First-time sitters described a mix of apprehension and wonder, such as one participant who heard a first-timer sharing, "I'm a little scared. ... Oh my God, it's a hug. I'm getting a hug. I don't know who it's from, but I'm getting a hug" (P05, S23). In contrast, more seasoned attendees drew comparisons across multiple séances and mediums, noting consistencies and differences. A sitter described being at séances with different mediums and at different locations a year and a half ago: "When [the spirit] comes in, she has a very different distinctive voice. ... The spirit that is identified with that same name has the same voice regardless of which medium she is coming in with and in both [séance] locations" (P05, S15). Others described the impact of attending multiple sittings on themselves or their companions, as one sitter recalled, she and her husband also attended a table-tipping séance with the medium the next evening, which she said was extraordinary. Her husband, a big skeptic, was "blown away by it and still talking about it" (P18, S21). These contrasts illustrate how expectations and interpretations shifted with repeated attendance and experience.

9. Set and setting. Lighting, seating arrangements, and the physical environment influenced participants' perceptions. Pitch blackness was common, interspersed with red or blue light. As one sitter noted:

Everything that was potentially causing light was blacked out. ... I was the one manipulating the light when spirit told me to. The only light that was on was a little light strip of blue light or red light or white light [not a single bulb—tiny lights]. When [the spirit] told me, I would turn the light on and the color that they asked me to. (P12, S22)

Seating arrangements and proximity to the medium also shaped experiences. Being close to the cabinet or in a position where physical contact with spirit forms occurred was often described as more impactful than sitting at the far edge of the circle: "Everyone was in a circle for the séance. You couldn't see anything. Everyone's knees were touching so you have an idea of where everyone is in the room" (P18, S21). Others recalled less comfortable settings: "There were way too many people in the room ... probably 30. There were three rows in the back, two on the side. It was a very tiny room. You were crammed in your seat, trying not to move" (P09, S99).

Attendees often assisted in setting up or inspecting the space, which some felt added credibility to the proceedings. One participant explained:

The room was searched. The cabinet was searched. [The medium] was searched. I personally tied [the medium] with zip ties to the chair. Me and one other person. I did one side and the other person did the other side. We clipped the ends and later matched them up and they were the same ones. (P08, S11)

Another reported, "At the entrance to the séance room we were patted down, scanned, just like going through TSA [airport security]" (P16, S19).

Music played a significant role in shaping mood and facilitating the medium's trance state. For some, it was unsettling, as one sitter explained:

The first piece of music that he uses to get into trance is one that works very well for him, but for most of the sitters, myself included, the music is a little disturbing ... then it goes into upbeat music that most people know. As soon as that started, things started happening in the room. (P05, S10)

And another sitter explained: “[The medium] has music so we sing along with the music and I was circle leader. If I feel the energy dropping, then I will ask everybody to do ‘‘OMs’’, to do ‘Row, Row, Row Your Boat,’ ‘Frere Jacques,’ any of these songs” (P11, S13). These accounts highlight how atmosphere and environmental details were integral to the interpretation and impact of the séance.

10. Types of séances. Participants attended varied formats, including traditional physical mediumship, Lakota healing ceremonies, and table-tipping sessions. Each had its own rhythm, tools, and atmosphere. Some sessions took the form of table-tipping circles, where energy and movement built communally: “When the table lifted off the ground, all four legs lifted and it went straight up and straight down. ... It went high enough that you had to put your hands above your head” (P21, S21). Others described Lakota healing ceremonies, which contrasted sharply with European séance traditions: “We all held hands in the circle. ... There was a rug in the center, an altar with rattles, drums, bones, feathers, bowls ... [The medium] was drumming and chanting with his wife beside him. ... It was one of the most incredible experiences” (P05, S17). In both table-tipping séances and Lakota healing ceremonies, the medium is fully conscious and an active participant in the phenomena being produced.

11. Props and tools. Alongside phenomena such as ectoplasm and materializations, séances often featured physical props that were intended to be used in ways participants interpreted as spirit interaction. Drums and tambourines were common: “The drum ... was in the cabinet, came out and hovered over our heads. Apparently, a drumstick came out with it and was pounding on the drum, which is very rare to happen. Usually it's fingers” (P15, S21) and

The harmonica was played in the back of the room ... the cabinet was on the other side ... playing [along with] the song. It's not just random sounds. ... The tambourine was also playing along to the beat of the music. The tambourine was on one side and the harmonica was on the other side. ... That lasted for an entire song, so probably three minutes. (P05, S10)

In some cases, luminous tape was used to enhance visibility, and luminous plaques or balls were used to demonstrate materialization. A sitter recalled, “A hand shape was seen moving across the plaque, a pretty well-formed hand.

The hand actually slid the plaque across the floor, between someone's feet." (P15, S20). A nurse observed:

Throughout the séance, we would see little glow in the dark balls on the floor. [A materialized] spirit would pick them up and hold them ... and then he would walk around the circle ... you could see [the] spirit's hand and part of an arm. ... The skin looked like what you would see on a dolphin – very smooth. They were showing it palm up ... I didn't see hand prints or finger prints or lines at all. It was very smooth and white. (P12, S22)

These accounts highlight how props and tools, whether instruments or luminous objects, became central in both enabling and evidencing spirit interaction.

12. Role of the cabinet/tent. The cabinet or tent was a central and often personified feature of the séance, serving as both the locus of phenomena and a source of speculation. Cabinet structures varied widely, ranging from simple fabric enclosures with zippers to more elaborate constructions. Some were partially open or lacked a roof or floor, while others were built from PVC piping with an open top or a base cut away. Sitters frequently remarked on the unusual mechanics of the enclosure, as one explained:

The zippers on those tents—when it zips, they zip [close] at the bottom. ... In the case of the hand coming out, it unzips [opens] from the top. ... It opens, but they don't do it like one of us. It's like it separates and then it closes again. (P11, S13)

The cabinet itself could become animated, with participants reporting that "[The] spirit can lift it up and spin it around. You can see [the medium's] feet zip tied to the chair, never moving even though the tent is spinning" (P14, S22). A more skeptical sitter said, "This is the hard thing, because we don't see inside the tent" (P03, S13). The cabinet was used by all the mediums who produced partial or full materialization. In the table-tipping séances, the medium was out of the cabinet and participating at the table. The cabinet was in the room and contained props: "A tambourine came out of the cabinet from across the room. You could hear the tambourine shaking and scraping the ceiling above us as it came across the room. Then it fell onto the table" (P15, S21). In the Lakota healing ceremony, there was no cabinet.

C. Mediumship mechanics and interpretation

13. Trance process. Participants consistently described a patterned process by which mediums entered trance and spirit communicators emerged. The trance process included ritualized music chosen by the medium to support the transition. Once the medium was in trance, sitters perceived other personalities speaking. One participant explained:

[The medium] brought through an entity ... [that] gave a beautiful talk. ... A different voice came through the medium as [the spirit control]. I'm familiar with

this because I have attended his [medium's] online presentations before and have heard this entity speak, so I knew who the entity was as soon as he started speaking. (P16, S19)

Deep trance was observed when ectoplasm was being produced:

We had amazing ectoplasm ... the tent was unzipped towards the end of the session ... the spirits allowed us to draw close and see ectoplasm manifesting through [the medium] and the color changing as well. ... I think the majority was coming from his mouth and perhaps his nose ... [The medium] was leaning forward in deep trance. (P07, S99)

The medium's body was also used to assist with the phenomena being presented:

[The medium] was standing and [two sitters] were on his sides holding his arms and he had ectoplasm come out of his mouth. They had the red light on so this was visible and it started off here like a few inches below his chin ... and eventually touched the ground. ... Then he took either side of the ectoplasm, like pulled it out on the sides, so you could see there was a transparent sheet-like material. It was wild. It was very wild. ... It was semi-transparent, it was neon green, and there is a smell associated with it ... and that was interesting ... it was a musty smell ... a cool, musty smell. (P08, S09)

Deep trance was also associated with the production of apports: "I've seen him lean forward and stones start falling out from under the eye and you can hear them falling down to the floor" (P20, S09).

Spirit 'controls' often acted as masters of ceremonies, guiding the flow of the séance and orchestrating sitter participation. "[The spirit control] will ask the person who was controlling the music to stop the music and start it. [The spirit control] tells them what to do" (P11, S13). Also, "I got the apport IN the séance. [The spirit control] asked me to come up and sit or kneel. I kneeled and he asked me to feel [the medium's] hands, to see if there was anything in [the medium's] hands. There was light, I could see ... [The spirit control] then told me to cup my hands" (P19, S21).

14. Ectoplasm vs materialization. Participants frequently described seeing ectoplasm emerging, in its raw form, from the medium's body in striking and sometimes unsettling ways. A first-time sitter only recalled: "Then ectoplasm ... started out like a beard coming down [the medium's] chest and it was much more than I expected. It looked like a white cloudy beard" (P21, S25). Another sitter explained,

By the time he [medium] was finished, his whole body was covered in ectoplasm, like a blanket all the way to the floor. I saw it moving down slowly and then (later) it dissolved very quickly. You could see it moving. The quantity and fluidity were astonishing! I remember the looseness and the fragility of it, you could almost see through it, transparent. At one point we saw a face in it. [The spirit control] asked us to come up and look at it, all of us, three at a time. Starting at his left, at 1 o'clock, in

the ectoplasm there was a circular area, about the size of a baseball, the face [in it] was the size of a tennis ball [three dimensional]. He had a black beard and mustache, very dark hair, a Middle Eastern type face. No one recognized the face. (P19, S21)

Unique sounds were also described by sitters:

It [ectoplasm] kind of sounded like bubbles in water, like [makes slurping sound]. That was in the darkness and then also in the red light when he [medium] already had the ectoplasm coming out and as it was building and going down you heard more of that sound. (P08, S09)

Alongside these reports, participants also described apparent materializations, where full or partial figures seemed to appear. Many of the quotes in previous sections highlight these types of experiences.

15. Voice phenomena. Sitters frequently described hearing voices during séances, though their sources were not always clear. Some emphasized independent voices moving through the room:

A disembodied entity was speaking to people. That entity went around the room speaking to people. It was an independent voice, not from the medium [trance speaking], not through a trumpet. Most of the time it was a male voice with a European accent, possibly German or Austrian. All got to ask a question. (P01, S01)

Others recounted the use of instruments, as in one participant's experience:

There was speaking coming through the trumpet. ... The trumpet was right between us. It was so close ... that I could hear a low, very gravelly voice saying, "it's okay, she's with us, we have her, she's safe, she's with us." ... It was very moving. (P13, S22)

Some descriptions referred to ectoplasmic mechanisms said to produce voice. One sitter recalled,

I ... sometimes saw ectoplasm flowing from mouth, sometimes a veil over face of the medium with transfiguration, other times a thin cord coming from the mouth and connected to an ectoplasmic 'voicebox' near the neck of the medium, when independent direct voice [in the air] was being produced. (P06, S02)

Yet, even in detailed observations, attribution was not always straightforward. As one participant noted, "I remember the high pitched voices that came when [the medium] was talking to [their] team. When [the medium] went into the cabinet, there were voices. They weren't [his]. I think they were [his] team's that [the medium was] channeling" (P21, S25).

Summary

The sitters described experiences shaped by their beliefs, emotions, sensory impressions, and the social and physical structure of the séance across the interviews. Participant accounts illustrate how they interpreted a diverse range of ambiguous and often striking events through a combination

of personal meaning-making and the ritual context of contemporary physical mediumship.

DISCUSSION

This study explored participants' self-reported perceptions and experiences of physical mediumship séances, providing a multifaceted picture of contemporary sitter accounts. The aim was not to validate the objective reality of any reported phenomena, but to document the range, nature, and subjective impact of these experiences in public séance contexts. In doing so, the findings contribute to the small but growing body of work addressing why individuals attend séances and how they interpret the events they witness.

Participants

The sample was composed predominantly of women (over 80%), with an average age in the early sixties; most were highly educated and based in the USA. This demographic profile is broadly consistent with surveys of individuals engaged in spiritualist and other anomalous experience communities (e.g., Beischel et al., 2017; Castro et al., 2014). The predominance of prior séance experience (over 85% had attended before) also indicates that the sample reflects a community of sitters who are familiar with mediumship practice, which may shape both expectations and interpretations of phenomena.

Interpretation of findings

A wide variety of phenomena were reported, encompassing sensory experiences (e.g., lights, sounds, tactile sensations, breezes in sealed rooms), perceived spirit communications, healing experiences, and the appearance of apports. Interview themes also underscored the importance of context. Sitters described the collective atmosphere of the séance, where responses were often shaped by the visible reactions of others and by ritual elements, such as music, lighting, and the arrangement of the circle. Proximity also mattered: those close to the cabinet often described more impactful encounters, while others seated further away expressed frustration at limited access. Certain phenomena, particularly apports, were described by some sitters as especially compelling, partly due to their tangible and lasting nature, and in some cases because they were witnessed in well-lit conditions. Some sitters interpreted the phenomena with skepticism, noting aspects that seemed methodical, staged, or inconsistent with their expectations of genuine spirit communication.

Qualitative themes highlighted the complex interplay between belief, skepticism, and meaning-making. While most participants expressed strong belief in the possibility of spirit communication, this did not preclude them from noticing or discussing elements that could suggest deception. This mirrors historical tensions within psychical research, where deep conviction and critical scrutiny often coexisted in the same observers (Alvarado, 2014; Lamont,

2005). Across interviews, participants described a broad range of experiences, including emotionally salient encounters, healing events, and multisensory impressions, alongside moments of discomfort or critical appraisal. Elements such as group dynamics, ritual structure, lighting, music, and the medium's trance state all influenced how sitters interpreted what they witnessed. These patterns suggest that séance participation involves an active process of meaning-making in which sensory ambiguity, emotional impact, and communal context interact to shape how attendees understand and evaluate physical mediumship.

Fraud, credibility, and the public séance context

Historical and contemporary investigations into physical mediumship have long grappled with the problem of fraud (e.g., de Oliveira Maraldi, 2023; Nahm, 2016). Consistent with the literature, the reliance on witness testimony in low-light or no-light conditions, the limited opportunity to introduce independent controls, and the reluctance of some mediums to permit recording or intrusive investigation remain substantial barriers to establishing scientific credibility (Braude, 2014; Nahm, 2014, 2016). In the present study, while some sitters expressed unequivocal trust in the medium's authenticity, others recounted experiences that led them to question the genuineness of what they observed. This range of responses aligns with previous documentation in the literature describing both strong personal convictions of authenticity and well-substantiated exposures of fraudulent practice (Braude, 2014, 2016; Nahm, 2018).

Interviews also highlighted the role of what participants referred to as 'spirit controls.' A spirit control is typically described as an intermediary entity that communicates through the medium and coordinates interactions between the medium, other purported spirits, and the audience. In several of the séances described by participants, these communicating voices also appeared to structure the progression of events by directing music, inviting specific sitters to participate, or announcing upcoming phenomena. In this sense, participants often described the control as guiding the sequence and pacing of the séance, shaping how the events unfolded. These structuring roles influenced how sitters interpreted what they experienced, particularly in settings where visibility was limited or non-existent, and participants relied on auditory cues and ritual coordination.

The persistence of physical mediumship despite such controversies suggests that, for many participants, experiential and emotional dimensions outweigh the demand for conclusive proof. Several respondents explicitly noted that even if deception were possible, the personal meaning they derived from the experience made attendance worthwhile. Structured group rituals may themselves have therapeutic effects, independent of the objective reality of the phenomena. Research in anthropology and psychology suggests that collective rituals can

strengthen social cohesion, regulate emotion, and promote meaning-making, which may help explain why participants experience séances as beneficial even amid uncertainty (Hobson et al., 2018).

Public séances, in particular, often involve large groups, variable conditions, and formats that prioritize participant experience over experimental control (Katz, 2023). While most accounts in this study derived from traditional physical mediumship séances, participants also described Lakota healing ceremonies and table-tipping circles. These provided a broader comparative lens, underscoring that physical mediumship was not experienced as a single practice but as one among multiple ritual traditions. Participants' interpretations were also shaped by the ritualized structure of séances, including shared expectations surrounding cabinets, trumpets, darkness, and spirit controls. Anthropological and psychological research suggests that such ritual contexts can scaffold attention, perception, and interpretation, particularly under conditions of sensory ambiguity, thereby shaping how experiences are noticed, evaluated, and remembered (Hobson et al., 2018; Luhrmann et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of situating sitter narratives within broader cultural, symbolic, and ritual frameworks when interpreting reported phenomena.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The study relied on a small number of self-selected participants who were willing to be interviewed, potentially skewing the sample toward individuals with more positive or notable experiences. Because participants were recruited from individuals who had chosen to attend such events, the sample likely reflects a community already interested in or open to physical mediumship, and the findings should therefore be interpreted as descriptive of that experiential group rather than representative of broader public perspectives. In addition, the participants were largely experienced sitters, and prior exposure, expectations, and repeated attendance likely shaped interpretation. Also, because interview material was drawn from overlapping séance events and mediums, some reports reflect repeated conditions rather than fully independent accounts. Many participants attended multiple séances, sometimes with the same medium, which means their accounts are not entirely independent of each other. Also, interviews were conducted at varying intervals following séance attendance, which may have affected memory, emotional framing, or post-event reflection, representing an additional limitation of the study. In addition, several survey responses were incomplete and had to be excluded, which likely reflects some of the logistical challenges of administering surveys in public séance settings and may have limited the size of the recruitment pool for interviews. Because attendance records for the séance events were not systematically available, it was not

possible to determine how many total individuals attended the events or what proportion of attendees were represented among the survey respondents. Finally, the data reflects subjective perceptions in not formally controlled settings; no objective verification of reported events was attempted or possible within the scope of this study.

Relation to prior research

The present findings can be situated alongside the limited prior research on sitter experiences in physical mediumship, most notably the survey-based study by Bauder (2019). Similar to Bauder's results, participants in the current study were predominantly individuals with prior exposure to séances and generally positive orientations toward mediumship, underscoring the challenge of recruiting broadly representative samples in this research domain. The present study extends this work by employing in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing for a more detailed examination of how sitters interpret sensory ambiguity, emotional responses, and moments of both conviction and doubt within specific séance contexts. Together, these studies suggest that while sitter samples are often shaped by preexisting interest or belief, qualitative approaches can yield complementary insights into the meaning-making processes that accompany séance participation.

Future directions

Future research could examine how prior belief, skepticism, and repeated attendance shape the interpretation and meaning of séance experiences over time. Mixed-methods designs that integrate physiological or environmental monitoring, where acceptable to mediums and sitters, could help bridge the gap between subjective experience and empirical investigation. Comparative studies of home circles versus public séances may also illuminate how setting and social dynamics influence both the production and perception of phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a contemporary examination of sitter perspectives on public physical mediumship séances, with detailed narrative accounts. The findings underscore that, regardless of whether phenomena are viewed as anomalous events or as products of expectation and ritual context, séance participation can be deeply meaningful for many attendees. Persistent methodological challenges, including limited visibility and the potential for deception, remain significant considerations; however, they do not diminish participants' interest or engagement. By centering sitter perspectives, this work highlights the experiential, psychological, and social dimensions of séance practices and emphasizes the value of documenting these viewpoints to better understand how physical mediumship is interpreted and sustained in modern settings.

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AI USE DISCLOSURE

Portions of this manuscript were prepared with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT, which was used to support drafting, summarization, and editorial refinement of text throughout the project. The authors guided all content generation and are solely responsible for the final versions of all analyses and interpretations.

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THE GHOST BRUSH INSTALLATION: A CASE-CENTERED PRIMER ON PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTAGION EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

An official-looking cemetery sign paired with a nearby shoe brush—an art installation playfully warning visitors about “giving ghosts a free ride”—offers a compact, real-world prompt that vividly demonstrates the recently developed cascading-resonance model (CRM) of psychological contagion, the process by which thoughts or behaviors can amplify and spread across people like a ‘virus.’ This novel framework synthesizes emotional, cognitive, and behavioral mechanisms into a three-layer process: (a) input (suggestibility, expectancy priors, ritual affordance), (b) synchronization (attention convergence, mimicry/entrainment, social appraisal), and (c) scaling (prestige cueing, network feedback, and threshold dynamics). By mapping the features of this art installation against the CRM’s nine core mechanisms, it is illustrated how contagion effects in paranormal-related contexts can emerge and intensify without invoking transmissible supernatural agents. This conceptual exercise thus offers parapsychologists and amateur investigators a mechanism-rich alternative to metaphysical interpretations, showing that clustered or transient perceptions of anomalous phenomena often reflect cascading resonance rather than evidence of external forces.

INTRODUCTION

So-called ‘paranormal contagion’ and the ‘hitchhiker effect’ are hot-button topics within certain investigative communities. These terms refer to anomalous events at a specific ‘hotspot’ that purportedly follow witnesses or investigators after they leave the location (e.g., Knapp & Kelleher, 2005; McCue, 2022; Ritson, 2021). In other words, instead of remaining confined to the original location, phenomena such as ghosts, poltergeist disturbances, unidentified aerial phenomena, or cryptid encounters (i.e., animals whose existence is claimed but unverified) may follow witnesses home or manifest in entirely new places—at times even involving their friends or family members. But contagion can also describe episodic spikes in ‘paranormal’ activity at certain times or places. For instance, Houran et al.’s (2026a) survey found that both professional and amateur researchers often experience a surge of strange and disruptive events while writing about paranormal topics—anomalies reliably showing a hierarchical pattern that the study described as a ‘trickster chain’ (p. 1). This

suggests that contagion-type effects can escalate in diversity and strength over time akin to a ‘seed-to-burst’ trajectory, i.e., where a small initiating event (the seed) spreads through a network or population, gradually amplifying until it reaches a tipping point that activates rapid, widespread adoption, reaction, or collapse (the burst).

Contagious processes have long been implicated in ghosts, hauntings, and poltergeists (i.e., ‘ghostly episodes’) and kindred phenomena (e.g., Bauer, 1989; Kerner, 1836; Lange & Houran, 2001; Laythe et al., 2017; Nisbet, 1979; Playfair, 1980). However, perceptions that ‘cluster or snowball’ within or across individuals often can be parsimoniously explained via cognitive mechanisms such as suggestion effects or fear responses as opposed to transmissible supernatural agents. In particular, *psychological contagion* (PC) offers a multilevel social-cognitive account of how emotions, cognitions, perceptions, or behaviors can amplify, synchronize, and spread through social networks (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Christakis & Fowler, 2013; Friston, 2005; Hatfield et al., 1993). The novel cascading-resonance model (CRM) of PC synthesizes these literatures into a processual framework involving nine core mechanisms that move from individual susceptibility to interpersonal alignment and then to network scaling (Houran et al., 2025).

In particular, CRM describes contagion as a three-layer architecture operating across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis. At the *micro-level*, dispositional factors such as suggestibility and boundary thinness, in combination with automatic mimicry and expectancy effects, lower an individual’s threshold for social influence and produce internal mirroring of another’s affective or behavioral state. When multiple individuals undergo similar resonance within a shared temporal, spatial, or digital context, attention alignment, neural entrainment, and social appraisal processes confer collective meaning on converging private states, driving a transition to interpersonal synchronization at the *meso-level*. Should this synchronization be sustained, network amplifiers, moral framing, and self-reinforcing feedback dynamics push the system past nonlinear tipping points into population-wide psychological states at the *macro-level*. Critically, the model treats these layers not as discrete phenomena but as a recursive, integrated system in which macro-level signals can back-propagate to alter individual receptivity while micro-level processes aggregate upward into collective outcomes. Suggestibility functions as a cross-domain substrate linking all three layers, and the framework yields specific, testable intervention points—including disruption of attention synchronization, dampening of algorithmic amplification, and reduction of moralized framing—at each level of the cascade.

While CRM offers a comprehensive framework for understanding contagion dynamics, its practical utility for field investigators has yet to be illustrated. This case-centered primer therefore serves as a translational bridge—demonstrating how the CRM’s constituent mechanisms manifest *in situ* and

how they can inform evidence-based field protocols, thereby moving from metaphor to mechanism. Indeed, some parapsychologists and especially citizen scientists or amateur field investigators (Hill et al., 2019) may be unaware of either the key PC literature that is integrated within the CRM framework or its application to real-world contexts. Therefore, this paper uses a single, richly featured artifact (i.e., the ‘cemetery ghost brush’ art installation)—which is analogous to observational research on poltergeists, haunted houses, and other spectral-related phenomena, including paranormal tourism, Ouija board use, visits to mediums, and similar ritual practices (see Houran et al., in press)—to compress the theoretical ingredients of CRM into an accessible focal stimulus for educational purposes. The conceptual mapping of this installation against nine core mechanisms shows how it can function as an instigator for PC, which is intended to support interpretive clarity in parapsychological reasoning. This examination does not negate the possibility of parapsychological influences in some contagion-type spontaneous cases, but it instead prioritizes the need to assess for standard mechanisms before considering unorthodox influences or agencies (cf. Houran et al., 2026b).

THE GHOST BRUSH INSTALLATION: A STIMULUS WITH POWERFUL POTENTIAL

Figure 1 shows a cemetery sign directing visitors to “Wipe your feet” and to “Please use ghost brush before leaving the cemetery.” Portland artist Ryan Iverson conceived *The Ghost Brush* as a playful outdoor art installation (though not expressly disclosed as such on the sign itself) at Lone Fir Pioneer Cemetery in Portland, Oregon (New Awesome, n.d.). He took inspiration from the shoe-cleaning brushes found at trailheads—used to prevent the spread of invasive plants—and reimagined them as a way to ‘wipe off’ lingering spirits before leaving the grounds, preserving the boundary between the living and dead. This idea further parallels the popular concept of ‘spirit clearing, cleaning, or cleansing,’ i.e., a metaphysical practice involving prayer, meditation, or other symbolic acts aimed at removing negative energies, emotional burdens, or spiritual impurities within an individual or location (e.g., Storm & Tilley, 2020). Therefore, the installation exemplifies the kinds of contextual variables—official-style signage, ritual affordances, and narrative framing—that often influence perceptual and attitudinal readiness to suggestions of the paranormal.

For example, Lange et al. (1996) highlighted how environmental prompts like signage or other embedded cues can powerfully shape the onset or contents of ghostly experiences. In their analysis of one hundred and twenty-seven spontaneous haunt reports from a commercial book series, they found that *demand characteristics* (direct or indirect suggestions of paranormal activity through folklore, rumors, or advertising) appeared in 61.6% of cases, while *embedded cues* (sensory or contextual hints such as matching scents and colors) were noted in 26.2% of cases (Lange et al., 1996, p. 758). Note that such patterns also extend to other types of entity encounter experiences (Houran, 2000). The



Figure 1. Cemetery art installation instructing visitors to “Please use ghost brush.” The sign concentrates attention and supplies a supernatural interpretive script that can seed expectancy, ritual enactment, and social transmission—key components of the CRM (Houran et al., 2025) of PC.

cemetery ghost brush nonetheless embodies both contextual variables, i.e., it implies that spirits can cling to visitors’ shoes and frames them as ‘brushable’ or tangible residue, which primes perceptual expectations. As a result, Iverson’s installation operates as a live demonstration of how contextual variables such as expectancy-suggestion effects can stoke or perpetuate anomalous experiences (cf., Lange & Houran, 1997; Simmonds-Moore et al., 2017; Wiseman et al.,



Figure 2. Liability disclaimer as paranormal cue at Bobby Mackey's Music World, Wilder, Kentucky. The prominently displayed warning sign cautions patrons that the establishment is “purported to be haunted,” and disclaims legal responsibility for any ghostly activity. The formal tone and institutional styling function as prestige and credibility cues, potentially activating PC mechanisms such as expectancy framing, social appraisal, and moralization. Positioned alongside media clippings, the sign reinforces the venue’s haunted reputation and primes interpretive resonance among visitors.

2003). This influence is especially pronounced among individuals who are more susceptible to such effects, as shown by research indicating that people who report ghostly episodes tend to score higher on measures of boundary thinness, such as hypnosis-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Kumar & Pekala, 2001; Laythe et al., 2018, 2021).

But this art installation is not the only public instance of such overt priming. Bobby Mackey’s Music World bar in Wilder, Kentucky, similarly warns patrons with a large placard that the establishment assumes no liability for any paranormal activity (Figure 2). Several other well-known paranormal tourism sites employ formal signage to warn visitors of potential ghostly encounters. At India’s Bhangarh Fort, the Archaeological Survey of India apparently prohibits anyone from remaining after sunset due to local legends of curses and restless spirits (Pushkar, n.d.). In Kansas, the privately owned Stull Cemetery displays a prominent ‘Keep out’ sign that specifically cautions against

trespassing after dark to ward off its infamous gatekeeper ghost. New Jersey's Clinton Road 'ghost bridge' features an official county maintenance notice advising drivers to proceed with caution—an indirect warning of paranormal hazards. Romania's Hoia Baci Forest is partially fenced and marked with 'No entry after dusk' signs, following reports of mysterious disappearances and unexplained phenomena (Malorie's Adventures, 2025). In Scotland, UK, the Black Mausoleum in Greyfriars Kirkyard is widely known for 'poltergeist attacks,' with warnings issued prior to tours and online about the potential for physical and mental distress (Ironside, 2018b). And in Philadelphia, Eastern State Penitentiary's annual 'Terror Behind the Walls' Halloween event has included clear disclaimers about 'supernatural experiences,' advising those with heart conditions or severe phobias to refrain from entering (cf. Houran et al., 2020, pp. 299–302).

As Figure 1 shows, the cemetery ghost brush plainly fuses a causal narrative ('ghosts can attach to people') with a visible ritual affordance ('the shoe brush') and a faux-authoritative tone ('City of Portland Bureau of Supernatural Containment'), together encapsulating the three input triggers inherent to the CRM framework. In doing so, it simultaneously (a) provides an explicit interpretive frame, (b) invites embodied enactment, and (c) conveys institutional credibility. The sign also possesses memetic simplicity, making it easy to photograph, caption, and share across social media (e.g., Berger & Milkman, 2012; Hill et al., 2018). Conceptually, these collocated features may serve as a minimal sufficient contextual variable to stimulate a cascading resonance, i.e., they prime priors, provide an enacted response option, and offer a credibility signal that enhances transmissibility, especially in individuals with thinner mental boundaries, or a perceptual-personality profile involving greater synthesis of imagery, ideation, and affect, often leading to heightened sensitivity, creativity, emotional openness, and anomalous experiences (Evans et al., 2019; Kumar & Pekala, 2001; Laythe et al., 2018; Roxburgh et al., 2024; Ventola et al., 2019).

THE CEMETERY GHOST BRUSH IN THE CRM PERSPECTIVE

Table 1 summarizes the nine core mechanisms of PC as organized within the CRM framework (for a detailed presentation with supporting references, see Houran et al., 2025). These mechanisms are grouped into three layers: *input* (i.e., suggestibility, expectancy framing, and embodied simulation), *synchronization* (i.e., shared attention, interpersonal entrainment, and social appraisal), and *scaling* (i.e., prestige amplification, moralization/affective intensity, and feedback loops/threshold dynamics). Each mechanism is defined in terms of its cognitive, affective, or social function, offering a clear operational scaffold for analyzing contagion dynamics in field settings. When activated in sequence, these mechanisms can transform ambiguous or overt stimuli into socially shared meaning and behavior. *The Ghost Brush*

TABLE 1.

Nine PC mechanisms in the three-layer CRM (Houran et al., 2025)

#	Contagion mechanism	Layer	Definition
1	Suggestibility and boundary thinness	Input	Dispositional and state permeability that fuels susceptibility to social cues
2	Expectancy and framing	Input	Verbal or contextual cues that bias priors and shape perception, affect, and action
3	Automatic mimicry and embodied simulation	Input	Rapid sensorimotor or affective mirroring that seeds alignment, amplified by cross-modal mapping in which cues in one sensory channel recruit somatic and affective responses in others
4	Attention synchronization and salience amplification	Synchronization	Shared focus (physical or algorithmic) that raises exposure and signal prominence
5	Interpersonal entrainment and neural synchrony	Synchronization	Temporal alignment of physiological or neural activity supporting coordination
6	Social appraisal and norm signaling	Synchronization	Interpretive/status cues that convert raw affect/perception into social meaning
7	Network and institutional amplifiers	Scaling	Algorithms, media, prestige, and scripts that stabilize and scale local synchrony
8	Moralization and affective intensity	Scaling	Ethical framing and high arousal that increase transmissibility and resistance
9	Feedback loops and threshold dynamics	Scaling	Iterative reinforcement and tippingpoint dynamics that produce nonlinear cascades

installation nicely illustrates how these mechanisms can be engaged to produce a full contagion cascade.

Figure 3 first shows the input layer, where psychological resonance begins with mechanism 1 (suggestibility and boundary thinness). Individuals high in cognitive permeability or transliminality are more likely to internalize ambiguous cues as meaningful (e.g., Thalbourne & Houran, 2000), especially when primed by context (e.g., Houran et al., 2002). For example, a person entering a dimly lit ‘haunted’ setting after hearing suggestive background stories may interpret a stray draft of air or a settling noise as a deliberate presence, reflecting how contextual cues can steer high-transliminal individuals

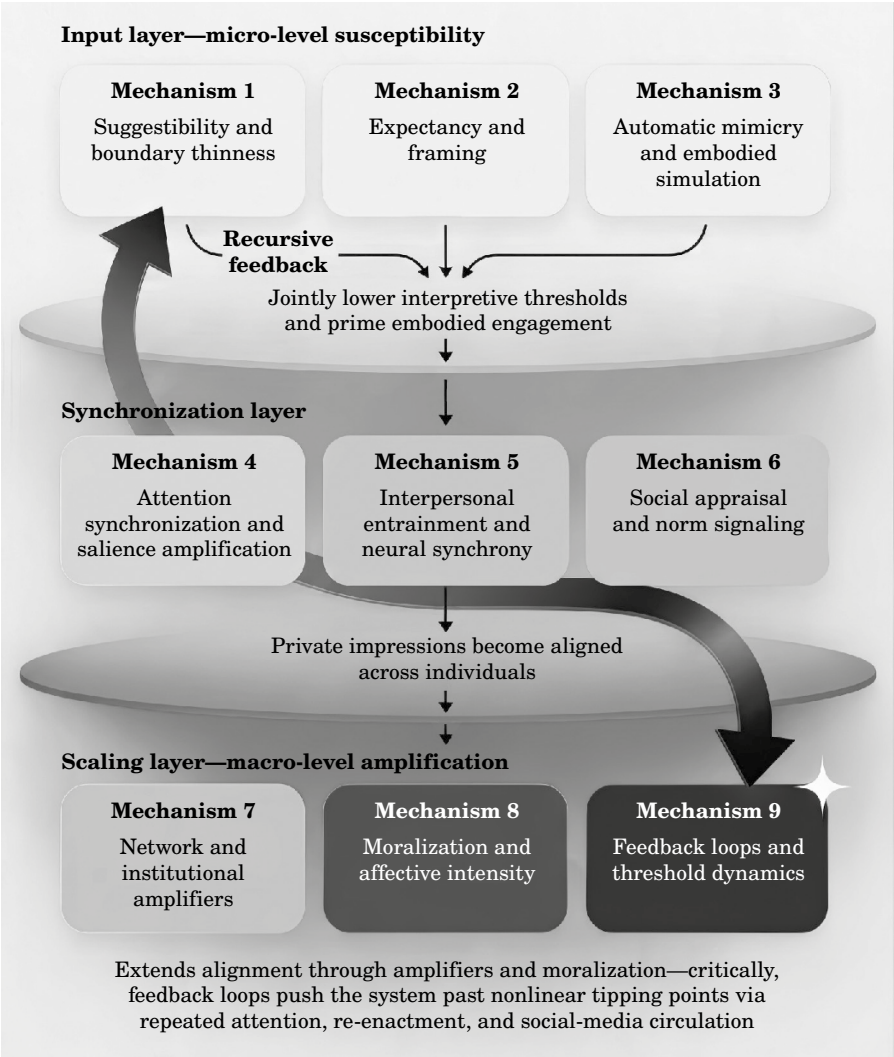


Figure 3. Micro-level susceptibility (input layer) is aligned across individuals (synchronization layer) and amplified through networks and moralization (scaling layer). Mechanism 9's feedback loops are the critical element: repeated attention, re-enactment, and circulation can push the system past nonlinear tipping points even under minimal stimulus conditions, as at The Ghost Brush installation.

toward meaningful interpretations of otherwise ambiguous sensations. This predisposition is amplified by mechanism 2 (expectancy and framing), in which verbal or contextual cues—such as the sign’s ghost-themed caption—bias perceptual priors and lower thresholds for schema-congruent interpretations.

Mechanism 3 (automatic mimicry and embodied simulation) is then activated through ritual affordance. The presence of a simple motor action, such as brushing one's shoe, links cognitive framing to physical enactment, reinforcing belief and producing observable behavior that others can imitate.

This linkage can be further amplified by cross-modal mapping. The body does not process symbolic, visual, and proprioceptive information in isolated channels but integrates them syncretically, such that a visual cue (the sign) recruits tactile affordances (the brush) and affective-somatic responses (a felt sense of contamination or uncanny presence). This synesthetic blending—whereby meaning registered in one sensory channel activates resonant responses in others—means the ghost brush functions not merely as a semantic prompt but as a somatic one. Such cross-modal contagion is likely especially potent for boundary-thin individuals (Thalbourne et al., 2001), whose perceptual systems are already disposed toward synesthetic-like synthesis of imagery, affect, and bodily sensation (Simmonds-Moore et al., 2019), and aligns with broader accounts of embodied meaning-making in which the body is not a passive receiver of cues but an active integrator of cross-modal significance (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2010).

The synchronization layer builds on these primed responses by aligning attention, affect, and behavior across individuals. Mechanism 4 (attention synchronization and salience amplification) occurs when salient artifacts concentrate observers' focus on shared cues. The visual prominence of the brush and sign increases the likelihood that multiple individuals will attend to and interpret the same ambiguous event. Mechanism 5 (interpersonal entrainment and neural synchrony) describes automatic behavioral and physiological alignment among co-present individuals, fostering affective resonance and perceptual convergence; this process is further supported by empathic attunement and mirror-neuron responses that make others' reactions feel intuitively meaningful and contagious.

Critically, this entrainment is not confined to a single sensory modality: co-present individuals may synchronize not only in gaze direction and gesture but in respiratory rhythm, autonomic arousal, and postural adjustment simultaneously, producing a whole-body experience of 'being-in-sync' that carries visceral conviction beyond what any single-channel alignment could generate (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). This multimodal bodily resonance provides a somatic substrate for the shared sense that 'something is happening here,' lending felt credibility to paranormal interpretations that purely cognitive accounts of entrainment tend to underestimate. Mechanism 6 (social appraisal and norm signaling) then transforms private ambiguity into socially endorsed meaning. Observing others brushing their shoes or commenting on the sign provides interpretive cues that validate and normalize the behavior.

At the scaling layer, mechanisms extend local alignment into broader social networks. Mechanism 7 (network and institutional amplifiers) is activated

through prestige and credibility cues. The sign's faux-official tone and formatting function as institutional signals, increasing perceived legitimacy and encouraging imitation and reposting. Mechanism 8 (moralization and affective intensity) enhances transmissibility and resistance to correction. If the sign evokes emotional arousal or moral framing—such as invoking respect for the dead or communal ritualism—this increases the likelihood of viral spread and interpretive entrenchment. Mechanism 9 (feedback loops and threshold dynamics) refers to iterative reinforcement via repeated attention, social endorsement, enacted rituals, or algorithmic boosting that produce nonlinear tipping and persistence. In the ghost brush example, repeated photos, comments, reenacted brushing, and social-media reposts can lock a local interpretive frame into a self-sustaining cascade that persists even after the artifact is removed.

A full contagion cascade, on the ground, typically unfolds as a recognizable experiential arc. Early in the sequence, individuals report subtle shifts in attention and bodily state—heightened vigilance, a sense of 'charged' atmosphere, or ambiguous sensations that feel personally meaningful. As synchronization takes hold, these private impressions become socially contagious: people cluster around the same cues, mirror one another's startled reactions, and begin to trade short, affect-laden interpretations ('Did you feel that?' or 'Something's off here'). Once scaling mechanisms activate, the atmosphere can shift rapidly. Groups may adopt shared rituals (e.g., everyone brushing their shoes 'just in case'), emotional tone intensifies, and ambiguous events are reinterpreted through a common narrative lens. Anxiety, excitement, or moral urgency can escalate, and the experience becomes self-reinforcing: each new reaction validates the last, producing a sense of collective momentum. In extreme cases, this can resemble the early stages of mass psychogenic episodes—heightened arousal, coordinated behavior, and a shared conviction that something significant is unfolding, even in the absence of external influences.

Together, these nine mechanisms form a coherent minimal pathway for contagion. That is, the cemetery ghost brush may shift observers' priors at the input layer, align their attention and behavior at the interpersonal layer, and then gain momentum through prestige cues, moral framing, and reinforcing feedback at the network layer. For individuals high in boundary-thinness—particularly those prone to psychological absorption or transliminality—the sign can therefore operate as a compact contagion engine, converting private ambiguity into patterned ritual and shared belief without invoking any transmissible supernatural agent. This demonstrates how even simple artifacts, when structured to engage CRM mechanisms, can propagate meaning and behavior across social space (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Understanding why some individuals are especially responsive to these cues requires examining the dispositional traits that heighten sensitivity to contextual prompts and suggestion. Psychological absorption, a disposition

toward deep imaginative involvement and immersive attention, heightens sensitivity to symbolic and contextual cues (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). Transliminality similarly reflects a heightened permeability to psychological material crossing thresholds of awareness and is associated with anomalous perception, magical ideation, and modestly increased susceptibility to suggestion (Irving et al., 2024).

Such tendencies are further amplified by suggestibility: thin-boundary individuals often show elevated imaginative or hypnotic responsiveness, making them more reactive to contextual prompts, implicit cues, and anomalous interpretations (e.g., Acunzo et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2019). Although research is mixed on whether transliminality and hypnotic responsiveness reflect a shared underlying factor or partially independent pathways (cf. Lynn et al., 2015), both reliably predict a greater propensity to internalize and elaborate suggested meanings. These overlapping sensitivities help to explain how a single, well-framed sign can catalyze coordinated belief and behavior among those most attuned to suggestion-driven interpretive shifts.

MANAGING CONTAGION IN FIELD INVESTIGATIONS

The preceding is instructive for spontaneous case researchers who routinely operate in environments primed for PC effects, wherein *a priori* belief, ambiguous stimuli, heightened expectancy, and group dynamics can rapidly escalate private impressions into shared beliefs and ritualized behaviors (e.g., Childs & Murray, 2010; Drinkwater et al., 2019; Eaton, 2019; Hill et al., 2018; Ironside & Wooffitt, 2021). The cemetery ghost brush demonstrates how environmental cues—when structured to engage one or more of the nine mechanisms of the CRM framework—can fuel full contagion cascades. To preserve interpretive integrity and minimize false positives, researchers must therefore actively monitor and mitigate these mechanisms across the model's three layers of input, synchronization, and scaling.

This need for careful mitigation is further underscored by findings in clinical parapsychology showing that different categories of anomalous experiences carry distinct anxiety profiles and that boundary-setting practices can play a protective role in shaping how such experiences unfold. Research consistently indicates that spontaneous, intrusive, or poorly integrated anomalous experiences are more strongly associated with anxiety and dysregulation, whereas structured, meaning-laden, or ritually contained experiences tend to correlate with better psychological adjustment (for a clinical discussion, see Houran et al., 2026b). This distinction highlights the importance of boundary maintenance as a psychological safeguard. Blackmore (1994), for example, observed that even simple rituals—such as explicitly ‘closing’ a Ouija session—can help participants to re-establish cognitive and emotional boundaries after liminal engagement. Similarly, Roxburgh and Roe (2011) found that mediums who employ clear interpersonal, temporal, and symbolic boundaries

report greater well-being and fewer anxiety-linked effects than those lacking an organizing framework. These findings complement evidence that certain practices, including Ouija board use, can be associated with elevated anxiety when undertaken without such structuring strategies (e.g., Escolà-Gascón et al., 2025). Together, this literature suggests that the presence or absence of boundary-maintaining frameworks is a key factor differentiating healthy from less healthy engagement with anomalous phenomena, reinforcing the need for investigators to attend to boundary conditions when assessing or managing contagion-prone environments.

At the input layer, these clinical distinctions underscore why mechanism 1 (suggestibility and boundary thinness) and mechanism 2 (expectancy and framing) require especially careful management in field settings, as both can heighten anxiety-linked interpretations and accelerate contagion dynamics. It should be noted that narratives influencing expectancy and framing may be present *in situ* (such as the ghost brush sign) or prior to investigations, through verbal or online discourse (Eaton, 2019; Ironside & Smith, 2024). Investigators should therefore avoid priming participants with leading narratives, sensational language, or paranormal labels before data collection. Instead, they should document baseline expectations, assess prior knowledge of a location, and screen for individual differences in transliminality or cognitive permeability that may bias perception. Mechanism 3 (automatic mimicry and embodied simulation) can be instigated by ritual affordances—such as inviting participants to touch objects, reenact events, or engage in symbolic gestures. These should be used cautiously and only after initial observations are complete, to avoid contaminating spontaneous responses.

In the synchronization layer, mechanism 4 (attention synchronization and salience amplification) and mechanism 5 (interpersonal entrainment and neural synchrony) can be inadvertently activated by shared focus on ambiguous cues—such as flickering lights, temperature shifts, or electronic voice phenomena playback. During investigations, interaction (talk, embodied action and expression) with research colleagues, study participants, shared objects, or the immediate environment shapes both interpretation and co-experience (Ironside, 2018a; Ironside & Wooffitt, 2021). Investigators should stagger exposure, isolate observers when feasible, film participants during fieldwork, and use blind protocols to reduce convergent attention. Mechanism 6 (social appraisal and norm signaling) is especially influential during post-event discussions where narrative editing (Eaton, 2019) and social alignment of reported paranormal activity may emerge (Childs & Murray, 2010)—for an in-depth discussion on related ‘positive’ gaslighting (or social pressure to endorse paranormal interpretations) and ‘negative’ gaslighting (or social pressure to resist paranormal interpretations) with individuals or groups, see Drinkwater et al. (2019). To prevent interpretive convergence, investigators should delay group debriefs, record individual impressions independently,

consider filming collective debriefs, and avoid affirming or dismissing others' experiences until all data are collected. Filming participants during fieldwork and debriefs enables investigators to identify moments of alignment, editing, and joint interpretation as they emerge in talk and bodily conduct, and to assess how these moments may evoke contagious effects.

At the scaling layer, mechanism 7 (network and institutional amplifiers), mechanism 8 (moralization and affective intensity), and mechanism 9 (feedback loops and threshold dynamics) pose risks when findings are shared publicly. This may be especially true for online dissemination. Digital content reinforces and co-creates the narrative and perception of haunted places which may, in turn, influence suggestibility, expectancy and framing (mechanisms 1 and 2) for future investigations (Ironsides, 2023, 2024). The use of official-looking signage, branded equipment, or authoritative commentary can unintentionally amplify perceived legitimacy and increase viral spread. Furthermore, the use of various instrumentation, as reviewed by Houran and Lange (1998), should also be appropriately minimized to further lessen the ritual and perceived legitimacy effect. Investigators should contextualize findings with epistemic humility, clearly distinguish observation from interpretation, and avoid moral framing that could heighten arousal or resistance to correction. To blunt feedback loops and raise contagion thresholds (mechanism 9), investigators should delay or moderate public dissemination of preliminary observations, attach provisional and contextualized disclaimers to shared media, prefer controlled release (e.g., embargoes, moderated channels), introduce friction to sharing (e.g., delayed uploads, moderation), and monitor early network spread to insert corrective framing before amplification reaches critical mass.

Table 2 operationalizes this mapping into procedural safeguards, converting a conceptual model into a practical checklist. Each recommendation is aligned with a specific mechanism in the CRM framework, offering researchers a practical framework to minimize interpretive distortion and enhance methodological control. These strategies are particularly important in emotionally charged or symbolically loaded environments—such as culturally or sub-culturally defined 'hotspots'—where contagion cascades are most likely to occur. Understanding the local religious, spiritual, and cultural discourses is essential because these narratives shape investigators' and participants' expectations, interpretive frameworks, and susceptibility to suggestion. Culture influences not only how experiences are interpreted but also what counts as anomalous in the first place (e.g., Larøi et al., 2014). To be sure, PC is not merely a theoretical concern—it is a practical variable that can shape what is seen, felt, and believed during field investigations. By systematically mitigating the nine contagion mechanisms, investigators can reduce interpretive distortion, enhance empirical rigor, and foster more credible engagement with anomalous phenomena. Together, these strategies constitute a standardized control framework for anomalistic fieldwork, paralleling bias-reduction protocols in

TABLE 2.

Strategies to mitigate PC in field investigations (mapped to the nine CRM mechanisms)

#	Contagion mechanism	Field strategy
1	Suggestibility and boundary thinness	Assess investigators' transliminality levels to document baseline susceptibility prior to exposure, enabling careful interpretation of responses and tailoring of support. Screening should inform awareness and preparatory measures rather than serve as a criterion for exclusion, with particular attention to ethical considerations when individuals score at the extreme high end
2	Expectancy and framing	Assess prior knowledge of a location; avoid priming with paranormal labels or sensational language prior to data collection
3	Automatic mimicry and embodied simulation	Delay ritual enactments (touching, reenactment) until after initial observations
4	Attention synchronization and salience amplification	Stagger exposure; isolate observers when feasible to reduce convergent attention
5	Interpersonal entrainment and neural synchrony	Use blind protocols and minimize group observation of ambiguous cues; film investigators/ participants during fieldwork
6	Social appraisal and norm signaling	Record impressions independently; delay debriefs; record/film debriefs; avoid interpretive reinforcement
7	Network and institutional amplifiers	Avoid authoritative branding/signage; contextualize claims; limit prestige cues
8	Moralization and affective intensity	Refrain from moral/emotional framing; use provisional language and epistemic humility
9	Feedback loops and threshold dynamics	Delay or moderate public posting; attach contextual disclaimers; insert sharing friction; monitor early spread and intervene to raise thresholds

experimental science and marking a step toward cumulative methodology in parapsychology.

But might contagion effects also manifest in parapsychological ways? This intriguing question perhaps has no definitive answer at this time, though we can speculate. Cox (1961) discussed the notion of 'imitative fraud,' which describes trickery or the intentional manufacture of poltergeist-like events by individuals

out of an apparent need for attention or validation. This underscores that some paranormal reports are best understood as socially reinforced behaviors, whether fraudulently or sincerely experienced. Covert deception and other forms of ambiguous stimuli can also reinforce paranormal belief (Wiseman et al., 2003) or fuel a sense of enchantment (Lange & Houran, 2021) within and across individuals, which might be conducive for the production of legitimate parapsychological outcomes (for a discussion, see McClenon, 2024). This line of reasoning implies that socially mediated mechanisms—whether rooted in imitation, deception, or belief—may not only influence spontaneous anomalous experiences (Childs & Murray, 2010; Drinkwater et al., 2019; Eaton, 2019; Ironside & Wooffitt, 2021; Lange & Houran, 2001) but also serve as contagious catalysts for putative psi across certain networks.

Complementing these psychosocial perspectives, Batcheldor (1984) proposed that the removal of disbelief itself can sometimes facilitate unusual effects, suggesting that shifts in cognitive set or expectancy may not merely reflect underlying psychological states but can actively modulate the likelihood of anomalous phenomena being experienced and reported. In Batcheldor's view, when individuals suspend skepticism, adjust their thresholds for what counts as possible, and become more open to anomalous interpretation, the conditions are altered such that unusual events are more apt to occur or be perceived—either through psychological mechanisms, parapsychological processes, or an interaction of both. This balance between expectancy, cognitive openness, and experiential outcome provides a useful counterpoint to strictly social contagion accounts, enriching our appreciation of how belief systems and interpretive frameworks themselves contribute to the manifestation or spread of anomalous experiences.

Empirical work on collective anomalous phenomena suggests that psi-type effects are more likely to manifest during collective experiences involving synchronized emotions or intentions, such as religious rituals or cultural celebrations (e.g., Bancel, 2017; Nelson & Bancel, 2011; Nelson et al., 1996; Radin, 2023, 2025), and that cultural framing influences both what is reported and how it is construed by witnesses and investigators alike. Walter von Lucadou's model of pragmatic information (von Lucadou, 1995, 2015) likewise offers a provocative theoretical bridge between parapsychological phenomena and contagion dynamics. Rather than treating poltergeist episodes as externally imposed disturbances, von Lucadou reconceptualized them as emergent properties of complex social systems—specifically, as nonlocal correlations arising within psychosocially entangled networks of individuals under conditions of heightened stress, emotional arousal, and interpersonal tension. In this framework, the 'poltergeist' is less a discrete entity or force than a systemic expression of a destabilized social field, in which anomalous perceptions and experiences are co-produced by the relational dynamics among those present rather than generated by any single individual. This position is

elaborated theoretically through generalized quantum theory, which formalizes the conditions under which nonlocal, acausal correlations can emerge in psychological and biological systems beyond the domain of physics proper (von Lucadou et al., 2007; Walach et al., 2014).

This reconceptualization resonates intriguingly with contagion-based accounts of anomalous experience. If poltergeist phenomena emerge from the psychological and emotional entanglement of a social system, then the mechanisms driving their onset and escalation bear meaningful structural resemblance to those implicated in mass psychogenic illness and related PC effects—particularly suggestibility, interpersonal entrainment, expectancy-driven perception, and self-reinforcing feedback loops. The characteristic trajectory of poltergeist cases, typically involving an escalating cluster of reported anomalies that peaks before declining as social attention intensifies, mirrors the threshold and tipping-point dynamics described in cascade models of contagion (von Lucadou, 2001). von Lucadou's well-documented 'decline effect'—whereby anomalous correlations weaken systematically as external scrutiny increases—is consistent with the disruption of the closed social feedback loops that contagion frameworks identify as necessary conditions for cascade maintenance (von Lucadou et al., 2007; von Lucadou & Zahradnik, 2004).

Where the model of pragmatic information diverges most sharply from conventional contagion accounts, however, is in its insistence that the correlations underlying poltergeist phenomena are genuinely nonlocal—irreducible to purely psychological transmission between individuals—and that attempts to extract pragmatic information from the system will inevitably suppress the very effects under observation (von Lucadou, 1995; Walach et al., 2014). This positions von Lucadou's framework as neither straightforwardly parapsychological nor conventionally psychosocial, but as occupying a theoretically generative middle ground in which the boundaries between contagion, suggestion, and anomalous interaction remain productively unresolved.

But a neutral stance is warranted regarding the source of such putative effects. Although our discussion has emphasized living-agent psi in the context of paranormal contagion, this does not preclude discarnate-based interpretations. Rather, living-agent psi is highlighted because it aligns more directly with the psychological and social-cognitive mechanisms outlined in the CRM framework, and because it offers testable predictions about how stress, expectation, interpersonal dynamics, and boundary-thinness might generate or modulate anomalous events. At the same time, discarnate models remain part of the broader theoretical landscape, and scholars have long noted that ghostly episodes can be conceptualized through multiple lenses—including survival-based, environmental, cultural-symbolic, and psychodynamic perspectives (Houran & Lange, 2001). CRM does not adjudicate among these ontological positions; instead, it provides a mechanism-level account of how experiences become organized, amplified, and shared, regardless of their ultimate source.

These collective data points raise the possibility that various parapsychological findings (and thus potentially different forms of psi) may involve underlying PC cascades, though this connection remains entirely speculative. Nevertheless, interpreting clustered reports through mechanistic cues or explicit demand characteristics—such as *The Ghost Brush* installation—offers three key conceptual advantages for parapsychologists and field investigators. *First*, it shifts causal language from metaphor and mysticism to identifiable social-cognitive processes, aligning interpretation with cumulative scientific dialog on contagion and cascades (Christakis & Fowler, 2013; Hatfield et al., 1993; Houran & Lange, 1996). *Second*, it explains multimodal convergence—affect, perception, and behavior—as expected outcomes of the same resonance dynamics rather than as disparate phenomena requiring multiple unrelated explanations (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Friston, 2005). *Third*, it demonstrates that scaling phenomena do not necessitate mysterious transmission. Rather, well-understood network accelerants and threshold effects are arguably sufficient to account for rapid spread (Berger, 2011; Granovetter, 1978). This conceptual PC reframing encourages parapsychological reasoning that is both parsimonious and consistent with broader social and cognitive theory.

Given its integrative structure and direct applicability to spontaneous case research on ghostly episodes and kindred phenomena, we recommend that Houran et al.'s (2025) paper outlining the CRM framework be considered fundamental reading along with existing guidance on *ethical* (Baker & O'Keeffe, 2007), *procedural* (Parsons, 2018), and *educational* (Massullo et al., 2025) practices for aspiring field investigators. A key next step is to translate this framework into real-world settings where most paranormal investigators operate casually or without formal research training. One promising pathway is an intervention-based field study in which investigators receive a brief, structured educational module on contagion dynamics, anxiety-linked phenomenology, and basic documentation standards, followed by pre-/post-assessments of anxiety, expectancy, and interpretive discipline during actual investigations. Such work would test whether CRM-informed training measurably reduces contagion-driven distortion and increases interpretive clarity, while also generating a scalable model for community education that can be adopted by teams, workshops, and public-facing paranormal organizations. In this way, the CRM framework becomes not only a conceptual tool for scholars but a practical, evidence-based intervention for improving field practice among the groups most actively generating spontaneous case data.

DISCUSSION

Our examination of *The Ghost Brush* art installation shows how a single, well-constructed environmental cue can activate the full spectrum of standard contagion mechanisms, offering a compact and realistic illustration of the CRM framework in action. Beyond its descriptive value, this case study invites broader

reflection on how parapsychologists conceptualize and investigate ‘waves, clusters, or spikes’ of anomalous events in spontaneous cases. Rather than defaulting to metaphysical explanations or invoking transmissible paranormal agents, CRM reframes contagion-type effects as emergent properties of social-cognitive dynamics—mechanisms that are identifiable, testable, and often observable in real-time (Houran et al., 2025).

Note that this paper only comprises a conceptual exercise rather than the report of a controlled empirical study. Our analysis simply operationalizes the CRM framework to explain how a demand characteristic or embedded cue can plausibly engage the nine contagion mechanisms in natural or structured settings, though it does not include systematic participant sampling, experimental manipulation, or blinded measurement required to establish causal efficacy. Moreover, it remains unknown whether the cemetery ghost brush itself has generated any clusters or flurries of spontaneous experiences among visitors, as to our knowledge there are currently no published academic studies or documented media reports addressing its perceptual or attitudinal impacts.

Still, this outside art installation, and related variants on its underlying demand characteristics documented elsewhere, constitutes an ecologically valid stimulus which is readily adaptable for rigorously designed field experiments and quasi-experimental protocols that build off prior efforts (e.g., Escolà-Gascón et al., 2025; French et al., 2009; Houran & Lange, 1996; Lange & Houran, 1997; Simmonds-Moore et al., 2017). These can include randomized exposure conditions, pre-post expectancy assessment, blinded observer arms, staggered group entry, and network tracing of reportage—each of which could empirically test CRM’s proposed pathways and quantify contagion thresholds.

The CRM reframing nonetheless carries significant implications for both theory and field practice. Theoretically, CRM bridges parapsychology with mainstream cognitive science, affective neuroscience, and network theory, offering a unifying framework that accounts for multimodal convergence—where emotion, perception, and behavior synchronize across individuals and groups (Dumas et al., 2010; Hasson et al., 2012). It also provides a mechanism-rich alternative to vague constructs like ‘energy’ or ‘presence,’ grounding interpretation in falsifiable processes such as predictive coding, mimicry, and threshold dynamics (Friston, 2005; Granovetter, 1978). This shift from metaphor to mechanism strengthens parapsychology’s epistemic posture and aligns it with cumulative scientific dialogue on contagion and cascades (Christakis & Fowler, 2013; Kramer et al., 2014).

A fuller account of these dynamics should also address how cross-modal mapping contributes to experiential intensity. Syncretic-type processes may constitute an underexplored substrate through which the CRM’s mechanisms gain somatic traction. For boundary-thin or highly transliminal individuals in particular, the integration of visual, tactile, auditory, and affective signals into

a unified experiential gestalt can blur the distinction between what is being sensed and what is being imagined, accelerating the transition from private impression to shared interpretive frame. This embodied dimension of contagion aligns with phenomenological and enactive accounts of perception in which the body is the primary site of meaning-making rather than a downstream output of cognitive processing (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2010; Noë, 2004), and with emerging research linking sensory processing sensitivity to anomalous experience and synaesthetic-like perceptual blending (Roxburgh et al., 2024; Simmonds-Moore et al., 2019). Future studies might usefully assess cross-modal sensory integration alongside existing measures of transliminality and boundary thinness to determine whether syncretic processing moderates both susceptibility to contagion and the multimodal richness of reported paranormal experiences.

Practically, CRM equips investigators with a diagnostic lens for fieldwork. It encourages pre-emptive design strategies to minimize interpretive distortion—such as blinding, staggered exposure, filming participants during fieldwork and post-investigation discussions, and independent reporting—and it highlights the importance of monitoring not just what participants perceive, but how those perceptions are shaped, produced, and shared (Childs & Murray, 2010; Drinkwater et al., 2019; Eaton, 2019; Ironside & Wooffitt, 2021; Lange & Houran, 2001). By turning the focus on themselves as a *group*, investigators can add the social environment as an analytical frame during fieldwork to identify and mitigate moments of potential contagion arising from co-presence and dynamical interaction. The model also cautions against inadvertently amplifying contagion through prestige cues, moral framing, or premature narrative closure (Brady et al., 2017; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). In this sense, CRM functions as both a conceptual scaffold and a methodological safeguard.

A practical challenge, however, is that many participants in paranormal investigations—especially amateur or recreational groups—are drawn to these settings precisely because they enjoy the shared meaning-making, emotional arousal, and communal storytelling that synchronization and scaling mechanisms produce. Individuals who are already belief-prone or boundary-thin often self-select into such activities, increasing the likelihood of contagion dynamics from the outset. Bringing CRM-informed safeguards into these mainstream contexts therefore requires a balance between methodological rigor and the social value participants derive from the experience. One workable compromise is to preserve the group's meaning-making rituals but shift them after individual interviews and independent reporting. This sequencing allows participants to enjoy the communal interpretive process without contaminating primary data. Filming is especially valuable here (cf. Table 2): it provides an objective record of interactional dynamics, captures subtle moments of alignment or suggestion,

and allows investigators to reconstruct how interpretations emerged without relying solely on retrospective accounts.

When contagion reaches ‘critical mass,’ the experiential dynamics often shift from subtle alignment to rapid, self-reinforcing escalation. At this tipping point, the group’s interpretive frame becomes dominant enough that ambiguous cues are no longer treated as ambiguous: ordinary sounds, bodily sensations, or environmental fluctuations are rapidly assimilated into a shared narrative, and dissenting interpretations lose traction. Affective intensity typically rises—attendees may report heightened vigilance, fear, excitement, or a sense of ‘charged’ atmosphere—and behavioral coordination becomes more pronounced, with individuals clustering around the same cues, mirroring one another’s reactions, or engaging in improvised rituals that feel necessary or protective. Social media amplification can accelerate this process, transforming a local interpretive loop into a broader network cascade. In extreme cases, the pattern resembles early-stage mass psychogenic episodes, where emotional contagion, expectancy, and escalating arousal produce a temporary but compelling sense of collective significance. Understanding these dynamics underscores why CRM-informed safeguards—staggered exposure, independent reporting, delayed group discussion, and continuous filming—are essential for preventing interpretive runaway while still preserving opportunities for post-hoc communal meaning-making.

That said, CRM opens new avenues for experimental research. By isolating and manipulating specific mechanisms—such as expectancy framing, attention synchronization, or the pacing of micro-cues—researchers can test causal pathways and quantify contagion thresholds. Systematic testing becomes more powerful when the model is analytically decomposed into its constituent phases: (a) the introduction of cues, (b) the perceptual uptake of those cues, (c) the cognitive appraisal that follows, (d) the emotional resonance that emerges, and (e) the eventual behavioral propagation. Treating these phases as separable but interdependent allows researchers to perturb one stage at a time and observe where amplification accelerates, stalls, or reverses.

This kind of phase-based analysis supports a range of methodological strategies. Micro-experimental manipulations can vary the timing, intensity, or ambiguity of cues to reveal how expectancy and synchrony take shape. Sequential process-tracing methods—such as think-aloud protocols, reaction-time measures, or physiological monitoring—can capture how individuals move from one phase to the next. Network-level simulations can then stress test how small perturbations in early phases scale into collective outcomes, making it possible to estimate tipping points and saturation effects. Ethnographic or interaction-analytic observation adds a complementary layer by examining how people actually engage with a hot spot or installation, documenting how attention is recruited, how expectations are negotiated, and how resonance spreads through micro-interactions. Such close-up observation is especially

valuable for identifying tacit behaviors, improvisations, and contextual contingencies that controlled experiments may overlook.

Together, these approaches shift the field from post-hoc interpretation to proactive hypothesis-testing, advancing the study of contagion from descriptive casework to predictive modeling. They also underscore the need for interdisciplinary collaboration with social psychologists, cognitive neuroscientists, anthropologists, and complexity theorists who study similar multi-stage dynamics in other domains (e.g., Berger, 2011; Berger & Milkman, 2012; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Finally, the example of the cemetery ghost brush underscores the importance of cultural and contextual sensitivity. What induces cascading resonance in one setting may be inert or ironic in another. Investigators must remain attuned to local norms, symbolic meanings, and network configurations that modulate contagion potential (Drinkwater et al., 2022; Lange & Houran, 2021). CRM does not claim universality; rather, it offers a flexible template for charting how specific cues interact with specific audiences under specific conditions to produce specific outcomes.

Viewed through this lens, CRM transforms contagion from a vague, folkloric-like placeholder into a structured, empirically tractable framework—one that parapsychologists cannot afford to ignore. It is important to understand that CRM is not a metaphor for groupthink, i.e., “a strong concurrence-seeking tendency that interferes with effective group decision making” (American Psychological Association, 2023). It is instead a mechanism map. Each layer—input, synchronization, and scaling—marks a distinct diagnostic zone that investigators can monitor in real-time rather than treating contagion effects as a mysterious residue of the supernatural. This shift is not merely semantic; it is epistemological. It demands that field investigators in particular move beyond anecdote and ambiance toward operationalization, measurement, and falsifiability.

The CRM framework and associated PC literature challenge researchers to abandon passive stances toward ‘contagion’ as a presumptively parapsychological or inexplicable effect and instead embrace it as a diagnostic lens, a methodological control, and a generative engine for new hypotheses (cf. Houran et al., 2025). Properly applied, the acknowledgement of standard psychological mechanisms does not necessarily diminish the mystery of ghostly episodes and other ‘catchy’ or memetic-like anomalous experiences—it sharpens it, stripping away the noise of social-cognitive resonance to reveal what, if anything, remains. In this way, PC becomes not a contaminant of inquiry, but a crucible for testing the resilience of certain parapsychological claims. If the field is to mature scientifically, it must confront the possibility that some, or many, of its most compelling ghostly episodes are not wholly evidence of the extraordinary, but manifestations of ordinary minds in extraordinary synchrony.

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RESEARCH NOTE: SCEPTICAL OF SURVIVAL—AN APPRAISAL OF THE COUNTER-ADVOCATE POSITION

BY CHRIS ROE

INTRODUCTION

A broad range of scholars and scientists have presented the case for post-mortem survival, drawing on evidence from an array of sources and evaluating it in the light of counter-explanations that seek to explain the phenomena in terms that are consistent with a materialistic worldview. From this standpoint, consciousness is solely a product of brain activity, and ceases when the brain perishes. When addressing these counter-explanations, proponents usually take a narrow view that focuses on only those arguments that bear on the specific phenomenon under consideration. In this essay review, I intend to consider the sceptical response more broadly; a perspective that allows me to identify any general patterns or strategies that have been adopted to counter the survival hypothesis across all its various forms, and to test the extent to which those objections represent reasonable interpretations of data rather than more shallow rhetorical tactics. Criticism and disagreement are healthy characteristics of scientific practice—they provide important checks and balances against confirmatory bias. Competing theories or interpretations help clarify claims, reveal assumptions, and test evidence. My purpose is therefore to determine whether there are sceptical arguments that merit serious attention and might help in future to direct the search for and evaluation of evidence that bears on the question of survival. It is not my intention to evaluate the case for survival per se, or comment on proposed mechanisms by which post-mortem survival might be effected (e.g., see Moreira-Almeida et al., 2022; Rivas et al., 2023).

When prominent sceptic Ray Hyman was tasked with providing a critical assessment of the field of parapsychology, he recognised that it would be practically impossible to review the entire literature. He decided instead to focus on one exemplar that he could interrogate thoroughly, on the grounds that “it would be fairer to try to assess the case for parapsychology at its best. I suspected that the typical contribution to any research enterprise is mediocre and that the viability of a research program is best judged by its strongest representatives” (Hyman, 1985, p. 4). With this in mind, I will take as my focus the collection of essays published in *The Myth of an Afterlife* (Martin &

Augustine, 2015). Comprising thirty chapters and covering six hundred and seventy-five pages, this substantial collection is described in the publisher's cover comments as "a strong, comprehensive, and up-to-date casebook of the chief arguments against an afterlife", so we might be confident that it offers a fair reflection of contemporary sceptics' responses to the types of evidence that have been interpreted as suggesting post-mortem survival.

In identifying common arguments raised there, I will take my lead from a similar analysis I undertook when appraising sceptics' objections to the case for experimental parapsychological phenomena (Roe, 2017). On that occasion, I compared sceptical contributions to Krippner and Friedman's (2010) book, *Debating Psychic Experience*, with critical commentaries that had been published twenty-five years earlier (for a summary and critique, see Honorton, 1993). This allowed me to explore how the sceptical position had responded to the significant advances in methods and enormous accumulation of data that had occurred in that time. Disappointingly, I found that there had been no appreciable progress in the nature or quality of sceptical arguments; indeed, sceptics' appraisals of the evidence showed very little familiarity with the actual activities and findings of contemporary parapsychology and relied instead on unsubstantiated assertions that were often too vague to be testable. On the few occasions when sceptics referred to particulars, I discovered that they tended to cherry-pick examples that supported their cause rather than those that were representative of the research area (a form of straw man argument) or would misrepresent the research in ways that turned it into a parody of itself. It will be interesting to see if the standard of scepticism is any higher when it comes to rejoinders to claims for survival that appear in *The Myth of an Afterlife*.

ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN AWAY BELIEF IN SURVIVAL

A number of chapters contend that survival is impossible on various a priori grounds that allow them to explain away claims for its occurrence without having to consider any empirical evidence at all. A whole section is devoted to philosophical or theoretical objections of this sort. Some chapters are effectively a challenge to dualism, and rehearse objections based on the difficulties in explaining how an immaterial thinking substance could interact with a material unthinking substance (e.g., Horder, Chapter 9; Kim, Chapter 13)¹ and whether such interaction would violate energy conservation (Wilson, Chapter 14). These concerns do not relate specifically to the issue of post-mortem survival, so thankfully I do not have to devote space to them here. Other contributors are troubled by the inconceivable nature of any supposed afterlife.² For example,

1. When referring to chapters from *The Myth of an Afterlife*, I have given the author and chapter number rather than the full citation, so that the reference list does not become unwieldy. All other sources are cited in the conventional fashion.

2. Lester (Chapter 30) criticises near-death experiences for telling us little about the nature of post-mortem existence, but that seems an unwarranted expectation, rather like expecting that someone who paddles at the beach should be able to describe what life is like under the sea.

some (e.g., Drange, Chapter 12; Lester, Chapter 30) see personal identity as inextricably tied to corporeal characteristics, so that discarnate personalities would have no basis on which to recognise each other. This seems untenable to me on a number of grounds. Firstly, we have no trouble making attributions to another person without necessarily having access to particular physical properties of that person—we can confidently communicate with others via body language, a telephone call, an email or a postcard, despite those media having no common substance. Indeed, we have no trouble making attributions to people who are physically absent even when they have not intended to communicate with us (e.g., when they have forgotten, again, to clear away their breakfast things, or have series-linked yet another television programme). These recognitions rely on our shared history and a capacity to see features of the ‘interaction’ as characteristic of them. We are also quite able to recognise the identity of a person even when they have physically changed (e.g., because they have grown up, have gained or lost weight, have hair that has gone grey). It seems clear, then, that people are not slavishly tied to specific unchanging physical attributes of a person as the only (or even primary) means by which they can be recognised. In a similar vein, contemporary mediumistic communications do not typically rely on materialisation or personation through the medium to establish identity but rather do so by capturing some quality of the discarnate’s personality and interests and by conveying information that is known only to the deceased and the sitter (e.g., Braude, 2013).

The identity objection seems to reflect a more general presumption that conditions that pertain in spacetime dimensions that are the context for our current incorporated experience would necessarily apply to any post-mortem existence, so that it is impossible to comprehend how we might, for example, perceive without sense organs, or remember things without a hippocampus. Thus, Blackmore (Chapter 17) assumes that any astral body would need to consist of all the structures found in the physical body because it must perform the same functions (perception, movement) in the same way as that physical body. This creates the paradox that if the astral body is less substantial than the physical body, then it would be incapable of these functions; but if it were sufficiently substantial to be capable of these functions, then it would be incapable of feats that seem characteristic of astral bodies, such as passing through physical barriers or moving rapidly over large distances. But this line of thinking seems to me rather like the fallacy of affirming the consequent: just because perception *can* be achieved via a particular physical system does not imply that perception *can only* be achieved by that method. This logical error influences the kind of evidence that is presented, with the focus being wholly on confirming the already established link between our sensory systems and subjective perceptions as they are experienced in embodied persons. But this does not demonstrate that sensory systems are the *only* pathway to perception, any more than the claim that all four-legged animals are dogs can

be demonstrated by showing that each dog we see does, indeed, have four legs. The art to testing a claim is to look for refutations of it, so that closely inspecting just a single cat can allow us to reject the claim that all four-legged animals are dogs. Is there a corollary when it comes to sensory systems and perception? Well, experiments designed to test for extrasensory perception seem to show that people are capable of accurate perceptions under circumstances that do not involve the peripheral visual system (cf. Baptista et al., 2015; Cardena, 2018), and psychokinesis experiments indicate that physical effects can be achieved without being mediated by the psychomotor system (Roe et al., 2015; Varvoglis & Bancel, 2015). Alas, the philosophical chapters show little appetite for seeking out and engaging with empirical evidence that might challenge their assumptions.

Another way in which belief in survival is explained away a priori is by identifying supposed psychosocial benefits in holding the belief irrespective of its truth. If these can be shown to account for belief, then there may be no need to scrutinise the believed-in phenomena. For example, Stewart-Williams (Foreword) rather grandly refers to ‘wishful thinking theory’ as:

belief in life after death may eliminate—or at least weaken—the fear of personal extinction, the overwhelming sadness we experience when a loved one dies, and the sense that a life of finite duration would be meaningless ... In short, people invent, retain and refuse to relinquish religious beliefs because they provide a balm and salve for the pains of life—our own and those of the people they care about. (p. xv)

Similarly, Gennaro and Fishman (Chapter 5) claim that “historically, belief in dualism has often been theologically motivated by the understandable desire for immortality” (p. 107). Of course, it’s not clear that all flavours of afterlife are so simple or comforting (one only need think of a Hieronymus Bosch painting), and for my part the prospect of simple annihilation seems a much less trepidatious prospect than the unknown of an afterlife.

Augustine (p. 11) identifies religious indoctrination as a chief reason for belief in survival after death, and Stewart-Williams goes on to suggest that paranormal beliefs provide a means of controlling society by offering additional rewards for ‘good’ behaviour and punishments for ‘bad’ behaviour. This sounds rather like the social marginality hypothesis, which has been described in detail by Irwin (e.g., 2009)—while that theory is quite elegant in positioning afterlife beliefs as a form of psychosocial compensation for current injustices or hardships, sadly numerous attempts to support it empirically, as documented by Irwin, have been unsuccessful.

Taking a different tack, Lange and Houran (Chapter 23) avoid having to engage with empirical claims concerning hauntings and poltergeists by arguing that since ambiguous psychological and physical phenomena can be interpreted as paranormal under certain circumstances, then this warrants the development of a theory of hauntings and poltergeists that focuses on

the affective and cognitive dynamics of people's interpretation of ambiguous stimuli. While not without value (for a more detailed review, see Roe, 2024), this approach adopted in isolation seems akin to acknowledging that some people who claim to be ill are prone to hypochondria and then proceeding to adopt a model of human illness that focuses only on factors that affect hypochondria. The UK's National Health Service would be in a very sorry state indeed. Additionally, the approach relies on the presumption that apparitional experiences are usually ambiguous in form, when that is clearly not the case. Take, for example, the many witnesses of the Enfield phenomena (Playfair, 1980), or the detailed reports of after-death communications (e.g. Elsaesser et al., 2021). In conclusion, these a priori objections seem far from compelling.

NEUROSCIENCE

The primary objection in principle to the possibility of survival comes from the *mind–brain dependence thesis*, which holds that “having a functioning brain (or similar physical structure) is a necessary condition (or prerequisite) for having any sort of conscious experience ... and if human consciousness most likely cannot exist in the absence of brain activity, then it must cease to exist when the brain dies” (p. 3). In support of this thesis, Weisman (Chapter 4) refers to the “near perfect correlation between brain functions and mental function” (p. 102), and Augustine & Fishman (Chapter 10) to “tight correlations between mental states and brain states [that] have been observed time and again using both passive observation and active experimental manipulation under a wide range of conditions” (p. 203). McCormick (Chapter 2) goes further, in claiming that “even the most abstract mental faculties—and the most specific features and contents of our private mental states—can be mapped directly onto brain functions” (p. 55).

But are such claims justified? McCormick refers to some specific clinical disorders and claims they have a recognised neurological cause. “What is important about these disorders”, he asserts, “is that we have mapped their specific locations or functional pathologies in the brain, sometimes down to the millimetre”, though sadly no examples of this interpersonal precision are forthcoming. In contrast, Piccinini and Bahar (Chapter 6) concede that while some mental functions, such as early sensory processing and late motor control, appear to be neatly localised in well-defined regions of the brain,

other mental functions may well be distributed over vast networks of neural systems. Some neural systems also appear to participate in many neural functions. As far as we are concerned, the neural structures that implement a mental function need not have sharp boundaries, need not be contained within a contiguous spatial region, and need not stay the same over time. (p. 138)

So, functions of the mind can be mapped precisely onto specific cortical regions (except for those functions that have no identifiable locus), and cortical regions

are associated with particular functions (except when they seem to be implicated in a range of functions). That would certainly cover all bases.

Even that narrower set of brain–mind associations that are presented as tightly boundaried may not be so in practice. The exemplary case of ‘HM’, who was left with anterograde amnesia after suffering damage to the hippocampus, turns out to be more complex than it first appears (e.g., Annese et al., 2014; MacKay, 2023), and the relatively strong evidence for language dysfunction being associated specifically with Broca’s and Wernicke’s areas of the cortex turns out to be much less consistent than generally stated, since “the locations of these regions did not appear to be as neatly organised as the ‘homunculus’ studied by Penfield; they varied from one patient to the next” (Piccinini & Bahar, Chapter 6, pp. 143–147). Disappointingly, the exactitude claimed for the localisation of brain function is often missing when particular empirical findings are presented in this volume to evidence them, and experimental outcomes are typically couched in vaguer terms such as ‘[psychological function x] *corresponds to* activity [in brain region y]’, ‘[activity of brain region y] *is implicated in* [psychological function x]’, or even ‘[brain region y] *plays a role in* [function x]’ (see pp. 147–150). My concern is not in relation to the problems in inferring causality from correlation (though of course those are formidable), but rather with the weak circumstantial nature of the case being made. (I should add that I do not seek to deny the general claim that there are correspondences between brain states and phenomenology, but rather to question the tight and universal binding that is implied in some chapters, despite acknowledging exceptions that violate this in other chapters.) To illustrate, Piccinini and Bahar (Chapter 6) note that taxi drivers in London, UK, have larger volumes of hippocampal grey matter than bus drivers who simply follow set routes. This is interpreted in terms of the greater spatial learning demands made upon the former (who have to be much more creative and flexible in planning their routes), which stimulates growth of the hippocampus because it is said to be responsible for such spatial memory. However, the same review notes that hippocampally damaged residents of Toronto, Canada, did not experience deficits in navigational ability, and Toronto residents with normally functioning hippocampi did not show increased activity in that region when asked to mentally navigate around the city. Thus, it is now claimed, the hippocampus is only required for spatial navigation when the task is complex (Toronto is a more simply laid out city than London), and when need be, we can manage by accessing long-term memories stored elsewhere (p. 144). When the goalposts can be moved so easily, it is difficult to think of any observation that would qualify as a refutation of the mind–brain dependence thesis.

As I’ve already mentioned, it is not enough when testing a theory to simply look for confirmations of it; rather, we must seek out and interrogate apparent disconfirmations. McCormick (Chapter 2) acknowledges, “if brain damage of various sorts left cognitive functions unscathed, or if consciousness persisted

despite alterations in brain chemistry and structure, then we might have some evidence to doubt the correlation and causal connection ... *But we find no such violations*" (p. 57). One potential violation is the condition hydrocephalus. In such cases, during childhood the circulation of fluid from the ventricles of the brain is blocked, or there is increased pressure in the spinal area, forcing excess fluid into the ventricles. As the volume of fluid within the ventricles increases, it can press the overlying brain tissue against the cranium, restricting its growth as well as stretching and destroying connections. In severe cases, ventricle expansion can fill 95% of the cranium. Paediatrician John Lorber found that 60 of the 600 hydrocephalus cases he investigated were of this severe type. Some of these patients presented with substantial intellectual and physical disabilities, as expected; however, about half of them were found to have IQs above 100 (Lewin, 1980). Lorber referred to one exceptional patient,

who has an IQ of 126, has gained a first-class honors degree in mathematics, and is socially completely normal [yet] ... instead of the normal 4.5-centimeter thickness of brain tissue between the ventricles and the cortical surface, there was just a thin layer of mantle measuring a millimeter or so. His cranium is filled mainly with cerebrospinal fluid (as cited in Lewin, 1980, p. 1232).

Lorber's claim has not been taken seriously by the scientific mainstream, but a more recent case has supported his contention. Feuillet et al. (2007) describe the clinical case of a patient who had suffered a massive enlargement of the ventricles, and consequently had a very thin cortical mantle. Psychological testing revealed that although he scored below average on intelligence (his verbal IQ was 84, and his performance IQ 70), he showed no sign of disability beyond a mild left leg weakness that had led to the consultation in the first place. As a married father of two who worked as a civil servant, he was clearly socially functional. Hydrocephalus has a much greater effect on white matter than on grey matter, and this could go some way to explaining the remarkable retention of many normal functions in severely affected individuals. Additionally, these remarkable competences have only been documented in patients with chronic hydrocephalus, during which ventricular expansion may be gradual, and the patient has an opportunity to adapt or compensate (de Oliveira et al., 2012). In contrast, Majorek (2012) cites the case of a female patient, who at the age of three underwent a hemispherectomy (i.e., her dominant hemisphere was surgically removed in order to control intractable epilepsy that had led to right-sided hemiplegia and severe regression of language). By the age of seven, despite no obvious regeneration of brain tissue in that hemisphere, she had recovered to such an extent that she was fully bilingual in Turkish and Dutch, and her hemiplegia was only noticeable as a slight spasticity of her left arm and leg. She otherwise led a normal life. This is not an isolated case; Majorek cites a follow-up study of thirty-three children and adolescents who underwent hemispherectomy at

Great Ormond Street Hospital, London, among whom no significant cognitive deterioration or loss of language occurred despite the excision of a whole hemisphere. Nahm et al. (2017) draw attention to further cases of this type, concluding “findings that pertain to brain dysplasia and brain lesions indicate that in some individuals there is a considerable discrepancy between the cerebral structures and cognitive functioning”, posing a formidable challenge to the mind-brain dependence thesis (for an updated review that draws a similar conclusion, see Kofman & Levin, 2025).

A second potential disconfirmation involves dementia conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease. Augustine and Fishman (Chapter 10) observe:

perhaps no disorder demonstrates this [association between brain damage and loss of cognitive function] as clearly as the progressive brain degeneration of Alzheimer’s disease: the greater the deterioration of synaptic connections, the greater the loss of memory, recognition of others, and characteristic personality traits. (p. 205)

Weismann (Chapter 4), a neurologist at Temple University, Pennsylvania, describes the case history of one of his patients who had a malignant mass deep in his left temporal lobe that caused his condition to worsen over time, first losing the ability to understand language, then the ability to attend to people in his environment, and ultimately to lose consciousness for a time and then die. This and similar cases powerfully demonstrate the linkage between degradations in brain functioning and diminution of subjective experience. As Gennaro and Fishman (Chapter 5) summarise:

brain damage has negative effects on one’s mental states, altering or even eliminating one’s ability to have certain conscious experiences ... it thus stands to reason that when all of one’s brain activity ceases upon death, consciousness is no longer possible, and so neither is an afterlife. (p. 105)

However, there are occasions when someone who is in the later stages of a progressive decline that has left them uncommunicative and unresponsive, spontaneously and with no obvious cause becomes lucid and able to interact with those around them. Mashour et al. (2019) provide a review and speculate on possible mechanisms to account for this phenomenon, which they term *paradoxical lucidity*. More commonly, it is referred to as terminal lucidity, to reflect the tendency for it to occur in the days or even hours before death (Nahm et al., 2012), often with spontaneous recovery of physical and cognitive function (Nahm & Greyson, 2009). Mendoza (2019) cites a representative case:

My grandfather was in palliative care for dementia. He had severe cognitive decline over the months preceding his death. There was no recognition of family or friends, paranoia, hallucinations, confusion, social withdrawal, refusal of food and drink, mumbling incoherent speech, and a lack of ability to toilet or shower himself. He awoke and began talking in a clear voice with obvious recognition of family and surroundings. He was able to inquire about family and friends that he had not been able to recognize previously. He asked that the books he had borrowed months ago be

returned to their owner. He said he wished his death would come quicker. After 20 minutes, he became tired, fell asleep, and died shortly afterward.

There are few quantitative estimates of the prevalence or degree of terminal lucidity, though recent surveys among people who care for the terminally ill suggest the phenomenon may be quite common (Brayne et al., 2008; Fenwick et al., 2010), despite this kind of neurological degeneration being regarded as irreversible.

Despite hydrocephalus and terminal lucidity being commonly cited as remarkable counterexamples to the mind–brain dependence thesis, only two chapters in *The Myth of an Afterlife* refer to them explicitly. Augustine and Fishman (Chapter 10) dismiss them as “rare neurological outliers” (p. 251), claiming “such few and far between cases are better explained as exaggerations based on erroneous data [and] the products of neuroplasticity” (pp. 248–249). Weismann (Chapter 4) similarly tries to equate these periods of lucidity with occasions when a dementia patient “will occasionally make a great deal of sense. From time to time the cobwebs seem to clear, and the patient makes an uncharacteristic and appropriate comment or two” (p. 100), but that does not seem a fair description of the longer-lived and more coherent phenomena described above. Attempts to trivialise these experiences seem doomed to failure—such troublesome data are unlikely to go away simply because they are labelled as anomalous; indeed, they are likely to accumulate.³ Augustine and Fishman (Chapter 10) allude to “neurological improvements” (p. 250), but this too seems inadequate given that several forms of dementia, including Alzheimer’s dementia, are largely associated with *irreversible* degeneration of the cerebral cortex and the hippocampus, so that it is not clear how such recovery could ever take place, and their sudden onset argues against the kind of recovery that might be possible via neural plasticity or regeneration.

ACCOUNTING FOR SURVIVAL PHENOMENA

Just one of the four major sections of *The Myth of an Afterlife* is concerned with considering empirical evidence for survival with the rest, as we have seen, taking care to skirt around such troubling data. This section is particularly important, then, in demonstrating how familiar sceptics are with the observations and research data that suggest consciousness can survive bodily death and in drawing attention to the shortcomings they have identified that allow them to set aside this evidence as suspect. The strongest sceptical arguments will be those that explain the best evidence for survival rather than some straw man version. Sadly, most of the chapters included in *The Myth of*

3. Forsdyke (2015), for example, notes that individuals with exceptional memory (savant syndrome) tend to have normal-size heads with no need for the enlargements of the type that result in taxi drivers. Similarly, microcephalics, who have exceptionally small heads, while typically intellectually impaired, include a number of cases where intelligence is normal.

an Afterlife show little awareness of that extensive literature, and betray an unwillingness to grapple with the most challenging evidence.

Thus, Augustine closes the introduction (Chapter 1) with the glib dismissal, “direct experimental tests of the dualistic survival hypothesis are not only possible, but have been carried out—thus far without success” (p. 32), without indicating what those tests might have been, or in what way they were unsuccessful. Augustine and Fishman (Chapter 10) similarly swiftly dismiss the empirical case for survival, since “the quality of the data for such paranormal phenomena pales in comparison to that available for the neuroscientific and other phenomena we have considered throughout this paper” (p. 248). One is left to wonder how we can assess the quality of that work when no space is devoted to considering it—I term this the ‘Lord Nelson defence’, since it is reminiscent of Horatio Nelson’s (perhaps apocryphal) act at the Battle of Copenhagen of holding his telescope to his blind eye and announcing that he could see no signal commanding him to end the action and retreat. Of course, one sees no evidence that favours the survival hypothesis when one takes no steps to look for it.

Other contributions suffer from an embarrassing lack of currency. A chapter by Blackmore on astral bodies (Chapter 17) was originally published in her 1982 book *Beyond the Body*, and her other chapter on out-of-body experiences (Chapter 24) was excerpted from an article she published in the journal *Anabiosis* in 1983, fully thirty-two years before the publication of *The Myth of an Afterlife!* Neither article is amended or revised in any way. Are we to believe that no research of note has been conducted on these topics in all that time? Tellingly, Blackmore offers a blueprint for future, more persuasive near-death experience cases that is a reasonable fit for the Pam Reynolds case (Sabom, 1998) but misses the opportunity to consider the merits (and weaknesses) of that case because it was not available during the 1980s when her article was originally written.

Example cases chosen by other authors show a similar disregard for contemporary research. Larsen (Chapter 27), for example, analyses the case for reincarnation by focusing on a single investigation by Ian Stevenson that was published over forty years earlier (Stevenson, 1974). Have there been no advances in research methods since then that need to be taken into consideration (for an overview, see Mills & Tucker, 2015)? One might also ask why this case has been selected as representative, when Mills and Tucker estimate that approximately 2,500 cases of children who report past lives have been investigated. If we must take a single case, then why not analyse one that has been more positively appraised, such as that of James Leininger, discussed by Tucker (2013), or that of Purnima Ekanayake, reported by Haraldsson (2000). Similarly, Augustine and Fishman (Chapter 10) focus selectively on attempts to detect out-of-body experiences (OBEs) and the outcomes of cipher tests (i.e., the creation by a living person of a code with the intention of providing the key post-mortem) as the main approaches to falsify the brain dependence theory,

but these forms of research are quite antiquated and are hardly representative of contemporary efforts to test claims for survival. Unsurprisingly, they only make reference to work published in the 1980s and earlier, fully thirty years out of date.

Descriptions of key studies often include serious errors that enable the sceptic to speculate that the reported success of the experiment could be due to participant cheating. For example, Augustine and Fishman focus on an experimental test of OBEs that involved number detection (Tart, 1968). The sole participant, Miss Z, was an acquaintance of Charles Tart's, and she had described to him how she regularly had OBEs as part of her normal sleep experience. He invited her to take part in a formal test that involved her sleeping at the laboratory over a number of nights. While she slept, her brain activity was monitored by EEG apparatus. If she discovered during the night that she was having an OBE, she agreed to try to read a sequence of random numbers that had been written on a sheet of paper and placed on a shelf high up on the wall (the numbers were different each night, and were only generated after she had gone to sleep). On the first three nights, she was unable to view the numbers, but on the final night when she woke up she called out that the number was 25132—the correct sequence, with odds against chance of 1 in 100,000. However, Augustine and Fishman claim:

unfortunately Miss Z was not monitored through the night on any of these occasions, adequate controls were clearly not in place. Tart himself conceded that Miss Z could have concealed a hidden mirror, or otherwise seen the number reflected off the surface of a clock above the shelf holding the target number. (p. 220)

In fact, Tart (2009) clearly explains (in the book Augustine and Fishman cite as their reference) that Miss Z was wired up to EEG apparatus that continuously monitored her, which severely constrained her movements. Tart also describes attempts that he and Arthur Hastings (a skilled amateur magician) undertook to discern the number by normal means, but found that nothing at all could be seen reflected by the casing of the clock, and indeed the room was so dark that they needed to shine a bright flashlight directly onto the numbers in order to see them. This demonstrates the value of providing citations so that the interested reader can check for themselves the accuracy (or otherwise) of a second-hand account.

Another example of this Procrustean zeal in shaping facts to fit a narrative is provided by Larsen (Chapter 28), who evaluates the case for mediumship by analysing a single sitter experiment by Schwartz (2002). Larsen claims that statements Schwartz described as hits “had to be dragged out of the sitter using a string of standard cold reading techniques” (p. 603), but does not elaborate on what these techniques were nor how they led to these correct statements—he could not do so because neither the original journal paper nor Schwartz's subsequent book includes a transcript of the actual reading. Larsen admits as much when he goes on to say:

The whole experiment took almost two hours ... yet Schwartz has said very little about what Campbell [the medium] actually said during it. He tells us about the fantastic hits ... but given the many hooks that mediums usually throw out, we hear next to nothing of Campbell's actual words. (p. 605)

Thus, it is clear that his attribution of cold reading is based on wishful thinking rather than any close analysis of data. He also alleges collusion between participant and medium—even though Schwartz asserts that the medium was blind to the selection and identities of specific sitters—and suggests that the successful outcome was due to some combination of collusion and cold reading. One wonders why, if the participants are colluding (based on Larsen's wild speculation), they would still need to resort to the use of cold reading techniques that, for Larsen, are clearly evident in the non-existent transcripts. Finally, Schwartz's experiment has been described by Sarraf et al. (2020) as "highly controversial", and these authors note "Schwartz has conducted [subsequent] experiments to which many criticisms of his earlier work do not apply" (p. 2), so it seems like another instance of the straw man strategy in which a weak or flawed example is presented as if it were typical research practice, or even represented best evidence.

My final example is Battista et al.'s (Chapter 29) analysis of Julie Beischel's research on mediumship. They speculate about biases (choice bias, confirmatory bias, distinctive bias) that can have no effect on the statistical outcomes reported in the experiment but only serve to muddy the water. They concede that "the fact that each sitter had to make a judgement between the intended and control reading resolves some of this issue, *as bias alone cannot guide their hand to the intended reading*" (p. 618, my emphasis), but this is misleading, since such biases cannot *in any way* affect the statistical analysis. They raise concerns about the mediums being provided with the first names of deceased persons they are asked to contact on behalf of an absent sitter, since generational trends in name popularity could give clues as to the discarnate age or background. They speculate that matching names such as 'Dorothy' and 'Brittany' would allow the medium to infer that 'Brittany', being a younger name, belongs to someone who died prematurely, perhaps by suicide or in a vehicle accident, while 'Dorothy', being older, could be a candidate for cancer or heart disease. First names can also indicate ethnicity, so they could be used to identify hair, skin, and eye colour. These objections seem reasonable until one finds that Beischel (2007) has gone into great detail to describe how names were matched in order to avoid exactly this kind of potential cue, and she is very clear that

in cases in which the names provide overt evidence about the discarnates' ethnicities and in turn their probable physical descriptions ... or provide other identifying information (e.g., religion), either a pair is chosen to include two discarnates of the same ethnicity or religion or the discarnates are chosen only for studies in which blinding is not necessary. (pp. 41–42)

This is another example of a general strategy to offer speculative counter-explanations that sound plausible so long as they are not be tested against actual data.

CONCLUSION

My aim in this note was not to evaluate the case for survival but rather to uncover and evaluate the objections that have been raised by sceptics which might provide a source of constructive criticism for future research and theory development. I began with the hope that my review of *The Myth of an Afterlife* would highlight better standards of scholarship and argument than I found when reviewing sceptical objections to experimental parapsychology in contributions to Krippner and Friedman's (2010) book, *Debating Psychic Experience*. Sadly, the standard seems to be even worse when it comes to survival research. Again, sceptics' analyses showed little familiarity with the actual activities and findings of contemporary researchers, sidestepping thorny phenomena such as hydrocephalus and terminal lucidity cases and preferring vague allusions and broad, untestable pronouncements. When critiquing survival research, their preferred examples were often decades out of date, or focused on weak examples that were not very typical of methods or findings, or they included misrepresentations that suggested design weaknesses that did not actually pertain.

This is disappointing, since the scientific method depends on close scrutiny of research findings and the claims based on them. Open (but informed) criticism can help correct woolly thinking and improve research designs. I began this review by quoting prominent sceptic Ray Hyman, and it seems fitting to close with his advice to sceptics as part of a subsequent joint communiqué with parapsychologist Charles Honorton (Hyman & Honorton, 1986, p. 64, emphasis added):

As in any other area of scientific enquiry, research in parapsychology requires continual scrutiny and criticism. Both critics and parapsychologists want parapsychological research to be conducted according to the best possible standards. *Critics can contribute to this need only if their criticisms are informed, relevant and responsible.*

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BOOK REVIEWS

PARASCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS: THE SCIENCE AND CULTURE OF THE PARANORMAL

*By Derek Lee. University of Minnesota Press. 2025. 304 pp. Hardback,
paperback, and ebook*

This book presents a series of interesting case studies in which marginal concepts or theories developed in psychical research slip out of scientific orthodoxy but start to thrive in popular culture. Derek Lee (a literature professor) calls this process ‘parascientification’. The cases absorb the attention, despite the rather tortured academic prose throughout. I was less convinced by the conceptual framework Lee proposes for his term ‘parascience’, however.

The first chapter focuses on the mid-1960s work of Adrian Dobbs, who borrowed from the phase of extraordinary science (to use Thomas Kuhn’s term) in the detection of subatomic particles in physics to propose the existence of the ‘psitron’ or ‘thought particle’, which might form the physical underpinning for telepathy. He also thought the speculative existence of tachyons (particles that might travel faster than light) could explain precognition and other time slips. Lee admits that Dobbs’s work was marginal, even to psychical research, but suggests that tachyons have had a significant afterlife.

The term was picked up in the writings of science fiction writer Philip K. Dick and in the comics of Alan Moore. Dick had what he felt was a profound religious experience in the early 1970s, in which he believed he had been bombarded by a beam of tachyon particles bearing information from a remote divine source: he wrote three million words of his ‘exegesis’ trying to explain this experience. Moore, the cult comics writer steeped in alternative histories and heterodox and occult knowledges, also used the tachyon at the core of his influential *Watchmen* series. These instances illustrate Lee’s central proposition that “literature can serve as the primary medium for the evolution and dissemination of anomalous science” (p. 51). This is a valuable exploration of the place of the cultural persistence of ideas originating in psychical research (the classic instance being ‘telepathy’). It’s a little like Christopher Partridge’s term ‘occulture’ for the mix of esoteric and magical discourse with wider cultural expression. Lee’s larger claim, however, that ‘parascientification’ in turn destabilizes the orthodoxies of narrow institutional science, is more problematic, I think.

The second chapter explores the ‘Gaia hypothesis’, first proposed by James Lovelock (and later supported by biologist Lynn Margulis). The proposal that Earth is a complex living entity is now well known—still controversial among evolutionary biologists but widely adopted by some ecologists and again in the wider culture. It seems slightly odd to think of the Gaia hypothesis as a ‘paranormal’ theory, but Lee approaches it initially through a mediumistic channelling of its ‘voice’ in Pepper Lewis’s *Gaia Speaks*, which feels like a mild sleight of hand to allow this framing. It does lead to some valuable tracking of Gaia through diverse locations: philosophy, systems theory, biology, critical theory (Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers), and the kind of Californian New Ageism that comes out of stoner theoretical physics at Berkeley—as in the once fashionable best-sellers by Fritjof Capra. Lee then follows this into science fiction, particularly the work of Greg Bear (another Californian). Bear was a ‘hard SF’ writer, interested in extrapolation from known science, but his work is full of speculative psychical realms. (This chapter is an instance of what Bruno Latour would call ‘actor-network theory’—that is, follow a term wherever it goes without imposing any artificial disciplinary distinctions, to see where and how it travels.)

In chapter three, Lee tracks the work of Ingo Swann, who came, so he claimed, from a family gifted with psychic powers, and who ended up centrally involved in the 1970s and 1980s with the Stanford Research Institute’s pursuit of psychical research in the service of the Cold War. This story is of course well known now; Swann’s role perhaps less so. Swann was a key participant in the development of ‘remote viewing’ as a technique of spying surveillance. When the intensity of Cold War paranoia fell away, so did institutional scientific support for this kind of research. Lee then follows Swann into the writing of novels, and his later popular psychical research manuals and memoir. Again, there is some overstatement about the place of this kind of literature (broadly conceived) in destabilizing the authority of orthodox science. However, it is certainly worth tracking this kind of popular literature, which often sells very well, and Lee is right that manuals and self-help books framed in New Age or psychical paradigms have been largely ignored by critics.

In the last two chapters, Lee moves to a different terrain, exploring in detail how fiction that uses ‘paranormal’ tropes by Asian-American writers further undoes scientific orthodoxies. ‘Science’ is now exposed as what we might call ‘instrumental rationality’: narrow, Westernized, positivistic, institutional knowledge systems that since the 17th century have brooked no alternative to their materialist explanation of the world. Lee brings to bear feminist, post-colonial, and decolonial critiques of modernity to resituate paranormal tropes in fiction as devices to outflank the dead hand of scientific orthodoxy.

In chapter four, Lee focuses on the figure of the medium in Amy Tan’s Chinese-American *The Hundred Secret Senses*, and the Korean shaman in Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*. Lee also explores Chinese conceptions of

qi, the vital energy or life-force that underpins everything in the universe and largely ignores binaries of material versus spiritual or life versus death. An openness to Chinese conceptions or Korean religious frameworks resituates cultural representations of ghosts away from (materialist) readings of them as metaphors for the traumatic past and literalizes the hauntings that pervade these novels in a way that suggests their paranormality subverts Western norms, Lee argues.

The last chapter does the same again, this time using Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex* and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, two novels that employ non-Western conceptions of time and temporality, again resituating some of the central claims of psychical research against the narrow norms of Western science.

There is a wealth of material covered in this book. Unfortunately, it is presented in the densely jargonized prose still favoured by academic cultural studies. The book inadvertently reveals its own narrow disciplinary location in this regard, rather against the grain of its own interdisciplinary ambitions. I come from the same territory, so I am used to this style. Even so, I found some of the fuzziness and slippage in conceptual language throughout frustrating. Ultimately, this slippage seemed to be revealing of weaknesses in the core proposal for Lee's term 'parascience'.

In the introduction, Lee proposes parascience as "the epistemic realm on the borders of establishment science where heterodox concepts can hybridize with other areas like literature, myth, philosophy, theology, non-Western thought, and novel research programs to produce new knowledge forms that persist across modern science and culture" (p. 19). This is valuable: it rightly moves the judgements inherent in terms like 'pseudoscience' or 'parapsychology' out of the way, as well as considering the limits of more recent terms like 'marginal science' (associated with Seymour Mauskopf) or 'almost science' (Massimo Pigliucci) or Christopher Partridge's 'occulture'. It is odd, then, that Lee continuously and almost compulsively switches between 'parascience' and 'pseudoscience' throughout the book, as if they were synonyms. On the same page, he can suggest that the term 'pseudoscience' blocks "any attempt at reasonable debate", but then almost immediately says that the academy has acted as if "pseudoscience does not exist" (p. 214)—he means, I think, parascience in this second quote. I found this kind of conceptual slippage everywhere. For instance, Lee will follow the critique of Western modernity as making other cultural belief systems exotic or primitive, but then immediately argues that "speculative ethnic fiction" harks back "to premodern, theological and non-Western systems of thought" that will "transcend the scientific limitations imposed by the West" (p. 179). Is 'premodern' a negative colonial epithet, then, or a positive escape from coloniality? It seems to be both, switching almost sentence by sentence. His use of a term like 'multiculturalism' is similarly vague—the valence of that term shifts according to political location and context (perhaps especially so in

the UK context, where it is now often used pejoratively), but here it floats free of its place in the culture war as if it can signal diversity only positively.

I'm not sure this is just carelessness in language so much as revealing of an unhelpful cultural relativism at the core of Lee's project. Towards the end, Lee insists that his challenge to scientific authority does not end up in a world where conspiracy theories, alternative facts, or anti-vax claims cannot be challenged. He insists that parascience (or what he also problematically calls pseudoscience at this dangerous juncture) is of a different order of belief than this. But it is hard to stop the slippage into cultural relativism and post-truth with the loose framework Lee formulates for the reader. I found the exploration in this book of the cultural circulation of ideas from psychical research into the wider culture really valuable. I still, however, would prefer to have scientific protocols in place to contest dangerous pseudoscientific ideas. Lee's model does not, in the end, help that distinction: it seems happy to erase these borders. My main worry, as I read it, was that it would persuade very few natural or social scientists who might come across it that this kind of cultural studies isn't just a fast route to relativist positions. Contextual framing can provide subtlety and nuance to the history of science: I don't think Lee quite succeeds in developing a model for this here.

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BEYOND TIME AND SPACE: HOW SCIENCE STUDIES THE
POWER OF THE MIND AND ITS POSSIBLE SURVIVAL OF
BODILY DEATH

*By Piero Calvi-Pariseti. OpenMind Publishing. 2025. 243 pp. Hardback
and ebook*

Piero Calvi-Pariseti's new book on the science of psi manages to combine two ordinarily incompatible qualities, comprehensiveness and brevity. The comprehensiveness stems from the number of topics covered: the nature of psi; precognition and presentiment; telepathy and remote viewing; direct interaction of the mind with both living and non-living physical systems; global consciousness; near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions; mediumship; and reincarnation. The brevity comes in because each topic is typically covered by the examination of between just two and eight peer-reviewed articles.

The result is a book short enough to be accessible to the interested layperson, but thorough enough to touch on all the major issues in parapsychology. The drawback is that some areas are given decidedly short shrift. This is particularly true of postmortem survival, as Calvi-Pariseti acknowledges:

As for the hypothesis of survival, the seven articles examined, plus the methodological contribution of Prof. Patrizio Tressoldi, cannot even remotely do justice to what many consider a veritable ocean of evidence. The reader should consider this second section of the book simply as a minimal selection of examples. (p. 24)

In the opening chapter, Calvi-Pariseti addresses common criticisms of parapsychology. He notes that anecdotal reports, while often dismissed, play an essential role in many scientific disciplines when systematically collected and analysed. "The 'plural of anecdotes' (an expression often used by sceptics), therefore, does constitute research data, contrary to what is too often claimed" (p. 5). While acknowledging that "the weight of anecdotes is much lower compared to other types of evidence" (p. 5), he is by no means ready to dismiss them outright.

Calvi-Pariseti also challenges the claim that psi research fails to replicate, arguing that "the replication difficulties in parapsychology are exactly at the same level as those experienced in general psychology, biomedical research, nutrition sciences, or economics" (p. 6).

Subsequent chapters examine specific phenomena. Precognition and presentiment are discussed in terms of “fast” (implicit, unconscious) versus “slow” (explicit, conscious) mental processing. The evidence surveyed suggests that anticipatory effects appear more robust in fast, nonconscious responses.

Much of his discussion draws on Daryl Bem’s (2011) well-known article ‘Feeling the Future,’ covering nine experiments conducted over eight years, in which subjects appeared to respond to stimuli that had not yet been selected by the computer. In a typical experiment, Bem’s subject had to choose which of two curtained windows on a computer screen concealed an erotic image. “At the moment the subject makes a choice, however, *neither curtain hides the photo*. It is only *after* the subject has chosen that the computer makes a random choice and assigns the erotic image to one of the curtains” (p. 47, emphasis in original). The success rate was significantly above chance.

Bem received fierce criticism from sceptics, including this primal yawp from cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter: “If any of [Bem’s] claims were true, then all of the bases underlying contemporary science would be toppled, and we would have to rethink everything about the nature of the universe ... There has to be a common sense cutoff for craziness.” Astronomer David Helfand declared Bem’s work “an assault on science and rationality.” Psychologist Ray Hyman called Bem’s work “madness, pure madness” (p. 49). And on it goes.

Telepathy is the subject of Chapter 5. Calvi-Pariseti writes that “between 1882 and 1939, 142 scientific publications reported a total of 3.6 million individual trials (remember that a trial is, for example, every instance in which a subject tries to guess a card) by more than 4,600 participants in 185 different experiments” (p. 81). The result obtained by meta-analysis was consistent with odds against chance of more than one billion trillion to one.

The controversial Star Gate project comes up in Chapter 6, centred on remote viewing. Calvi-Pariseti quotes contrasting assessments by statistician Jessica Utts and Hyman. Utts concluded that “psychic powers exist and have been well demonstrated ... based on commonly accepted scientific criteria” (p. 106), emphasising the consistency of results across laboratories. Hyman, while more cautious, nonetheless acknowledged that “the statistical results ... are far beyond what is expected by chance” (p. 107) and that the experiments were carefully designed.

The interaction of the mind with physical systems, including living systems, follows in Chapters 7 and 8. The author discusses the famed double-slit experiment in physics, then proceeds to explore “the brilliant idea of [Dean] Radin and his collaborators ... to see if the shift between wave behaviour (when particles are not observed) and particle behaviour (when they are) would happen without a physical detector. They predicted a shift towards particle behaviour proportional to levels of *mental awareness* ... Subjects were asked to focus their attention” (p. 131, emphasis in original) on the double-slit set-up and, in particular, the screen that recorded photon hits. The hypothesis was that

there would be “a shift towards a diffraction pattern, indicative of the collapse of the wave function” (p. 131), in the intervals of focused attention. The outcome?

The spectral analysis shows exactly the shift towards the diffraction pattern during the ‘active’ periods with a human subject predicted by the experimental hypothesis ($z = -4.36$, $p = 6 \times 10^{-6}$). The control sessions ... do not show any movement. (p. 131)

The use of intentionality to affect the progress of disease brings up experiments by William Bengston, who infected mice with deadly tumours, then placed his hands on their plastic cage at regular intervals. In the first experiment, five of the six mice survived, even though “there is not a single case in literature in which an animal infected with this tumour has survived more than 27 days” (p. 148). Complicating this result, four of six control mice, not subjected to the ‘laying on of hands,’ also recovered!

Subsequent experiments also showed baffling recoveries for at least some of the control animals. Conceivably, this was a kind of spillover effect having to do with the animals’ proximity to the ones being treated. When the control mice were sent to a different city, where presumably they would be subject to no inadvertent healing intentions, all of them died on schedule. Though Calvi-Pariseti is especially enthusiastic about these experiments, I’m inclined to think that until the survival of so many control animals can be properly accounted for, our conclusions must be limited.

After reviewing evidence for global consciousness (Chapter 9) and considering some sceptical demurrals (Chapter 10), Calvi-Pariseti addresses the objection that there is currently no formal theory of psi. He disagrees, citing James Carpenter’s (2012) book *First Sight*, which, to him, offers “undoubtedly the most elegant, organic and the best supported theory of psi” (p. 172). The advantages of Carpenter’s approach, he writes, are that it normalizes psi, presenting it not as a capricious aberration but as “a constant aspect of how organisms interact with reality” (p. 177).

Chapter 12 explores the nature of consciousness, as a lead-in to the final section of the book (Chapters 13–18) which, as stated earlier, offers a rather perfunctory overview of evidence for life after death. Near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences and deathbed visions come up for discussion. There is the well-known story of the ‘dentures man’, a patient suffering from hypothermia who, upon recovering, was able to identify the nurse who had removed his dentures and to say precisely where the dentures had been stored. According to the nurse, “I remembered the incident very well, but at that time the patient was in a deep coma and receiving cardiopulmonary resuscitation” (p. 198). Young children who claim to remember a past life make an appearance, though past-life regression under hypnosis receives only passing mention, perhaps on account of the high chance of confabulation by the percipient.

The book concludes with a personal statement, in which Calvi-Pariseti argues that “simply acquiring information about just one of the areas of

evidence supporting the survival hypothesis (through what in psychology is called bibliotherapy) can have profound effects on people's psychophysical well-being" (p. 242). He cites his own research in support of the thesis that "engaging in depth with the evidence suggesting the existence of an afterlife ... results in psychometrically measurable changes in attitudes and beliefs ... And this has a very positive (sometimes literally transformative) effect for bereaved people" (p. 242). Calvi-Pariseti's deep purpose is not just to win an argument, but to help people.

Overall, his book accomplishes what it sets out to do. However, there are occasional errors. For example, we're told that the remote viewing studies were "conducted at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), a think tank linked to the prestigious university of the same name" (p. 104), but actually the institute cut all ties with the university in 1970. Case studies of children who remember past lives are confounded by confusing shifts in pronouns; in reference to one little boy, KumKum Verma, it is said that "*she* began saying at the age of three and a half that *she* had lived in Darbhanga" (p. 232, emphasis added). I also noted a few formatting problems in this self-published edition. Some of these issues may already have been resolved, as the author encourages readers to apprise him of mistakes.

These caveats are trivial. For your open-minded friend or colleague who desires a readable introduction to parapsychology, *Beyond Time and Space* is an excellent choice.

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GRAND MANUEL DE PARAPSYCHOLOGIE SCIENTIFIQUE
[GRAND MANUAL OF SCIENTIFIC PARAPSYCHOLOGY]

Edited by Renaud Evrard, Claude Berghmans, & Paul-Louis Rabeyron.

Dunod. 2025. 648 pp. Paperback and ebook

This anthology is a comprehensive overview of the history and subfields of scientific parapsychology, its methods, findings, and theories. Although the emphasis is on laboratory studies, there is also some treatment of spontaneous cases and of the socio-cultural environment in which this research has been conducted.

The main target audience is French parapsychologists and other scientists who are unfamiliar with English publications in the field, especially given the lack of overviews written in French. However, the book substantially and creatively incorporates the French literature as well. There are eleven French authors, one Belgian, and three English-speaking authors (whose chapters were translated into French).

Historical sections cover the struggles of prominent intellectuals such as William Crookes and Frederic Myers in the UK, William James in the USA, and Henri Bergson in France to legitimise the study of psychic phenomena in the 19th century when the professionalization of science was in the process of tightening the control of orthodox science.

Nevertheless, the 19th century was also a period in which these countries were experiencing the impact of European quasi-scientific mesmerism and Swedenborgianism on religious movements like Spiritualism that spread throughout the UK, the USA, and Europe. By the 1930s, scientific parapsychological research on Spiritualist mediums centred on the Society for Psychical Research in Britain, and the American Society for Psychical Research had begun to morph from scientific or spiritual questions about mediumship into scientific laboratory studies such as those conducted at Duke University by J. B. Rhine and his colleagues. And after 1942, psychic phenomena became further secularised by being labelled as the unknown factor psi.

Phenomena covered in the *Grand Manuel* include presentiment and precognition, remote viewing, micro-psychokinesis, apparitions and hauntings, survival, unusual (e.g., death-bed) end-of-life experiences, clinical psychology of exceptional experiences, lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, and near-death experiences. Specialists in some of these areas may argue that other

important literature should have been included, but these substantial though non-exhaustive treatments provide a strong overview with many useful cross-references to other sections.

More important than ever before is the treatment of methodological and theoretical issues. Some of the methodological problems that have plagued psi research are the replicability of findings, experimenter bias, information leakage and fraud, statistical treatment of findings, and the file drawer problem (selective publication only of positive results). There has been a long history of refinement of methods to ameliorate these problems, but there has also been a battle against the intransigence of some critics who may appear to be either uninformed or even wilfully ignorant. Many in this volume write also of difficulties caused by the low level of public funding for psi research. The authors call for more coordination of effort to focus on more comparable research questions and design.

Theoretical issues are interwoven with methodological ones. The reason for this relates to the elusiveness of psi itself. Experimenter effects, for example, cannot be controlled for by merely masking (blinding)—if psi exists. Even if the researcher, associates running the experiment, the subject, and the recorder or interpreter of results are all masked about the target, this may not rule out some subtle influence from the experimenter or someone else other than the subject. When sceptics run their own experiments, they may fail to replicate results because of their own unconscious experimenter effects.

Another interesting theoretical conundrum discussed is the phenomenon of retrocognition (and retro-psychokinesis). Some experiments have been designed to measure this, showing that outcomes may be affected by future intentions—as long as the results have not yet been observed. This connects to theoretical debates over quantum physics, which would seem to support the possibility of retro-psi. Although there are warnings about possibly misapplying quantum physics in this book and elsewhere, there is certainly at least a plausible analogy between quantum physics and psi phenomena.

Nevertheless, current issues demonstrate how important psi research is for testing the adequacy of our dominant paradigms of reality. Due to the lack of a basic understanding of psi processes, theory tends towards some kind of 'hidden order'. Early research by Rhine and others had shown that psi was apparently not a classical Newtonian force phenomenon. Psi did not fade by distance or get blocked by Faraday cages. So, what is psi?

In addition to quantum physics, this book considers other hidden-order theory models, including the metaphysical 'collective memory' theory proposed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), with whom many English or US parapsychologists may not be very familiar. The virtue of this theory is that it is consistent with aspects of psi involving shared knowledge at a distance. The same can be said of Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphogenetic fields.

Renaud Evrard presents George Hansen's theory of the trickster (a force that facilitates anomalies in liminal states but also thwarts attempts to capture them in research) as an insightful explanation for both the production and elusiveness of psi and its rejection by social forces defending the status quo. However, Evrard sees the theory as lacking a means of testing it experimentally. The same could be said about most if not all theories of psi, again due to the mysterious, apparently acausal nature of the phenomena. Nevertheless, many sections of the book present advances in the understanding of conditions favourable to psi: for example, the subject being in a relaxed mood or being in an altered state of consciousness.

Although the *Grand Manuel* emphasises laboratory studies, there are also sections on the social and cultural context. Part of this involves the historic battle between orthodox and heterodox science of course, but there are also variations in cultural interpretations of what are nevertheless universally occurring phenomena, such as apparitions, spirit mediumship, and near-death experiences.

The most extensive look at socio-cultural factors is found in the section on the work of Jeffrey Kripal, US professor of religious studies, a field along with anthropology and sociology in which much relevant work is being done by bracketing anomalous phenomena within a cultural frame, thus avoiding extremes of sceptical condemnation of the research.

The editors state that the bold style of Kripal may portend future directions in French parapsychology. In the US ecosystem of psi, although it may meet somewhat less academic resistance than in France, the paranormal thrives mostly in popular culture (e.g., in science fiction and comics as analysed by Kripal) and in esoteric societies or New Age and spiritual groups. There are also widespread paranormal beliefs and experiences in all societies for that matter, in spite of academic resistance.

In the summary, the editors state, "No chapter in this work directly treats concrete applications of parapsychology" (p. 626, my translation). They think it would be premature, due to experimental, theoretical, and social difficulties, a frustrating situation which they have learned to live with. I think this sells the book short and is too pessimistic. What they say may be literally true, but I see many sections that present, at least indirectly, useful, practical information.

The best example of applied parapsychology is found in Chapter 9 (pp. 337–359) on the history of and recent developments in clinical psychology of exceptional experiences, by Renaud Evrard and Thomas Rabeyron, a subject likely to be little known in the UK and the USA. There is also the practical use of remote viewing by the US intelligence agencies. In addition, the Esalen Institute in California, referred to by Kripal, has been the centre of a wide variety of alternative science research and applications. Although not a focus of this book, there are also increasing applications of spiritual or paranormal principles in

alternative (integrative) medicine. Perhaps someone will undertake a *grand manuel* of applied parapsychology as a companion to this book?

Not to deny the frustration of many parapsychologists with underfunding and academic resistance, I suspect that historical and theoretical chapters of this book will deserve future revision to celebrate new contributions of research on anomalies not only towards a better understanding of psi but also towards improved models of consciousness and the universe.

In conclusion, the *Grand Manuel* is a great and the most recent handbook for synthesising the variety of research in parapsychology and putting it into a historical, theoretical context. It is very well edited to connect important themes throughout and to integrate much literature, both English and French.

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HANUSSEN: AUFSTIEG UND FALL DES ILLUSIONISTEN [HANUSSEN: RISE AND FALL OF THE ILLUSIONIST]

By Wilfried Kugel. Tredition. 2025. 364 pp. hardback

After a decade of research, Wilfried Kugel, a physicist with an interest in parapsychology, wrote *Hanussen: Die wahre Geschichte des Hermann Steinschneider* (Hanussen: The True Story of Hermann Steinschneider). It was published in 1998 and was recognised as the most scholarly biography of Hanussen to that date.

Now, Kugel has updated his biography with additional information, expanding the original work from 300 to 364 pages (the number of endnotes increasing from 644 to 653). The greater page count may be partly due to a slightly smaller format, though the font size is correspondingly smaller as well. This new edition is more attractive, having over a hundred higher-resolution photos, including several in colour, among them Hanussen's three best-known posters and a graphic photo of his corpse.

Erik Jan Hanussen (born Hermann Steinschneider in Vienna in 1889) rose to prominence in pre-Third Reich Germany as a controversial *Hellseher*; that is, a clairvoyant. However, most would call him a mentalist, meaning an entertainer who specialises in simulating psychic abilities. Hanussen was controversial because he claimed that his powers were real, and used that pretext to charge clients for advice, which, along with his popular theatrical performances and occult-themed publications, made him extremely wealthy. Although Jewish, he cultivated the Nazi elite and boosted the Nazi cause in his weekly Berlin tabloid. His primary claim to fame is that he supposedly predicted the burning of the Reichstag in Berlin on the eve of its destruction. Less than a month later, he was murdered by Nazi stormtroopers.

Kugel's book is generally organised chronologically, beginning with Hanussen's genealogy (Jewish on both sides going back several generations) and childhood (though Kugel admits the primary source for this section is Hanussen's own unreliable 1930 autobiography), but takes deep dives into special topics.

Hanussen had a varied early career, first as a small-time itinerant actor, tabloid journalist in Vienna, hypnotist, dowser, performer of 'Hellstromism' (finding objects hidden by the audience through muscle reading) and manager of various sideshow acts, most prominently a fake strongwoman, Martha Farra

(a name he used for three different women in this role), in opposition to the popular Jewish strongman Siegmund Breitbart. Eventually, Hanussen settled on being a touring entertainer himself, and Kugel gives a detailed description of his performances, a combination of Hellstromism, hypnotism, graphology, psychometry, cold reading, and audience readings using information secretly obtained and communicated to him by his associates. The public performances also served as an advertisement for his availability to give private readings, a lucrative source of additional income.

His greatest breakthrough as a celebrity came when he was arrested and imprisoned for three weeks in February 1928 in Leitmeritz (now Litoměřice) in Czechoslovakia, on charges of defrauding the public. Kugel covers the trial, which garnered headlines internationally and lasted until 1930, in great detail. Hanussen was ultimately acquitted of the charges after giving a dramatic demonstration of psychometry to the court, but not because the jurists were convinced his psychic abilities were real, though they conceded they might be, but on the grounds that he appeared to be convinced of them himself, and therefore was not deliberately defrauding the gullible. Nevertheless, his acquittal was spun in the press as triumphant proof of his abilities and even covered as such in the *New York Times*.

Having been expelled from Austria in 1923 by the Viennese police for ten years as an undesirable alien (his Viennese birth had been recorded in his father's home town of Prossnitz—now Prostějov—in the Czech Republic, making him a citizen of Czechoslovakia) for his repeated run-ins with the law starting in 1913, Hanussen set up shop in Berlin in 1930.

Hanussen quickly gained a following in Berlin, particularly among the Nazi elite, who were initially not aware of his Jewish heritage. The notorious Count Helldorff, in particular, benefited from Hanussen's largesse, the latter apparently repeatedly lending Helldorff large sums of money to cover his many gambling losses and in return receiving inside information on Nazi party intrigues. Hanussen began boosting Hitler, Helldorff, and others in his occult themed weekly tabloid, *Hanussens Bunte Wochenschau* (Hanussen's Colourful Weekly), starting in January 1932. Although some authors have claimed that Hanussen met with Hitler and coached him in speaking and mesmerising crowds, Kugel argues it is unlikely that the two ever met.

In mid-January 1933, Hanussen signed a two-year lease on a Berlin apartment that he outfitted opulently as a 'Palace of the Occult'. Its invitational grand opening took place on Sunday, 26 February 1933, four weeks after Hitler had been appointed chancellor of Germany. Accounts differ as to details of the midnight séance that was a highlight of the celebrity-filled event, some reporting that Hanussen himself had a vision of a large building burning, others claiming that a hypnotised subject, the actress Maria Paudler, had the vision before fainting. Regardless, the next day, the German seat of parliament, the Reichstag, fell victim to arson, destroying it. The Nazis used this as a pretext

for declaring emergency powers, suspending civil liberties and due process, and arresting numerous opponents.

In an astonishingly short period of time, Germany became a one-party dictatorship. On 1 March 1933, Hanussen began a scheduled one month run of twice-daily performances at Berlin's famed Scala theatre, with an audience capacity of approximately three thousand. On Thursday 16 March, Hanussen was baptised in a Protestant church. One week later, on Friday 24 March, following his afternoon performance at the Scala, Hanussen was arrested on the pretext that he had lied about his Aryan heritage on his application for NSDAP (Nazi Party) membership. His corpse with three bullet wounds and ravaged by wild animals was discovered in a forest on the morning of 7 April 1933. Kugel reconstructs the details of who ordered his murder and who carried it out. The multiple motivations are enumerated as:

- (1) The fact that he was Jewish, which had been widely reported in the left- and right-wing press in late 1932 and early 1933.
- (2) The fact that he knew too much about Nazi intrigues through his close relations with high-ranking party members.
- (3) The fact that he held numerous favours from high-ranking Nazi officials such as Helldorff, Ernst Roehm, and Karl Ernst (who ordered his murder).

Numerous conspiracy theories surround Hanussen, in particular regarding the Reichstag fire. Austrian–Hungarian filmmaker Geza von Cziffra, who had known Hanussen in Berlin and was also friendly with his private secretary Ismet Dzino, claimed in his book that Hanussen had hypnotised the Dutch anarchist Marinus van der Lubbe, who was convicted of setting the fire, to induce him to the act of arson to gain favour with the Nazi hierarchy (von Cziffra, 1978). While Kugel does not endorse the theory, he also does not rule it out as a possibility. This is, of course, an incendiary possibility, since it would make a Jew, Hanussen, directly responsible for Hitler's assumption of dictatorial powers and all the evil that followed it. Kugel, incidentally, co-authored an 863-page book with Alexander Bahar about the Reichstag fire (Bahar & Kugel, 2001), so can be considered an authority on that subject as well.

Kugel also evaluates Hanussen's claims to psychic abilities, looking at his many published predictions for future events and checking whether they came true. Not surprisingly, some did, but on balance Kugel finds the overall evidence lacking, particularly since Hanussen was known to simulate psychic abilities using trickery throughout his career. In the case of the Reichstag fire, even if he did not have a direct hand in it, his connections to those who did make inside information a more likely explanation for his correct predictions than psychic abilities.

One event that is puzzling is his prediction on 17 May 1932 that the race car driver and aristocrat Czech Prince Georg Christian von Lobkowitz should take special precautions in the upcoming 22 May race on Berlin's racetrack, for

which he had qualified. The warning was not publicised in advance, but Prince von Lobkowitz was killed as a result of an accident in that race.

As an appendix to the book, Kugel includes historical criticisms of Werner Herzog's film *Invincible* (2001, with Tim Roth as Hanussen), Mel Gordon's (2001) *Erik Jan Hanussen*, and Arthur J. Magida's (2011) *The Nazi Séance*. The appendix also includes a five-page bibliography, which covers Hanussen's own writings, interviews with him, films and recordings he made, as well as the extensive secondary literature on him, and films and television programmes about him.

In summary, Kugel's revised and expanded biography of Hanussen tells a fascinating and disturbing story in great detail. Highly recommended.

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OBITUARY

KENNETH GRAHAM DRINKWATER 1968–2026



Kind, intelligent, and a constant source of humour—what better qualities could a life hold? Dr Ken Drinkwater passed away unexpectedly, 8 July 2026.

He attended Loreto Sixth Form College (1986–1989), Manchester. Before pursuing a career in psychology and parapsychology, he initially worked as a painter and decorator, and went on to work at Cable & Wireless. He later gained bachelor's (2001), master's (2007), and doctoral degrees (2017), all from Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), with a focus on paranormal beliefs. His viva examiners for the PhD were past and present presidents of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), Professors Chris Roe and Caroline Watt.

On the podcast 'Club Paranormal (Truth be Told)' in 2021, Ken featured along with his close friend (sidekick/partner in crime), colleague and PhD supervisor, Professor Neil Dagnall. They both outlined the field of parapsychology and how their involvement began. As Neil explained:

Even from a very early age [we both had a general interest in the paranormal] together with influences like watching ... the emergence of Amityville, for example, and being gripped by that story as it actually unfolded as a book in the 1970s. And then it was in the late 90s we had a course at Manchester Metropolitan University

which was parapsychology. Now the two people who were running it, they left within a short period of time. Which meant we had a choice, either I took over the course, or the course didn't run. And we had students who were interested, I was interested, so we jumped into that void, and then a few years later Ken joined, and we've been teaching it ever since in different guises. (Club Paranormal (Truth Be Told, 2021)

It is most fortunate that Ken did bits of media and podcasts, as we now have some lasting memories and lectures from him for people to share in his knowledge and personality.

Ken had a long-time association with the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), which included publishing in the journal. However, he officially joined the society in April 2018, attending that year's conference in Newcastle and the following year in Leicester. He was also a regular attendee of the BIAL Foundation conference held in Porto. His publication record with colleagues from MMU is an impressive constant stream of outputs. These primarily focused on human beliefs and the application of validated scales. His ResearchGate profile alone lists 219 outputs. Uniquely for Ken, one of his final collaborations was a paper this year on the topic of survival, which lends support to the idea that consciousness may persist outside of the body during clinical death (Escolà-Gascón et al., 2026).

I regularly attended MMU from 2015 onwards. During that time, Ken introduced me to the various Parapsychology Society (Student Union) leads that they had over the years, notably Claire Elliott and then Becky Roberts. These events would involve talks at the MMU Brooks Building and typical trips to the pub, or, indeed, talks in the pub. At the pub, I saw Ken give various talks on conspiracy theories in psychology, especially the John F. Kennedy assassination, for which he was incredibly knowledgeable. It was a joy to watch him inspire the students and throw a little light humour into any talk he gave. With his colleagues at MMU, he also held ghost-hunting events for the students at Ordsall Hall, Withington Baths, the old Hotspur Press, and over in the Netherlands at a spiritualist HQ and a panopticon prison. This was all in aid of teaching the students about field investigation. And indeed the various anomalistic psychological explanations to look out for, which could lead people to think they have encountered haunting activity—and could anything go on beyond that?

As part of that interest, he contributed as editor to the publication of two substantial textbooks in anomalistic psychology and social science research methods. The first being *Ghosted!*, an anthology co-authored by Dr Brain Lythe, Dr Jim Houran, Professor Dagnall, and Dr Ciaran O'Keeffe, with a foreword and afterword by Professor Chris French and Loyd Auerbach, respectively (Lythe et al., 2021). And just last year, *Applied Cognitive Psychology: A Case Study Approach*, with long time colleagues from MMU Dr Andrew Denovan and Professor Dagnall (Denovan et al., 2025).

Outside of MMU, Ken was a regular attendee of the Exceptional Experiences and Consciousness Studies research group at the University of Northampton, often driving from Manchester to Northampton and back for the evening's catch-up. In more recent times, Ken and Neil were often on webcam together, presenting papers to the Anomalous Beliefs and Experiences Research Group (ABERG) run by Claire Murphy-Morgan of Northumbria University Newcastle. A meeting of the ABERG on 9 September discussed and celebrated Ken's life and work.

My lasting memories of Ken are not so much his work but his kindness. We have had many pub lunches together, but also many telephone calls. We were good enough friends to have heart-to-heart conversations about any challenging life events we faced. You couldn't ask for more in a good friend. I can't imagine Neil without Ken, as they really were a working duo, bouncing ideas, writing, humour and constant mockery off each other—the strongest of friendships, and I'm glad I got to witness that between them on many occasions at MMU.

The funeral ceremony took place at Chester Crematorium Chapel, in Ken's hometown, 31 July. His life was celebrated with a full audience of family, friends, colleagues at MMU, and noted figures in parapsychology such as Professor Dagnall, Dr Denovan, and Dr Fabrizio Cocchiarella, and myself. He is survived by his partner Judith, his stepbrother Mark, his stepfather, and the many friends who adored Ken's company.

In writing this piece for Ken, and SPR members, I read sections of his PhD thesis. It's apparent how important Ken's connection was to his late mother. In the sadness and grief of losing Ken so soon and indeed unexpectedly, some comfort could be taken from the thought that he is reunited with his mother. To love and to be loved is the most precious thing we have.

In Dr Ken Drinkwater's own words:

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my mum, Ann. I thank her for supporting me so unselfishly throughout my life, especially during the last nine years. She was always so positive, supportive, loving, and even during her prolonged illness made me feel special. She was the best mum, and is so sadly missed. Thanks mum I love you, always. (Drinkwater, 2017, p. 3)

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CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor:

Has the accurate location of a stolen small harp by someone living 4,000 km away offered a fundamental challenge to sensory system information only neuropsychology?

This case of a non-visually detected location of a stolen harp was recounted by Dr Elizabeth Mayer, then Associate Professor of Psychology, University of California and living in Oakland, a large port in the Bay area, in her book *Extraordinary Knowing* (Mayer, 2007). Her daughter's valuable small harp was stolen during a 1991 pre-Christmas concert. In late February 1992, she contacted Harold McCoy, then President of the American Society of Dowsters, who lived in Fayetteville, Arkansas, some 4,000 km east of Oakland, to ask if he could locate the harp. He requested a street map of Oakland and replied by saying that "It's in the second house on the right on D— Street, just off L— Avenue." She fly-posted two blocks locally, offering a reward for its return, and was contacted by someone willing to act as a negotiator. A meeting was arranged, and she returned home with an undamaged harp.

The effect upon Dr Mayer by this apparently impossible feat of detection was to 'Irrevocably change my familiar world of science and rational thinking ... If Harold McCoy did what he appeared to have done, I had to face the fact that my notions of space, time, reality, and the nature of the human mind was stunningly inadequate' (Mayer, 2007, pp. 3–4). The intellectually comfortable world of mainstream scientific thought that Dr Mayer had taken for granted had no apparent answer, including a basic principle of neuropsychology that the only way in which we can obtain new information about the world external to ourselves is through our sensory nervous system.

Given this outcome, it is worth asking who was Harold McCoy. Arkansas born, McCoy was an ex-army man who had completed twenty-four years of military service as an intelligence officer before retiring with the rank of US army major in the late 1970s to live in Fayetteville, home to the University of Arkansas. Over the years, he had come to believe that he had a gift for healing together with a talent for finding lost objects through the medium of dowsing. In the mid-1990s, he obtained a grant from the State of Arkansas to found the Ozark Research Institute (ORI), Fayetteville, as an educational non-profit

organisation, chartered by the State of Arkansas to conduct classes and research into 'The Power of Focussed Thought'. Before Dr Mayer sought his help, he had been practising as a dowser for thirty years.

In response to Dr Mayer's inquiry as to how he could locate distant objects, McCoy said that in answer to a request to locate a lost object, he needed to engage in the mental procedure of dowsing. When doing so he transitioned into a very different state of mind from his everyday sensory input state of mind, and this was an essential precondition for distant object location. He described it as an "intuitive sense of knowing", saying that once he had entered it, "The rods just show what your subconscious mind knows already" (p. 170). When the rods had indicated the location of a lost object, it would appear in the front of his mind as a clear mental image, and he could then inform the owner of the precise location of the missing item. In an interview with Dolores Cannon (Cannon, 2006), McCoy details the yes/no questions he asked of his pendulum on this occasion and resulting mental imagery while locating the stolen harp. To first determine whether the harp was still in Oakland he says "I used my pendulum to ask and the pendulum said 'yes'." After receiving a posted street map of Oakland together with a photograph of the harp, McCoy says:

I laid that map out on the dining room table, and I held the picture of the harp in my hand and said, "Is this harp in the area represented by this map?", and my dowsing told me it was. So I've got this map laying on this big dining room table ... and I started on the left side of the map and I got a straight edge with a yardstick, and I said, "OK, I'm going to bring this yardstick across the map and when the edge of the yardstick is at the intersection nearest the harp, give me a 'yes'." So I'm bringing that yardstick across, and pretty soon I got a "yes". So I drew a line right down the edge of that yardstick. Then I went to the top of that line with the yardstick, and I was coming down, and when the edge of the yardstick gets to the intersection nearest the harp it gives me a "yes". So this thing was coming down very slowly, very slowly, and pretty soon it said "yes", so I drew another line. Now that X just happened to be in the very centre of an intersection, so I just mentally placed myself in that intersection. I was facing one way, and I just asked, "Is the harp up this street?", and it said "no", so I turned to the right and looked up that street in my mind's eye, and said, "Is the harp up this street?", and it told me "yes". I said, "Is it on the left side?", and it said "no"; "Is it on the right side?", and it said "yes". Y'know, a series of yes/no questions. So I said, "OK, I'm going to count houses on the right side of this street ... the corner house is number one, the next one is number two, etc." I asked the dowsing system can I do this, and it said "yes". So I had a picture of the harp in my left hand, and said "Is this harp in house number one?", and it told me "yes" ... When I got a "yes" I just got a flash of somebody carrying that harp into the house from a pick-up truck. It happens frequently, just another mind phenomena thing.

When McCoy telephoned Dr Mayer to say "It's in the second house on the right on D— Street, just off L— Avenue", he also told her about his momentary picture of seeing a pick-up truck and a man carrying the harp into the house. When Dr Mayer drove to check the location, she saw the pick-up truck in the

driveway, thus confirming the address (this detail is not mentioned in her account of the case).

Following the recovery of the harp, Dr Mayer asked McCoy if he could discover who had stolen it from the theatre during a Christmas concert:

So I told her go to the theatre and get the names of everybody who had a key to that theatre within the last two years ... someone had a key and went and got it. So she went, and she faxed me about fifteen or sixteen names, and so I was just going down the list saying. "Did this person take the harp?", and pretty soon the pendulum told me "yes", so I called her up and told her, "I think this guy might have taken the harp." So she took his name over to the theatre manager, and said, "I think this guy might have taken the harp", and he said. "Oh yeah, he used to be a maintenance man here", so he looked in the card file and said, "Where did you say the harp was found?", and she told him the address, and he said, "That was probably him because that is where he lives." So it works, it really does work [not mentioned in Dr Mayer's account].

Neither the questions asked, the yes/no response of the pendulum that led to the location of the harp and sighting of the thief, nor the resultant mental imagery described by McCoy can be accounted for by sensory-system-only neuropsychology. This implies that sensory system input only is not an absolute requirement for the acquisition of new mental information concerning the external world. There is a different state of mind in which such non-visual location is possible. This implies that which of the two states of mind is engaged seems conditional upon the form of interaction required with the external world. For everyday interaction, sensory system information is essential. But to answer some forms of client need, intuitive 'knowing' is required. When in this state of mind, physical distance is an irrelevant factor. Professional intuitives, dowzers, and healers have learned to transition from their sensory-based mind into the intuitive mind in response to the personal need of someone else. Sometimes, this change of mind may occur spontaneously as in, for example, an involuntary sense of 'knowing' that someone has been taken ill and needs help.

McCoy's intuitive location of the stolen harp indicates that such 'knowing' is possible in mental principle, so can occur in practice. Its factual occurrence gives credence to what, in parapsychology, is termed extrasensory perception (ESP), which can be defined as the acquisition of new knowledge not explainable by present sensory circumstances or prior knowledge. Since its establishment in 1882, the Society for Psychical Research, together with fellow societies in other countries, has collected thousands of reported ESP experiences for which the experiencer could find no sensory-based explanation. Such experiences are studied under the heading of parapsychology, and have been collated according to similarity of ESP experience as in telepathy (mind-to-mind communication), clairvoyance or remote viewing (perceiving beyond the limits of sensory perception), retrocognition (awareness of a past event not known through prior information), and precognition (seeing a future event later

confirmed in detail beyond chance coincidence) (e.g., Feather & Schmicker, 2005; MacKenzie, 1997; Mayer, 2007; Playfair, 2012; Rhine, 1961). There is also empirical evidence demonstrating that ESP is a genuine mental phenomenon (Broderick & Goertzel, 2015; Vernon, 2021). To account for such experiences, a mental faculty termed psi has been hypothesised that can induce an intuitive state of mind during which such phenomena, known as psi phenomena, can occur (Charman, 2025). Unless mainstream neuropsychology can provide an explanation for McCoy's feat of non-visual location, the answer to the question in the title seems to be a definite 'yes'.

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To the Editor:

More on the null hypothesis

Thanks to Paul Stevens (2026) for his reply. My original letter encouraged researchers to include the possibility of psi not existing when they explore a null result. Stevens argues that such results can only be seen as showing that psi did not occur under specific experimental conditions and cannot be extrapolated beyond that. I see the point, but I believe that researchers should explore both options. Let's look at two imaginary scenarios.

(1) A researcher notices that spontaneous paranormal experiences frequently occur during dreaming and conducts a study in which participants try to predict the future in their dreams. The study obtains a null result. The researcher can explore this finding in two main ways. First, they can assume that the psi-dreaming effect is genuine and attribute the null result to an aspect of the experiment (e.g., the study used every dream report, whereas it should have focused on those that were especially striking). Second, they can assume that the psi-dreaming effect is spurious and question the original claim (e.g., could the reports of spontaneous experiences be the result of selective reporting or poor recall?).

(2) Previous studies suggest that older people obtain higher psi scores than younger people. A researcher runs an experiment to replicate this alleged effect and obtains a null result. Once again, this finding could be explored from two main perspectives. First, the researcher could assume the psi-age effect is genuine and attribute the null result to experimental conditions (e.g., in the original studies the participants claimed to be psychic, whereas in the replication they did not). Second, they could assume that the psi-age effect is spurious and question the original studies (e.g., were the positive effects due to chance or undetected artifacts?).

In my experience, parapsychologists readily discuss ways in which null results could be the result of experimental conditions and tend to ignore the idea of null results being due to the absence of psi. Being more open to the possibility of psi not existing will help parapsychologists remain alert to possible non-psi factors at play and avoid appearing biased toward the validity of the psi hypothesis.

It is for these reasons that I would like to see *JSPR* editors and reviewers supporting this practice.

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NOTICE

Annual General Meeting 2027

The Annual General Meeting of the Incorporated Society for Psychical Research will be held at the SPR Offices, 1 Vernon Mews, London W14 0RL on Saturday 24 April 2027 commencing at 5:15 p.m. In the circumstance that it is not possible to hold a physical meeting, we reserve the right to hold the meeting online via a video conferencing application. The following six members of the Council will retire from office immediately before the meeting, and are eligible for re-election, pursuant to Article 28 of the Articles of Association:

C. J. Farrell, BSc, GRSC

C. A. Roe, BSc, MSc, PhD

J. Fraser, BA

A. P. Ryan

R. G. McLuhan, BA, BLitt

C. E. Cooper, BSc, MRes, PhD, CPsychol, FHEA

Other nominations may be submitted by any Member or Associate of the Society, and should be sent to The Secretary at SPR, 1 Vernon Mews, London W14 0RL before 31 January 2027. Potential candidates can be any Member or Associate of the Society; they must receive two written nominations, which will be kept on file for each candidate. A vote to elect six members of Council will only be required if there are more than six candidates for the six vacant places.

Full Members have the right to submit resolutions under Part 13 of the Companies Act 2006. These must be submitted in writing and must be sent to The Secretary at SPR, 1 Vernon Mews, London W14 0RL before 31 January 2027.

NOTES FOR AUTHORS

The *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research (JSPR)* provides a peer-reviewed forum for communication and critical debate for the community of scholars and interested parties involved and/or interested in the field of psychic, parapsychological or anomalous effects.

TYPES OF PAPER

The journal publishes empirical research, research notes and short letters to the editor. All submissions need to be in English. Research-based submissions to the *JSPR* for publication need to be *original* (i.e., not published or submitted for publication elsewhere), provide a *significant* contribution to the field, and be underpinned by a highly *rigorous* methodology.

Empirical Research (6,000 to 8,000 max.)

The journal welcomes a range of empirical work including (though not restricted to): experimental research (quantitative and qualitative); field investigations; case collections; theoretical contributions; review articles; historical perspectives.

Research Notes (4,000 to 6,000 words max.)

Research notes refer to short reports of interesting and important issues and/or relate to specific or current research carried out in the field.

Letters to the Editor (1,000 words max.)

The journal welcomes letters to the editor that comment on or otherwise develop ideas introduced by the material published in the journal.

MANUSCRIPT PREPARATION

As noted above the major criteria for the acceptance of a research article will be its originality, significance, and rigour. Detailed guidance on the preparation of empirical research articles, research notes, and letters to the editor can be found on the SPR website at: <https://jspr.spr.ac.uk/index.php/jspr/information/authors>.

SUBMISSION PROCESS

Submissions to *JSPR* ought not have been published elsewhere and must follow standards of expected ethical behaviour (see <https://www.spr.ac.uk/publication-ethics-publication-malpractice-statement>). All submissions need to be in English and submitted online at <https://jspr.spr.ac.uk/index.php/jspr/about/submissions>. Authors need to register with the journal prior to submitting or, if already registered, can simply log in and begin the process.

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