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Ghost Hunting Groups and Ghost Hunters in Germany: Results of Two Online Surveys	65
<i>By Gerhard A. Mayer and Sonja Nowara</i>	

RESEARCH NOTE

One Woman's Extraordinary Set of Communications Through Mediums Can Be Interpreted as Compelling Evidence of Life After Death: But Should a Non-survivalist Explanation Be Considered?.....	101
<i>By Robert A. Charman</i>	

BOOK REVIEWS

<i>Ted Serios: The Mind's Eye</i>	113
<i>By Sarah Sparkes</i>	
<i>The Spiritualist Prime Minister, Volume 1. Mackenzie King and the New Revelation</i>	117
<i>By Katie Oates</i>	
<i>The Case for the Afterlife: Evidence of Life After Death</i>	121
<i>By Daniel Bourke</i>	
<i>Lucid Dying: The New Science Revolutionizing How We Understand Life and Death</i>	128
<i>By Graham Kidd</i>	
<i>Chasing Evil: Shocking Crimes, Supernatural Forces, and an FBI Agent's Search for Hope and Justice</i>	135
<i>By Zofia Weaver</i>	

OBITUARY

Stephen Edward Braude.....	139
<i>By Mario Varvoglis</i>	

CORRESPONDENCE

Letter from Richard Wiseman	141
Letter from Ashley Knibb	142

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GHOST HUNTING GROUPS AND GHOST HUNTERS IN GERMANY: RESULTS OF TWO ONLINE SURVEYS

BY GERHARD A. MAYER AND SONJA NOWARA

ABSTRACT

We conducted two online surveys with German ghost hunting groups (GHGs) and individual ghost hunters. The first questionnaire targeted entire teams, the second individual members. Our goals were (1) to understand the current GHG scene in Germany—their composition, investigation approaches, and exceptional experiences (ExEs)—and (2) to gain insight into the people engaged in this time- and resource-intensive hobby. We developed two questionnaires and included two established scales in the individual version to assess exceptional experiences (Fragebogen zur Phänomenologie außergewöhnlicher Erfahrungen [Questionnaire on the Phenomenology of Exceptional Experiences, PExE II]) and paranormal beliefs (Belief in the Supernatural Scale [BitSS]). We received twenty-one team responses and thirty-nine from individuals. Results from study 1 showed that GHGs exhibited similarities in site selection, investigative methods, use of technical equipment, and types of recorded anomalies. Social media now largely replaces traditional websites and local TV features. However, teams differ in documentation practices and how they handle collected data. Group sizes, founding dates, and annual investigation frequency vary widely. Study 2 found that ghost hunters reported more ExEs than student samples and hold stronger paranormal beliefs (BitSS). Surprisingly, 85% believe in a link between paranormal phenomena and the deceased, while 30% identify as atheists or agnostics—suggesting belief in spirits of the deceased is not necessarily tied to belief in God. For ghost hunters, ExEs are typically not distressing but inspire curiosity and further pursuit. Nearly two-thirds stated that prior ExEs were key motivators for taking up ghost hunting. In addition to the entertainment aspect, the possibility of ‘real’ contact with the supernatural plays an important role for many ghost hunters, something that cannot be found in media offerings on this topic. The motivation of ghost hunters ranges from scientific interest to the desire to confirm or question their own beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

Ghost hunting (GH) is a leisure activity that has become increasingly popular since the first decade of the new millennium (e.g., Mayer, 2013). Ghost hunters are people who get together in small groups and, in their free time, visit places that are supposedly haunted. Some groups also investigate poltergeist cases in private households in response to requests from those affected. The main objective of the activity is to detect and record alleged paranormal phenomena

in the relevant locations using various technical devices such as audio and video recorders, full-spectrum and infrared cameras, and measurement devices for ambient electromagnetic fields (EMF meters) and temperature, as well as radio-frequency motion detectors (REM pods), among others (e.g., Auerbach, 2004; Wilson, 2005).¹ The use of technical devices is considered a characteristic of a scientific approach and is associated by many ghost hunters with the idea of the ‘measurability’ of ‘ghosts’ or their physical traces (Mayer, 2010; Potts, 2004). The recordings and measurements are analysed in the follow-up, and the results are often made available to the public as research reports on their own websites, on YouTube and on Facebook.

Most of the studies published to date on the phenomenon of GH are based on the analysis of self-portrayals of GH groups (GHGs) on the internet (e.g., Hill, 2017; Mayer, 2013; Potts, 2004) and sometimes supplemented by interviews (Bartoschek & Waschkau, 2013; Mayer, 2010). The American literary scholar Alan Brown conducted guided telephone interviews with forty-three founders or leaders of GHGs, asking questions about their motives, methods, group composition, members’ backgrounds, and more (Brown, 2006). He found that they had a number of things in common, for example in terms of their mission, the technical equipment they use, their experiences of the social reactions of the environment, and—surprisingly—their rejection of the TV show *Ghost Hunters*, which was very important for the development of the GH scene (Mayer, 2013). For Brown, the most important difference between the individual groups was whether they regularly use psychic mediums or dowsing rods as ‘metaphysical methods’ to obtain additional information, or whether they limit themselves to purely technical measuring devices that provide ‘hard’ data. More than half of the groups use both ‘metaphysical’ and ‘scientific’ methods (Brown, 2006, pp. 345–348).

For geologist Sharon Hill, the question of the scientific nature of the activities of amateur paranormal research groups was at the centre of her study (Hill, 2017), while anthropologist Ehler Voss focused on the quasi-religious aspects of his field research in California (Voss, 2021). In a very informative study on GHGs, cultural anthropologist Michele Hanks conducted interviews with ghost hunters and providers of ‘ghost tourism’ services (e.g., ‘ghost walks’ in cities), and got to know the work of four GHGs with membership numbers between two and twenty-five in participatory observation (Hanks, 2015, 2016a, 2016b). She elaborated the role of doubt for ghost hunters, which is intended to ensure their connection to science: Those who doubt and are critical of supposedly paranormal phenomena are acting rationally. Doubting shows that one is not gullible and easily influenced.

1. Meanwhile, there are a myriad guides to the technical side of ghost hunting, including the book *Ghost Hunting for Dummies* (Bagans, 2020), although little additional information is provided with new publications.

One of the two authors of this article (S.N.) presented her insights as a long-time insider of the GH scene. In addition to a brief historical overview and a presentation of the common methodology used by GHGs, the different self-portrayals of the groups as well as more recent developments and changes in the German GH scene are described—mainly from an emic perspective (Nowara & Mayer, 2024).

To our knowledge, systematic surveys of personal motivations, beliefs, and other personal aspects of ghost hunters have not yet been conducted. Hence, the aim of our research project was (1) to get an idea of the current scene in Germany, the composition of the GHGs, the specific approach to paranormal investigations (PIs), and the exceptional experiences (ExEs) encountered during these investigations, and (2) to better understand the people who pursue this time-consuming and resource-intensive leisure activity. GH requires a great deal of commitment to pursue it. We wanted to know what ‘type of people’ are attracted to it and what the individual motives are for each ghost hunter. We also wanted to get information about what kind of ExEs dominate and how pronounced paranormal and supernatural beliefs are. For this purpose, we created two questionnaires, the first of which was addressed to entire GH teams and the second to individuals. Due to the lack of comparable studies, this two-part study was purely exploratory. It was approved by the local ethics committee of the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health (IGPP-2023-02).

SURVEY ONE: GHGs IN GERMANY

Method

Participants

The first questionnaire (see Appendix A) was addressed to entire teams. We received a total of twenty-two data sets. Two members of one group completed the survey separately for this group, meaning that the total information obtained relates to twenty-one groups. For the statistical group evaluation, we used the data provided by the team leader of this group, as she is also its founder.

Materials

The questionnaire developed for GHGs asked about the location of the group, methods used in the investigations, handling of media (television, print media, social media), etc. It was not anonymized because it did not ask for personal data subjected to data protection, but only for data that was publicly accessible in principle, i.e., on the websites of the corresponding groups. The questionnaire consisted of thirty-seven items, some of which have free-text fields for more detailed descriptions. The items were organized into five blocks, (1) general statements or information such as the number of members, number of PIs conducted, internet platforms used for publication of the cases, etc.;

(2) questions about how PIs are carried out (locations, technical equipment, cooperation with public media); (3) questions on the documentation and evaluation of PIs; (4) questions about paranormal phenomena and ExEs during PIs; and (5) relation to academic science. It also contained an introductory section in which we introduced ourselves and our research question. We used the online questionnaire tool LimeSurvey.

Procedure

The questionnaire was sent to active GHGs in Germany whose contact details were available. This was the case for thirty-five of the fifty-eight groups active at that time. The call was also posted in two WhatsApp groups (Ghosthunter-Treffen and Blabla) specifically for ghost hunters, as well as on Facebook. Data collection was carried out between October and December 2023.

Data analysis

We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 28) for calculations. However, most statistics are only descriptive in nature. For group comparisons, we used the Kruskal–Wallis test, as our measuring instruments are ordinal scaled. Due to the purely exploratory nature of the correlation statistics, we did not make corrections for multiple testing. We performed two-sided significance tests, and agreed to a significance level of 0.05.

Results

General questions or statements

Age and size of the groups. The average age of the GHGs was 7.7 years ($SD = 5.95$). The range extended from 0 years, i.e., the groups were founded in the year of the survey (three groups = 14.3%), to 19 years (one group = 4.8%). Half of the groups were no more than 7 years old, and a quarter were no more than 2.5 years old. This is an indicator that the groups tend to be short lived. However, about a quarter of the groups had been in existence for more than 12 years. The groups had an average of three members ($SD = 1.8$), with a minimum of one person (solo investigators) and a maximum of eight people. Dogs that are regularly worked with were not counted as members.

Number of PIs. To answer the question about the number of PIs carried out, free-text fields were provided in which a corresponding entry was to be made. This allowed respondents to differentiate where necessary, but also led to less clear-cut answers. In the case of approximate figures, the lower values were taken; in the case of a range, the mean value (rounded down) was used.

On average, the groups conducted seven to eight PIs per year ($Mdn = 7$, $IQR = 5–11$), with a range of 2–24. The median of the total number of PIs performed since the groups were established was forty ($IQR = 20–95$) with

TABLE 1.

Importance of public perception: “How important are viewer numbers, page views, and general awareness for the team?”

	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Completely unimportant (= 1)	8	38.1	38.1
Not very important (= 2)	9	42.9	81.0
Somewhat important (= 3)	3	14.3	95.2
Important (= 4)	1	4.8	100
Very important (= 5)	0	0	
Total	21	100	

a range of 7–120 PIs. These figures indicate a high variance in terms of both commitment (number of PIs per year) and longevity or consistency among the groups.

More than half of the groups had conducted a maximum of four PIs in private households (*Mdn* = 4, *IQR* = 1–15), which can be seen as a special type of PI (see below). However, in one group with a very large number of PIs, approximately half of the cases involved PIs in private households.

GHGs and the public. During the early years of GH, the most important way to attract the attention of the public or other groups was GHGs reporting the PIs on their own websites. Of the teams participating in the survey, 38% have their own website, and 29% used it to publish their PI reports. However, according to our data the importance of having one’s own website for this purpose has decreased. At the time of the survey, Facebook (86%) was the most commonly used platform to publish investigation reports, followed by YouTube (67%) and Instagram (57%). Other platforms are used by 29%.

We asked on a five-point scale (from ‘completely unimportant’ [= 1] to ‘very important’ [= 5]) how important viewer numbers, page views, and general awareness are for the team. For most groups (81%), these aspects are ‘completely unimportant’ or ‘not very important’. Only one team consider this aspect ‘important’. None of the teams rated it as ‘very important’ (Table 1).

The teams’ relationships with other GHGs. We asked the teams to give a general assessment of their relationship with other GHGs on a five-point scale ranging from ‘mostly good’ to ‘mostly problematic’. Two-thirds of the teams (fourteen groups) described the relationship between their team and other teams as predominantly good, a further 14.3% (three groups) as generally good, another three teams as ‘partly good/partly problematic’, and only one team described the relationship with other teams as ‘generally problematic’. The category ‘predominantly problematic’ was not used.

TABLE 2.

Role models for GHGs

	Frequency	Percentage
American TV series (e.g., <i>Ghost Hunters</i>)	0	0
Other TV series (e.g., <i>Geisterakten</i>)	2	9.5
TV documentaries	3	14.3
Websites/presentations from other teams	9	42.9
Other	16	76.2

Note: Multiple answers were possible.

Role models. We also asked which role models the team used as a guide for its investigations. Interestingly, TV series such as the influential American show *Ghost Hunters* no longer seemed to play a role. Apparently, their influence on outfits and technology has become so established that there is no need to go back to the original source. The websites of other teams are an important influence for almost 43%. However, there appear to be other role models, as around 76% ticked 'other' for this question (Table 2).

The following items deal with information on the implementation of PIs.

Conducting PIs

Location of the PIs. The reference to a specific historical event was the most important factor when choosing the location for a PI. Ninety-five per cent of groups conduct PIs in such locations that are accessible to the public,² and 76% in locations that are not accessible to the public.³ Places without a specific historical reference, such as graveyards, were also of interest for GHGs: 67% conducted PIs in such locations that are publicly accessible, and 48% also in places that are not publicly accessible.

Investigating hauntings in private households can be considered a special case of publicly inaccessible locations. However, it is also a special type of PI, and it is viewed critically by some groups. No one can suffer psychological harm during a PI in a public place or an abandoned location where place-centred hauntings tied to a specific location occur (with the possible exception of the ghost hunters themselves). This is not the case with poltergeist cases in private homes. Here we usually deal with person-centred poltergeist phenomena that are associated with specific individuals and are usually the result of complex

2. Typical examples are castles or other historically significant buildings that can be visited as tourist attractions.

3. Typical examples are abandoned clinics or other 'lost places' located on private property where access is normally not permitted.

psychodynamic factors (Fach, 2022, 2024). Only 38% of the groups investigated hauntings or poltergeist cases in private households, which is still a relatively high number considering that such cases involve the risk of interfering with psychodynamic processes that require the support of professional psychotherapists.

Sixty-two per cent of teams stated that they do not follow any other specific criteria when choosing a location, while 38% do. Pragmatic aspects such as hazardous situations (e.g., risk of building collapse), known sources of disruption (e.g., busy roads), and existing (filming) permits from the owner were cited (in comment fields) as necessary prerequisites.

Preparation of PIs. All teams conduct research on the location prior to an on-site investigation. There are differing opinions on how thoroughly one should conduct historical research in advance, as this can influence perception due to the expectations created. This also applies to reading investigation reports from other GHGs that have already investigated the site. However, some groups believe that knowledge of so-called hotspots can be helpful and time saving when selecting and installing equipment. Some groups conduct targeted investigations into possible sources of interference (e.g., radio masts). In some cases, only the team leader has advance information about the location, to ensure the impartiality of the team members as much as possible.

Technical equipment and other means of detection. Audio and video recording devices and EMF meters are part of the teams' basic equipment. All teams work with such devices, although in one case where no audio recording device was used, audio recordings are available on the video track of the video recording device. Due to the darkness at the site (any light sources will be switched off during the investigation), video recordings are made in infrared or ultraviolet (full spectrum). In most cases, the video cameras and audio devices are installed at supposedly 'interesting hot spots', based on prior research. In addition to this standard equipment, which was available for all teams, other devices were also used, e.g., REM pods (radio-frequency motion detectors—these emit a sound when an object moves through the EMF generated by the devices), spirit boxes and portals (modified radio receivers used for detecting electric voice phenomena), kinects (motion-sensing input devices originally developed by Microsoft for the Xbox 360), parascopes (for visualizing changes in the surrounding EMF), and other devices (Table 3).⁴

In addition to technical measuring devices for detecting anomalies, GHGs also partly support the idea that there are 'living detectors', namely psychics, or even animals that are said to be particularly sensitive to the presence of any invisible entities (Mayer & Schetsche, 2019, pp. 96–97).

4. A brief technical explanation of such devices is provided by Dark Whimsical Art (2025, January 21).

TABLE 3.

Technical equipment used by GHGs

	Frequency (%)
EMF meter (including K2 and Mel Meter)	100
Video recording devices/cameras (including infrared and full-spectrum cameras)	100
Audio recording devices	95
REM pod	76
Spirit box	57
Kinect	43
Mobile phone apps	33
Portal	29
Parascope	24
Other	76

Note: Multiple answers were possible.

Just over half of the teams (eleven out of twenty-one) occasionally work with a psychic, and in slightly less than half of the teams (ten out of twenty-one), there were individuals who believe they have psychic powers themselves.

Cooperation with public media. The question of cooperation with television or the press during the PIs has been with the GH from the very beginning. The presence of TV crews brings public attention to the GHG, which is appreciated by some for various reasons—after all, the members of the American group The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) have become media stars thanks to the series *Ghost Hunters* (Mayer, 2013). In addition to such personal aspects, media presence can also have advantages when it comes to providing information about haunted locations (“This is the only way we can show people that we exist and that they can turn to us”) or granting permission to investigate. However, it’s a double-edged sword. “The press and TV have very specific ideas and wishes”, which deprive the research team of freedom and spontaneity. Sensational images or footage are desired. In addition, there is always the risk of being “ridiculed and made fun of by such media” (all quotes are taken from comments on the question of cooperation with the media).

Fifty-seven per cent of the teams denied such collaborations during the PIs. Of the 43% who said they allow this, we have no information on how often this happens. A comment on this question states, “in principle, no. There are exceptions now and then ... So, ‘yes’, but 90% of requests are turned down.” Some also make cooperation dependent on the type of request, for example, whether it comes from regional media or public television. Overall, there is a tendency to reject sensationalist portrayals. This is exemplified by the following comment:

From many years of experience and numerous TV collaborations, I can now say that such cooperation is unsatisfactory and does not do justice to the subject matter. What people want is horror and action, and it goes without saying that this cannot be delivered and that a false impression in the public eye is inevitable.

The procedure. The procedure of a PI is very similar for all teams. After an inspection of the location (getting a feel for the place, checking for possible sources of interference, walking around the site to identify and mark any hazards [if present], identifying hotspots), a consultation takes place, followed by the set-up of the equipment, in some cases combined with a 'baseline measurement' of, for example, temperature, EMF radiation, and in individual cases air quality. Some of the teams begin with meditation, often followed by a 'passive session' or 'passive sit-in', i.e., ambient noises are consciously perceived and identified (seeing/feeling/smelling/hearing). This is usually followed by an 'active session', i.e., questions are asked to establish 'contact'. This procedure is repeated at various points. In most cases, this is monitored by cameras. The questioning and measurements often continue into the early hours of the morning, lasting between 3 and 6 hours, with variations in both directions. Sometimes the team splits up, and certain areas of the investigation site are examined in a specific formation (e.g., only male or only female team members). Finally, the equipment used is dismantled.

Documentation and data evaluation

There are two aspects to consider when documenting PIs: firstly, the recording of potential anomalies such as raps, shadows, or the reaction of specific ghost detectors, i.e., devices listed in Table 3, and, secondly, the documentation of subjective perceptions of the ghost hunters, the procedure itself, and the general conditions during the PI. Most teams use video and audio recordings as well as photos for documentation purposes. Just over half of GHGs (57%) use written records in addition to technical recording devices. Two GHGs record the entire PIs with technical recording devices, while most only record individual sessions (e.g., during a phase of asking questions or during a phase of using certain GH gadgets) as part of the overall PI. Immediately after the sessions, participants are asked about their (subjective) perceptions. In many teams, participants comment on their perceptions directly during the individual sessions so that they are stored on the video and audio recordings. Basic information such as the location, date, names of those present, and weather information are also recorded using technology and/or in writing. Any special occurrences or circumstances at the location are documented. These may include noticeable background noises (cars, airplanes), disruptive factors (other people, animals), or even the documentation of self-made noises (e.g., yawning, stomach rumbling), which could lead to misinterpretation in the analysis. All recordings made on site and other forms of documentation are included in the subsequent

analysis. Two teams used a self-created questionnaire for documentation that, in addition to basic information (location name, date, time), records the individual devices and the name of the person evaluating the respective device as well as the type of possible anomaly.

The data is transferred to PCs and analysed. Each recording is viewed or listened to, and any anomalies are noted with the timecode or cut out, and then compared in context with other recordings from the same location (sometimes multiple cameras or cameras and audio devices are located in a single room or confined area). This serves to determine whether the anomaly can be seen or heard on multiple devices. An example of this would be if a visual anomaly is visible on a recording and, at the same point in time, one or more team members reported unusual (bodily) perceptions (e.g., on the audio recording). This makes it easier to assess whether these are actually anomalies or conventionally explainable phenomena.

The results of the evaluation are documented in writing and/or as video documentation and, in some cases, published on social media.

There were no differences between the teams with regard to the *type of data* (video and audio recordings, photographs) that is evaluated. This also applies to the more subjective data. Despite the ghost hunters' great affinity for technology and the associated desire for physical measurability of the phenomena, subjective perceptions, sensations, and experiences (e.g., bodily sensations, shadow sightings, touches) were documented and evaluated by all teams except one.

The question of *which team members* evaluate the data does not yield a clear picture. All options are equally common and do not depend on the size of the team. In 33% of the cases, a preliminary evaluation by specialists in the team takes place, followed by joint evaluation. Twenty-nine per cent of teams state that the group members all carry out the evaluation together. In 24% of teams, this is done exclusively by specialists, and in 14% of teams, members do this partly together. Personal preferences and interests of individual team members play a decisive role here. For some, the data collection part, i.e., conducting and experiencing a PI at the location, may be the most important part, while the evaluation part may be perceived as rather boring and gladly left to other team members. Two-thirds of the teams occasionally consult external experts for evaluation or obtain expert opinions.

Seventy-one point five per cent of the teams store and retain all raw data on a storage device or in the cloud. Nearly 10% save the raw data of interesting parts or sections in this way. In the remaining 19% of cases, the raw data is largely deleted after analysis or processing. Seventy-six per cent of GHGs state that they completely secure and store the processed material, while 19% only store the most interesting parts.

Seventy-six per cent of the GHGs make their processed data publicly available (social networks, websites, etc.), and 24% the raw data too. Sixty-four

per cent also publish their historical research on the locations, and 57% provide contextual information (e.g., directions, environment).

Potentially paranormal phenomena and ExEs during PIs

Since the central goal of GH is to measure and record assumedly paranormal phenomena whose origins cannot be explained by conventional scientific models, corresponding reports and statements are to be expected. We were interested in the nature of such phenomena and if they could be documented. Table 4 shows a list of reported phenomena and the percentages of the GHGs that experienced each phenomenon.

Some of the phenomena mentioned concern the level of emotions and inner perception and are not objectively measurable and documentable. Hence, in these cases the documentation is in the form of a written protocol or by completing a questionnaire created for this purpose. Other phenomena were not perceived during the PI but only discovered later when the recorded data is evaluated. Table 5 provides a list of such documented phenomena with the corresponding percentages.

All listed classes of perceived phenomena, with the exception of the feeling of being influenced by an alien entity, are reported by at least half of the groups (see Table 4). The setting of GH seems likely to produce unusual acoustic, visual, or haptic perceptions. This also applies to feelings of the presence of someone or something (a spirit, an energy). Four-fifths of the groups reported the latter.

The documented phenomena classified as paranormal also offer little surprises (see Table 5). All groups reported EVPs as well as other acoustic phenomena on their recordings. Reactions of ghost detectors and other specific

TABLE 4.

Perceived paranormal phenomena experienced during PIs

	Percentage
Acoustic phenomena (mimicry sounds, e.g., raps or voices)	100
Visual sightings (e.g., shadows)	95
Haptic perceptions, touch	90
Feeling of the presence of someone or something / a spirit / an energy	81
Sudden changes in temperature	71
Temporary health impairments (e.g., pain sensations)	67
Odours, special olfactory perceptions	67
Sense of threat	52
Feeling of being influenced by an alien entity	29
Other	24

Note: Multiple answers were possible.

TABLE 5.

Recorded or documented paranormal phenomena during PIs

	Percentage
Electric voice phenomena (EVPs)	100
Acoustic phenomena (e.g., mimicry sounds or raps)	95
Reactions and measurement readings of devices used for GH	90
Anomalies on photographs	81
Unusual reactions from individual team members	38
Significant changes in temperature	14
Other	24

Note: Multiple answers were possible.

devices for GH could be recorded on video. Eighty-one per cent of the groups reported anomalies on photographs. It is noteworthy, at most, that the drop in temperature, which is part of the classic narrative of ghost stories, could rarely be measured objectively.

We asked the participating groups about their most impressive paranormal experiences related to PIs. Due to the diversity of the reported phenomena, which often triggered a strong sense of subjective evidence when combined, attempting to generalize them into categories is of little use, as can be seen from the following examples. A team reported:

RSPK [recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis] phenomenon in Scotland. Two out of five people (I was one of them) heard and felt hammer blows coming from the next room. According to the homeowner, who happened to be present and was not part of the investigation team, a device placed in the window was lifted and dropped forward. The hammer blows only stopped when the device hit the floor.⁵

Another report goes:

I was hit by a lump of clay in the garden, at the same time we were recording an EVP in which a woman said: throw it away. I once saw a planchette fly about 3 meters in a high arc out of a metal bowl. Since this bowl was standing about 1.5 meters next to me and I could see everyone in the room, I still can't explain it to this day.

While the two examples above combine acoustic phenomena and inexplicably moving objects, the next example concerns a remarkable photographic anomaly:

While visiting Hohenlimburg Castle during a filming session for a WDR program,⁶ we were able to take two photos that still impress me to this day. The photos are of a white woman who was/is known by name. The clarity of the photos and the fact that they were taken in an almost empty room have stayed with me to this day. Even

5. All translations by the authors.

6. WDR: Westdeutscher Rundfunk is a German public-broadcasting institution.

during the investigation, we tried to reproduce these photos to rule out the possibility that there might be a rational explanation for them, but without success. For me, as an objective skeptic, these photos are proof that ghosts do exist!

The last example presented here is about physical sensations experienced during a PI:

A jab (with a finger?) in my back and, after I asked him to stop, [I felt] a gentle stroke across my arm and a grasp of my hand. It felt like the hand of a child—although there wasn't enough room behind me or beside me for a child to have been there.

Despite the diversity of such reported phenomena, almost all have in common that they affect the physical level. These include, for example, unexplained movements of objects or the occurrence of noises for which conventional causes have been ruled out.

The exclusion of conventional explanations is of central importance in GH. The teams find conventional explanations for about three-quarters of the phenomena ($Mdn = 75\%$, $SD = 27\%$). We asked the participating teams to briefly describe how they rule out conventional explanations for supposed paranormal phenomena. Almost all teams state that they initially use exclusion methods and measurements to search for natural causes and also involve experts in the process. For example, EMF measurements are used to check whether strong EMFs are present, whether there are power or cell phone towers nearby, whether there are natural noise sources that could be reflected in the recorded data, etc. If, for example, anomalies are detected in photographs, attempts are often made to test the phenomena for replicability on site by recreating and reconstructing them. When analysing data recorded with different devices, their temporal synchronization plays an important role in determining whether a potential anomaly can be detected only on one device or on several in some form.

In the end, there is not always a uniform assessment of the phenomena within the teams, but overall the agreement is quite large in most cases. Over 80% state that there are only 'rarely' or 'occasionally' conflicting opinions at the end of the analysis. Only two teams (10%) state that this is often the case.

GH and academic science

Three final questions in the group questionnaire concerned scientific theories and a willingness to cooperate with academic researchers. When asked whether the team also deals with scientific explanatory models or theories on the subject, 62% said they do so occasionally. Four GHGs (19%) do this intensively, and another four GHGs do not engage in it. Names that are mentioned in the accompanying comments belong to the field of transcommunication (e.g., Ernst Senkowski) and paranormal research in general (e.g., Hans Bender, Walter v. Lucadou, Alan Gould, Steve Parsons, and others), with no distinction often being made between popular science and academic literature. The majority of

teams (71%) indicated that they would be very interested in closer scientific exchange with academic researchers and would also be willing to fulfil certain requirements for cooperation with academia (e.g., completing a questionnaire before and after the PI). Twenty-four per cent (five teams) would be ‘somewhat’ interested; one team stated that it was ‘not very’ interested. Four teams stated that they were ‘likely’ to fulfil certain conditions for cooperation, while the remaining two responded ‘rather not’.

Discussion one

We find similarities between the GHGs in many respects. This concerns the selection of locations, the type of approach, the use of technical equipment, and the nature of the anomalies experienced and recorded, but also the fact that TV series such as *Ghost Hunters* or *Most Haunted* are not considered role models. GHGs seek guidance on other teams’ websites or from other sources, indicating a shift in the scene. Social media presence has largely replaced team websites and appearances on local television stations. Given the increasing commercialization of parts of the GHG scene (Nowara & Mayer, 2024), the data obtained from our questionnaire regarding the little importance of viewership and public attention is surprising. Another common feature is the reluctance of most GHGs to conduct investigations in private homes. This is positive from the perspective of professional counsellors for people who have had ExEs.

A large variance can be observed in the group size, the age of the group, and the number of PIs performed per year. This is understandable given the considerable time and financial investment required by the GH.

The analysis and interpretation of (measurement) data and the testing of various explanatory hypotheses using exclusion methods are familiar scientific approaches to understanding reality. In this respect, it is understandable that many GHGs consider their approach to be scientific and that their members describe themselves as sceptical. However, GH is a leisure activity, and only very few ghost hunters are likely to have received training in scientific methodology, although the proportion of those with an applied sciences university degree was comparatively high at 38.5% (see the results of survey two). In principle, there is a high willingness to cooperate with academic science. However, the teams have different ideas about how the PIs are to be documented and what exactly happens with the collected data.

Some limitations should be mentioned. Since the questionnaire was not anonymous, the responses are self-reported and may contain a significant degree of bias towards a positive image (e.g., relationship to other groups, largely described as good; or that media coverage and audience figures are not particularly important for the team). It is also unknown to what extent the information reflects a team or group opinion that may have been discussed beforehand, or whether it is the individual assessment of the team leader. At least on the last point, we received an indication of the different assessments

and perspectives within a GHG, since we had two questionnaires filled out by the team leader and another team member (only partly filled out). Most differences between those two, such as those relating to the storage or publication of raw data, can be attributed to insufficient communication and varying levels of information due to different basic interests and functions within the group. Different answers to the question of what was the most impressive paranormal experience in the context of PIs clearly demonstrate the varying degrees of individual impact that such experiences have. A notable difference between the statements of the team leader and the other team member was evident in the estimation of the percentage of recorded unusual phenomena for which the team finds a natural explanation. The assessment was made using a slider ranging from 0 to 100%. The team leader stated that 25% of these phenomena could ultimately be explained conventionally, while the other team member estimated the proportion at 75%. Furthermore, the two gave slightly different frequencies for how often team members had conflicting about the nature of the phenomena at the end of the analysis. While the team leader stated that this was 'rarely' the case, the team member stated that this happened 'occasionally'. These differences give the impression that the team leader is less sceptical than the team member, although it remains unclear whether this is more attributable to the team leader's external presentation of the team or to individual differences in subjective perception of evidence.

SURVEY TWO: GERMAN GHOST HUNTERS

Method

Participants

The second questionnaire was addressed to individual members of GHGs. We received thirty-nine evaluable data sets. Thirty-eight of these were completed in full, while one was partially completed, with the values on one scale ("belief in the supernatural") missing. The response rate can only be estimated as we do not know how many members were forwarded the link to the questionnaire by the group leaders. It could be around a third, assuming an average size of three people in a group. The mean age of the participants was 45 years ($Mdn = 46$, $SD = 9.3$). Fifty-six per cent were female, 44% male, and 0% diverse.

The majority (36%) felt they belonged to Christianity. However, there were also 21% atheists and 9% agnostics in the sample (Table 6).

The marital status in our sample roughly corresponded to the average German population (Statistisches Bundesamt, n.d.-a). Approximately one-quarter of participants (25.6%) were single, slightly more than half (51.3%) were married, 20.5% were divorced, and one person (2.6%) was widowed. Seventy-two per cent of the participants had a permanent life partner.

The picture regarding educational qualifications is similar to that of the general population. Thirty-eight-point five per cent had a German

TABLE 6.

Religion / spirituality of participants

	Percentage
Christianity (Catholic/Protestant)	36
Christianity (other forms)	0
Buddhism	3
Islam	0
Other	21
Unattached spirituality/religiousness	23
Atheist (“I don’t believe in anything divine”)	21
Agnostic (“One cannot decide whether God exists or not”)	8

Note: Multiple answers were possible.

Fach-/Hochschulabschluss [higher education entrance qualification], 33.3% a German Realschulabschluss [intermediate school leaving certificate], and 28.2% a German Hauptschulabschluss [secondary school leaving certificate] and none without school leaving certificate (Statistisches Bundesamt, n.d.-b).

Eighty-nine-point seven per cent of the participants were employed at the time of the survey. This is higher than in the general population, whose employment rate in May 2023 (people aged between 25 and 74 years) was 68.1% (Statistisches Bundesamt, n.d.-c). Three people (7.7%) were housewives or househusbands, and one person selected ‘other’. The high level of employment is understandable given that GH is a costly hobby.

Materials

The devised questionnaire was addressed to individual ghost hunters (see Appendix B). In addition to the parts we created ourselves, we used two existing measurement instruments in this questionnaire: the Fragebogen zur Phänomenologie außergewöhnlicher Erfahrungen (Questionnaire on the Phenomenology of Exceptional Experiences—PExE II; Fach, 2018) and the Belief in the Supernatural Scale (BitSS; Schofield et al., 2018). It also contained an introductory section in which we introduced ourselves and our research question. It consisted of four blocks, concerning (1) sociodemographic data (seven questions); (2) the motivation and attitude towards GH, including the role of previous ExEs (five questions); (3) questions on ExEs in general (PExE II, twenty questions); and (4) questions on supernatural or paranormal beliefs (BitSS, forty-four questions).

The PExE II is an instrument which asks about experiences of supposedly paranormal phenomena, such as apparitions, telepathy, clairvoyance, premonition, and precognitive dreams, but also phenomena like strange perceptions (e.g., hearing inner voices), cognitions (e.g., thought intrusions),

and automatisms (e.g., spontaneous and uncontrolled body movements). The authors created a classification scheme for ExEs allocating them into four basic categories on two dimensions, (1) external phenomena–internal phenomena, and (2) coincidence phenomena–dissociation phenomena, as well as to six typical ExE patterns (poltergeist and apparitions, internal presences and influences, extrasensory perceptions, meaningful coincidences, automatisms and mediumship, external presences and nightmare) (Belz & Fach, 2015; Fach, 2022, 2024). The items are assigned to the basic categories and measure the frequency of these experiences on a five-point scale ranging from ‘never’ (= 0) to ‘often’ (= 4). The activity of the GH itself makes an increased frequency of certain ExE likely, e.g., external presences and apparitions, but we wanted to know about the frequency of other forms of ExE.

Schofield et al. (2018) developed the BitSS in order to avoid some problems with the widely used the Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (rPBS; Tobacyk, 2004). In our opinion, it distinguishes better between religious, supernatural, and paranormal beliefs. We used a German translation of the scale (cf. Mayer & Fuhrmann, 2021). The scale has a five-factor structure composed of “mental and psychological phenomena”, “religious beliefs”, “psychokinesis” (psychically affecting matter), “supernatural beings”, and “general paranormal perceptions”. The forty-four items measure the degree of agreement with the statements ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (= 1) to ‘strongly agree’ (= 7). Our goal in using this scale was to see how strongly the activity of GH is associated with certain personal beliefs. Although the questionnaire data does not allow any conclusions to be drawn as to whether ExEs promote paranormal beliefs or whether, conversely, belief in ghosts increases the probability of perceiving them (experiential versus cultural source hypothesis; cf. Hufford, 1982), the data promised interesting information on the relationship between the scores in the subscales. GH in itself suggests a spiritualist worldview, but one could assume cultural differences depending on the degree of secularization of a society (Mayer, 2010, 2013). By applying the BitSS, we wanted to obtain reliable data on this aspect.

Procedure

The devised questionnaire was sent to active GHGs in Germany, together with the first questionnaire addressed to the groups themselves. Group leaders were asked to forward the second, individual, questionnaire to their members. The call was also posted in two WhatsApp groups (Ghosthunter-Treffen and Blabla) specifically for ghost hunters and on Facebook as well. Data collection was carried out between October and December 2023, using the online questionnaire tool LimeSurvey. The questionnaire was anonymised in accordance with the data protection guidelines applicable in Germany. Participants provided informed consent and had the opportunity to make comments.

Data analysis

We used the SPSS (version 28) for statistical calculations. For group comparisons, we used the Kruskal–Wallis test, as our measuring instruments are ordinal scaled. Due to the purely exploratory nature of the correlation statistics, we did not make corrections for multiple testing. We performed two-sided significance tests and agreed to a significance level of 0.05.

Results

Motivation and attitude towards GH

The fascination of GH. The most intriguing part of GH for almost everyone was the contact with the paranormal or supernatural (95%), followed by the specific history of the location where the investigation was conducted (74%). Another important factor is the analysis of the data. This also holds a special fascination for three-quarters of the participants (74%). Although data analysis must be considered a tedious task, e.g., listening to or watching hours of recorded audio and video material, this process nevertheless seems to hold great appeal. Perhaps it is the fascination of the treasure hunter who sifts through the earth hoping to discover a gold nugget. The fascination of handling technical devices was mentioned by only half of the participants, the group experience by only 38%, and the publicity aspects (online presentation and popularity) played a minor role (Table 7).

Explanations or theories for paranormal or supernatural phenomena during PIs. We offered three statements for which participants had to indicate their level of (dis)agreement on a five-point scale from ‘I fully disagree’ (= 1) to ‘I fully agree’ (= 5) (see Table 8): (1) they are signs of the deceased, spirits, or other

TABLE 7.

Fascination of GH

	Percentage
Possible contact with the paranormal/supernatural	95
The history of the locations where a PI is performed	74
Evaluation (documentation, analysis, discussion)	74
The locations of the PIs	64
Working with the technical equipment used in PIs	51
Group experience	38
The presentation of the results on the website or on social networks	15
The media impact or the level of awareness that can be achieved by publishing documentaries or film presentations	5

Note: Multiple answers were possible.

TABLE 8.

Basic explanation or theory about paranormal phenomena

	Percentage				
	I fully disagree	I partly disagree	I don't know	I partly agree	I fully agree
They are signs of the deceased, spirits, or other entities ('spiritualist')	2.6	5.1	7.7	43.6	41.0
They are related to the members of the team ('team')	7.7	5.1	33.3	46.2	7.7
They are connected to the history of the location ('location')	2.6	0	7.7	79.5	10.3

Note: Multiple answers were possible.

entities ('spiritualist'); (2) they are related to the members of the team ('team'); and (3) they are connected to the history of the location ('location').

Almost 85% of participants consider explanation 1 ('spiritualist') to be partially or completely correct. Three persons (7.7%) cannot or do not want to decide, and another three reject this statement either partially or completely. Almost 90% are convinced that the phenomena are connected with the history of the location ('location'). Three people 'don't know' and one completely rejects this explanation. More than half of the participants (53.9%) partially or fully agree with the 'team' explanation. A third do not know, and just under 13% partially or completely reject this explanation.

Sceptical attitude. One item concerned the self-assessment of one's own scepticism regarding such phenomena and perceptions. The prompt was: "Please use the slider to indicate on a scale from 0 ('not at all sceptical') to 100 ('extremely sceptical') how sceptical you feel about perceptions or claims of paranormal or supernatural phenomena." The mean value of scepticism is 67.5 on a scale of 0–100 ($Mdn = 70$, $SD = 20.8$) on the side of the sceptical pole.

Ghost hunters and ExEs

A frequently discussed question is the connection between culturally determined beliefs, individual beliefs, and ExEs. According to the *cultural source hypothesis*, it is culturally transmitted ideas and narratives that promote belief in the paranormal or supernatural and lead to corresponding experiences. The *experiential source hypothesis*, on the other hand, assumes that experiences precede beliefs (Hufford, 1982). These two hypotheses are not exclusive. They explain different aspects of the relationship between direct experiences, communicated experiences, beliefs, and narratives. In any case, it is interesting to find out about the role of previous ExEs.

TABLE 9.

ExEs prior to taking up GH as a hobby

	Percentage		
	Yes, I am sure	Probably yes	No
Did you have any paranormal or supernatural experiences before you started using GH?	64.1	25.6	10.3

	Percentage	
	Yes	No
If so, did these experiences play a central role in your decision to start using GH?	61.5	28.2

We asked about ExEs prior to GH and the role these played in the decision to start GH. About 64% of participants ($N = 25$) had had paranormal or ‘supernatural’ experiences before taking up GH as a hobby. Another quarter (25.6%; $N = 10$) stated that they believed they had had such experiences, and only four people (10.3%) had clearly not had any preceding ExEs. Sixty-one and a half per cent of participants stated that these previous ExEs played a key role in their decision to start GH; for 28.2%, this was not the case (Table 9).

The items of the PExE II concern ExEs in general in relation to all life contexts (the prompt is “Please read the following statements carefully and mark with a cross for each statement whether you have never, almost never, rarely, occasionally, or frequently experienced the described phenomena in your life”). It was developed for clients of the counselling service of the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health (IGPP) who are suffering from psychological distress due to such experiences. There are no standard values for the questionnaire, but values from some comparison groups are available. In our case, two comparison groups are of interest: the clinical group of IGPP clients and a group of students that appears to correspond roughly to the normal population (Fach, 2024).⁷ The four basis categories are ‘internal phenomena’, ‘external phenomena’, ‘coincidence phenomena’ and ‘dissociation phenomena’ (Belz & Fach, 2015; Fach, 2022, 2024). We find a clear predominance of external phenomena in PExE II data (Table 10). This distinguishes them from the typical pattern of a student sample, but also from the counselling sample, where the average maximum is found in coincidental phenomena and the minimum in dissociative phenomena or experiences. Their average scores on the four

7. There is data from a representative Swiss sample that was collected using the first version of PExE and is similar to that of a student sample. The values of a student sample collected using the second version of the PExE show comparable characteristics, so it can be assumed that they are close to the norm values (Fach, 2024).

TABLE 10.
Mean values of the PExE II subscales and the overall scale for ghost hunters, the IGPP clients sample and a student sample

	Overall	External	Internal	Coincidence	Dissociation
M ghost hunters (Student sample)	1.44 (0.86)	2.31 (0.75)	1.19 (0.86)	1.61 (1.32)	0.67 (0.52)
(IGPP clients sample)	(1.36)	(1.32)	(1.31)	(2.05)	(0.75)
SD ghost hunters (Student sample)	0.66 (0.53)	0.83 (0.67)	0.82 (0.69)	0.88 (0.76)	0.62 (0.60)
(IGPP clients sample)	(0.82)	(1.15)	(1.11)	(1.08)	(0.89)

Note: Five-point scale ranging from 'never' (= 0), 'almost never' (= 1), 'rarely' (= 2), 'occasionally' (= 3) to 'often' (= 4). Comparison values of a student sample (N = 450) and an IGPP clients sample (N = 193) in brackets (Fach et al., 2024, p. 58).

TABLE 11.
Mean values of the BitSS subscales and the overall scale for ghost hunters and a UK validation sample

	Overall	Mental and psychic phenomena	Religious belief	Psychokinesis	Supernatural entities	Common paranormal perceptions
M ghost hunters (UK validation sample)	3.90 (3.24)	5.02 (3.80)	2.43 (2.72)	3.48 (2.56)	3.73 (3.38)	3.83 (2.96)
SD ghost hunters (UK validation sample)	1.21 (1.41)	1.46 (1.64)	1.29 (1.64)	1.36 (1.57)	1.46 (1.77)	1.41 (1.51)

Note: Seven-point scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (= 1) to 'strongly agree' (= 7). Comparison values of the British validation sample (N = 700) in brackets.

PExE II subscales are consistently higher than the comparison values of the student sample (Fach et al., 2024, p. 58).

The belief in the supernatural or paranormal

The 'belief in the supernatural', measured with the BitSS (Schofield et al., 2018) among the ghost hunters is higher than among a sample ($N = 700$) from a British university used for the validation of the BitSS.⁸ This applies to all subscales except the subscale Religious Belief (see Table 11).

Exploratory correlation statistics and group difference statistics

Sociodemographic data and religion. We examined the data exploratively for correlations and group differences that can provide clues to hypotheses for further research. We were particularly interested in the relationship between socio-demographic data, religious affiliation, paranormal or supernatural beliefs, ExEs and the fascination with GH as well as the explanatory models for unusual phenomena in the context of GH.

The sociodemographic data did not prove to be meaningful for distinguishing between subgroups, and no significant correlations were found between the variables listed above, which may be partly due to the small N .

We also found no significant group differences with regard to religious or spiritual orientation in the mean scores of the BitSS scales, with one exception: those who identify as Christians have significantly higher scores on the BitSS subscale 'religious belief', which concerns traditional religious beliefs ($H [1, N = 39] = 5,034, p = 0.025, \eta^2 = 0.08$).

ExEs prior to GH. Significant group differences were found with regard to ExEs prior to taking up GH. We found a highly significant group difference between previous ExEs and the fascination of contact with the paranormal or supernatural through GH ($H [2, N = 39] = 17.973, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.44$). In order to get a clearer picture, we excluded those who were not sure if they had had ExEs before taking up GH (see Table 9). The remaining two groups for comparison included individuals who were certain that they had had paranormal experiences prior to the GH ($N = 25$) and those who were certain that they had not had such experiences ($N = 4$). The group difference regarding the above-mentioned fascination was significant: ($H [1, N = 29] = 12.963, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.44$) (Table 12).

We compared these two groups regarding self-assessed scepticism toward paranormal phenomena. The difference is close to the level of significance: $H [1, N = 29] = 3.753, p = 0.053, \eta^2 = 0.10$.

8. Malcolm Schofield (email, personal communication, 1 February 2022) provided the data from the samples of two validation studies. The values of both studies ($N = 382, N = 312$) were combined and averaged here.

The difference between these two groups in acceptance of the ‘spiritualist’ explanatory model for paranormal phenomena in PIs is $H [1, N = 29] = 7.872$, $p = 0.005$, $\eta^2 = 0.25$; the difference in acceptance of the ‘location’ explanation is $H [1, N = 29] = 10.947$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.37$. We did not find a significant difference in the third, the ‘team’ explanation. However, the median values differ.

PExE. We found two significant correlations between two PExE II subscales and the agreement with the ‘spiritualist’ explanation and ‘location’ explanation (Table 13), a significant correlation between the PExE II subscale ‘dissociation phenomena’ and the agreement to the explanation ‘location’ ($r_s = 0.396$; $p = 0.013$), and another significant correlation between the PExE II subscale ‘coincidence phenomena’ and the agreement to the ‘spiritualist’ explanation ($r_s = 0.393$; $p = 0.013$).

BitSS. The degree of agreement with the ‘spiritualist’ explanation correlates significantly with the BitSS overall scale and four subscales; the degree of agreement with the ‘location’ explanation correlates with the BitSS overall scale and two subscales (Table 14).

Discussion two

GH is a costly hobby. An above-average level of employment of about 90%, compared with 68% in the general population (aged between 25 and 74 years), is therefore not surprising. It is also higher than the average PExE sample of the

TABLE 12.

Median scores for scepticism and the acceptance of explanation models for ghost hunters with and without ExEs previous to GH

Scepticism	Ghost hunters with ExEs previous to GH	Ghost hunters without ExEs previous to GH
Self-assessed scepticism towards paranormal phenomena	60.00	86.50
Explanation		
Acceptance of ‘spiritualist’ explanation	4.0	3.0
Acceptance of ‘location’ explanation	4.0	3.0
Acceptance of ‘team’ explanation	4.0	3.0

Note: Scepticism was measured on a slider scale ranging from 0 (‘not at all’) to 100 (‘extremely sceptical’). The acceptance of the explanation models was measured with a five-point scale (1 = ‘I totally disagree’, 5 = ‘I totally agree’).

TABLE 13.
Correlations between agreement to explanation models or theories and the PExE II subscales and the overall scale

Explanation	Overall	External	Internal	Coincidence	Dissociation
They are signs of the deceased, spirits or other entities ('spiritualist')	0.286	0.293	0.066	0.393*	0.244
They are related to the members of the team ('team')	0.079	0.044	0.095	0.097	0.080
They are connected to the history of the location ('location')	0.231	0.018	0.161	0.186	0.396*

Note: Spearman's r ; * $p < 0.05$.

TABLE 14.
Correlations between agreement to explanation models or theories and the BitSS subscales and the overall scale

Explanation	Overall	Mental and psychic phenomena	Religious belief	Psychokinesis	Supernatural entities	Common paranormal perceptions
They are signs of the deceased, spirits or other entities ('spiritualist')	0.547***	0.548***	0.345*	0.108	0.433**	0.552***
They are related to the members of the team ('team')	0.007	0.084	-0.199	0.109	-0.192	0.081
They are connected to the history of the location ('location')	0.357*	0.382*	0.028	0.126	0.414**	0.292

Note: Spearman's r ; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

IGPP clientele⁹ with 49% (Fach, 2022). The proportion of those with a steady relationship is higher among ghost hunters than in the general population, with 72% of participants having a steady partner. The figure for the average for the general population is around 50% (Statistisches Bundesamt, n.d.-a). This could be interpreted as an indication that GH is not particularly well suited as a hobby for people in precarious social situations.

The term ‘ghost hunter’ actually implies a belief in the existence of spirits of deceased persons or other ‘supernatural’ beings that can be ‘hunted’. However, on closer inspection, this turns out to be not quite so simple. The term for this leisure activity was taken from English-speaking cultures and is used untranslated without necessarily adopting the associated beliefs. The proportion of the population which believes in “supernatural spirits (e.g., angels, demons, fairies, ghosts, etc.)” differs remarkably between the United States (61%) and Germany (33%) (Ipsos Global Advisor, 2023).¹⁰ Overall, the German GH scene seems to reflect the secularized state of German society. The proportion of Christians (36%) is lower than in the general population, which, according to the Religion Monitor, is 50% (Müke et al., 2023, p. 16). The finding that 21% said they do not believe in anything divine is surprising. Apparently, GH and atheism are not necessarily contradictory. The proportion of ‘other’ religious affiliation is also surprisingly high. Twenty-one per cent of participants ticked this option in the questionnaire. This could mean that a large proportion of these people do not feel they belong to any religious community and are not particularly spiritually oriented, but still believe in a divine principle. Taking the values of ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’, and ‘other’ together, one gets 50%. The combined figure of this group in the general population is 40% (Müke et al., 2023, p. 16).¹¹ There, we find a proportion of 8.5% who belong to Islamic religious communities. This is completely missing in our sample.

One might think that ghost hunters believe more strongly than average in the existence of ghosts, demons, and other supernatural entities and that they therefore tend to have a more religious worldview, but the connection does not seem to be that simple, as we can see from comparison of the figures of the

9. ‘IGPP clientele’ are individuals who contacted the counselling service of the IGPP.

10. These figures are from an online survey with 19,731 respondents from 26 countries. It is not representative. Other figures from representative surveys in the US and Germany are not directly comparable, as the survey periods differ and the questions were not identical. However, the overall picture remains consistent. According to a representative survey conducted by Ipsos in 2019, 46% of Americans believe that ghosts are real (Ipsos, 2019), while according to a representative survey conducted in 2002, this was only the case for 8% of the German population (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2002). The figure for Germany may have risen in the meantime, but it is certainly considerably lower than that for the US.

11. However, the values are not exactly comparable and should only be understood as guidelines, since in the population survey of the Religion Monitor, no multiple answers were possible, as was the case with us. In addition, the Religion Monitor did not include the categories ‘unattached spirituality/religiousness’, ‘atheist’ and ‘agnostic’ as response options, but instead ‘other religious community’ and ‘no religious community’ (Müke et al., 2023, p. 16).

BitSS subscales Religious Belief and Supernatural Entities of the ghost hunter sample and the British test sample (see Table 11). Religious Belief stands out especially. Here, the British validation sample shows a higher mean value, although, according to an Ipsos survey from 2023, religiosity in the UK is even slightly lower than in Germany (Ipsos Global Advisor, 2023).

The biggest difference between the two samples is in the subscale Mental and Psychic Phenomena, but the difference is also considerable in the two subscales Psychokinesis and Common Paranormal Perceptions (see Table 11). These three subscales relate to phenomena that can be experienced during GH, whereby the Common Paranormal Perception factor includes items for haunting as well as a number of items for fortune telling (astrology, card reading). We can therefore say with some certainty that ghost hunters are more strongly convinced than average about paranormal or supernatural phenomena. This is to be expected, since GH is geared towards experiencing paranormal phenomena.

It is now well known that the idea that people's individual belief systems and worldviews must be consistent and free of contradictions is wrong (e.g., Luhrmann, 1989), and this is also clearly evident in the sample of ghost hunters. It is reflected in their explanations of paranormal phenomena. About 85% see them as signs of deceased persons or of supernatural entities, despite the rather high percentage of atheists or agnostics among them. As expected, a strong connection between the phenomena and the history of the locations is assumed, as this is the basic narrative of GH itself. Ghost hunters visit certain places because they believe that such phenomena are likely to occur there, or because other people have had ExEs there that they associate with the location. The majority assume at least a kind of 'memory of place' or 'living history of a place'. This is consistent with the high proportion of those who are fascinated by the history of PI locations (see Table 7). However, from a psychodynamic perspective, paranormal phenomena can be interpreted as an externalization of psychological or emotional tensions (Belz & Fach, 2015). More than half of the participants (53.9%) also partially or fully agree with this explanation ('team'). Despite this strong belief in the paranormal, the majority of people are sceptical about the phenomena they have experienced. This can be seen as an expression of the self-image of a scientific approach. It is consistent with previous findings from interviews with German ghost hunters (Bartoschek & Waschkau, 2013).

ExEs are crucial for becoming a ghost hunter and to pursue this leisure activity. Ghost hunters have made it their hobby to have ExEs at selected locations that are primarily thought of and experienced as external. It is therefore hardly surprising that we find a clear predominance of external phenomena in PExE II data (see Table 10). This distinguishes this group from other samples in which PExE II had been applied (Fach, 2024). Another difference between the IGPP clientele (see footnote 8) and the ghost hunters is in the area of social bonding (social situation, relationship). Forty-five per cent

of the IGPP clientele are without any stable partnership (Fach, 2024, p. 354), while 72% of the participants of our study have a permanent life partner. If Wolfgang Fach rightly relates the question of the quality of attachment, social integration, and also the employment situation to the frequency of experiencing ExEs and has found significant correlations, the small and special sample of ghost hunters relativizes the generalizability of his findings. With ghost hunters, the experience of ExEs is obviously not associated with suffering, but rather awakens in many the desire to deepen and actively seek out such experiences. After all, almost two-thirds of our participants stated that previous ExEs had played a key role in their turning to GH as a leisure activity.

It is therefore obvious that almost all ghost hunters state that the possible contact with the paranormal or supernatural is what particularly fascinates them about their hobby. Given the importance of ExEs prior to GH, a closer examination of the four participants (10.3%) who did not experience paranormal phenomena prior to GH could be promising. A group comparison in which one group is so small is obviously problematic. All findings obtained from this are therefore highly speculative. Nevertheless, we have made some statistical group comparisons, and the picture that emerges is relatively consistent. The most interesting statistical findings were related to the reasons for the fascination with GH, the theories or explanations for the paranormal phenomena during the PIs, and to paranormal or supernatural beliefs (BitSS scales). We found a highly significant group difference between previous paranormal experiences and the fascination of contact with the paranormal or supernatural through GH. For the four people without ExEs before GH, any paranormal phenomena that may occur during the PIs account for a significantly lower proportion of the fascination than for the vast majority of ghost hunters. It is reasonable to assume a connection to scepticism, and, in fact, these four have a higher average value when it comes to assessing their own scepticism towards paranormal phenomena (see Table 12).

A similar picture can be seen in the explanatory models for paranormal phenomena in PIs. The highly significant correlations between the level of agreement with two of the three explanatory models offered and paranormal or supernatural beliefs are not surprising as they are related to fundamental ideas of GH. However, both the 'spiritualist' explanation and the 'location' explanation are virtually out of the question for the four people with no previous paranormal experience. The difference between the two groups with and without ExEs before GH disappears in the third, the 'team' explanatory model, according to which the phenomena are related to the members of the team, which, in addition to the animistic–psychological explanation, can also be interpreted as a conventional explanation, namely that they could be deceptions or self-deceptions. The picture that emerges is that even some people who are generally sceptical about the existence of paranormal phenomena nonetheless enjoy the GH (see Table 12).

Regarding the results of the statistics of the BitSS scales and the agreement to the three explanatory models, the non-significant correlations are of greater interest than the expected significant ones (see Table 13). There is no significant correlation between agreement with the ‘spiritualist’ explanation and the ‘location’ explanation and belief in psychokinetic phenomena. This is interesting because GH also uses so-called move tests, in which objects are supposed to move without any visible cause. If this is actually observed, then from an external perspective it could be interpreted as a psychokinetic phenomenon, i.e., as a result of the interaction of a human consciousness (effort of will) with an external physical object. However, this view does not fit in with the basic narratives of GH. Although the term ‘paranormal activity’ is often used in a neutral way, it is generally assumed that external actors are the cause and not the ghost hunters themselves, as would be suggested by the questionnaire items of the BitSS Psychokinesis scale. This is also reflected in a significantly lower level of agreement with the explanation that the paranormal phenomena during GH could be related to members of the team. To put it shortly: if objects move by themselves, then it is the spirits and not psychokinesis.¹²

The two significant correlations between two PExE II subscales and the agreement with the ‘spiritualist’ explanation and ‘location’ explanation are difficult to interpret (see Table 14). We found a significant correlation between the PExE II subscale Dissociation Phenomena and the agreement to the explanation ‘location’, and another significant correlation between the PExE II subscale Coincidence Phenomena and the agreement to the ‘spiritualist’ explanation. A main problem with the interpretation is that the PExE II measures experiences, but the explanatory models concern beliefs or theoretical assumptions about the world.¹³ Another important point can easily be overlooked if one only looks at the significant correlations. The highest mean difference between the GH sample and the comparison samples is on the PExE II subscale External Phenomena. This was to be expected due to the objective of the GH. However, there is only a weak correlation with the spiritualist hypothesis, which does not quite reach the selected significance level of 5% ($r_s = 0.293$; $p = 0.071$). If one considers that the GH attempts to make the invisible visible with various technical aids and to establish meaningful connections between the spiritual and material phenomena, then a significant correlation between the frequency of experiencing ‘coincidence phenomena’ and agreement with a spiritualist

12. In a German population survey from 2025, which, among other things, asked about the possibility of psi phenomena, psychokinesis achieved the lowest approval rating, with 17%. Extrasensory perception in connection with death and crises received the highest score, with 71% approval (Schmied-Knittel et al., 2026).

13. Although one must assume a strong interdependence between beliefs and experiences—perception and thus also experiences are significantly influenced by beliefs and culturally mediated concepts, and experiences in turn can create or reinforce beliefs—the extent and direction are rarely clearly identifiable and are likely to vary greatly from individual to individual.

explanatory model becomes understandable.¹⁴ We were unable to find such a comprehensible explanation for the significant correlation found between the frequency of experiencing ‘dissociation phenomena’ and agreement with the ‘location’ explanation.

CONCLUSION

This study was exploratory, as to our knowledge there are no comparable studies with which the data could be compared, and which would have allowed data-based hypotheses. The evaluation was primarily descriptive due to the small size of the sample. Some of the results were expected, such as ghost hunters seem to experience more ExEs on average than a student sample because they actively search for them. They also believe more in the paranormal or the supernatural than the test sample of the BitSS scale. Other results are rather unexpected, such as the fact that 85% believe in a connection between the suspected paranormal phenomena and the deceased or ghosts, while 30% describe themselves as atheists or agnostics. This speaks for a high acceptance of the survival hypothesis, which is apparently not tied to a belief in God or the divine. GH, or belief in spirits of the deceased, and atheism are not necessarily contradictory.

The fascination with the uncanny, the occult, the paranormal, and the supernatural is reflected in myths, legends, works of literature, and film art, but also in ‘ghost tours’ as tourist attractions (e.g., Houran et al., 2020; Pedreño-Peñalver et al., 2023), on the internet, and in social networks. A recent variant could be seen in ‘virtual dark tourism’ on YouTube, i.e., virtually participating in GH activities as a form of ‘armchair travel’ (Basaraba, 2024). The pleasant horror, the thrill of fear (*angstlust*), can be enjoyed in the safe environment of the living room. This is an aspect that can be intensified by GH at supposedly haunted locations, i.e., doing the ‘real thing’ and not only participating virtually by watching seemingly authentic PIs. However, it would certainly not do justice to the ghost hunters if GH were to be reduced to this alone. Virtually everyone mentions the possible contact with the paranormal or supernatural as an aspect of the GH that fascinates them. In GH, the quality of authenticity comes into play as an element, which is missing from media-mediated reception of the paranormal.¹⁵ Whether the impulse to explore the paranormal in a more or less scientific sense is the central motivation or the desire to find confirmation for or challenge one’s own belief system may vary from person to person.

14. Coincidence phenomena are connections between ordinarily disconnected elements of the self-model and the world-model and often experienced as meaningful links between mental and material events” (Belz & Fach, 2015, p. 371).

15. This even applies to ‘paranormal tourism’. Houran et al. (2020, p. 17) write: “Overall, we speculate that paranormal-like experiences are appealing to many people, in part, because they are *unique and elusive*”.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire: GHGs in Germany

(1) GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Name of the team/name of the person completing the form
2. Location of the group (city, state)
3. Year the group was founded
4. Number of members
5. How many paranormal investigations (PI) does the team conduct on average per year?
6. How many cases has the team investigated in total so far?
7. How many cases have involved hauntings in private homes?
8. Does the team have its own website?
9. On which internet platforms does the team publish reports or material on PI?
 - Own homepage
 - YouTube
 - Facebook
 - Instagram
 - Others
10. How important are viewer numbers, page views and general awareness for the team? (completely unimportant; not very important; somewhat important; important; very important)
11. What is your team's relationship with other Ghosthunter teams? (mostly problematic; tends to be problematic; partly problematic/ partly good; tends to be good; mostly good)
12. Which role models does the team use for its investigations?
 - American television series (e.g., *Ghost Hunters*)
 - Other television series (e.g., *Geisterakten* [German pay-TV show])
 - Television documentaries
 - Websites/presentations of other teams
 - Other sources

(2) QUESTIONS ABOUT CONDUCTING PI

1. At which locations does the team conduct PI?
 - Publicly accessible locations *with* a historical reference
 - Publicly accessible locations *without* a specific historical reference (e.g., cemeteries)
 - Locations not open to the public *with* a historical reference
 - Locations not open to the public *without* a specific historical reference
 - Hauntings in private households
2. How does the team prepare for a PI? (e.g., prior research on the location)
3. Does a location have to fulfil certain requirements?
 - Yes, namely (free-text field)
 - No specific requirements need to be met
4. What technical equipment do you use?
 - KII
 - EMF meter
 - Melmeter
 - Rem-Pod
 - Kinect
 - Portal
 - Spirit box
 - Infrared cameras
 - Recording devices, e.g., H2
 - Full spectrum cameras
 - Mobile phone apps
 - Parascope
 - Other (free-text field for additions)
5. Does the team work (occasionally) with a psychic (medium)?
6. Is there one (or more) person(s) in your team who believe to have psychic powers?
7. Does the team co-operate with the press/TV during the PIs? If yes: Why? If no: Why not?
8. Please describe briefly or in keywords how a PI is organised in your group.

(3) QUESTIONS ON THE DOCUMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF PIS

1. Please describe briefly or in keywords how a PI is documented in your group.
2. What types of data are analysed?
 - Film recordings
 - Sound recordings

- Photographs
 - Perceptions during the PI, e.g., body sensations, shadow sightings, touching
3. Who carries out the evaluation?
 - All together
 - Partly together
 - Pre-evaluation by specialists in the group, then jointly
 - By specialists in the group
 4. Do you occasionally call in external experts for evaluation or obtain external expert opinions?
 5. What happens to the raw data material after it has been analysed? The data material
 - is completely saved and stored on a data carrier (cloud, computer hard drive, USB stick, etc.)
 - is partially saved and stored on a data carrier (only the interesting parts or excerpts)
 - is largely deleted after being analysed or processed
 - is completely deleted after being analysed and processed
 6. What happens to the processed material after it has been analysed? The data material
 - is saved and stored completely on a data carrier (cloud, computer hard drive, USB stick, etc.)
 - is partially saved and stored on a data carrier (only the interesting parts or excerpts)
 - is mostly deleted after the analysis
 7. Which data material is made publicly accessible online?
 - Processed recorded data material
 - Raw data
 - Recordings or texts on the context (directions, etc.)
 - Historical research
 - Other data

(4) PARANORMAL PHENOMENA

1. What potentially paranormal phenomena has the team experienced so far during the PI?
 - Visual sightings, e.g., shadows
 - Mimicry sounds, e.g., knocking or voices
 - Haptic perceptions, touches
 - Temporary health impairments, e.g., sensations of pain
 - Feeling of being influenced by a foreign entity
 - Feeling of the presence of a presence/energy/spirit
 - Feeling of threat
 - Olfactory perceptions, odours

- Sudden differences in temperature
 - Other (free-text field)
2. What possible paranormal phenomena has the team been able to capture/record so far?
 - Acoustic phenomena (mimicry noises such as knocking)
 - EVP
 - Photographic anomalies
 - Unusual reactions of individual team members
 - Significant temperature differences
 - Reaction of certain devices used for ghost hunting
 - Other (free-text field)
 3. Are there any unedited recordings of this?
 4. What was your most impressive paranormal experience in the context of PI? (free-text field)
 5. How do you or the team rule out natural causes? Briefly describe the procedure (free-text field)
 6. How often are there contradictory opinions in the team after the analysis? (always; very often; often; occasionally; rarely; never)
 7. For what percentage of the recorded unusual phenomena does the team find a conventional explanation?

(5) GHOST HUNTING AND SCIENCE

1. Does the team also deal with scientific explanatory models or theories on the topic? Please give examples (e.g., book titles)?
2. How interested would you or the team be in a closer scientific exchange? (very, somewhat, not very, not at all)
3. Would the team be willing to fulfil certain requirements for a collaboration with academic researchers? (e.g., completing a questionnaire before and after the PU)

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire: German ghost hunters

(1) QUESTIONS ABOUT YOURSELF

1. Gender (female; male; diverse)
2. Age in years
3. Which religion or form of spirituality do you feel you belong to? (Tick the answer options that apply to you)
 - Christianity (Catholic, Protestant)
 - Christianity (other forms: free church, charismatic, evangelical movements, etc.)

- Islam
 - Buddhism
 - Other (please specify)
 - Unaffiliated spirituality/religiosity
 - I do not believe in anything divine (atheist)
 - you cannot decide whether God exists or not (agnostic)
4. Marital status
 5. Do you currently have a steady (married) partner?
 6. School-leaving qualification (Hauptschule [secondary school]; Mittlere Reife [GCSE]; Fach-/Hochschulreife [A-levels]; other qualification; no qualification)
 7. Current main occupation (school/training; employed; homemaker; retiree; unemployed/incapacitated; other)

(2) WHY DO YOU ENGAGE IN GHOST HUNTING (GH)?

1. Did you have any paranormal or supernatural experiences before you started GH?
2. If yes: Did these experiences play a central role in you starting GH?
3. What fascinates or interests you most about GH?
 - Group experience
 - The places where PI are held
 - The history of the places where PI are held
 - The possible contact with the paranormal / supernatural
 - The handling of the technical equipment used in PI
 - The evaluation (documentation, analysis, discussion)
 - The presentation of the results on the website
 - The media impact or the level of awareness that can be achieved by publishing documentaries/film presentations
4. What basic explanation/theory do you have about paranormal phenomena?
5. Would you describe yourself as sceptical? (Please use the slider to indicate on a scale of 0 to 100 how sceptical you are about perceptions or claims of paranormal or supernatural phenomena)

(3) QUESTIONS ABOUT EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES (PExE II)

The PExE II questionnaire is unpublished so far. Interested parties should contact the author, Wolfgang Fach (fach@igpp.de).

(4) QUESTIONS ABOUT SPECIFIC BELIEFS (BITSS)

See Schofield et al. (2018), The Creation and Validation of the Belief in the Supernatural Scale, *Journal of Parapsychology*, 82(1), 41–64 (the questionnaire items are on pp. 59–63).



RESEARCH NOTE: ONE WOMAN'S EXTRAORDINARY SET OF COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH MEDIUMS CAN BE INTERPRETED AS COMPELLING EVIDENCE OF LIFE AFTER DEATH: BUT SHOULD A NON-SURVIVALIST EXPLANATION BE CONSIDERED?

BY ROBERT A. CHARMAN

INTRODUCTION

From its inception in 1882, one of the main research interests of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) has been to determine whether mediums receive telepathic messages from the living mind of a bodily dead person, thus confirming personal life after bodily death, or from the mind of a sitter. Despite much continuing research, the issue as to whether we survive bodily death remains unresolved and subject to much vigorous debate (see the Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies, 2021, essay contest on the best evidence for life after death, and subsequent critiques by Augustine, 2022a, 2022b; Sudduth, 2024).

David Kennedy (1973) presents a very persuasive account of what appears to have been a series of spontaneous, unsolicited, medium-conveyed communications from Ann, his recently deceased wife, indicating observational awareness of events occurring in his life following her death, which may be unique in the literature. Despite this, there does not seem to be any reference to the case by the twenty-nine successful contributors to the Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies 2021 essay contest, and the SPR did not possess a copy of Kennedy's book until recently; it therefore seems unlikely that many readers are now familiar with Kennedy's account. The background to the case is as follows.

In 1942, David Kennedy, aged 26, then an electrical engineer working in Glasgow during the Second World War, met Ann, an amateur painter aged 28, and they married in 1944. Ann suffered from mitral valve aortic stenosis that severely reduced her physical activity. During 1945, she experienced several episodes of heart failure and cardiac asthma, having to sleep propped up on pillows, and was required to take 6 months of complete bed rest, followed by limited physical activity. Her condition was considered so severe that David was given a private prognosis that Ann had a year to 18 months at most. One night in February 1956, David woke up at 4 a.m. to hear a voice saying very clearly, "Ann will recover". He goes on to say, "I felt a load lifted from my shoulders, I knew she would recover, and she did" (Kennedy, 1973,

p. 12). Although Ann could not walk far without becoming breathless, for the next 7 years their life was transformed. They went to concerts, operas, plays, talks, and art galleries and exhibitions. They read poetry together and studied classical Greek philosophy and literature. David says that they discovered “the unutterable beauty of Socrates in Plato’s Symposium and Phaedo, read the tragedies of Aeschylus aloud to each other and marvelled at the civilized wit of Aristophanes” (Kennedy, 1973, p. 12) Ann was also absorbed by Russian literature, especially Chekhov. They became interested in psychical research, joined the SPR, explored the extensive literature on mediumship and the case for possible survival, including over 60 years of SPR research, and arranged occasional sittings with mediums in their early years. Convinced by what they considered to be the strong evidential case for life after death, they promised that whoever died first would ‘come back’ and provide evidence of postmortem survival in a manner that would seem beyond reasonable doubt.

During late 1951, Ann’s health deteriorated. She had a mitral valvotomy, and then nearly died from a pulmonary embolism, but in March 1952 she was well enough to come home. David felt God had given them another chance of life together, and in gratitude he gave up his successful engineering consultancy to retrain as a Church of Scotland minister, qualifying in 1956, aged 40. After a further 2 years of relatively good health, Ann started to deteriorate again. She had another heart valve operation and recovered enough to live a limited housebound life. From 1967 onwards, she became increasingly bedbound but felt mentally well enough to continue her literature studies. In December 1969, Ann caught influenza, was admitted to Glasgow Infirmary, and died on 11 January 1970, aged 46. They had been married for 25 years. Soon after Ann’s death, David started to visit mediums, hoping to hear from Ann.

Booked seances

Determined, as they had agreed, to remain objective in his assessment of what the mediums said to him, he audiotaped each sitting. In this way, he could identify instances of specific information that only Ann would have known from mediumship generalities about life after death. The main medium David consulted was Albert Best (1917–1996), who lived some miles outside Glasgow, and besides mediumship ran a healing centre. Another medium was Mrs Lexie Findlater, who lived in Grangemouth some 40 miles from Glasgow. During visits to London, David often saw the medium Ena Twigg. These sittings, including mediums whom David had not met previously, provided many examples of factually correct information concerning present and past family relationships that only David and Ann, or close relatives and friends, could have known. Based upon what he considered to be the balance of probabilities, David concluded that it was Ann in spirit who was providing the mediums with this information rather than any telepathic transfer of information from his, or any other person’s, mind to a medium.

Unsolicited messages

But what to David confirmed Ann's postmortem existence beyond all reasonable doubt came from a series of unexpected, unsolicited messages that mediums received as if from the voice of Ann speaking in their minds. These concerned everyday events and experiences occurring in David's life that Ann instructed them to pass on to him to demonstrate she was fully alive in spirit and remained close to him. These messages commenced several weeks after Ann's death. The seven examples below are quoted in full from Kennedy (1973) to illustrate the circumstances in which they occurred.

When the Church of Scotland commemorates the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, it involves two 90-minute services with a lunch interval in between. During their marriage, David, on arriving home about 4 p.m. and feeling emotionally exhausted, would sleep on the sofa for about 90 minutes before Ann, often with difficulty, woke him to get ready to attend evening service.

(1) On the 15th March, 1970, which was the first occasion of commemorating the Sacrament after Ann's death, David again fell into a deep sleep on the sofa and was slowly dragged back into consciousness by the continuous ringing of the telephone. On answering it, he heard a woman's voice saying "Is that the Reverend Kennedy? My name is Mrs Lexie Findlater. I am telephoning from Grangemouth. Your wife is impressing upon me so strongly that I just have to telephone you now. I have tried to write a letter to put off this feeling, but I am being told that I must telephone you now. She is so very insistent, yet I have no idea why. Your wife is simply saying 'Get out now and use the old notes.' I don't know what it means but I have to do this." David thanked her for telephoning, explained why Ann was so insistent, and just made it in time for the evening service. (p. 45)

As David points out, Mrs Findlater knew his name and which area of Glasgow he lived in, but not his address, and had to spend time finding his number from directory enquiries.

(2) Three days later he was washing his yellow pullover and had poured in too many soapflakes resulting in a thick lather and the washbowl overflowing. The telephone rang and he heard Albert Best say "Are you shampooing? Not your hair but something woollen. I see lather, suds overflowing and something woollen in the basin. Your wife is saying that she was watching you do this." David explained what he was doing, and Best then said "Well, your wife is saying 'put in the black pullover while you are at it. The one with the egg stains, it badly needs washing' and 'for heaven's sake get an alarm clock and don't sleep in again at the end of the week'." (pp. 45-46)

(3) Sometime in mid April Best telephoned David to say "Your wife is here again. She keeps setting me puzzles. She is saying something about ballet shoes. You don't know anything about them, but you will ask when at home and then discover. She is laughing, it seems to be a joke about ballet shoes." Some twenty minutes later Ann's younger sister Mary calls David on a small matter and David takes the opportunity to ask if there was ever a joke about Ann and ballet shoes. Mary replies that this was

an unexpected question, as there was a joke that she thinks only the two of them ever knew. Mary had just started ballet lessons, and one day Ann had found the ballet shoes and tried them on. As they were too small for her feet, she was bending over, holding them on by pulling the shoe ribbons up while trying to point her toes when Mary came in, and they were both laughing. In a later phone call that same day Best said "Ann is saying 'You got the telephone call.' Yes, I impressed on her to call you. I don't know what she is talking about." (p. 50)

(4) David had taken a patient with severe arthritis to the sanctuary where Best practised healing. Suddenly Best turned aside from giving healing saying "Your wife says you telephoned Kilmarnock." David said. "Yes, it was to the Gemmells." Then Best continued "and you have cleaned the windows, you did something to the hem of the curtains, and finally your wife says that you came out today and found you had forgotten your handkerchief". All this was correct, and Best then said "This is just to let you know how close to you your wife is". (pp. 50–51)

(5) On another occasion when Best was giving healing to the same patient he turned and said to David "Your wife is here again. She says you have just lost your filling from your back lower tooth on the right side. A large filling and it is giving you trouble." David had lost the filling two days earlier. She then reminds him to collect her special Dunlopillow from the hospital and goes on to say that he had recently given a framed coloured photograph of her to their friends the Gemmells, and had recently dined out in a restaurant on the High Street. On this occasion, Best seemed increasingly irritated by these interruptions to his healing with patients, saying, "I really must get on with my work here. This must be the last message." But again he was mentally interrupted, and told David "Your wife simply won't go away. She asks me to add this last piece of evidence. She was with you last night when you tried to sew on the middle button on the coat of your suit." (pp. 85–86)

All these statements are correct.

(6) David was dressing in formal black for a funeral service he would be taking in an hour's time. Finding, to his horror, that he had no clean, starched, clerical collars left in the drawer, he was hunting through the pile of used collars to find the cleanest one. The telephone in the hall rang, and on answering it he heard Best say "Are you in the midst of looking for a clean, white, clerical collar, because Ann is impressing upon me to telephone you? First of all to let you know she was with you while you were looking, and secondly to tell you that if you look in the bottom drawer of the chest of drawers, in the right-hand corner under some shirts you will find three clean collars." David checked, and replied to say that the three clean collars were there. Best then said "And she says, do please send away the pile of collars to be cleaned, there are exactly twenty-three in that box now." David again checked and replied to confirm that there were twenty-three collars. Best ended the telephone call by saying "Ann says that you are going to take the funeral of a Mrs H in half an hour, and she will be with you. She helped her over at her passing last week." (p. 106)

(7) During a séance with a Mrs Constable, who he had not met before and lived in Aberdeen, she told him that Ann was saying to her "Tell him that things will move, 'You will wonder if your eyes and ears are playing you false.'" (p. 143)

Three days later he was in the brightly lit hall dressed for conducting a funeral. As he was adjusting his cufflinks, his attention was drawn by a loud bang to a large, heavy, 15-inch pottery vase Ann had made that stood on a solid oak cabinet. As he looked at it, he saw the vase begin rocking in a circular orbit with the top swinging "in a radius of a six-inch circle as if some unseen hand was slowly moving the vase in a circular motion." (p. 147)

The vase continued in motion for a while with diminishing effect until it was still again. This appears to have been a one-off event, as he does not mention any other psychokinetic activity.

These unsolicited messages through Best and other mediums also included examples of clairvoyant precognition of what he would find. For example, on one occasion, when David took a patient to Best's healing sanctuary, Best suddenly related an urgent message from Ann, saying, "Please check the lights on your car when you leave here, there is something wrong with one of them and it could be dangerous" (Kennedy, 1973, p. 125). When David checked his lights, he found the nearside front light was out, and the wires behind the light were dangerously overheating. These unsolicited communications through various mediums occurred while David, as a Church of Scotland minister, was fully employed looking after his Glasgow parish, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, organizing funerals and weddings, chairing meetings, preparing sermons, and learning to cope alone at home without Ann for company and support.

His account, which includes some fifteen audiotaped sittings and an estimated twenty spontaneous, unsolicited messages from mediums, with the latter conveying some seventy-seven separate items of information concerning his personal circumstances, covers the first 6 months after Ann's death in January up to July 1970. Six months later, he added a postscript with a few more examples and personal reflections on the implications of his experience. He also included three appendices concerning the Church of Scotland's attitude to Spiritualism, mediumship in the early church, and proposed prayers for the dead. There is a 1986 reprint but no later edition, so we do not know if the messages faded away over time, although there was a strong hint from Ann, through Best, that this would happen, as she felt she had presented her case and had her new life of spiritual study she needed to take up. David remarried in the early 1980s, an occasion that may have coincided with his decision to take clerical retirement in 1983, aged 57. He died aged 75 on 12 August 2001.

DISCUSSION

For the purposes of discussion, David's argument that the mediums involved in the unsolicited communications could not have known of these personal events in David's life is accepted. The anecdotal and empirical evidence for extrasensory perception (ESP), as in telepathy, clairvoyance, retrocognition, and precognition, as well as psychokinesis (mind affecting matter directly) is also accepted, as is the hypothesis that they are phenomena associated with

a mental faculty termed 'psi' (Batchelder, 1966; Broderick & Goertzel, 2015; Feather & Schmicker, 2005; Mayer, 2007; Osborne, 1961; Owen & Sparrow, 1976; Rhine, 1961; Vernon, 2021).

The commencement of such unsolicited communications seems to have been an unusual change of medium contact with a client. There is little, if any, reference to it in the considerable literature on mediumship, and may have been as much of a surprise to the mediums involved as to David. In each case, the medium was instructed by a voice in their mind, which they identified as David's deceased wife Ann, to contact David because she wished to tell him something. When he took patients to Best's healing sanctuary, Best often had to interrupt his healing to tell David what Ann was saying to him, as if she were present and aware they were talking together.

The question that David's account raises concerning these unsolicited messages is: which of two hypothesized agents is the most probable? Was it the Ann he had once known, now a disembodied spirit (hypothesis one)? Or it was 'Ann' as a mental entity created by David's mind in memory of the Ann he had known in life (hypothesis two)?

Hypothesis one

This is that it was the spiritual mind of the physically deceased Ann who telepathically communicated these unsolicited messages concerning David's circumstances to the minds of various mediums when they were in a psi receptive mode

According to this hypothesis, postmortem Ann, now bereft of her bodily senses and brain, remains the same person as before physical death but with additional psi-based abilities, as in communicating with different mediums. In her postmortem relationship with David, she observes what he is doing and who he is meeting as if with eyes, and hears, as if with normal hearing, their conversation. She is aware of what David is thinking and feeling, and she knows whose funeral he is, or will be, taking. She is able to access the minds of mediums when they are in psi-receptive mode, speaking to them as a recognizable voice in their inner minds. She can influence the mind of her sister despite her sister being unaware of Ann's psychic presence, and enabled Best to 'see' in his mind's eye what David was washing.

Despite much research attempting to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt the postmortem existence of the same person after bodily death as before bodily death (Beischel et al., 2015; Beischel & Rock, 2009; Beischel & Schwartz, 2007), the concept remains one of personal belief because it is not falsifiable. Jesse Bering (2008) has proposed that the idea of continuing mental life as a bodiless person is an imaginary scenario created by minds unable to imagine the nothingness of their own death and the deaths of others. This proposition is based upon the concept of 'person permanence' with regard to one's self and everyone else. Everyday experience repeatedly confirms the concept of 'person permanence' to the effect

that when we are out of sight and sound of each other, we continue to exist as individuals until we meet again. Bering (2008) proposes that this confirmatory experience underpins the resultant belief that when someone dies, they leave the body they once inhabited but continue to exist as an invisible form of themselves who remains aware of what is happening to those 'left behind' (Charman, 2011).

In the evolutionary context, this hypothesis carries fundamental implications concerning the bodily death of everyone who has ever lived, whatever their age, their mental state at the time of death, and their relationships with regard to others, whether well intentioned or ill intentioned, including those they will meet in spirit after bodily death. The twin concepts of personal immortality throughout endless eternity imply that for millions of years, billions of pre-hominids, hominids, Neanderthals, and, latterly, humans are still alive in some discarnate state of unending being. The question must be: for what conceivable purpose? It also raises the question of when, in some line of ancestral regress, the separation of a personal mind from its normally integrated relationship with its brain on the occurrence of brain death first happened.

Hypothesis two

This is that 'Ann' was a mental entity created by David's mind in memory of the Ann he once knew. Before her death, David and Ann's daily relationship was as two separate persons who knew each other very well. After Ann's death, David's imagery of her became a powerful memory of how she had been as a very positive personality when still alive. He imagined Ann as living in her new state of spiritual existence, determined, as agreed, to demonstrate that she was still alive.

The advantage of this hypothesis is that the anecdotal evidence (as follows) can be tested by experiment, and so is falsifiable. When mediums are in a psi-receptive state of mind during a séance, they can telepathically access imagery in the mind of the sitter concerning the personality and circumstances of the person the sitter hopes will 'come through'. The medium, in complete non-conscious awareness, uses this telepathically acquired knowledge to create a convincing vocal presence of that person, known as the communicator, as if responding to someone who has survived death. In the audiotaped sittings, David says that mediums often adopted Ann's way of speaking, both in intonation and characteristic turn of phrase, which added a sense of personal authenticity. When this phenomenon occurs during a séance, it is likely to be interpreted by the sitter as evidence that the deceased is now alive in spirit, and interpreted likewise by the medium as their basic belief system. However, as the following sitter experiences demonstrate, there may be another explanation.

Rosalind Heywood (1885–1980), a former vice president of the SPR, recounts such an experience when acting as a sitter in her chapter on 'Death and Psychical Research' in the book *Man's Concern with Death* (Toynbee et al., 1968) under the subheading 'From Whence Does a Medium Get Her Information?'

Soon after the Second World War I decided to test a medium by having an anonymous sitting with her and mentally asking for the fate of a German friend of whom I had heard nothing since 1938. He was a prominent man of great integrity and I feared that he must have been killed either by the Nazis or the Russians. He soon appeared to turn up at the sitting, gave his Christian name, spoke through the medium in character, and reminded me of various pleasant experiences which he had shared with my family in America which I had forgotten. He said that he had been killed in grim circumstances which he did not want to talk about. (Heywood, 1968, p. 233)

If, in confirmation, it was subsequently discovered that he had been captured by the Gestapo and had suffered a gruesome death, this could be taken as good evidence of a postmortem, self-aware person who knew that his friend Rosalind wanted to know what had happened to him. He was aware that she was visiting this particular medium, and was telepathically communicating through the mind and voice of the medium. To ensure that she realized it was definitely him who was communicating and no one else, he identified himself by stating his forename and had spoken through the voice of the medium with the Germanic inflexion typical of him (he had spoken 'in character'). He provided memories of their shared past when on a joint holiday in America, memories that Heywood had forgotten but recalled when reminded, and had decided to spare her distressing details of how he was murdered. As an example of apparent postmortem communication from someone known to have died, it makes a very convincing case, but reality turned out to be very different:

After the sitting I made inquiries as to his fate. He was eventually traced by the Swiss Foreign Office to a neutral country and in reply to a letter from me he said that he has escaped both the Nazis and the Russians, had married, was living in two rooms and had never been so happy in his life. Here, then, it looks as if the medium, unknown to herself, was building a picture of my German friend from my conscious memories and my fears as to his fate. (Heywood, 1968, p. 233)

This finding carries the inference that visual and emotional imagery in the minds of sitters concerning a hoped-for communicator and their possible afterlife circumstances may be the unwitting source of some if not all such communications through the psi-receptive minds of mediums. Because neither sitter nor medium is consciously aware of this telepathic communication, the natural conclusion is that the voice and manner of speech of the communicator, recreated in the mind of the medium from the sitter's remembrance of his or her voice, is the deceased relative or friend who is physically dead but mentally still alive.

That many mediums can also visualize imaginary characters created in the mind of a sitter and reflect them back to the sitter as if they are postmortem communicators is demonstrated in the next example. The author and clairvoyant Phoebe Bendit (née Payne) attended a conference on mediumship where one of the lecturers, who, she says, was a "well-known authoress", described how a medium had given her messages from several apparently deceased persons,

including their names and descriptions of their historical circumstances. In each case, these were accurate descriptions of clearly visualized, imaginary characters in a historical novel she was writing at the time (Payne, 1938).

Imagined personalities as thoughtforms

All imagined personalities of other people, whether consisting of memories of someone known personally, biographical recreations, or characters created by the minds of novelists and playwrights, possess a semi-autonomous agency of will and action consonant with their imagined character that defines them. In the case of the latter, they may be so strongly imagined as individuals living within the social context of the novel or play that their character influences the shape and outcome of the narrative. They exist in the reality of the author's imagination as independent, self-aware personalities, and as a class of mental entities they can be collectively classified as 'thoughtforms'. Parker and Puhle (2018) preface their discussion of the concept of thoughtforms across history and cultures by defining a thoughtform as "An entity created directly and exclusively by the mind, whether consciously or unconsciously, which appears to develop a life of its own."

Phoebe Bendit provides an example of an imagined thoughtform imbued with enough agency to influence a medium when in receptive psi mode (Payne & Bendit, 1950). In the 1920s, she was a member of Hewat McKenzie's British College of Psychic Sciences. This was established to try to identify mediums of genuine ability, and Bendit, then Miss Payne, was often one of a group of sitters during séances. By chance observation, she discovered that if she imagined a narrative of events and people and held onto those mental images during the séance, the medium would almost always include them in their account as if accessing postmortem communicators. Finding this experiment was repeatable beyond chance coincidence, she put it to the test in public. On one occasion, she told her séance group in advance that she would get the medium to introduce an imaginary dead fiancé of a confirmed bachelor in the group who she knew had never had a fiancé. During the séance, Payne's strongly imagined dead fiancé duly communicated imagined details of her relationship with this man, saying that she loved him and although she had died, she was still with him in spirit (see also Charman, 2016a, 2016b) These experiments came to an abrupt stop when the director heard of them and forbade her to do it again, thereby, as Payne pointed out, rejecting a golden opportunity for real research. The self we refer to as the 'I' or 'me' having experiences and making decisions can be considered as the primary thoughtform, and the selves we imagine into existence, either as memories of someone or as imagined characters, as secondary thoughtforms.

David and Ann's relationship

Implicit in David's account is that their relationship throughout their 25 years of marriage was an exceptionally close and united one. Over the years,

he would have come to know far more about her family relationships than he consciously remembered, and the same about what had happened during their marriage. Each possessed a vivid imagination which enabled them to share a combined love of poetry, literature, philosophy, and the arts. They were convinced of life after death as a continuance of their immortal selves into eternity and had promised that whoever died first would provide factual evidence that they were still alive. They had often discussed this eventuality and ways by which this could be achieved. As is evident from his account, David was determined to remain objective with regard to assessment of any medium-acquired evidence that the Ann he knew and loved in life was still with him. From examples of factual evidence that the mediums supplied during sittings, and spontaneously at an apparent Ann's request, David became convinced that Ann was alive in spirit.

Deceased Ann as a David-conceived and -imagined Thoughtform Ann

David now imagined Ann as the strong, self-willed person that he remembered, determined to demonstrate, as agreed, that she still existed, and was still with him, observing what he was doing, and able to convey this awareness through telepathic contact with mediums. She became a very positive, self-willed, semi-autonomous thoughtform in his imagination. When they were in their psi-receptive state of mind, the mediums became aware of Thoughtform Ann as an exceptionally dominant personality, inwardly telling them to contact David with this or that unsolicited message concerning his present circumstances. She even appeared to be able to influence the mind of her sister to telephone David concerning the ballet shoes, and Best to inwardly 'see' David washing his pullover and the suds overflowing while inwardly listening to 'Ann' talking. She mentally forced Mrs Findlater to keep telephoning David until he replied. Once Thoughtform Ann, as David imagined her with such immediacy, had provided what she felt were enough examples of her continued existence, she said, through Best, that although she would still be with him, she now had to continue her own spiritual studies and would communicate less frequently. This is how he imagined the Ann he knew, as engaging with academic opportunities available to her in her new spiritual life. Through these unsolicited messages, she often said how close she was to him because, as Thoughtform Ann in his mind, she was mentally with him in daily life.

Mediumship and possible thoughtform research

David's account of these medium-received, unsolicited messages from an apparent postmortem Ann offers support for the possibility that psi, as in ESP, is a genuine mental faculty. The hypothesis that sitter thoughtforms are the telepathic agent, as Heywood and the "well-known authoress" discovered during a sitting, is open to experimental verification, as Payne demonstrated (Payne & Bendit, 1950). For instance, Charman (2015) has proposed a type of

sitter experiment that has not yet been performed, whereby a group of strong visualizers, possibly novelists, playwrights, and artists, agree a fictional story and strongly imagine it during the séance. If the medium, unaware of the experiment, includes that story during the séance, it would support the hypothesis that sitter thoughtforms are the telepathic agent. Such a proposal is not only falsifiable but could provide interesting insight into the possible source of information relayed by some mediums.

Another type of experiment could be to pre-rank experimenters, who would be acting as potential sitters, on the Vividness of Mental Imagery Questionnaire (VVIQ) scale (Marks, 1973), from complete aphantasia (an inability to voluntarily create imagery of a person or scene when not in the act of visual observation) through to hyperphantasia (extremely vivid mental imagery of a person or scene 'as real as seeing'). If sitter thoughtforms in the form of imagery of the deceased are the telepathic agents, then mediums will not be able to detect any sitter imagery in the minds of the former and, conversely, will increasingly detect specific sitter imagery of a person in the minds of strong to very vivid imagers.

Closing remarks

The main reason people book sittings with a medium is in the hope of hearing from a dead relative or friend, confirming their belief that the person continues to exist as the person they once knew. This conceptual possibility cannot be dismissed, as it may be true, although it can be neither proved nor disproved. In contrast, there is anecdotal evidence that mediums in receptive ESP mode may be able to become aware of thoughtforms in the mind of the sitter, and reproduce them as active and responsive communicators during the seance. It is proposed that this is what occurred in this case. David's strong belief in Ann's survival created a Thoughtform Ann so psychologically intense that telepathic communication with mediums occurred spontaneously as well as during formal sittings.

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BOOK REVIEWS

TED SERIOS: THE MIND'S EYE

Edited by Lucy Kingett. Atelier Éditions. 2023. 223 pp. £32.96. Hardback

Ted Serios: The Mind's Eye is a fine anthology, designed by Emma Singleton, that accompanied the exhibition “Mind’s Eye: The Psychic Photographs of Ted Serios”, curated by Emily Hauver at The Image Centre, Toronto Metropolitan University in 2023.

The cover is a photograph, folded to create a book jacket. Out of focus, it features a man’s eyes and forehead, looming, filling the frame. The eyes have the intense gaze of someone in an altered state; they could belong to a performer or a punk rock star in the zone. Tucked away on the inside sleeve, a second male figure appears in the background, peering in with an inquiring look on his face.

The wide eyes on the outer cover belong to Ted Serios, a working-class American who claimed to project images from inside his mind onto unexposed Polaroid instant film. The other figure, in the background observing, I assume to be the psychiatrist Jule Eisenbud who, between 1964 and 1967, extensively researched, documented, archived, and wrote about Serios’s extraordinary abilities.

This beguiling book jacket envelops a softback 8 × 10 inch publication which consciously has the look and feel of a research dossier—as if it has come straight out of Eisenbud’s archive. The aesthetic of this book, with its intriguing cover and the six specially commissioned essays within it, illustrates beautifully the narrative of Serios’s extraordinary talents and his relationship with Eisenbud, and takes us into the borderlands where science and the sensational intersect. This book eloquently and thoroughly presents the evidence, while leaving readers to draw their own conclusions about the authenticity of Serios’s and Eisenbud’s paranormal claims.

For those who are not familiar with their story, here is some background. Ted, that is, Theodore Jude Serios (1921–2006), sometime hotel porter at the Conrad Hilton, Chicago, USA, was charismatic and witty, with a love of alcohol that led him to several run-ins with the police. Serios had an interest in the paranormal, and in the 1950s began to explore his psychic capabilities, claiming to experience “remote viewing” when being hypnotized. These initial experiments evolved, with Serios attempting to project the mental images of

his visions onto film in a Polaroid instant camera, a process already known in Spiritualism as thoughtography. Mysterious images did indeed emerge on some of the photographs, and Serios went on to develop his thoughtography technique using a small cardboard tube he called a “gizmo” to direct his thoughts on to the photographic paper inside the camera. His thoughtography gained the interest of the Illinois Society for Psychic Research, which invited him to demonstrate his alleged paranormal powers. Eventually, Serios came to the attention of Dr Jule Eisenbud (1908–1998), who had himself experienced what he considered paranormal events. Eisenbud set out to study Serios’ psychic abilities.

Over a four-year period, Eisenbud meticulously recorded Serios’s production of thoughtographs, documenting these in *The World of Ted Serios: Thoughtographic Studies of an Extraordinary Mind* (Eisenbud, 1989/2021). Eisenbud’s studies were conducted during a period marked by the Cold War and emerging technologies, where there was heightened interest in psychic phenomena. Eisenbud remained a firm believer, though many critics, including magicians and scientists, suggested that Serios’s thoughtographs were achieved through trickery. In addition, the conditions under which the experiments were conducted have come under scrutiny: Serios was an alcoholic, and insisted on consuming dangerous amounts of alcohol in order to produce his phenomena, which Eisenbud facilitated.

Jule Eisenbud’s extensive Serios archive is held in the Special Collections of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), USA. A fine selection of thoughtographs, research data, letters, and other ephemera from this archive, many of them previously unpublished, is included in *Ted Serios: The Mind’s Eye*. These were also displayed in an exhibition, “Mind’s Eye: The Psychic Photographs of Ted Serios”, and this book was created to accompany the exhibition. Published by Atelier Éditions, which specializes in artist publications, this is a limited edition run with just 3,000 copies. Atelier Éditions is known for its attention to detail and craftsmanship. High-quality paper and printing techniques are used to reproduce the photographs and ephemera with precision, ensuring that the textures and tonalities of the original Polaroid images are faithfully represented. It is worth getting your hands on a copy while it is within an affordable price range.

There is a curator’s sensibility in the presentation of this publication. Serios’s Polaroids, Eisenbud’s research materials, letters, the commissioned essays, and other materials are arranged in such a way as to create a visual narrative contextualizing Serios’s thoughtographs as both historical artefacts and artistic objects.

Featuring a foreword by Paul Roth, director of The Image Centre, and an introduction from curator Beth Saunders, who is also curator of Exhibitions, UMBC, there are also six accompanying texts by Mikita Brottman, Clement Chéroux, Mark Alice Durant, Emily Hauver, Ellie Howard, and Beth Saunders—all distinguished writers, artists, curators, and archivists with

expertise in photography. Their essays interrogate and illuminate the work of Serios and Eisenbud with an acknowledgement throughout of the artistic interest that the thoughtographs, with their performative means of production, have stimulated.

“The scientist and his subject” by Mikita Brottman, psychoanalyst and author known for her interest in true crime, gives an introduction to Eisenbud’s research background and a glimpse into his personal life. It looks at his research methods, recognizing the scientific protocols, but acknowledging that Eisenbud’s own beliefs were active agents when it came to Serios. The scientific community may well have dismissed the integrity of this research; however, the artistic community has embraced and been inspired by it.

In “The prodigal son”, Emily Hauver, curator of exhibitions at the Library Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore, compares Serios to the ‘trickster character’ from myth and folklore. The trickster has secret knowledge and uses this to fool people. She looks into his early life and familial relationships and his character as anecdotally recounted by acquaintances, as well as his run-ins with the law and his mental health issues—both possibly linked to his alcoholism. Serios captured himself in action on numerous Polaroids when attempting to produce thoughtographs. What can we discern of his character through these images: the shaman/showman, the child seeking parental attention?

The power dynamic between Serios and Eisenbud is further explored by curator and writer on the paranormal and photography Mark Alice Durant in his chapter “Inscrutable documents”. “Serios is the act, but it is Eisenbud’s show” (p. 55a). Could their relationship be seen as a kind of collaborative performance or vaudeville act, with Eisenbud narrating and telling the audience how to interpret the act? Durant curated the exhibition ‘Blur of the Otherworldly’ at the Center for Art and Visual Culture, UMBC, in 2005. This show included some of Serios’s thoughtographs along with the work of major international contemporary artists. Durant brings insight into the enigmatic quality of Serios’s thoughtographs. These Polaroids are a testament to how the shifting technologies of photographic processes influence the visual qualities of paranormal images, in turn inspiring artists to reproduce these effects.

Ellie Howard, a photographer and writer interested in mediums in the intersection of art and science, eloquently describes Serios’s Polaroid images: “Like a half-remembered dream, they capture ruins lying abandoned in the abyss, or the watery traces of figures swirling down a dirty sink” (p. 66). Her essay, “Black cats and TV: A journey into the mind’s eye”, evokes the publication title. Are the images projections from inside the mind? Whatever you believe, the Polaroids, with their dream-like quality, remain as a prompt to activate the conscious and unconscious mind.

Beth Saunders, curator and head of special collections and the Library Gallery at UMBC, outlines the cultural background to this story, including research during the Cold War into using psi and the space race. Saunders muses

on how these could have influenced the images that Serios produced. She writes about some of Serios's and Eisenbud's critics, including the magician James Randi (1928–2020), and how Eisenbud eventually lost the support of his peers.

The final essay, "Serios beyond belief", from the director of the Cartier-Bresson Foundation Paris, Clément Chéroux, locates Serios's Polaroids alongside contemporary photography practice, particularly the use of deliberately distorted images by such artists as Barbara Ess and Nancy Rexroth in the 1970s and 1980s. Ess organized the first gallery exhibition of Serios's photographs in the 1990s.

Serios's thoughtographs have continued to be exhibited in group and solo exhibitions, and are often featured in art publications. A large number of these enigmatic photographs, many of which have never been published before, are displayed in the central section of this book, "Psychic Polaroids". The Polaroids are reproduced close to their actual size, and are mostly one to a page, placed centrally, with a large area of blank page framing each photograph. This gives each image gravitas, allowing us to focus on the artistic merits—tone, composition, subject, angle, etc.—within each. One can return to gaze repeatedly at these blurry, distorted Polaroids—unique artefacts with an aura and an extraordinary 'back story'—and wonder: are we seeing visions from Serios's mind or the product of a clever trick? Whatever you may conclude, these are beguiling and haunting photographs in a rather wonderful publication.

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THE SPIRITUALIST PRIME MINISTER, VOLUME 1. MACKENZIE KING AND THE NEW REVELATION

By Anton Wagner. White Crow Books. 2024. 388 pp. Paperback and ebook

Canada's longest-serving Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, was at the forefront of early 20th-century Spiritualism in Canada. Yet this fact has been dismissed, ignored, or edited out of history in attempts by his executors and fixers in the Liberal Party to control political damage, refusing to recognize King's consultations with astrologers, fortune-tellers, graphologists, mediums, palmists, phrenologists, psychics, and psychical researchers regarding political matters.¹ In two volumes, Anton Wagner painstakingly outlines the ways in which the Prime Minister was, indeed, influenced by spiritual practices and beliefs. Wagner's historical revisionist approach elucidates (1) how King was Canada's "most prominent psychic explorer from 1919 when he became Leader of the Liberal Party Opposition in Parliament until his 1948 resignation as Prime Minister" (p. ix), (2) how spiritualism had shaped his worldview since childhood, and 3) why it was imperative to keep this knowledge from the public. The question of whether King used "his spiritualism and occult practices to enhance his emotional well-being and assist ... in making difficult political decisions" or if he was "as mad as some have argued" (p. 51) is the central question around which Wagner anchors his nuanced historical analysis.

Volume I is divided into thirteen chapters, all of which cover a different aspect of King's spiritual pursuits and interactions. For instance, details of family history and Spiritualism in Canada; King's connections to spiritualist circles in Canada and London, England; conflicting opinions of King's historians and biographers; and his struggles with mental health, and overpowering "carnal temptations" and "magnetic currents" (p. 155), as King described them. Wagner starts by describing the Prime Minister's intimate relationship with his mother, Isabelle King (daughter of William Lyon Mackenzie). This is an important place to begin, for she is foregrounded as the shrine—literally and metaphorically—of his spiritualism. Appearing almost nightly in his "dream visions" (p. 59), she was the catalyst for his interests, having had her first encounter with a fortune-teller at age seven (p. 23). Prior to her death in 1917, King had already

1. Wagner notes: "After his death in 1950, King's executors restricted access to his diaries and correspondence to prevent knowledge of his spiritual beliefs and occult practices becoming part of the public record" (p. 109).

perceived her as a “divine figure” (p. 104), and, after her death, he communed with her regularly. Wagner argues that it was his “unbreakable bond” (p. 52) with her that compelled King to persistently pursue methods of contacting her. Yet, growing up with his mother’s spiritual beliefs, Wagner shows how King had pursued occult practices throughout much of his life as well—practices that appear more as a compulsion than an interest, for he never made major political decisions without seeking spiritual guidance.

Wagner’s volumes are the first to provide a comprehensive exploration of King’s spiritualism, making it a significant and fascinating contribution to Canadian, political, and psychical histories.² Wagner shows the ways in which the Prime Minister’s political decision-making was influenced by his deep conviction that he had been chosen by God to lead his country, and that deceased family members and political and psychic leaders supported and guided him. Some scholars have acknowledged King’s participation in occult practices, yet in ways intended to diminish or tarnish his reputation, casting doubt on not only his decision-making but also his sanity. For example, H. Blair Neatby dismissed King’s occult activities as “superstitions”, while Wagner notes that Charles P. Stacey “destroyed his image as an intellectual” (p. 185). King has been mocked (Donald Brittain), as well as deemed a “quackery” (Stacey) and a “certifiable nut” (Pierre Berton), to name a few such denigrative claims. Some have taken a more neutral approach, concluding that the connection between King’s spiritualism and his accomplishments remains an enigma without having all of the necessary pieces to create a fuller picture of his life (Paul Roazen); while others have simply omitted this part of his life (J. W. Pickersgill). Wagner contends that King has been misjudged by historians, and aims to outline a rounded view of his “life-long spiritual pursuits and how Spiritualism was a fundamental element of his worldview and being” (p. 191).

The lack of knowledge about King’s spiritual beliefs and practices is largely a result of his executors and trustees removing such documentation from the public record after King’s death in 1950. Furthermore, Library and Archives Canada, where the King pages are housed, did not release them until the early 1970s, and even burned any documents relating to spiritualism in 1977. They did, however, miss many of his séance notes, which were not released until 2001. The records also include 30,000 pages of diary entries and correspondence. King scrupulously recorded his daily activities—his thoughts and feelings on spiritual topics, and wrote about astrological readings, table-tipping, psychic readings, conversations, and sittings with psychical researchers, such as Thomas Glendenning and Lillian Hamilton in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Drawing on the archive, Wagner weaves 10 years of primary research, including genealogical data gathered from family history and newspapers, as well as firsthand stories and portraits from the descendants of three of King’s psychics.

2. Allison Christine Bullock (2009) started this work in her thesis.

Had the Prime Minister written and published his memoirs as he intended, the connection between his spiritualism and politics would have been articulated in his own words, removing the need for the level of questioning and debate it has garnered amongst historians. King planned on concluding his memoir with a final chapter to “relate his varied experiences in psychical research, describe [his] experiments together [with Edouard Handy, King’s principal secretary, 1936–1950] and declare his faith in a spiritual world” (p. 231). In the absence of King’s memoir, Wagner creates as close a personal account as possible through extensive quotations. He succeeds in creating a strong connection between the reader and the Prime Minister’s (somewhat stream of consciousness) thoughts, as read through his immense volume of diaries; readers almost feel as though they are reading the diary excerpts for themselves. While this methodology achieves an immersive experience—drawing readers into the mind and life of the Prime Minister—it also, at times, weighs down the writing. Wagner’s voice gets lost in such details, some of which are digressions from his key arguments.

While the Prime Minister was aware of the political consequences of his spiritual beliefs becoming public knowledge, Wagner notes that King’s unwavering belief in the afterlife was not uncommon. The Spiritualist movement gained popularity in the late 19th to early 20th century after mass casualties—post the American Civil War and the First World War. Like many others at this time, King and his mother experienced deaths in the family—his sister, Bella, in 1915 and his father, John King, in 1916—further inciting them to seek consolation through spirit communication. Wagner situates King’s spiritualism in the introduction of volume I, setting the historical context, and then outlining the lineage of magical thinking throughout the Prime Minister’s personal and political life.

Throughout the biography, Wagner effectively shows that rationalism and spiritualism were not mutually exclusive to King’s political leadership—he held a PhD in political economy from Harvard, and he communed with his deceased mother, while remaining ranked by historians among the country’s greatest prime ministers. His convictions about his own psychic powers and the spiritual guidance he received from deceased loved ones shaped his ability to become one of the most extraordinary prime ministers in Canada’s history.³ Wagner illuminates how King used spiritual practices and his inner dialogue with others as a balm for, or relief from, external conflict, and what can ultimately be understood as an inability to make consequential decisions without spirit consultation.

The Spiritualist Prime Minister aims to do justice to King, personally and politically. Wagner provides more than ample evidence to support the book’s overall claims but is hesitant to apply a persuasive analysis, which could have

3. With regard to King’s record of achievements, which is only surpassed by Sir Wilfred Laurier and Sir John A. Macdonald, see Parks Canada (2024, April 18).

strengthened his stance. He does, however, leave room for readers to interpret the facts as they are presented and ultimately draw their own conclusions about Canada's longest-serving Prime Minister's leadership. Overall, the volumes stand as the most thorough analysis of the Prime Minister's spiritualist beliefs and practices, making a significant contribution to not only the history of King's life but also the early 20th-century Spiritualism in Canada.

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THE CASE FOR THE AFTERLIFE: EVIDENCE OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

By Chris Carter. Llewellyn. 2025. 272 pp. Paperback, ebook, and audiobook

INTRODUCTION

With *The Case for the Afterlife*, Chris Carter brings a lucid, succinct, and eminently readable contribution for the newcomer, both in presenting evidence in support of the book's title and in dealing with a number of the logical fallacies often engaged in by sceptics. While a majority of the sources have been cited many times in related works, Carter, as ever, brings his own perspective and engages with sceptical arguments at every turn. With this said, those more familiar with the subjects covered won't learn much new, and its triteness can be, at times, to its detriment.

Fundamentally, Carter's idea is to suggest that survival, in the context of alternative explanations, can be proven beyond reasonable doubt and to address attempts to disingenuously raise doubt. Does it constitute, however, a case for the afterlife? That, in my estimation, is slightly less clear, and readers' mileage may vary.

PART I: THE TOOLKIT

Amidst some historical and relevant snapshots of the philosophy of science, Carter begins by arming the reader with knowledge regarding the kinds of basic and repetitive logical fallacies so commonly committed by sceptics, or more accurately, in many cases, militant debunkers in the area of and adjacent to survival, beginning with dualism. It has often been surprising to me, for example, how rarely monists have tackled the fact that their evidence for that position is not exclusive evidence, and that a number of anomalous phenomena are at least, if not better, accommodated by models dealing with a non-local consciousness. "No evidence is exclusive", will come the more crafty retort, and yet, the initial position was often that no other interpretation of the data was possible.

With some interesting citations, Carter exposes many of the talking points and philosophical biases regarding opposition to dualism as unconvincing, such as the so-called interaction problem or the idea that dualism conflicts with energy conservation in physics. Furthermore, the typical poisoning of the well fallacies that often occur regarding accusations that dualists are trying to

smuggle religion back into the conversation are spoken to. One could, of course, cite such cases. However, the accusation is often reactionary and has no place in good-faith debate. Likewise, basic begging-the-question and circular reasoning fallacies are dealt with when it comes to arguments such as ‘brain physical, mind non-physical, therefore no interaction possible’. In addition, that one cannot fathom a mechanism has no bearing on whether or not there may be a mechanism. Indeed, if one cannot at least suspend disbelief, then one is likely not in the realms of fruitful inquiry.

Carter also briefly but helpfully speaks to the nature of evidence and standards of proof, keying in on the kinds of special pleading and double standards often engaged in when it comes to eyewitness testimony or anecdotal evidence. The salient point is made that the importance is that something at all was agreed to have occurred, and this is backed up with an interesting, though single, citation speaking critically regarding the supposed frailties of human memory. I am reminded of a narrative relayed by Green and McCreery (1975, pp. 44–48), who speak to the differences in perception between the individuals in the midst of a collective apparition, rather than focusing on the fact that three separate people saw anything at all simultaneously. Furthermore, the witnesses saw a man they didn’t know was dead, who turned out, in fact, to have been recently deceased at the time of the collective and apparently veridical vision.

Commonly, as Carter addresses, cases are dismissed *a priori*, yet by individuals who will cite anecdotes from other fields, entirely ignoring other lines of reasoning and assuming that each anecdote, by definition, is equitable to the next. Furthermore, they will accept non-experimental and non-repeatable conclusions drawn in other spheres such as cosmology, where many of the big questions not only currently cannot be tested or repeated experimentally but also never will be. Likewise, Carl Sagan’s (1980, p. 75) “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” quote, so often still employed, is addressed. Yes, there is some semblance of reason to it, and it can be helpful, but it is ultimately stifling and easily used in order to arbitrarily dismiss entirely reasonable evidence that meets the standards presently required. A perfect example of this comes from psychologist and sceptic Richard Wiseman, who was quoted in the *Daily Mail* as having said, “I agree that by the standards of any other area of science that remote viewing is proven, but begs the question: Do we need higher standards of evidence when we study the paranormal? I think we do [Wiseman later clarified this applied to ESP in general]” (Penman, 2007).

Overall, Carter provides a concise and illuminating introduction that sets the stage nicely, especially for the newcomer, but what of the evidence itself?

PART II: THE EVIDENCE

In Part II, Carter looks at what he considers some of the strongest converging lines of evidence for survival, dealing, in varying detail, with the near-death experience (NDE), apparitions, deathbed visions, memories of past lives, trance

mediumship, and cross-correspondences, among other subjects. For the reader familiar with the literature pertaining to any of these areas, there won't be many surprises. For example, we read once more about the famous NDE of Pam Reynolds. We read again of J. B. Rhine and card experiments. The ever-reprinted account of the Cheltenham ghost is also covered. Likewise, we read of the trance medium Leonora Piper. Indeed, the same cases have been cited dozens of times before. That said, Carter does engage directly with sceptics of most of these areas, and deals with cited arguments and extracts well enough to keep things interesting. Furthermore, these are still solid cases against which to contrast with the super-ESP explanations and, for that, both newcomers and those veterans less familiar with super-ESP will be grateful. Fundamentally again, however, the main strength is in highlighting the logically fallacious nature of many of the general arguments made against, for example, NDEs or apparitions used as survival evidence.

The book brings a number of veridical cases from some of the better-known researchers in these areas; however, I would like to have seen much more regarding, for example, the 'Peak in Darien' experience in the section about deathbed visions. In addition, the chapter itself is just five pages and presents the same cases as usual.

Regarding the NDE, I was pleased to see Carter deal with the semantics of whether or not one is 'really dead', and therefore with the idea often employed by sceptics that if they weren't, they cannot therefore actually tell us what the next life is like, if there were one at all (see p. 64). This is something survival proponents also fail to address.

In terms of apparitions, Carter relates that "the fact that eyewitness testimony is sometimes flawed does not mean that it is always flawed" (p. 91), noting that this changes the burden of proof from beyond reasonable to beyond conceivable doubt. This should seem an obvious statement; however, these are still grounds upon which the sceptic might reject engaging the topic in the first place. Furthermore, some of the observations in this chapter seem especially hard to explain in light of super-ESP. This continues as we also read of apparitions seemingly with their own agenda and how they seem to act independently of the will and even the knowledge of the percipient or medium. These are examples wherein, for instance, the apparition comes to someone other than the intended, and asks them to offer a message to another person. Such cases are especially challenging to conventionally account for. The reader may consider Evans (2002) or Rogo and Bayless (1979/2025), for more interesting accounts and commentary. Likewise, one of the book's main strengths in terms of the evidence would be dealing with examples in which highly specific skills and extremely particular personality traits are expressed by the medium claiming to be inhabited by said personality. This seems to be an area of special interest to Carter, and the reader unfamiliar with these cases will likely find them fascinating and thought provoking, including the example

of a supposedly deceased chess master playing a game of chess with a living master through a medium.

Concise as it is, the book, in some areas, doesn't cite a greatly impressive volume of evidence, given the task that has been set. This can be to its detriment regarding, for example, terminal lucidity, a subject that would have done wonders for Carter's case, to which only two pages are dedicated. Similarly, little room is given to memories of past lives. With that said, Carter clearly has his areas of special interest, and the reader will find his work shining in those chapters.

PART III: RIP SUPER-ESP

While it is a persistent theme throughout the book, in the third part, Carter primarily focuses on critiquing the idea of super-ESP, a postulated form of especially powerful ESP, as an alternative explanation of certain evidence put forwards in favour of survival. Carter attempts to make the case that this form of ESP currently has little to no pragmatic explanatory power or empirical backing when compared with the survival hypothesis or in relation to the nature of seemingly conventional ESP itself.

As referenced, Carter especially details mediums who gain the ability to exactly mimic idiosyncratic aspects of the deceased person's personality and skillset, including talents that take many years to develop. It is in this area I feel Carter shows the ineptitude of super-ESP most strongly, illustrating how Braude (1986), for one example, extends not only the powers of ESP in attempting to account for such instances but also hypnosis. While Braude suggests that those in hypnotic states may analogously act out certain skills and abilities to a greater degree than when not hypnotised. Carter, supported by citations, deals not only with the factual inaccuracies of the statement but also with the extent to which it is not even relevant to certain accounts.

Nevertheless, Carter seems not to engage directly with other arguments made by proponents of super-ESP, such as Sudduth (2014), who notes, for example, that the kind of ESP employed by the ostensible dead during encounters with them is on par with the claims made regarding the capacities of super-ESP. Sudduth (2014) sees explanatory parity in this regard, though this aspect of the argument seems somewhat shaky. The suggestion of exact parity, for example, seems like a positive claim that would need to be specifically quantified; otherwise, it leaves open the possibility that despite a general parity, one may yet hold greater explanatory power than the other, either generally or on a case-by-case basis. Indeed, a number of passages and reflections in the book dealing with auxiliary assumptions made by super-ESP in certain cases are quite thought provoking in this regard (pp. 179–80).

While Carter makes the point that even though ESP in the wild is more impressive than in the lab, his suggestion that there is no evidence to the contrary in relation to super-ESP is not necessarily true, and is a position that

has been rejected even by a number of survivalists, such as Rivas (2016). While Carter would be correct to speak to its relative sparsity, there are suggestive cases. For example, after NDEs, individuals often claim increased ESP, and certain cases in the more recent literature attest to rather dramatic and persistent effects. For example, Kenneth Ring relates that Georgia (alias), who almost died of pneumonia at 17, after her NDE had psychic experiences. Georgia, as she describes it, “can remember knowing *everything* [emphasis added]. And that was the hardest thing.” She went on to note that she “knew what you were thinking, I knew who was coming into the room, I knew there was someone coming up the hall, and I knew what they were going to say; and before you turned on the radio, I knew what was going to be played” (Ring, 1985, pp. 174–175). Georgia never told anyone of these experiences, which eventually subsided after about a year.

Georgia certainly experienced more than the average psychic experience in the wild, even if it still seems a little more limited than the most powerfully hypothetical kinds of super-ESP, where, for example, any and all thoughts may be known, as opposed to those being thought. There are, however, other attestations, including cases where, indeed, more than just what is being thought by a mind is purportedly revealed to another mind—this being a requirement of super-ESP. Swiss novelist Zschokke “frequently” found himself “possessed of a perfect memory of the past life of the person he was speaking to; and it is on record that on one occasion he confounded a sceptic who defied him by declaring to him certain passages of his past life known to himself alone and such as he could not have wished to be known to others. This was done in a large company” (Davey, 1881, p. 41).

My point is by no means to suggest there is powerful or ubiquitous evidence in this direction, only to say that there isn’t necessarily none, as Carter asserts. I am reminded again of the ruminations of Evans (2002). He accepts the possibility of super-ESP, though Evans offers numerous specific examples wherein it cannot so easily, if at all, be applied. Perhaps most important here is that whether or not Carter makes a case that there is zero evidence for super-ESP, he is entirely correct to consistently point out, with examples, how fallacious and disingenuous the appeals to it have at least sometimes been. The value of his work, in other words, is not so much in its assertions that super-ESP does not exist, but in presenting the ways in which it has been misapplied as at least equally explanatory in *specific* cases.

For all the logical precision employed here, however, there are some other more questionable lines of reasoning and omissions. The idea that there is no purpose to remembering a past life, for example, as opposed to super-ESP, seems strange and arbitrarily posed—one could contrive numerous reasons. Likewise, while Carter does spend a lot of time on the NDE, I would have liked more focus on this area regarding the extent of the challenge in explaining its aspects in light of super-ESP, something that Rivas (2016) drew specific attention to. As

Rivas notes in relation to certain writings of Sudduth (2014) and Braude (1986), “Of course, the authors are right to criticise weak arguments for survival, but it would have been better if they had taken some effort to also address stronger arguments.”

Consider cases where patients have been declared clinically dead yet have accurately reported observed distant events that occurred specifically during that time. In the case of corroboration in examples of this kind, survival and super-ESP do not seem to have explanatory parity, as the subjective experience is often exactly or nearly exactly matched to the reality, while a number of auxiliary suppositions are required for super-ESP. This is not to say the former interpretation is therefore correct, but simply to challenge the positive assertion of persistent parity. The likes of Sudduth (2014), however, might then argue that the survivalist is also supposing the nature of consciousness after death. I find this an interesting, although limited, approach in some ways, as it is the anecdote itself that suggests this nature to us. It is not so much that the auxiliary assumptions are presumed as much as they are themselves implied or seen to be suggested by the initial facts themselves. All discovery does not have to be bottom-up, and certain things will always remain impossible to independently verify or control experimentally. In other words, there seems to be a conflation between inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning, the last of which often most readily accommodates non-experimental approaches to survival. Both Carter and Braude (1986), in fact, see the value of non-experimental evidence, and there is some interesting and potentially fruitful common ground in this regard.

In summary, Carter does a solid job at showing specific examples where applications of super-ESP seem to be currently lacking; however, it would have been nice to have further indication as to some of the greater depth and subtlety of the debate.

OUTRO

For me, if the semantics may be forgiven, it is not so much clear that Carter has made a case for the afterlife as much as he has made a case that there *is* a case for the afterlife, even if it is not all here. That is to say, this book may not quite bring together enough volume of evidence to make an entirely strong individual case, but it certainly makes it clear to the unbiased reader that there may be a surprisingly solid case. It is also made clear that the generally philosophical criticisms as to his position’s credibility are often untenable and, at times, intellectually disingenuous in their application. While Carter, at times, veers slightly off course, his critical approach and attention to logically fallacious reasoning is entirely welcome in these areas, and something I hope continues to rub off on his readers and peers.

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LUCID DYING: THE NEW SCIENCE REVOLUTIONIZING HOW WE UNDERSTAND LIFE AND DEATH

By Sam Parnia. Hachette Books. 2024. 352 pp. Hardcover, ebook, and audiobook

Sam Parnia's stated aim is "to synthesize the most important scientific discoveries and make them available to professionals and the general public alike" (p. 5). *Lucid Dying* is written in a straightforward though repetitive manner, and the tenor of the book is one of earnest enthusiasm if not actually proselytizing.

Parnia is well qualified to have an opinion on this topic, as he has been in the business of cardiac arrest resuscitation for most of his career. He is the director of critical care and resuscitation research at New York University Langone Medical Center. Parnia has taken full advantage of his position to study the transition between life and death, and has made some interesting observations. They are perhaps not quite as startling as he believes, but nevertheless of note. These concern the amount of time that body tissue, in particular the brain, can survive before life cannot be restored. Quite how these newish facts are relevant to the main thesis about the reality of near-death experiences (NDEs) is not entirely clear to me, though the chance of successful resuscitation has increased since techniques have evolved, hence more people now report having had NDEs.

Lucid Dying is divided into five sections: (1) 'The Science of Life and Death', (2) 'Experiencing the Grey Zone', (3) 'Exploring Consciousness', (4) 'A World of Distortions', and (5) 'What It all Means for Us'. Parnia concludes the book with a bibliography and a suggested reading list.

Parnia initially describes, in detail, how his interest in the subject developed. It began as a result of observing his brain-damaged father during his childhood. Later, as a medical student, curiosity led him to question how brain cells give rise to thoughts. He was of the opinion, standard at the time, that the answer lay "somewhere in the brain" (p. 7), but then asserts that science now suggests "that our consciousness and selfhood are not annihilated when we cross over into death and the great unknown" (p. 8). This is of course still controversial. His aim is to "uncover the mysteries of what happens in the newly discovered liminal zone" (p. 9). Parnia then claims that this is not a book about religion or philosophy but, as hinted at above, it seems to me that a large part of it is. There is no harm in that of course.

The first two chapters are devoted to the discovery of when a successful resuscitation is possible after heart stop and EEG flatline. He credits various doctors with their discoveries, including a Dr Sestan who restored function to the brains of pigs which had been removed from their skulls. To me, this enters the distasteful realm of the mad scientist. It astonished Parnia too, and he does acknowledge that “it is frightening that ... [an] individual may demand to have their brain ... preserved in this way” (p. 15). I agree! Such an individual might well regret having no body for the brain to ally itself to, constituting as it does a major part of selfhood.

In the second chapter, Parnia describes the scientific advances of the 1960s of resuscitation, with relevant discussions of how to declare someone dead, all interesting enough, but one might think not of immediate relevance to the main issue of what happens after death is ascertained. However, Parnia does attempt to delineate the grey zone within which presumably NDEs occur.

Chapter three explores the history of ideas about what happens at death, together with artistic interpretations such as Bosch’s version of heaven and hell. The main point is that there seems to be little variation in the accounts through time of those who have undergone an NDE. For example, Parnia quotes a British admiral who nearly drowned in 1795, and a Swiss geologist who survived a fall off a mountain in 1878, which prompted a typical NDE. These kinds of experiences did not stimulate further research until the 1950s, when people began surviving in intensive care units (ICUs). It was Moody (1975) who systematically collected cases and set out the eleven key themes of the experience that are now well known.

Parnia quotes at length the psychiatrist Bruce Greyson and others, reproaching them for lack of scientific rigour in defining near death. He reasserts his enthusiasm for reversing the death process: “It is now time for society to change how it views life and death based on these scientific discoveries rather than trying to force its own arbitrary and outdated concepts onto science” (p. 62). I am not sure if anyone is forcing anything. This, to my mind, is arguing for change by denigrating what may have been acceptable for good reasons, an annoying and unnecessary strategy to initiate change, as anyone who has been subjected to it will agree.

More acceptable is his later attempt to describe and debunk materialistic explanations of NDEs. It is these crucial arguments that seem to me to be most relevant and interesting. Parnia begins chapter four by exploring the discoveries concerning electrical activity in the dying brain. He describes the, I have to say, obnoxious though one supposes inevitable and necessary, experiments of Borjigin et al. (2013), who measured the EEG of rats as they were being put to death and observed unexpected bursts of electrical activity. Others have noted similar surges of gamma waves associated with conscious alertness in dying patients, and presumed this might explain reports of hyperconsciousness in percipients.

Parnia notes that materialists might be justified in presuming these bursts are triggered as a last-ditch attempt to re-establish brain and body activity. A materialist might also surmise that the surge could bring all memories at once into conscious awareness. This conceivably might include visual memories of loved ones, with associated words and feelings. The level of electrochemical energy one presumes is sufficient to activate self-awareness, albeit without full awareness of the body because of paralysis, thus perhaps creating a sense of floating and transparency. Bodily dissociation is a well-known phenomenon, experienced and reported by those in extreme situations. The lack of fear during NDEs may be because all available attentional capacity is focused on objective observation as opposed to preparing the body for fight or flight, something no longer relevant. The alternative theory, besides the spiritual one, is that evolution is still at play by softening the blow of the reality of impending doom.

Parnia set about to prove otherwise by collecting data in the form of EEGs and NDE reports of those undergoing resuscitation through his AWARE-2 (AWAreness during RESuscitation) programme. He was the director and lead scientist of this programme, and is rightly proud that it was the largest study of its kind, involving as it did some 567 subjects. Parnia thinks that it confirmed that consciousness is “not annihilated by death when people enter the ocean of death” (p. 73). Parnia also set up the opportunity to test for memories of images and sounds made on a computer that were presented, the latter through headphones. His assumption was that if the percipients recalled any of these percepts on recovery, it would indicate a degree of conscious awareness while transitioning from life to death. Obviously, if they had recalled a memory of a visual target with their eyes shut, this would in my mind constitute better evidence than vague recall of a sound, but that was not the aim of this experiment. Parnia also describes undertaking an experiment with hidden targets which delivered negative results. The results of Parnia’s AWARE-1 study are worth noting. Out of over 2,000 cardiac arrests, just 101 survived, and of these, only two reported out-of-body experiences (OBEs), of which one was evidential. Still, one white crow is all it takes.

Chapter five provides a fuller account of the AWARE-2 results. Parnia notes the rare but well-attested cases of ‘autoresuscitation’, when a body unexpectedly revives itself. I agree with Parnia’s assertion: “Your brain is optimized to derive the greatest meaning for you out of every circumstance” (p. 95), clearly an evolutionarily derived survival mechanism. He mentions the extreme levels of adrenalin and steroids flooding the body when it is in severe shock. One supposes this might generate the gamma surge as well as disinhibition and resultant effects that he describes, including access to hidden capabilities, and perhaps an awareness of new dimensions of reality. The life review Parnia asserts is a purposeful evaluation of one’s ethical conduct, but “we need to ask ourselves why does our brain—that optimally makes meaning out of every circumstance in life—now in death also makes meaning by facilitating the experience” (p. 95).

A materialist might interpret this as a last-ditch effort to discover if any memory from one's past might help solve the current predicament and aid survival.

Chapter six reviews in detail the typical NDE. Parnia once again berates those in the medical profession who refuse to acknowledge these experiences. I suspect that their rarity is a factor, as is the possibility that any survivor may not want to mention it to a doctor whose job it is to focus on recovery.

The second section of the book expands on the "fifty or so unique features of the recalled experience of death" (p. 105) not previously appreciated. Parnia begins by recounting the seven-times-repeated NDEs of a physician who suffered heart attacks, emphasizing his experience of consciousness and selfhood as being vaster than previously experienced. Parnia states the obvious, that the reason we do not have access to this regularly in our lives is because it is not actually necessary. He does state a fact that is of note, that, although anecdotes do not generally count as evidence, when the same thing is reported countless times, then it must be considered significant, though this perhaps remains arguable when considering subjective experiences of like-minded individuals of the same species.

Chapter eight records anecdotes of experiences of doctors going about their business carrying out resuscitations who received reports of OBEs after their successful resuscitations.

Chapter nine gets to the nitty-gritty, describing as it does in detail the fifteen components of the OBE associated with the NDE, backed up by accounts from percipients. Much is repeated, but these accounts bring to bear some interesting observations. These include the awareness of being dead and surprise at being conscious of the fact, together with the lack of fear after a period of confusion, observing approaching lights being transformed into beings, and the sensation of 360° vision. The life review in one case included memories of events in childhood before being able to talk, and of extreme empathy when witnessing their distraught mother. Perhaps most convincing is a report of a 3-year-old child describing his own dying process, including looking down from above when no one had informed him at any time that he had indeed been declared dead. He drew the same picture repeatedly, saying "When you die you see a bright lamp, and ... are connected by a cord" (p. 149). Another 3-year-old recognized a figure who he said had floated up with him from a photo that turned out to be his grandmother, whom he had never known.

The next chapter recounts the NDE experience of a doctor who concluded that there was a greater purpose in life, emphasizing relationships, and the effects that what a person does reverberate throughout the universe. There is also meaningful discussion about the life review and ethical ramifications of one's interactions. This modified my evolutionary survival hypothesis of the life review.

In chapter eleven, Parnia discusses in greater detail all the elements of the life review, including the presence of comforting wise beings, leading to an understanding of a higher overall purpose in life. He concludes: "Perhaps human

consciousness is like a huge iceberg ... mostly inaccessible, yet inexplicably comes to the fore in its entirety at death” (p. 182). Well, perhaps not completely inexplicable, given the previously mentioned surge of gamma waves, which may activate memories, which I presume he incorporates in his definition of consciousness.

In chapter twelve, devoted to a description of the ‘return journey’, Parnia begins by describing more functions and abilities of the brain and its limitations, and also attempts to explain the meaning of the word ‘ineffable’. He also covers the twelve elements of NDEs, including the well-known tunnel experience, together with travelling at speed and communicating through thought. Other elements include time being perceived as non-linear, by which is meant everything seeming to happen at the same time. Ordinary life seems now like a dream, knowledge may be presented about the future, and finally that suicide is not an option.

Section three explores consciousness. Parnia describes discoveries in brain research that he deems relevant, including those of Sperry, and of Eccles, who did not think that electrochemistry of the brain could account for consciousness. Parnia also involves the questions and thoughts of a whole gamut of thinkers, past and present, who contemplated the nature of consciousness and selfhood. He includes a firsthand account and discussion by a philosopher who suffered a brain injury. Parnia then returns to the pig brain experiments and Dr Sestan, who he quotes as asking the relevant question, “How you get thought in the brain?” (p. 220). However, there is no immediate discussion of possible materialist answers. Parnia concludes that his AWARE studies demonstrate that consciousness is liberated by disinhibition, and goes on to propose that it is “like a field of energy, tethered to but not produced by the brain” (p. 221).

Parnia’s discussion of how we are superior to animals is now out of date. It is less than he supposes. He asks if we can assume that simple organisms do not have consciousness. This raises the unanswered question of definition. However, Parnia does not delve further into this, merely stating “the more theories, the more uncertainty” (p. 225), which seems to me as if a degree of avoidance is operating. Nevertheless, he does relate conversations with various professors, including Chalmers, about the nature of the “hard problem”, concluding inevitably that materialist explanations are not satisfactory.

In chapter fourteen, Parnia reviews the notion of selfhood. Again he quotes Eccles and (at last!) a definition, by Eccles, of consciousness: “the part of an individual that experiences, observes, and is aware of life” (p. 233). This is not complete in my view. The definition must include the notion of awareness of the self at the same time, if only to a degree. The assumption of the unitary nature can also be challenged, as dissociative personality disorder is generally accepted as a reality. Likewise, Sperry’s split-brain experiments contribute to an understanding of the complex nature of divisions of the brain as having different roles in conscious and unconscious processing. Unfortunately, the book

lacks a detailed exposition of the notion of consciousness from which it would benefit—for which I heartily recommend Koch (2024).

Parnia discusses the notion of free will and current ideas, concluding that our experience of making decisions demonstrates that we have some control. However, the trail of causes and events and genetic loading, though complex, may in fact determine decision-making in the last analysis. What is at question is the degree to which that is the case. Eccles has important points to make, as do a number of other noted scientists who deliberate on this vital question, and Parnia, to his credit, quotes several, including Elahi, who postulates a substance yet unmeasurable by current scientific tools. Parnia wags his finger again at scientists who ignore the problem, but I suspect they will say it is because they have yet to discern a plausible theory that can be tested. No doubt a paradigm shift will in time occur. Meanwhile, materialists will, one suspects, stick to their reductionist theories, which despite Parnia's assertions are backed up by some data.

The next chapter concerns the sense of presence. Here, Parnia includes medical and neurological data which may explain at least some incidences. He makes an important distinction between percepts as reported in an NDE and hallucinations, and the result of experiments which induce some sort of OBE, which, however, always differ from an NDE. In chapter sixteen, Parnia then discusses the effect of hallucinogens, again emphasizing the difference between psychedelic experiences, together with dreams and NDEs.

In the final section of the book, Parnia again berates mainstream science before repeating his now well-described views. He also describes the largely positive outcome of NDEs, and also one conclusion, that suicide is never an option, as such attempts to avoid life's challenges will result in reincarnation. As he says, "You cannot really die" (p. 288).

Parnia also covers negative NDEs, which can include experiences of being attacked by demons and such like, but he considers that his AWARE study demonstrated that these were not authentic NDEs, but misattributed memories formed later, or misinterpretations of what they experienced people were doing while semi-conscious. This is indeed a valid explanation of delusions that people in an ICU occasionally suffer.

Parnia usefully discusses the nature of beliefs and tendencies towards unscientific bias. Thankfully, he does not blame people for being sceptical, with the proviso "at least not initially" (p. 293). Then, having told the reader about the perils of cognitive biases and such like, he informs us that "the greatest tragedy in all this is how many people will die and remain dead who could be saved, just because it will take us years to shake off these constructs" (p. 293).

Parnia advocates the use of animal organ transplants. However, one wonders if the human race, let alone the planet, will benefit from ever-extended lifespans. The main cognitive dissonance, which he describes, seems to me to be his, insofar as his emphasis on wanting to keep people alive seems to conflict with

the result of his studies, which, at least to him, demonstrate that we without doubt survive death. He also notes that “We can envision a scenario in which disembodied human brains could become guinea pigs for testing cancer drugs and Alzheimer’s therapies deemed too dangerous to try on the living” (p. 297). I detect more of the mad scientist here, which is disconcerting. Personally, I would not offer my brain just in case my selfhood was still attached to the brain, which most scientists still regard as a necessary substrate for consciousness.

In summary, I found this book stimulating. Parnia’s discussions with many scientists personally known to him in the field are interesting and are to be applauded. However, as may be surmised, aside from standard areas of dispute, I have quibbles, beginning with his attempts to create interest by unnecessary literary flourishes. For example, he describes at length the physical circumstances of a meeting of leading neuroscientists in 2018. Parnia uses superlatives which are debatable, such as “this meeting would change the world for ever” (p. 13). His use of quotations from conversations also never seems convincing. In addition, Parnia can seem patronizing: for example, “I know that what I am saying sounds counterintuitive and hard to fathom” (p. 43). Well, maybe not! He makes generalizations, which can be jarring, and some may actually be categorized as “plonking”, as Stephen Potter refers to statements which seem profound but are obvious and inclined to pause conversation, such as “Death concerns us all.” In other words, the book could have done with sympathetic editing and perhaps better organization.

That said, Parnia certainly gets the points he wishes to make across, by dint mainly of repetition as well as the multitude of stories and reports which convince by their similarity. This approach certainly reflects his enthusiasm. I must admit I finished the book fairly convinced of his message that consciousness survives death, though on reviewing recent brain research, doubts have since crept back in. I am not sure, despite his confident assertions, that Parnia has fully made his case, and so the search goes on. However, if one can forgive, if not tolerate, the breathless stylistic quirks, then this is certainly a valuable contribution to the search for meaning for the general interested reader and not just medical students.

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CHASING EVIL: SHOCKING CRIMES, SUPERNATURAL FORCES,
AND AN FBI AGENT'S SEARCH FOR HOPE AND JUSTICE

*By John Edward and Robert Hilland with Natasha Stoyloff. St Martin's
Essentials. 2025. 368 pp. Hardcover, ebook, and audiobook*

Chasing Evil is a vivid account of the collaboration between Robert Hilland, an FBI agent, and John Edward, a psychic medium,¹ famous from TV, in pursuit of criminal investigations. A disclaimer tells us that the book is based on real events as recalled and recorded by the authors themselves. The book underwent a review prior to publication, to ensure that there were no prohibited disclosures and there is no FBI endorsement, but information about a number of the cases described was already in the public domain and could be followed in other sources. Where relevant, the chapters are preceded by lists of investigators, officials, and interviewees, whose identities could be confirmed and who, presumably, could also confirm aspects of the cases in which they were involved. The book also includes a number of photographs relevant to the investigations.

This book is difficult to review for this journal for a number of reasons. It is not aimed at scientific exploration; as the subtitle suggests, it is intended for an identifiable audience and, as one of the blurbs makes clear, "For true crime fans, this is the Holy Grail." The style is appropriate for the genre, with an insistent sense of amazement, highly emotive language (e.g., the eyes of the murderer are "like a shark's the second before it rips you apart" [p. 6]), and repeated references to the simple heroic battle between good and evil. The reader is kept in suspense by tensions that keep mounting and resolving—all part of the thriller convention—as the cases and the authors' personal stories intertwine and develop.

The main thread is the pursuit of a 'cold case' from 1991, taken up by Robert Hilland in 1998, of what might be a serial killer: the man's two wives disappeared without trace, and he may have been involved in the deaths of a number of other women. The narrative describes the efforts invested in building up the profile of the suspect through interviews with family members and those who knew him,

1. As defined by Google AI, "A psychic medium is a person who claims to have psychic abilities to communicate with the spirits of the deceased and relay messages between the spirit world and the living. Unlike a psychic who can have various abilities like predicting the future or reading energy, a medium's defining characteristic is their ability to connect with and receive information from spirits." The abilities ascribed to John Edward are those of a psychic, regardless of how one interprets the source of information.

and the physical searches in various locations as clues are followed. However, while the search for the missing wives is eventually successful in part, it does not lead to a full and satisfying victory for the protagonists. But then, as we are told on a number of occasions by John Edward, it is the process of learning and growth that matters.

This applies to the many other cases in which Hilland and Edward are involved, from sickening murders to the just as sickening case of dogs being bred for dogfighting by a famous sports person. As his career develops, Hilland's expertise in polygraph readings, and his move to the Organized Crime Squad, take him to different parts of the world, some of them very dangerous, such as Afghanistan. The outcomes quite often are frustratingly inconclusive, even when clearly pointing to the culprits, as often happens in real life. There is also a genuinely moving account of Robert's personal involvement in the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 and its effect on both authors.

However, it is the involvement of Edward in criminal investigations that will be of greatest interest to the readership of this journal. Unfortunately, this emotionally charged fictionalized narrative, based on recollections and records of the authors going back many years, would not be possible to corroborate. On the other hand, the descriptions of how the psychic input works are strikingly similar to accounts of how other psychics, including remote viewers, portray the process, even though they all have individual specialisms, rituals, and interpretations of how it happens. Hilland said in an interview: "John never gave me evidence. He led me to places where I might find evidence. Think of it before the days we all had GPS. Somebody would say, 'Go down this rural road, you'll see a big red barn. Turn left.' Well, John's the guy that's saying, 'Hey, look for the red barn.' That's the best way I can describe it" (Baker, 2025).

Little research has been done into psychics' involvement in criminal investigations—neither general surveys about attitudes nor experiments where conditions are artificial tell us anything about case details. However, Schouten (2021, pp. 244–247, 261–264) describes the story of a gifted "psychic policeman" where the reporting is not anecdotal, since the police record all statements and actions, and where the outcome is also likely but not certain: they have reason to believe that the murderer had parked in the same place that the psychic identified. This characteristic feature, of the psychics' information not always being directly on target, appears in quite a few well-documented accounts—such as when the psychic tells the police in detail about the route usually taken by the victim but very little about the perpetrators (Janoszka & Weaver, 2023, p. 116)—and is also found in *Chasing Evil*.

Krzysztof Janoszka, who contributed to this review and who is an active police officer, found the book very interesting, and in particular the unique tandem in crime detection created by the authors. This relationship between the agent and the psychic is also very much part of the story. The special bond that forms between them develops from total rejection of the very concept by

the agent, through repeated exposure to John Edward's media appearances and desperation about the case, to seeking contact. Robert Hilland decides to call John Edward after listening to his show in 1998 (p. 47); this is quite early on in Edward's public mediumship, which began in 1995. During the first visit, Edward uses psychometry, and correctly identifies objects relevant to the case while discarding the control ones; he pinpoints the significance of locations, persons, or events (such as identifying the names and relationships to a watch that was significant at different times for different persons [p. 108]). Sometimes the instructions are very specific and in real time, as when looking for a child's body (chapter twenty-five); sometimes there are somewhat vague predictive statements that may have averted an assassination attempt (chapter five); and sometimes there are personal messages that turn out to be relevant. As in the case of other psychics, the information may be related to the events or persons of interest but extended over different time periods (the question of the "lady in the box" is not resolved until the year 2000, even though the box had been found in 1980).

There are similarities in the backgrounds of the authors: both are sons of 'alpha-male' policemen, and according to John Edward there already exists a 'karmic tie' between them (p. 222). Throughout the book there are conversations demonstrating the growing bond between the authors, with the agent becoming attuned to receiving psychic messages himself. As to the source of the information, for Edward it is the "Other Side", where spirits dispense general guidance about the journey one has to take in this life, as well as providing specific information. There are also dark, negative energies to be guarded against, but there is no discussion of the spirit world and how it works, while the ethics are a confrontation between good and evil. This is not a criticism: the worldview largely provided by Edward is simply part of the background. Each author provides an epilogue that is positive and hints at further cooperation.

According to Robert Hilland, in an interview on the NewsNation TV network, working with psychics is not common. However, perhaps it is more common than people are prepared to admit, considering the risk of ridicule and hostility. We doubt whether this book is likely to change such attitudes, but, for those who accept the basic premise of what Mayer (2008) calls "extraordinary knowing", this narrative offers some genuine-sounding insights into how cooperation based on awareness of limitations can work in practice.

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OBITUARY

STEPHEN EDWARD BRAUDE: THE JAZZ PHILOSOPHER 1945–2026



Stephen E. Braude—philosopher, jazz pianist, prize-winning 3D photographer, and relentless investigator of the unexplained—died 3 January 2026, leaving behind a legacy as one of the most brilliant and fascinating intellects of his generation. We had been friends for over four decades, and what I want to offer here is a deliberately personal portrait of the man I knew.

Steve was a virtuoso—of ideas, of language, of the art of living on one's own terms. He showed us that one could be a world-class philosopher and still be the life of the party. Whether dismantling memory-trace theories and mechanistic models of mind, delighting our ears at PA conventions with his jazz compositions, or plunging into the gritty details of table levitations, he did so with panache and an intensity few could match.

A lifelong provocateur, Steve loved to pick apart seemingly obvious assumptions and shake people out of complacency. He deployed his formidable critical skills against fellow parapsychologists as readily as against pseudosceptics. And while many of us were content to report cautious statistics and modest effects, he unapologetically defended the messy, spectacular reality

of macro-psychokinesis—insisting that historical cases, when treated with intellectual honesty, could be as evidentially rich as laboratory studies.

Yet even when sharply critical, his aim was never demolition for its own sake, but clarity, rigor, and intellectual courage. Beneath that fierce intellect was a man of genuine warmth, deep friendship, and astonishing artistic sensitivity. Steve didn't just play jazz—he understood its soul. He didn't merely listen to music; he approached sound as an act of reverence. And he didn't simply take photographs—he mastered the beauty of the third dimension.

He authored more than half a dozen major books and dozens of articles that reshaped how philosophers and psychical researchers think about mind, causation, and evidence. He served as president of the Parapsychological Association and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, and was a frequent contributor to the work of the Society for Psychical Research, which awarded him the Myers Memorial Medal—an honour reserved for those who have advanced psychical research with distinction.

Steve Braude is survived by a body of work that will continue to unsettle and inspire for decades, and by friends who will forever miss his laughter, his brilliance, and his singular, uncompromising spirit. The world is, quite simply, less interesting without him.

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To the Editor:

The null hypothesis

As part of an ongoing project, I recently reviewed the experimental psi studies that have been published in *JSPR* from 2012 to the present day. On many occasions the reports contained primary hypotheses that were not confirmed by the data. When discussing these null findings, the authors almost always attributed them to the non-psi-conducive nature of the experimental conditions, participants, target material, etc. They very rarely mentioned (let alone discussed) the possibility that the null results might be due to the non-existence of psi. In fact, as far as I can tell, this possibility is only briefly mentioned in one paper (Vernon, 2015, p. 76), wherein the author noted that their null results “may fit with the interpretation that such effects are merely the result of statistical and/or methodological artifacts”. The widespread nature of this omission is worrying, as I fear that it could cause people to question the scientific objectivity of those conducting parapsychological studies. To deal with the issue, could I suggest that *JSPR* encourages authors to mention (and perhaps to briefly discuss) the possibility that any null findings may reflect the non-existence of psi? Just a line or two in the discussion section would make a big difference. This approach could be instigated as a general publication policy and/or form part of the guidance issued to authors and referees. I believe that this simple and straightforward idea will help to make discussions of null results more balanced. Several other parapsychological journals suffer from the same issue, and changes in *JSPR* may encourage them to follow suit and so provide a much-needed service to the field.

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To the Editor:

Introducing the Psi Dynamics Research Unit

I am writing to introduce readers to a developing project within the Society for Psychical Research's Spontaneous Cases Committee (SCC): the Psi Dynamics Research Unit (PDRU). This initiative exists within the Committee's current structure and is intended to complement, rather than modify the SCC's established approach to spontaneous case work. The SCC continues to operate as it has for many years; the PDRU is a small exploratory unit focused on deepening analytical practice and preparing for more data-driven methods that may assist investigators in the future.

Our Society has a long tradition of methodological innovation. The early work of Gurney et al. (1886) in *Phantasms of the Living* demonstrated the value of systematic case cataloguing. *The Census of Hallucinations* (Sidgwick et al., 1894) illustrated the benefits of collecting large, comparable datasets. *Apparitions* (Tyrrell, 1953) highlighted the analytical importance of identifying recurring experiential motifs, while Cornell's (2002) SPIDER project represented a significant shift towards structured, instrumented field investigation. The PDRU continues this tradition by examining how contemporary digital tools might support clearer documentation, improved consistency, and richer cross-case comparison, while maintaining the Society's standards of caution and non-speculative reporting.

AIMS AND PURPOSE OF THE PDRU

At its present stage, the PDRU is focused on three developmental goals.

1. Improved capture and structuring of case contacts

The SCC increasingly receives case contacts in the form of emails, message threads, multi-part narratives, and attachments. A key aim of the PDRU is to explore methods for converting these into a consistent, structured format. This includes event segmentation, identification of witnesses, and extraction of contextual notes. The purpose is not to interpret the material but to clarify it for investigators reviewing potential cases.

2. Structured analysis of investigated cases

Where investigations are undertaken, the PDRU seeks to develop tools for integrating investigator notes, interview transcripts, environmental logs,

floorplans, and follow-up communications into unified analytical outputs. This helps preserve detail, minimize fragmentation, and ensure that investigated cases retain long-term research value for the Society's archives.

3. Foundations for macro-level, cross-case analysis

Building upon the Society's early statistical and comparative efforts (e.g., Green & McCreery, 1975; Sidgwick et al., 1894), the PDRU aims to lay the groundwork for identifying recurring temporal, spatial, contextual, or phenomenological patterns across multiple spontaneous cases. These patterns, while strictly descriptive, may shape future research questions and help focus investigative resources.

These aims do not replace existing SCC practice. Instead, they explore whether new tools can assist investigators by improving clarity, consistency, and analytical depth.

USE OF GENERATIVE AI AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPiDER-X

A significant aspect of the PDRU's exploratory work is the development of SPiDER-X (Spontaneous Phenomena Integrated Data Evaluation & Reporting), a system that applies generative AI solely to procedural tasks. SPiDER-X is intended as a digital successor to the organizational principles behind Cornell's SPIDER system—updated for the era of digital submissions, multi-document case material, and the need for consistent analytical formatting.

SPiDER-X has explicitly limited functions:

- organizing narrative material into discrete, chronologically ordered events
- producing neutral, non-interpretive descriptions
- mapping witnesses, documents, and observational overlap
- extracting contextual references such as time of day, environmental factors, or social circumstances
- generating structured datasets suitable for long-term research and cross-case comparison.

SPiDER-X does not draw conclusions, judge credibility, or offer interpretations, and it is not intended to replace the investigator's role. All evaluative work remains with human researchers. Its purpose is to reduce administrative burden and enhance methodological consistency—mirroring the procedural, rather than interpretive, role that SPIDER played in Cornell's investigations.

MICRO- AND MACRO-LEVEL RESEARCH VALUE

These methods provide two distinct benefits.

Micro-level (single case)

Clearer structuring of incoming material allows investigators to see the internal chronology, witness relationships, and contextual factors of a case

more readily. This can aid in preliminary assessment, investigative planning, and archival clarity.

Macro-level (multiple cases)

Over time, consistently structured cases allow for the identification of recurring motifs across large datasets, something that earlier Society projects repeatedly demonstrated as valuable (e.g., Sidgwick et al., 1894; Green & McCreery, 1975). Such patterns may inform future research questions, highlight under-examined areas, or suggest where field resources could be most effectively allocated.

The PDRU's work is still exploratory, but it aims to support the SCC in developing tools that may prove useful as case contacts grow larger and more complex.

INVITATION TO THE SOCIETY

As the PDRU is at an early stage, I would very much welcome comment, critique, and suggestions from Society members. Perspectives from investigators, archivists, historians, statisticians, and members with experience in digital methods would be particularly valuable. Even critical reflections may highlight practical concerns or opportunities we have not yet considered.

The intention of the PDRU is not to impose new methods but to explore possibilities and offer tools that may support the SCC's long-standing investigative and archival responsibilities. I hope that this brief introduction may encourage discussion within the Society and generate constructive feedback, ideas, or collaborations as the work continues.

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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

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