

Journal of the Society for Psychical Research

Volume 90, Number 3, Issue 964, July 2026

Phenomenology and Neurophysiology of Out-of-Body Experiences:
Mechanisms, Characteristics, and Empirical Evidence 145
By Sabine Rabourdin, Damien Roy, & Claude Berghmans

Evaluation of English-Speaking Medium and Trance Channeler
Certifications 164
By Juliette Gallo, Helané Wahbeh, Siri Zemel, & Leo Ruickbie

RESEARCH NOTE

Footnotes to the Chase Vault Mystery at Christ Church, Barbados..... 188
By Brian Ridout

BOOK REVIEWS

*Telepathic Tales Precognition and Clairvoyance in Legend, Lyric,
and Lore* 206
By Joshua Cutchin

Ghosted: A History of Ghost Hunting, and Why We Keep Looking 210
By Brian C. Wilson

*On the Banks of the River Styx: New Perspectives on Terminal
Lucidity and Other Near-Death Phenomena* 212
By Daniel Bourke

Aradia's Hidden Hand: The Untold Life of Roma Lister 218
By Massimo Biondi

CORRESPONDENCE

Letter from Callum E. Cooper..... 221

Letter from Paul Stevens 224

THE JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

The Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882 “to examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis”. In keeping with most scientific bodies, the society holds no corporate views, and any opinions expressed in this journal or the society’s other publications are those of the authors alone.

EDITOR

David Vernon, BSc, PhD, Canterbury Christ Church University.

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Zofia Weaver, BA, PhD, Independent, UK.

REVIEW EDITOR

Nemo Mörck, BA, MSc.

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Tammy Dempster, BSc, PhD, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK.

EDITORIAL BOARD

- Richard S. Broughton, BA, PhD, University of Northampton, UK.
Prof. Bernard Carr, MA, PhD, Queen Mary and Westfield College, UK.
Callum E. Cooper, BSc, MRes, PhD, University of Northampton, UK.
Eric Dullin, PhD, Psychophysics and Cognitive Dissonance Laboratory,
Poitiers, France.
Renaud Evrard, PhD, University of Lorraine, France.
James Houran, MA, PhD, Independent, USA.
Everton Maraldi, PhD, University of São Paulo, Brazil.
Prof. Adrian Parker, MA, PhD, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.
Prof. Chris Roe, BSc, PhD, University of Northampton, UK.
Adrian Ryan, Independent, UK.
Malcolm Schofield, BSc, PhD, University of Derby, UK.
Prof. Christine Simmonds-Moore, University of West Georgia, USA.
Paul Stevens, BSc, PhD, Independent, UK.
Steve Taylor, BA, MSc, PhD, Leeds Beckett University, UK.
Prof. Patrizio Tressoldi, PhD, Università di Padova, Italy.
Helané Wahbeh, ND, MCR, Institute of Noetic Sciences, USA.
Prof. Caroline Watt, BSc, PhD, University of Edinburgh, UK.
Prof. Robin Wooffitt, BSc, PhD, University of York, UK.

The annual subscription to the journal, which is published quarterly, is £56.
This includes any proceedings published. More information is available on the
society’s website at: www.spr.ac.uk.

ISSN 0037–9751

The Society for Psychical Research, 1 Vernon Mews, London, W14 0RL, UK
Telephone 020 7937 8984, email journal@spr.ac.uk, website <https://www.spr.ac.uk>



PHENOMENOLOGY AND NEUROPHYSIOLOGY OF OUT-OF-BODY EXPERIENCES: MECHANISMS, CHARACTERISTICS, AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

BY SABINE RABOURDIN, DAMIEN ROY, & CLAUDE BERGHMANS

ABSTRACT

Out-of-body experiences (OBEs) are phenomena in which a person perceives their consciousness as separate from their physical body. Although these experiences have been reported for centuries in spiritual traditions, they are attracting increasing interest in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and anthropology. This study aims to take stock of the issue through a literature review by presenting the main scientific research and the different explanatory approaches to OBEs. These generally occur in altered states of consciousness, such as sleep, meditation, hypnosis, or after taking psychotropic substances. They are also associated with lucid dreams, sleep paralysis, and situations of intense stress. Testimonies often describe sensations of floating, panoramic vision, perception of an altered body, or the impression of moving freely in space. Despite scientific advances, OBEs represent a phenomenon that remains difficult to study rigorously. There is still no consensus on their exact origin, and studies in neuroscience, psychology, and phenomenology are struggling to unify their results. In the discussion, we focus on the development of a more precise classification grid and suggest that the development of more advanced investigation methodologies could shed new light on these fascinating experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Research on out-of-body experiences (OBEs) has drawn scientific interest for decades (Tart, 1968) and has been documented in esoteric and spiritual literature for centuries. This phenomenon captivates multiple research fields—including neurology, psychology, and anthropology—while also resonating with a wide audience of individuals reporting these so-called exceptional experiences (Rabeyron & Caussié, 2016). OBEs are generally considered altered states of consciousness in which an individual temporarily perceives their centre of awareness as spatially displaced from their physical body (Irwin & Watt, 2007). This multisensory phenomenon is characterized by the sensation of being outside one's physical body (Blackmore, 1988; Blanke et al., 2004; Irwin, 1988; Levitan et al., 1999). Experimental research on OBEs remains limited, in contrast to a substantial body of popular literature, often framing these experiences within New Age narratives such as astral projection and disembodiment. The present study aims to provide a comprehensive literature

review, synthesizing key scientific contributions from neurology and psychology while also incorporating cultural and anthropological perspectives. Special emphasis will be placed on phenomenological accounts, focusing on first-person reports from individuals who have intentionally or spontaneously undergone OBEs. Accordingly, this article will first outline a general description of OBEs, then examine insights from neurological, psychological, and phenomenological research, culminating in a critical discussion of this multifaceted phenomenon.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF OBEs

According to Rabeyron and Caussié (2016), OBEs predominantly—but not exclusively—occur when individuals are in a state of rest, often near sleep or during sleep, with the supine position facilitating their onset (Zingrone et al., 2010). Various meditation techniques (Ring & Cooper, 1997), sensory deprivation (Kjellgren et al., 2008), and hypnotic states have also been reported to promote OBEs, as well as the use of psychedelics, particularly dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and ketamine (Wilkins et al., 2011). Additionally, OBEs are associated with sleep paralysis in approximately 40% of cases (Cheyne, 2003) and frequently co-occur with lucid dreaming (Blanke & Metzinger, 2009). These experiences can also be triggered by extreme stress or imminent danger, and have been reported by mountaineers, fighter pilots, extreme sports enthusiasts, and individuals who have undergone traumatic events such as sexual abuse or accidents. Furthermore, OBEs are often described as either a preliminary or concluding phase of near-death experiences (Cardena et al., 2000). Most OBEs thus arise in specific physical and psychological conditions, characterized by a heightened state of absorption,¹ as highlighted by Irwin's (2000) analyses.

Key phenomenological traits that systematically characterize OBEs include:

- a perception of having a different vantage point from that of the physical body
- a strong sense of realism, distinct from that of a dream.

Other characteristics may also occur, though not systematically. The frequencies in Table 1 and percentages are based on various case studies.

Core phenomenological features

Table 1 summarizes the main phenomenological features of OBEs, distinguishing between core, frequent and rare characteristics.

Characteristics of returning to the physical body ('re-embedding phase')

Pain: After a period ranging from several minutes to an hour, the return to the physical body can be more or less painful, with 40% of cases reporting discomfort upon re-entry (Catala & Lemarchand, 2013).

1. Absorption is defined as total attention to a single object, fully involving perceptual, motor, imaginative, and ideational resources (Irwin, 2000; Lynn & Rhue, 1986).

TABLE 1
Frequency of phenomenological features of OBEs

Category	Characteristic	Indicative frequency	Key references
Core	Feeling of separation from the body	Very high	Blackmore (1988), Irwin (1988)
Core	Observation of one's own body from the ceiling or another elevated position	50–80%	Catala & Lemarchand (2013)
Core	Realistic and stable environment	≈ 80%	Irwin (2000)
Frequent	At the onset of the experience: sudden jolt, noises, bodily vibrations, or muscular catalepsy	20–40%	Alvarado (2000), Montenegro (2020), Poynton (1975)
Frequent	Altered body schema (sphere, cloud)	Variable	Twemlow et al. (1982)
Frequent	Changes in the perceptual field, such as panoramic vision	Variable	Dethiollaz & Fourrier (2016)
Frequent	Feelings of calmness or, conversely, a sudden surge of energy	Variable	Rabeyron & Caussié (2016)
Frequent	Sense of free travel through space, including passing through walls or buildings and reaching distant locations	Variable	Dethiollaz & Fourrier (2016)
Rare	Animals or humans seem to perceive their presence	Variable	Monroe (1989)
Rare	Perception of a 'silver cord'	<20%	Catala & Lemarchand (2013)
Rare	Some events perceived during OBEs appear to be later corroborated	Approximately 15% of individuals report acquiring verifiable information	Alvarado (1986)

Fear or intense emotion: A sudden fear or strong emotion can abruptly end the experience. Likewise, external stimuli such as someone calling or touching the subject may trigger a return.

Anxiety: It is not uncommon for subjects to experience anxiety, which can lead to an involuntary return to the body. This re-entry is often facilitated by physical stimulation or by visually perceiving one's physical body (Irwin & Watt, 2007).

Forty-six per cent of individuals report being able to exert some degree of control over their OBEs, such as selecting specific locations to visit or choosing to end the experience at will (Catala & Lemarchand, 2013). Participants describe being able to focus their attention on an object in the environment in order to perceive it up close.²

Prevalence within the general population

Surveys have examined the prevalence of OBEs within the general population, estimating their occurrence at approximately 10% (Blackmore, 1984; Irwin, 1985; Palmer, 1979). The proportion appears higher among student populations, ranging from 25% to 48% (Palmer, 1979; Blackmore, 1982). Notably, about 50% of OBEs occur in individuals who had no prior knowledge of the phenomenon. When an individual experiences an OBE, it tends to recur in just under half of the cases (Catala & Lemarchand, 2013).

Most demographic and sociological factors—such as age, gender, education level, social status, beliefs, and religious practices—do not appear to significantly influence the frequency or phenomenology of OBEs (Irwin & Watt, 2007). However, individuals with a fantasy-prone personality, as defined by Wilson and Barber (1982), seem to be overrepresented among OBE experiencers. These individuals spend a significant portion of their waking time engaged in vivid quasi-perceptual imagery (non-pathological) “their fantasies were often as ‘real as life’ (hallucinatory)” (Wilson & Barber, 1982, p. 94). They report phenomena such as clairvoyance or OBEs. They may struggle to distinguish imaginary from real events but maintain a degree of social awareness that leads them to keep their imaginative experiences private. Additionally, they tend to report highly vivid dreams and are more prone to sleep paralysis episodes (Lynn & Rhue, 1986). Moreover, individuals with a natural tendency to adopt an allocentric perspective—visualizing events from an external viewpoint in both memories and dreams—are also more likely to report OBEs (Blackmore, 1987).

NEUROLOGICAL APPROACHES

OBEs have long intrigued both scientists and philosophers for their implications in understanding consciousness, self-perception, and the integration of sensory and body-related information. In recent decades, advances in neurophysiology and neuroimaging have enabled researchers to examine OBEs empirically and to propose models grounded in brain mechanisms rather than metaphysical assumptions. This article reviews the neuroscientific findings associated with OBEs, focusing on their neural correlates, methodological challenges, and the implications of current data for understanding consciousness.

2. Focusing attention on an object to perceive it more clearly is a normal perceptual process and not unique to OBEs.

In terms of brain activity and altered states of consciousness, one of the earliest electroencephalographic (EEG) studies relevant to OBEs was conducted by Tart (1968), who worked with Robert Monroe, known for reporting spontaneous OBEs. Tart observed a brainwave pattern characterized by the coexistence of theta activity, typical of stage I sleep, and alpha activity, which Tart (1968) interpreted as drowsiness. It is important to note that Tart's classification of alpha as an index of drowsiness diverges from mainstream psychophysiology. Modern literature more commonly associates alpha-band oscillations with attentional regulation and memory access rather than simple somnolence (e.g., see Klimesch, 1999, 2012; Petsche et al., 1997). Later studies confirmed that alpha predominance may occur at OBE onset, sometimes followed by slower theta or delta waves (Krippner, 1996).

However, EEG-based studies of OBEs remain limited in scope (Tart, 1967, 1968; Palmer & Lieberman, 1975; McCreery & Claridge, 1996), and their conclusions require replication under controlled conditions, standardized definitions, preregistered methodologies, and multimodal corroboration (Alvarado, 2000). More broadly, current neuroimaging evidence shows state- and task-dependent variations in neural activity across distributed cortical networks, suggesting that OBEs may reflect altered self-referential processing rather than a unique or localized 'signature' of disembodiment.

In terms of temporal-lobe phenomena and the sense of presence, Persinger (1993) proposed that OBEs could result from a sudden intrusion of right-hemisphere processes into left-hemisphere dominance, producing a temporary dissociation between the observing and the perceived self. This hypothesis was supported by findings of theta rhythm discordance in the temporal lobes during such states (Munro & Persinger, 1992). Further studies by Persinger and Makarec (1987) and Persinger (2001) linked disturbances in temporal-lobe function to anomalous perceptions such as the 'sense of presence'. A related case study by Sellers (2018) described a healthy subject who experienced heightened spirituality and a strong sense of presence during spontaneous OBEs. Importantly, this case is distinct from Persinger's neurological findings but converges phenomenologically. Additionally, electrical stimulation of the right superior temporal gyrus in epileptic patients has been shown to induce vestibular or floating sensations, further suggesting that OBEs may arise from aberrant activity within temporal-parietal circuits responsible for integrating vestibular, visual, and somatosensory input (Blanke et al., 2002; Penfield & Erickson, 1941).

A major breakthrough in OBE research came from clinical neurophysiology. Blanke et al. (2002) reported an OBE elicited through electrical stimulation of the right angular gyrus in an epileptic patient. In a follow-up study, Blanke et al. (2004) examined six patients with neurological disorders, and found temporoparietal junction (TPJ) dysfunctions in five of them. The TPJ, which integrates visual, tactile, proprioceptive, and vestibular information, is critical

for maintaining body ownership and the spatial unity of the self (Blanke et al., 2005).

While these results highlight a key role for the TPJ, they do not provide a complete explanation for OBEs. The phenomenon also occurs in healthy individuals without neurological pathology, and there is no clear epidemiological evidence of higher OBE incidence among epileptic patients. This suggests that OBEs emerge from distributed neural processes involving additional regions such as the anterior insula, posterior cingulate cortex, and cerebellum (De Ridder et al., 2007; Smith & Messier, 2014; Yu et al., 2018).

Building on these findings, Fang et al. (2014) proposed that the TPJ's central role lies in its function as a multisensory integration hub. Disruptions or conflicts among vestibular, visual, and somatosensory signals can produce disembodiment or self-location errors characteristic of OBEs. Supporting this, Cheyne and Girard (2009) suggested that vestibular anomalies—potentially arising from REM-related hypoperfusion of the temporo-parietal cortex—may provide aberrant sensory input that, when misintegrated by the TPJ, yields the subjective sensation of leaving the body.

Other authors have approached OBEs as manifestations of dissociative hallucinatory activity linked to cortical disinhibition (Siegel, 1977). More recent research indicates that OBEs involve multiple brain regions, including the insula, posterior cingulate cortex, and cerebellum (De Ridder et al., 2007; Hiromitsu et al., 2020). OBEs have also been associated with motor imagery, cortical hyperexcitability, and cervical spinal cord lesions (Catala & Lemarchand, 2013; Milne et al., 2019; Overney et al., 2009). Various techniques have been used to study OBEs experimentally, ranging from subcortical stimulation during awake craniotomy to virtual-reality paradigms simulating self-location shifts. Among these, hypnosis remains a flexible induction method allowing researchers to evoke OBE-like states in a safe and repeatable manner. Importantly, hypnosis serves as a means of induction, while tools such as EEG and functional magnetic resonance imaging measure neural activity, and the Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory (PCI) provides a standardized phenomenological profile of subjective experience (Mathias, 2023). The PCI facilitates the comparative classification of OBEs relative to other altered states, based on factors such as absorption, self-awareness, and perceived spatial dislocation.

In terms of methodological challenges and conceptual limits

OBEs are not homogeneous experiences. Phenomenological subtypes—ranging from vestibular-dominant or dream-like episodes to trauma-induced or meditation-related OBEs—likely engage distinct mechanisms. Consequently, disparate findings across studies are to be expected. Major methodological challenges include:

- lack of standardized operational definitions
- sampling biases (neurological versus healthy participants)

- small sample sizes and overreliance on case studies
- expectancy effects and demand characteristics
- state overlap with related phenomena (e.g., sleep paralysis, migraine aura, and dissociation)
- limited ecological validity of laboratory inductions
- ethical constraints on invasive neuromodulation studies.

Future progress requires multimodal, preregistered, and adequately powered designs integrating phenomenology, neurophysiology, and computational modelling to build a more unified, empirically grounded model of OBEs. As a conclusion, neuroscientific research has identified several brain regions involved in OBEs—particularly the temporo-parietal junction and the temporal lobes—but the diversity of reported experiences resists reduction to a single mechanism. OBEs likely represent a family of altered self-processing states emerging from transient disruptions in multisensory and body-schema integration. Bridging the gap between subjective phenomenology and objective neural correlates remains a critical challenge for the next generation of consciousness studies.

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO OBEs

The concept of the OBE, or ‘disembodiment’, is present in most non-Western cultures and to a lesser extent in Western culture, with references dating back to antiquity (Montenegro, 2015; Morisson, 2022). Since the 20th century, collections of cases have been documented (Crookall, 1986; Green, 1968; Irwin, 1985; Montenegro, 2015) in various ways, including autobiographical accounts from individuals who have experienced multiple OBEs (Guesné, 2009; Monroe, 1989; Yram, 1990), as well as exploratory interviews.

Cognitive and psychological theories

From a psychological perspective, various theories have been proposed to explain the phenomenon of an externalized self-experience that can be classified as an OBE (Rabeyron & Caussié, 2016). These include the assimilation of OBEs to extrasensory perception (Tyrrell, 1942); the creation of hypnagogic imagery to balance the lack of proprioceptive feedback and address a threatened ego (Palmer, 1978); the generation of a different model of reality by the cognitive system, originating from memory and imagination (Blackmore, 1984); and the emergence of a salutary hallucination during confrontation with death (Le Maléfán, 2011).

These theories can be questioned through phenomenological analyses, which reveal that OBEs possess distinctive experiential features that resist simple cognitive or hallucinatory explanations. Specifically, experiencers consistently report a coherent, continuous sense of self-awareness throughout the episode, stable perceptual organization of their environment, and the ability to make deliberate decisions—characteristics notably absent in hallucinations or purely

cognitive constructs (Blanke & Dieguez, 2009; Metzinger, 2003; Windt, 2015). Furthermore, unlike hallucinatory experiences, OBEs maintain internal temporal and spatial coherence, with experiencers able to provide detailed, consistent accounts that demonstrate preservation of cognitive functioning rather than its disruption. Irwin (2000) proposes that OBEs may arise from a high level of absorption induced by extreme excitation (either very high or very low) of the cortex. If this state of absorption is accompanied by dissociation—defined as a disconnection between normally integrated mental processes, particularly those involving bodily awareness and self-location (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)—from proprioceptive and kinaesthetic stimuli, an OBE could occur (Blanke et al., 2002). However, this model merely reformulates OBEs in terms of dissociative mechanisms without fully explaining the entirety of OBE phenomenology, serving only as one possible explanatory framework.

Neuropsychological conditions and brain activity

Complementing the neurological approach, which focuses on identifying brain structures and neural correlates associated with OBEs, the neuropsychological perspective examines the functional and state-dependent conditions under which such experiences are triggered and consciously accessible. From this standpoint, research has explored the necessary conditions for triggering an OBE (Lemaire, 1993). Three key conditions have been identified: withdrawal into oneself and entry into a state of hyper- or hypovigilance, immediately preceded and followed by an ordinary waking state. The absence of intermediate stages would allow the subject to retain a vivid memory of the experience. The triggering factors can vary widely, including bodily stimulation, ponto-geniculo-occipital waves—bursts of neural activity originating in the pons, transmitted through the lateral geniculate nucleus to the occipital cortex, typically associated with REM sleep and potentially involved in visual imagery generation—paralysis, intense desire, or strong emotional responses.

Furthermore, for the subject to perceive having accessed another level of reality, the imagery content must be plausible—that is, it must correspond sufficiently with verifiable features of the physical environment or align with the experiencer's expectations of reality—for the experiencer to attribute ontological validity to the experience. This includes the subject's inability to conceive that their own psyche could have generated such vivid images; the belief in the objective reality of the imagery providing existential meaning; and the reinforcement of this belief by a supporting micro-culture, such as a group of experiencers.

McCreery (2006) hypothesizes that OBEs may result from brief transitions into hypnagogic states during ordinary wakefulness. McCreery and Claridge (1996) found that individuals who frequently experience OBEs exhibit greater activation in the right hemisphere, increased EEG amplitude, and enhanced

interhemispheric coherence. Despite these neurological differences, they concluded that such individuals are socially well-adapted and psychologically balanced—sometimes even benefiting from their OBEs in terms of reduced death anxiety, enhanced sense of meaning, and greater psychological resilience (McCreery & Claridge, 1996).

According to Rabeyron and Caussié (2016), some OBEs remain infused with the imaginary, being “swollen” with unsymbolized traumatic elements. The traumatic aspects that initially produced and reinforced the dissociative tendency underlying the OBE resurface in the process of symbolization. Thus, there is a convergence of traumatic elements and the dissociative mechanism that originally shaped their processing. Consequently, the imaginary components of the OBE are directly linked to traumatic elements. However, this type of hypothetical explanation does not account for all OBEs and warrants further investigation.

Pathological correlates

From a psychopathological perspective, OBEs have been reported by patients with various medical conditions, and much of the research on the phenomenon is based on such cases (Blanke et al., 2004). However, there is no established correlation between pathology and the occurrence of OBEs, as healthy individuals also experience them (Morisson, 2022). Community survey data indicate that OBEs most often occur spontaneously during altered states of consciousness such as hypnagogia, sleep, or deep relaxation, frequently in emotionally salient or stressful contexts, and are not restricted to pathological populations (Palmer, 1979). Nevertheless, examining potential causes of OBEs in pathological cases remains valuable. For instance, seizures associated with lesions in the parietal, parieto-occipital, or parieto-temporal regions of the non-dominant hemisphere have been linked to OBEs (Vignal et al., 2001). However, these neurological findings account for only a subset of reported OBEs. The majority of OBE experiences occur in neurologically healthy individuals without detectable seizure activity, suggesting that while temporal-parietal dysfunction may trigger some OBEs, alternative mechanisms must explain the broader phenomenology.

Pathological autoscopic hallucination, or heautoscopy—where consciousness oscillates between two two perspectives—has also been documented. This phenomenon involves perceiving one’s own face, body, or body parts as if externalized and facing oneself. It can be triggered by various factors, including certain forms of schizophrenia, febrile confusional states, hysterical delusions, epilepsy, drug use, or sleep deprivation (Blanke et al., 2004). While heautoscopy shares phenomenological similarities with OBEs—particularly the externalized perception of one’s body—it differs fundamentally in that consciousness remains anchored to the physical body’s perspective rather than adopting a genuinely external viewpoint. Thus, heautoscopy may represent a related but distinct

phenomenon, potentially illuminating mechanisms of self-localization but not fully accounting for the complete dissociation reported in OBEs.

Empirical measurement attempts

Regarding empirical measurement of physiological correlates during reported OBE states, Tart (1969) employed sensors to study blood pressure, EEG activity, eye movements, and electrodermal responses in a subject known as Miss Z. During an induced OBE, she reportedly managed to read a number placed at an elevated location in the laboratory. However, while she succeeded once, the spatial arrangement of the experiment left open the possibility that she could have seen the number through normal means (Tart, 1968).

Another experiment involved Ingo Swann, a subject known for his proficiency in OBEs, who successfully identified eight preselected target objects (Osis, 1975). However, this study faced a persistent theoretical challenge: distinguishing between genuine spatial relocation of conscious perspective (OBE) and remote information acquisition without spatial displacement of consciousness (e.g., clairvoyance or remote viewing). This distinction remains methodologically elusive, as both phenomena could theoretically yield identical informational outcomes through different mechanisms.

Morris et al. (1978) explored the possibility of detecting an OBE externally. In one experiment, a cat's behaviour was observed during the subject's OBE episodes. Notably, the cat remained calm when its owner was in an OBE state but became highly active during control periods (Morris et al., 1978). While Morris interpreted these behavioural changes as potential evidence of a detectable presence during OBEs, alternative explanations—including subtle environmental cues or the owner's altered physiological state affecting the animal's behaviour—cannot be excluded.

Further correlations have been observed between information acquisition from a remote location and the detection of a 'presence' at that location using strain gauge sensors that measured ambient vibrations (Osis & McCormick, 1980). More recently, in one of the experiments supervised by Dethiollaz and Fourrier (2016) and two neuropsychologists, the subject Nicolas Fraisse exhibited electrophysiological variations—specifically, alterations in EEG amplitude and frequency patterns typically associated with altered states of consciousness—during reported OBE states while accurately transmitting information that was not accessible from his physical body (e.g., identifying images hidden in envelopes).

A number of studies have thus attempted to shed light on OBEs—some yielding promising results, while others remain plagued by methodological biases—including insufficient controls for sensory leakage, small sample sizes, lack of pre-registration, and inadequate blinding procedures. To date, no rigorous and replicable research has been conducted across multiple laboratories to elucidate the underlying processes or origins of OBEs.

Individual differences and personality correlates

Several studies have found correlations between OBEs, lucid dreaming, and related altered states, as well as with hypnotizability (Alvarado, 2000; Cardeña et al., 2000). Hypnotizability refers to an individual's capacity to enter a hypnotic state, characterized by dissociation from external reality and deep absorption in an inner reality, even in the absence of explicit hypnotic suggestions. Factors influencing hypnotizability include an individual's ability to engage in imaginative experiences, their capacity for focused absorption in internal tasks, and age—peaking between 8 and 12 years old. Various scales exist to measure hypnotic susceptibility, such as the Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scale: Forms A and B (Weitzenhoffer & Hilgard, 1959).

Specific personality traits have also been identified in individuals prone to OBEs, particularly somatoform dissociation, which refers to a lack of integration of the somatic aspects of stimuli. Another key trait is transliminality, which describes the permeability of the boundary between conscious and unconscious mental processes. Research on transliminality demonstrates that individuals scoring high on this dimension show increased propensity for mystical experiences and enhanced creativity, though these same individuals also demonstrate elevated scores on measures of psychoticism—a non-pathological personality dimension encompassing depersonalization, derealization, dissociation, mixed wake–sleep states, and experiences of thought control (Thalbourne & Delin, 1994).

In a study by Jones et al. (1984), OBE experiencers were found to be less prone to risk-seeking behaviours compared with a control group. Additionally, they demonstrated significantly better psychological adaptation than psychiatric patients, and were roughly equivalent to a randomly selected group of university students. Murray and Fox (2005) observed that participants with prior OBEs scored significantly higher on measures of body dissatisfaction and physical social anxiety, while scoring lower on a measure of physical self-presentation. Furthermore, OBE experiencers reported lower levels of bodily awareness when using an immersive virtual reality system compared to non-experiencers.

Trauma and psychopathology

More generally, OBE experiencers tend to report more frequent alterations in consciousness, perceptual and bodily distortions, hallucinatory episodes, and feelings of an unseen presence. Several studies have found correlations between OBEs and childhood trauma, including sexual abuse, physical violence, and traumatic bereavement (Cardeña et al., 2000). These correlations suggest that OBEs may function, in some cases, as dissociative coping mechanisms developed in response to overwhelming stress. However, this pattern does not characterize all OBE experiences, and should not be generalized to spontaneous or deliberately induced OBEs in non-traumatized populations. OBEs are also

four times more prevalent among individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Reynolds & Brewin, 1999).

Cultural and phenomenological considerations

Interestingly, OBEs have been reported by some individuals who are congenitally blind, who describe the experience of ‘seeing’ their environment during an OBE (Ring & Cooper, 1997). While cultural background does not appear to determine the ability to experience OBEs, it does shape the content of such experiences. For example, in cultures with strong shamanic traditions, individuals undergoing OBEs are more likely to perceive themselves in the form of a totemic animal (Catala & Lemarchand, 2013).

Given the persistent methodological challenges in isolating and measuring OBEs under controlled conditions—combined with the inherently subjective nature of the phenomenon—a complementary phenomenological approach becomes valuable not merely as a response to empirical limitations but as methodologically appropriate for capturing the first-person experiential structures that constitute the phenomenon itself. Such qualitative analyses through micro-phenomenological interviews could provide crucial insights into the subjective experience of individuals who have undergone OBEs, potentially illuminating aspects of the phenomenon that remain inaccessible to third-person measurement approaches.

MICRO-PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO OBEs

Micro-phenomenology is a first-person research method that elicits detailed descriptions of lived experience, focusing on the temporal unfolding and pre-reflective aspects of consciousness (Petitmengin, 2001).

While micro-phenomenological approaches are increasingly used to study cognitive processes such as meditation and hypnotic states, OBEs remain a relatively unexplored subject under this psychological and physiological lens. Some studies have focused on the overall phenomenological characteristics of the experience, and OBEs have been documented through first-person narratives of experiencers (Fox, 1962; LaBerge, 1986; Monroe, 1971; Muldoon & Carrington, 1951), helping to identify the conditions under which they can occur. Most OBEs take place in a state of deep physical and mental relaxation, sometimes associated with intense absorption (Irwin, 2000). Conversely, some OBEs can be triggered reactively by extreme stress, occurring without intentional induction (Alvarado, 2000).

Physiologically, OBEs are sometimes preceded by intense bodily vibrations (Rabeyron & Caussié, 2016). A study investigating the neurophysiological manifestations of these vibratory states found synchronized neural circuits and very high-frequency waveforms (neural oscillations beyond typical alpha/beta ranges), some of which do not correspond to any known human activity or behaviour (Alegretti, 2010). Few studies adopt a cognitive analysis approach,

that is, a way of studying psychological phenomena by focusing on internal mental processes—how a person perceives, processes, interprets, and uses information. Among them, Rabeyron and Caussié (2016) used techniques such as explicitation interviews (Petitmengin, 2001; Petitmengin & Bitbol, 2009; Petitmengin et al., 2019). The goal was to extract a detailed first-person account of OBEs, with initial interviews focusing on the phenomenological aspects and subsequent ones exploring the psychological reality of the subjects. Findings suggest that sensory integration and the embodied sense of self appear to ‘disintegrate’ during OBEs (Rabeyron & Caussié 2016). Consequently, OBEs likely result from a transient disruption of multisensory integration and self-representation processes. Physiological and cognitive data together point to a temporary decoupling between bodily perception and the sense of self, allowing consciousness to adopt an externalized perspective.

Another relevant study by Valenzuela et al. (2013) examined the ‘rubber hand illusion’, offering insights into the spatiality of consciousness. In this experiment, participants experienced a sense of ownership over a rubber hand while simultaneously feeling a loss of ownership over their real hand, revealing the brain’s flexible mapping of bodily self-location. Such research highlights the ability—or inability—to accurately localize body parts in space. Further studies on larger samples are needed to identify cognitive patterns unique to OBEs, enabling comparisons with other altered states of consciousness.

DISCUSSION

Despite recent advances in neuroscience, the study of OBEs remains incomplete and raises numerous questions regarding their exact nature and underlying mechanisms. One major challenge lies in the absence of clear distinguishing criteria that separate OBEs from other altered states of consciousness, such as lucid dreams, sleep paralysis, or dissociative experiences (Blanke et al., 2005; Cheyne & Girard, 2009). This ambiguity not only complicates the precise definition of the phenomenon but also hinders its experimental investigation. The identification of specific biomarkers—whether neurophysiological (e.g., EEG patterns, activation of certain brain regions) or phenomenological (e.g., sensory content, continuity of consciousness)—would represent a significant breakthrough in this field (De Ridder et al., 2007; Smith & Messier, 2014).

Furthermore, the interindividual variability of OBEs (Bünning & Blanke, 2005; Carruthers, 2018), in both frequency and intensity, suggests the need to study specific populations, including individuals capable of voluntarily inducing OBEs and patients suffering from neurological or psychiatric disorders associated with spontaneous episodes (Blanke et al., 2004; Facco et al., 2019). A recent theoretical review highlighted the importance of OBEs occurring during sleep and their proximity to other borderline states such as sleep paralysis and lucid dreams. Analysing transitions between wakefulness and REM

sleep could provide a relevant conceptual framework for understanding these experiences and their phenomenological continuum (Campillo-Ferrer et al., 2024). Distinguishing certain lucid dreams from OBEs remains a challenge.

Le Maléfan (2011) questions what has recently allowed OBEs to gain recognition as a legitimate clinical subject of interest. OBEs have gained legitimacy as a clinical subject because clinicians recognize their relevance for mental health, and emphasize the importance of distinguishing them from pathological dissociation; the term ‘clinical’ denotes the medicalization of what was once viewed as purely parapsychological. While research on OBEs has a long history, the growing clinical interest arises from their relevance at the intersection of neurology (e.g., temporo-parietal junction phenomena), psychiatry (dissociation, depersonalization), and mental health care. OBEs thus represent a legitimate subject of clinical and cognitive investigation. Le Maléfan (2011) suggests an explanation in terms of a contemporary contestation of the subject’s identification with their body. The concept of egobody—the entanglement of subjectivity and self within the body—has led to the emergence of a culture of ‘self-exit’ and ‘out-there’ experiences, legitimized by neuroscience and psychology. The question of OBE legitimization within society opens new avenues for research in socio-anthropology and psychology, exploring why such experiences happen to individuals at specific moments in their lives.

Additionally, several research questions remain regarding the successive stages of the experience. For instance, is there a common chronology in the unfolding of an OBE? Micro-phenomenology could provide valuable insights into these aspects. Finally, developing a categorization scale similar to those used for near-death experiences could be beneficial, relying on both qualitative and statistical analyses to refine our understanding of the phenomenon.

Corresponding author

SABINE RABOURDIN

Université Claude Bernard

Lyon 1: Villeurbanne, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, France

Email: sabine@rabourdin.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4397-5281>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by a grant from the Society for Psychical Research.

REFERENCES

- Alegretti, W. (2010). An approach to the research of the vibrational state through the study of brain activity. *Journal of Conscientology*, 11(42), 248–250.
- Alvarado, C. S. (1986). ESP during spontaneous out-of-body experiences: A research and methodological note. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 53(804), 393–397.

- Alvarado, C. S. (2000). Out-of-body experiences. In E. Cardena, S. Jay Lynn & S. Krippner (Eds), *Varieties of anomalous experience: Examining the scientific evidence* (pp. 183–218). American Psychological Association.
- American Psychiatric Association (2013), *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Blackmore, S. (1982). Beyond the body: An investigation into out-of-body experiences. Heineman.
- Blackmore, S. (1984). A postal survey of OBEs and other experiences. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 52(796), 225–244.
- Blackmore, S. (1987). Where am I? Perspectives in imagery and the out-of-body experience. *Journal of Mental Imagery*, 11, 53–66.
- Blackmore, S. J. (1988). A theory of lucid dreams and OBEs. In J. Gackenbach & S. LaBerge (Eds), *Conscious mind, sleeping brain: Perspectives on lucid dreaming* (pp. 373–387). Springer.
- Blanke, O., Dieguez, S. (2009). Leaving body and life behind: Out-of-body and near-death experience. In S. Laureys & G. Tononi (Ed), *The neurology of consciousness* (pp. 303–325). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-800948-2.00020-0>
- Blanke, O., Landis, T., Spinelli, L., & Seeck, M. (2004). Out-of-body experience and autoscapy of neurological origin. *Brain*, 127(2), 243–258. <https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/awh040>
- Blanke, O., Metzinger, T. (2009). Full-body illusions and minimal phenomenal selfhood. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 13(1), 7–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2008.10.003>
- Blanke, O., Mohr, C., Michel, C. M., Pascual-Leone, A., Brugger, P., Seeck, M., Landis, T., & Thut, G. (2005). Linking out-of-body experience and self processing to mental own-body imagery at the temporoparietal junction. *Journal of Neuroscience*, 25(3), 550–557. <https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.2612-04.2005>
- Blanke, O., Ortigue, S., Landis, T., & Seeck, M. (2002). Stimulating illusory own-body perceptions. *Nature*, 419, 269–270. <https://doi.org/10.1038/419269a>
- Bünning, S., & Blanke, O. (2005). The out-of-body experience: Precipitating factors and neural correlates. *Progress in Brain Research*, 150, 331–350. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0079-6123\(05\)50024-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0079-6123(05)50024-4)
- Campillo-Ferrer, T., Alcaraz-Sánchez, A., Demšar, E., Wu, H. P., Dresler, M., Windt, J., & Blanke, O. (2024). Out-of-body experiences in relation to lucid dreaming and sleep paralysis. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 10, 57–70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2024.105770>
- Cardena, E., Lynn, S. J., & Krippner, S. (Ed.). (2000). *Varieties of anomalous experience: Examining the scientific evidence*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10371-000>
- Carruthers, G. (2018). Confabulation or experience? Implications of out-of-body experiences for theories of consciousness. *Theory & Psychology*, 28(1), 122–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354317745590>
- Catala, P., & Lemarchand, K. (2013). *Cours de l'Institut Métapsychique International*. A-IMI.
- Cheyne, J. A. (2003). Sleep paralysis and the structure of waking-nightmare hallucinations. *Dreaming*, 13, 163–179. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025373412722>
- Cheyne, J. A., & Girard, T. A. (2009). The body unbound: Vestibular–motor hallucinations and out-of-body experiences. *Cortex*, 45(2), 201–215. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2007.05.002>
- Crookall, R. (1986). *Out-of-the-body experiences: A fourth analysis*. Citadel Press.
- De Ridder, D., Van Laere, K., Dupont, P., Menovsky, T., & Van de Heyning, P. (2007). Visualizing out-of-body experience in the brain. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 357(18), 1829–1833. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoA070010>

- Dethiollaz, S., & Fourrier, C. C. (2016). *Voyages aux confins de la conscience*. Trédaniel.
- Facco, E., Casiglia, E., Al Khafaji, B. E., Finatti, F., Duma, G. M., Mento, G., Pederzoli, L., & Tressoldi, P. (2019). The neurophenomenology of out-of-body experiences induced by hypnotic suggestions. *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 67(1), 39–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207144.2019.1553762>
- Fang, T., Yan, R., & Fang, F. (2014). Spontaneous out-of-body experience in a child with refractory right temporoparietal epilepsy. *Journal of Neurosurgery: Pediatrics*, 14(4), 396–399. <https://doi.org/10.3171/2014.6.PEDS13485>
- Fox, O. (1962). *Astral projection: A record of out-of-the-body experiences*. University Books.
- Green, C. (1968). *Out-of-the-body experiences*. Institute of Psychophysical Research.
- Guesné, J. (2009). *Le grand passage*. J'ai Lu.
- Hiromitsu, K., Shinoura, N., Yamada, R., & Midorikawa, A. (2020). Dissociation of the subjective and objective bodies following posterior cingulate lesion. *Journal of Neuropsychology*, 14, 183–192. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jnp.2199>
- Irwin, H. J. (1985). *Flight of mind: A psychological study of the out-of-body experience*. Scarecrow Press.
- Irwin, H. J. (1988). Out-of-the-body experiences and dream lucidity. In J. Gackenbach & S. LaBerge (Ed), *Conscious mind, sleeping brain* (pp. 353–371). Springer.
- Irwin, H. J. (2000). The disembodied self: An empirical study of dissociation and the out-of-body experience. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 64(3), 261–277.
- Irwin, H. J., & Watt, C. (2007). *An introduction to parapsychology*. McFarland.
- Jones, F. C., Gabbard, G. O., & Twemlow, S. W. (1984). Psychological and demographic characteristics of persons reporting out-of-body experiences. *Hillside Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 6(1), 105–115.
- Kjellgren, A., Lyden, F., & Norlander, T. (2008). Sensory isolation in flotation tanks: Altered States of consciousness and effects on well-being. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 636–656. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2008.1577>
- Klimesch, W. (1999). EEG alpha and theta oscillations reflect cognitive and memory performance: A review and analysis. *Brain Research Review*, 29(2–3):169–95. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0165-0173\(98\)00056-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0165-0173(98)00056-3)
- Klimesch, W. (2012). Alpha band oscillations, attention, and controlled access to stored information. *Trends in Cognitive Science*, 16(12), 606–617. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2012.10.007>
- Krippner, S. (1996). A pilot study in ESP, dreams and purported out-of-body experiences. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 61, 88–93.
- LaBerge, S. (1986). *Lucid dreaming*. Ballantine Books.
- Lemaire, C. (1993). *Rêves éveillés: L'âme sous le scalpel*. Les Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond.
- Le Maléfan, P. (2011). La 'sortie hors du corps' comme nouveau tropisme pour la clinique du corps? *Recherches en Psychanalyse*, 11(1), 38–46. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rep.11.0038>
- Levitan, L., LaBerge, S., DeGracia, D. J., & Zimbardo, P. G. (1999). Out-of-body experiences, dreams, and REM sleep. *Sleep and Hypnosis*, 1(3), 186–196.
- Lynn, S. J., & Rhue, J. W. (1986). The fantasy-prone person. Hypnosis, imagination and creativity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(2), 404–408. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.51.2.404>
- Mathias, J. (2023). *Review of hypnotic out-of-body experiences as an empirical state of consciousness*. ResearchGate Preprint. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.32060.21129>
- McCreery, C. (2006). Perception and hallucination: The case for continuity. *Philosophical Paper*, 1.

- McCreery, C., & Claridge, G. (1996). A study of hallucination in normal subjects—I. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 21(5), 739–758. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869\(96\)00115-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869(96)00115-8)
- Metzinger, T. (2003). *Being no one: The self-model theory of subjectivity*. MIT Press.
- Milne, E., Dunn, S., Zhao, C., & Jones, M. (2019). Altered neural dynamics in people who report spontaneous out-of-body experiences. *Cortex*, 111, 87–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2018.10.019>
- Monroe, R. A. (1971). *Journeys out of the body*. Doubleday.
- Monroe, R. A. (1989). *Journeys out of the body*. Souvenir Press.
- Montenegro, R. (2015). *The out-of-body experience: An experiential anthology*. Imagens & Letras.
- Montenegro, R. (2020). The vibrational state: A novel neurophysiological state. *AutoRicerca*, 20, 191–231.
- Morisson, J. (2022). *Expériences hors du corps*. De Vinci.
- Morris, R. L., Harary, S. B., Janis, J., Hartwell, J., & Roll, W. G. (1978). Studies of communication during out-of-body experiences. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 72, 1–21.
- Muldoon, S. J., & Carrington, H. (1951). *The phenomena of astral projection*. Rider.
- Munro, C., & Persinger, M. A. (1992). Relative right temporal-lobe theta activity correlates with Vingiano's hemispheric quotient and the 'sensed presence'. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 75(3), 899–903. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.1992.75.3.899>
- Murray, C., & Fox, J. (2005). The out-of-body experience and body image. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 193(1), 70–76.
- Osis, K. (1975). Perceptual experiments on out-of-body experiences. In J. D. Morris, W. G. Roll & R. L. Morris (Eds), *Research in parapsychology 1974* (pp. 53–55). Scarecrow Press.
- Osis, K., & McCormick, D. (1980). Kinetic effects at the ostensible location. *American Society for Psychical Research*, 74(3), 319–329.
- Overney, L. S., Arzy, S., & Blanke, O. (2009). Deficient mental own-body imagery in a neurological patient with out-of-body experiences due to cannabis use *Cortex*, 45(2), 228–235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2008.02.005>
- Palmer, J. (1978). Out-of-body experiences: Psychological and parapsychological perspectives. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 72, 1–20.
- Palmer, J. (1979). A community mail survey of psychic experiences. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 73(3), 221–251.
- Palmer, J., & Lieberman, R. (1975). The influence of psychological set on ESP and OBEs. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 69(3), 193–213.
- Penfield, W., & Erickson, T. C. (1941). *Epilepsy and cerebral localization*. Charles C. Thomas.
- Persinger, M. A. (1993). Vectorial cerebral hemisphericity as differential sources for the sensed presence, mystical experiences and religious conversions. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 76(3), 915–930. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.1993.76.3.915>
- Persinger, M. A. (2001). The neuropsychiatry of paranormal experiences. *Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 13(4), 515–524.
- Persinger, M. A., & Makarec, K. (1987). Temporal lobe epileptic signs and correlative behaviors displayed by normal populations. *Journal of General Psychology*, 114(2), 179–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221309.1987.9711068>
- Petitmengin, C. (2001). *L'expérience intuitive*. L'Harmattan.
- Petitmengin, C., & Bitbol, M. (2009). The validity of first-person descriptions. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 16(10–12), 252.
- Petitmengin, C., Remillieux, A., & Valenzuela-Moguillansky, C. (2019). Discovering the

- structures of lived experience. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 18, 691–730. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-018-9597-4>
- Petsche, H., Kaplan, S., von Stein, A., & Filz, O. (1997). The possible meaning of the upper and lower alpha frequency ranges for cognitive and creative tasks. *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, 26(1–3), 77–97. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-8760\(97\)00757-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-8760(97)00757-5)
- Poynton, J. C. (1975). Results of an out-of-body survey. In: J. C. Poynton (Ed.), *Parapsychology in South Africa*. South African Society for Psychical Research.
- Rabeyron, T., & Caussidé, S. (2016). Clinique des sorties hors du corps. trauma, réflexivité et symbolisation. *L'Évolution Psychiatrique*, 81(4), 755–775. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evopsy.2015.10.007>
- Reynolds, M., & Brewin, C. R. (1999). Intrusive memories in depression and PTSD. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 37(3), 201–215.
- Ring, K., & Cooper, S. (1997). Near-death and out-of-body experiences in the blind: A study of apparent eyeless vision. *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, 16(2), 101–147. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025010015662>
- Sellers, J. (2018). A brief review of studies of out-of-body experiences in both the healthy and pathological population. *Journal of Cognitive Science*, 19(4), 471–491. <https://doi.org/10.17791/jcs.2018.19.4.471>
- Siegel, R. K. (1977). Hallucinations. *Scientific American*, 237(4), 132–140.
- Smith, A. M., & Messier, C. (2014). Voluntary out-of-body experience: An fMRI study. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8, 70. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2014.00070>
- Tart, C. T. (1967). A second psychophysiological study of out-of-body experiences. *International Journal of Parapsychology*, 9(3), 251–258.
- Tart, C. (1968). A psychophysiological study of out-of-body experiences in a selected subject. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 62(1), 3–27.
- Tart, C. T. (1969). *Altered states of consciousness*. Wiley.
- Thalbourne, M. A., & Delin, P. S. (1994). A common thread underlying belief in the paranormal, creative personality, mystical experience and psychopathology. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 58(1), 3–38.
- Tyrrell, G. N. M. (1942). *Science and psychical phenomena*. Methuen.
- Twemlow, S. W., Gabbard, G. O., & Jones, F. C. (1982). The out-of-body experiences: A phenomenological typology based on questionnaire responses. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 139(4), 450–455.
- Valenzuela Moguillansky, C., O'Regan, J., & Petitmengin, C. (2013). Exploring the subjective experience of the rubber hand illusion. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 7, 659. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00659>
- Vignal, J.-P., Maillard, L., McGonigal, A., & Chauvel, P. (2001). Out-of-body experiences in epileptic seizures. *Brain*, 124(1), 164–175.
- Weitzenhoffer, A. M., & Hilgard, E. R. (1959). *Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scale: Forms A and B*. Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Wilkins, L. K., Girard, T. A., & Cheyne, J. A. (2011). Ketamine as a predictor of out-of-body experiences associated with multiple substance use. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 20(3), 943–950.
- Wilson, S. C., & Barber, T. X. (1982). The fantasy-prone personality. *PSI Research*, 1(3), 94–116.
- Windt, J. M. (2015). *Dreaming: A conceptual framework for philosophy of mind and empirical research*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262028677.001.0001>
- Yram. (1990). *Le médecin de l'âme*. FeniXX.
- Yu, K., Liu, C., Yu, T., Wang, X., Xu, C., Ni, D., & Li, Y. (2018). Out-of-body experience in the

anterior insular cortex during the intracranial electrodes stimulation in an epileptic child. *Journal of Clinical Neuroscience*, 54, 122–125. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jocn.2018.04.050>

Zingrone, N., Alvarado, C., & Cardena, E. (2010). Out-of-body experiences and physical body activity and posture: responses from a survey conducted in Scotland. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 198, 163–165. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0b013e3181cc0d6d>



EVALUATION OF ENGLISH-SPEAKING MEDIUM AND TRANCE CHANNELER CERTIFICATIONS

BY JULIETTE GALLO, HELANÉ WAHBEH, SIRI ZEMEL, & LEO RUICKBIE

ABSTRACT

We evaluated English-speaking medium/trance channeler certification programs. Certifications were descriptively outlined, and a comprehensive scoring matrix emerged for certification comparisons. Six certifications met the study inclusion criteria. Final scoring was intended to measure the extent to which certification status ensures practitioner competence and public safety through five core elements: skills assessment, protocol transparency, grief training, ethics training, and personal interviews. There were vast differences in the quality of descriptive data available for certifications. Future work is needed to standardize medium/trance channeler certifications to ensure public protection, most notably grief training, ethics training, and transparency of skills assessment protocols.

INTRODUCTION

Growing from ancient global roots (Beischel & Zingrone, 2015; Bourguignon, 1973; Guttierrez, 2015; Hunter & Luke, 2014), the mediumship and trance channeling¹ field is gaining both economic momentum (IBIS World, 2021) and societal popularity (Held, 2019). Mediumship and trance channeling represent essentially the same phenomenon—communication with non-physical entities—though they have emerged as distinct terms in different historical contexts. Mediumship, as Beischel (2007, p. 43) defines it, involves “individuals who report experiencing regular communication with the deceased” where practitioners typically interpret or translate information (also known as ‘mental mediumship’). Trance channeling evolved later, with practitioners believing they “use their body as a ‘vehicle’ for the purported disincarnate ‘being’ to incorporate into and to communicate directly via speaking, writing, or movement” (Wahbeh et al., 2019, p. 3). Rather than simply receiving and relaying messages, trance channelers reportedly allow entities to communicate directly through them. Despite these procedural distinctions, both practices

1. For the purpose of this study, the term ‘trance channeling’ is used where: “The channeler goes into an altered state of consciousness at will (i.e., trance state (the depth of the trance may vary), and the disincarnate entity/spirit uses the channeler’s body with permission to communicate directly through the channeler’s voice, body movements, etc. (rather than the channeler receiving information mentally or otherwise and then relaying what is being received)” (Wahbeh et al., 2019, p. 5).

represent fundamentally similar altered states of consciousness that facilitate access to transpersonal information. Their differences reflect evolving cultural contexts rather than substantive distinctions in the underlying phenomenon: mediumship emerged during the 19th-century Spiritualist movement focusing on deceased humans, while trance channeling gained prominence during the late 20th-century New Age movement, expanding to include various non-physical intelligences. Today, practitioners may use these terms interchangeably, recognizing them as variations of the same essential practice.

Growing research over the past two decades has shaped scientific understanding of individuals reporting mediumship or trance channeling abilities, including studies examining psychological and personality characteristics (Alvarado, 2010; Rock et al., 2008) as well as genetic attributes (Gattaz et al., 2025). Evidence suggests that mediums score higher for psychological well-being when compared with non-mediums (Roxburgh & Roe, 2011), refuting a common perception that mediumship/trance channeling abilities might be associated with psychopathology (Roxburgh, 2010; Roxburgh & Roe, 2011; Spindola-Rodrigues et al., 2022). Despite the growth in research, public interest, and economic impact, the field of mediumship/trance channeling is young in its professionalization journey.

In a study by Zemel and Wahbeh (2023), professional mediums/trance channelers voiced the importance of consumer ethics and a responsibility to do no harm. However, without universal or generally accepted certification protocols and standards, it is challenging to discern the quality, competency, and ethical preparedness of a professional medium or trance channeler. This absence of formalized training and oversight has significant implications for both consumers and practitioners. Individuals often seek the services of spiritual mediums during periods of grief (Beischel et al., 2014), a time marked by heightened emotional vulnerability. Research indicates that while some bereaved individuals report perceived comfort, engagement with mediumship occurs within a psychologically sensitive context that necessitates ethical boundaries, practitioner competence, and awareness of potential psychological harm, misinterpretation, or dependency (Osborne & Bacon, 2015; Testoni et al., 2022). From a professional standpoint, the absence of standardized training and regulation in mediumship and trance channeling leaves practitioners without consistent guidance on ethical decision-making, informed consent, scope of practice boundaries, or the recognition of mental health contraindications. Research shows that this lack of guidance creates difficulties not only for consumers but also for mediums themselves, who report uncertainty, emotional strain, and ethical challenges when working with psychologically vulnerable clients in the absence of consistent formal training, supervision, or referral frameworks (Wilde et al., 2019). Moreover, the absence of formal certification and recognized professional standards in mediumship and trance channeling undermines public trust and complicates efforts toward professional legitimacy.

Legal analyses have shown that the lack of coherent regulatory frameworks governing spiritualist and mediumship practice leaves the field vulnerable to ongoing criticism, consumer protection concerns, and legal uncertainty, thereby contributing to increased reputational risk for practitioners and organizations alike (Greenfield et al., 2012).

A contemporary example highlighting these risks is the ‘Maria Duval’ mail fraud scheme, in which vulnerable consumers, including elderly or financially insecure individuals, were repeatedly solicited for payments for purported psychic guidance and talismans. Investigators estimated that over 1.3 million people were defrauded of more than \$175 million before the scheme was shut down, and no evidence supported the claimed psychic services (US Department of Justice, 2024). This case demonstrates how, without standardized oversight and ethical safeguards, consumers can experience significant financial and emotional harm, underlining the importance of professional standards, training, and certification in the field. Research from comparable unregulated or loosely regulated helping professions, such as complementary and alternative medicine, further demonstrates that the absence of certification and institutional oversight can undermine public confidence, impede professional recognition, and expose practitioners to increased scrutiny and liability (Carè et al., 2021). These findings suggest that without standardized certification structures, mediumship remains susceptible to challenges that hinder its credibility, sustainability, and broader social acceptance. Therefore, the development of evidence-informed training and certification standards is essential to promote consumer protection, ensure practitioner accountability, and support the responsible integration of mediumship and trance channeling into broader societal and professional contexts.

Mediumship and trance channeling certification programs

A small number of field leaders offer evidence-based testing and certifications for mediums. The Windbridge Institute, LLC (now the Windbridge Research Center) developed an extensive certification process for research mediums. Certification was only offered to those who passed blinded, controlled testing for information accuracy and specificity—standards which have raised the levels of professionalism and credibility for both practitioners and researchers in the field (Beischel et al., 2015). However, the Windbridge Research Center discontinued its mediumship certification program after the program’s funding ended, and the organization decided to focus on broader research and educational activities rather than certifying mediums. No plans to reopen the program have been announced (Windbridge Research Center, n.d.). The Forever Family Foundation (n.d.), a non-profit organization that seeks to connect resources to the bereaved, developed a medium certification program grounded in rigorous testing (Ginsberg, 2021). Only about 10% of the mediums that go through the evaluation process at the Forever Family Foundation will

receive certification, primarily due to underdeveloped proficiency (Ginsberg, 2021). Blinded, evidence-based, multi-stage testing is also conducted by Mark Ireland to certify mediums and to approve volunteer mediums to serve in the non-profit program Helping Parents Heal, which is dedicated to assisting bereaved parents (Mark Ireland Certified Mediums, n.d.). As anchors in the field, various Spiritualist organizations offer training programs, including the National Spiritualist Association of Churches in the United States (n.d.), the Spiritualist National Union in the UK (n.d.), and the Arthur Findlay College in the UK, some of which may include certification such as the programs delivered by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches, and the Spiritualist National Union.

Certification programs for trance channelers are less prevalent than programs for mediums. Although a preliminary online search for trance channeler certification programs in the US elicits some results, there is a lack of comparable published material for trance channeling compared with mediumship, including organizational infrastructures, books, book chapters, and peer-reviewed scientific journal articles. This dearth of publications is juxtaposed with the occurrence of trance channeling, which is not entirely rare. Wahbeh and Butzer (2020) reported that trance channeling is more prevalent than most people realize. In a study from Wahbeh et al. (2018), nine hundred English speakers were asked whether they had a non-physical source from a different level or dimension of reality that used their body as an instrument for communication, and experiences were reported by 8.8% of the general population and 30% of exceptional human experience enthusiasts. Although medium and trance channeling certifications may be available, they vary widely and serve different goals. In a recent survey of nearly one hundred and fifty mediums/trance channelers, Zemel and Wahbeh (2023, p. 160) reported the frequently held view that “there are major inconsistencies across certification programs in that some are scientifically rigorous, while others can be obtained by simply paying a fee.” To our knowledge, there has been no formal evaluation of certification programs for mediums/trance channelers in English-speaking countries.

Evaluation of certification programs

Certification represents a large and growing segment of the credentialing sector (Buckendahl, 2017), and certification evaluation traditionally encompasses various methodologies and frameworks to assess effectiveness and impacts. Medium/trance channeler certification is voluntary, and differs dramatically from rigorous, mandatory professional credentialing such as licensures aimed to demonstrate competency before working with the public. According to Fabrey (2017, p. 218), “There is no control over either the use of the word ‘certified’ or the development of certification programs. Any entity can start a program ... and, regardless of the characteristics of a program, participants

can claim to be certified.” To our knowledge, mediumship and trance channeling certification programs have not yet been thoroughly evaluated, nor does an authoritative organization exist to perform such evaluations. This highlights the need for greater public education on program quality, as there can be tension between the “broader goals of public protection and business interests” (Buckendahl, 2017, p. 7). Any evaluation of certifications should be designed to reduce bias, be equitable, and incorporate clear criteria, guidelines, or standards (Fabrey, 2017). To our knowledge, currently no instrument is available to evaluate certification programs for mediums and trance channelers. Therefore, we have chosen to focus on skills assessment, transparency, public protection through grief and ethics training, and personal interviews, as these five key areas address the most salient indicators of certification quality relevant to public safety, particularly for emotionally vulnerable populations, by evaluating practitioner competence, ethical safeguards, transparency, and preparedness to work responsibly with grief. Additional factors, such as organizational reputation or requirements for criminal background checks, were excluded to avoid subjective judgments and jurisdiction-specific variability, thereby preserving fairness, replicability, and methodological consistency across certifications operating in different regions. However, these could be important elements to consider in future work.

We used an evaluation scoring matrix, described below, to operationalize these criteria. Scoring matrices provide a structured framework incorporating multiple criteria relevant to the evaluation context, where each option is rated against these criteria, and the scores are aggregated to derive an overall assessment (Hugh, 2022).

Skills assessment

A simple certification program may only require payment or confirmation of attendance to receive a certificate, while an assessment-based certification program requires education, training, and/or a passing test score demonstrating adequate knowledge and/or skills application (Fabrey, 2017). This is a nuanced area in the field of mediumship/trance channeling, where there is a discrepancy between practitioners who believe in innate ability versus those who emphasize learned skills (Zemel & Wahbeh, 2023). An assessment-based certificate uses formal measurement to rate professional competence. In dentistry, for example, test scores are meant to provide confidence to the public that entry-level dentists have demonstrated the necessary judgments and skills for safe practice. The design of such tests requires an understanding of measurement development and testing validation methods (Kane et al., 2017), which may sometimes be lacking among credentialing programs within newer occupations or professions (Buckendahl, 2017). Fabrey (2017, p. 222) details the need for “criterion- referenced passing points, verified with documented evidence to confirm the competence of the candidate,” and “validity of the pass/fail decision.”

Many professional certificate programs also require maintenance assessments, such as continuing education or recertification exams, after a period of time (Buckendahl, 2017), ensuring the continuation of a high standard of care and public protection (Peri & Eisenberg, 2024). Other professions are moving to longitudinal assessment, which repeatedly administers shorter evaluations over time to support lifelong learning and address emergent ethical topics (Giron et al., 2021).

Transparency

Transparency, including the willingness to be openly evaluated by accrediting bodies, is the gold standard among credentialing programs across a wide variety of professions (Friedrich et al., 2024; Kolsoom et al., 2023; Pelsner et al., 2019). Beyond the deep and thorough type of transparency that accreditation demands, a more basic type of transparency includes the processes and decision points required to achieve certification, which can provide both candidates and the public with an understanding of program objectives and quality. The type of transparency measured in this study is that of the certification program's processes and decision points.

Public protection through grief and ethics training

Testing and/or skills assessment only partially addresses public protection, and even if mediums/trance channelers operated from an innate skills versus learned abilities perspective, the sensitive knowledge of skillfully navigating grief and ethics is paramount to practitioner efficacy and consumer safety. A commitment to public protection is a recognition that members of the public may not be able to distinguish qualified versus unqualified occupational performance (Buckendahl, 2017). It is well documented that mediums/trance channelers work with the bereaved, an emotionally vulnerable population steeped in grief (Beischel et al., 2014; Mikles, 2023; Testoni et al., 2022), which demands special ethical considerations (Osborne & Bacon, 2015). For professions involving a heightened risk to the public, "an incompetent practitioner can produce lasting, negative consequences" (Buckendahl, 2017, p. 2), and surveyed practicing mediums/trance channelers in the US express the wish to 'do no harm' (Zemel & Wahbeh, 2023). Ethics are critical to professional competency and can include both consumer and general professional ethics. Nuanced ethical considerations may command specialized certificate programs in and of themselves for specific professions or sub-specialties (Thomas et al., 2021). There is currently no governing body, professional association, or established ethical standards for the mediumship and trance channeling fields. While an aspirational code of ethics was published by Zemel and Wahbeh (2025), integrating ethical training in mediumship/trance channeling, certification programs may be even more critical than in other fields that have well-defined ethical guidelines and training opportunities outside of the certification program.

Personal interviews

While personal interviews are not common practice for other professional certifications, they may be considered an extra layer of verification for evaluating mediums/trance channelers, particularly for certification programs that do not require any form of testing or skills assessment. Although unstructured personal interviews lack objective measurement of abilities, they can provide the opportunity for evaluators to assess candidates based on their perception of self-reported competencies, qualifications, experiences, and fitness for work with the public. This criterion represents a minimal but meaningful distinction from certifications awarded solely on the basis of payment.

Specific aims

Despite the growing visibility and utilization of mediumship and trance channeling, there has been little systematic examination of how practitioners are trained, evaluated, or certified to work with the public. The lack of evaluation of certification programs impedes the maturation of the field by limiting the ability to compare practitioner competencies, establish best practices, and integrate mediumship and trance channeling responsibly within broader research, clinical, and educational contexts. Systematic evaluation of certification programs therefore represents a critical step toward professional accountability, consumer safety, and the development of evidence-informed standards that can support both scholarly inquiry and ethical practice in this emerging domain.

Given the needed research around the standards of these certification programs, our objective was to comprehensively evaluate medium and trance channeler certification programs in English-speaking countries. The specific aims were to (1) identify certification programs available to English-speaking mediums and channelers, (2) identify specific certification program criteria, and (3) evaluate the certification programs using a rating system intended to mitigate individual rater bias through independent scoring.

METHODS

This cross-sectional evaluative study examined English-speaking medium and trance channeler certification programs using systematic document review and a structured scoring framework to compare program characteristics relevant to practitioner competence and public protection. The certifications were independently and quantitatively rated by three independent reviewers using the developed scoring matrix, with an aim to protect against researcher bias. No *a priori* goal or limit was placed on the number of certifications identified, with the search ending upon saturation. This study was not classified as research requiring institutional review board oversight because it relied solely on publicly available information and verifications from program administrators for any missing data. No private or sensitive information was collected, ensuring compliance with ethical standards.

Study inclusion / exclusion criteria

The study included companies or programs that provided certification for English-speaking mediums/trance channelers. We excluded programs that: (1) were no longer accepting candidates; (2) offering to train mediums and trance channelers without skills assessment or evidence-based testing; and (3) certified all applicants upon simply signing up and paying a fee.

Search strategy

We searched for certifications through online search queries, obtaining information from publicly accessible sources (including websites, program listings, and publications) and field notes (email correspondence). We began by searching for programs within the US using the terms ‘medium [trance channeling] certification’ and ‘certified [trance channeling] mediums.’ For the broader search across English-speaking countries worldwide, we used the queries ‘medium [trance channeling] certification in English-speaking countries,’ ‘medium [trance channeling] certification worldwide,’ and ‘mediumship [trance channeling] certification worldwide.’ The search strategy was intentionally restricted to programs explicitly using the term ‘certification,’ as it denotes a specific form of voluntary credentialing intended to signal practitioner competence and public protection within the credentialing literature. Alternative terms such as ‘registration,’ ‘accreditation,’ or ‘award’ are used inconsistently across organizations and jurisdictions, and often reflect substantively different purposes, which would have reduced conceptual clarity, comparability, and replicability of the evaluation framework.

Data collection

Data collection occurred from January 2024 through December 2025. We independently identified the certification programs ($n = 35$; thirty-two mediumship and three trance channeling results). Three researchers manually extracted the data from the qualifying programs ($n = 6$) and reported the information in a spreadsheet containing ten outcomes of interest. The outcomes of interest were specified prior to analysis as descriptive variables to capture certification structure and practices, while synthesis of these features informed development of the evaluative scoring framework. To address missing or unclear data, email and/or telephone requests for clarifying information were sent to the certifying organization.

Data abstraction

We screened results generated from online searches to exclude closed programs (no longer accepting candidates) and those programs that offer training without evidence-based testing. Programs that did not fulfil the inclusion criteria were omitted from the analysis.

Outcomes of interest

The outcomes used for initial descriptive data collection were: What is the specific testing process? Does certification include completion of a course? Are certification protocols published? Is grief training provided? Is ethics training provided? Is a personal interview required? Is testing in-person or remote? What is the pass rate? What is the certification cost? What is the business structure of the certifying agency? Three researchers entered descriptive details for each outcome of interest into a shared master spreadsheet.

Data analysis

Program elements were outlined, and a comprehensive scoring matrix emerged for certification comparisons. Five core components were used in the scoring matrix as described in the Introduction: skills assessment, protocol transparency, grief training, ethics training, and personal interview. The final score was intended to measure the extent to which certification status ensures ‘practitioner competence and public safety.’ Highlighting the rigor with which a medium’s accuracy is tested throughout the certification process, the matrix was weighted, with higher scoring for skills assessment than any other outcome category. Assessment was scored as 2 (lowest) to 4 (highest), while all other categories were scored from 0 (lowest) to 2 (highest). The maximum total score was 12 (Table 1). These scores were then aggregated across judges. An *a priori* goal of independent evaluations by at least three researchers from our team aimed to protect against researcher bias. Each of the three researchers rated the certification programs on the five components using the data collected about the programs.

RESULTS

We identified thirty-two medium certification programs and three trance channeling certification programs (Figure 1).

Twenty-six medium certification programs were excluded because they were closed or offered training without evidence-based testing, and all three trance channeling certification programs were excluded because they offered training without testing. A total of six qualifying certification programs were identified in this study. Five medium certification programs were identified in the US: the Forever Family Foundation (FFF) (n.d.), the Mark Ireland Certified Mediums Program (MICMP) (Olson Media, n.d.), Bob Olson’s Best Psychic Directory (BOBPD) (n.d.), Shay Parker’s Best American Psychics (SPBAP) (n.d.), and the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC) (n.d.). One medium certification program was identified in the UK, which was offered by the Spiritualists’ National Union (SNU) (n.d.). No trance channeling programs were identified that met the study inclusion criteria. The outcomes of interest for all qualifying certifications (listed in alphabetical order) are displayed in Table 2.

TABLE 1

Individual judge's scoring matrix to evaluate certification programs

Skills assessment	2	3	4
A test or skills assessment is required for certification	Testing or skills assessment required for certification, but not clearly documented	Testing or skills assessment required for certification is clearly documented (preferably validated)	Practitioner accuracy is rigorously tested, and the testing or skills assessment required for certification is documented (preferably validated)
Protocol transparency	0	1	2
Certification protocols are published	Certification protocols not publicly accessible, and not made available upon request	Certification protocols not publicly accessible, but made available upon request	Certification protocols published and publicly accessible
Grief training	0	1	2
Grief training is required for certification	No grief training required or provided for certification	Some grief training available through the organization to work with the bereaved, but is not required for certification	Comprehensive grief training for working with the bereaved is required and provided by the organization for certification
Ethics training	0	1	2
Ethical training is not required for certification	Ethics training required or provided for certification	Some ethics training provided, but is not required for certification	Comprehensive ethics training required and provided for certification
Personal Interview	0	1	2
Personal interview is required for certification	No personal interview required for certification	Personal interview may be required if decision-makers deem it necessary during the certification process	Personal interview required for certification
TOTAL SCORE	0–2	3–7	8–12
Sum all scores together for total score	Certification program may be insufficient to ensure practitioner competence and public protection	Certification program improvements may be recommended to enhance practitioner competence and public protection	Certification program has sufficient structure for practitioner competence and public protection

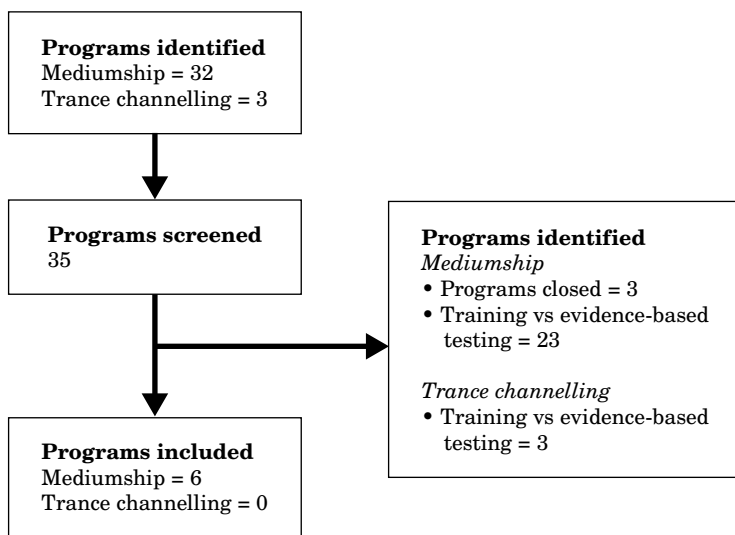


Figure 1. Flow chart of the screening process.

Testing process

Five organizations (83%) followed a specific process for testing candidate mediums, with no data provided by one organization (17%).

Course completion

Two organizations (33%) included mandatory training or course completion as part of the certification process, while four (66%) did not require course completion or training.

Transparency

Certification protocols were published for five of the six (83%) organizations, and one organization's protocols were not publicly accessible but were provided upon request (the NSAC).

Grief training

Grief training was not provided as part of the certification process for four organizations (66%), while two organizations did not provide this information to our research team (33%). Although formal grief training was not included, the SNU specified that trainee mediums are expected to act according to the needs of the bereaved when working with this vulnerable group. Similarly, the FFF stated that they "encourage prospective mediums to pursue that (grief training) on their own and cautioned all mediums to never represent themselves as grief professionals unless they also happen to hold such credentials."

TABLE 2
Outcomes of interest

Organization providing the certification	Specific testing process	Course	Protocol transparency	Grief training	Ethics training	Personal interview required	Type of testing	Pass rate (%)	Cost (\$)	Business structure
Bob Olson's Best Psychic Directory (BOBPD)	*	No	Yes	*	*	*	*	*	*	Private
Forever Family Foundation (FFF)	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Remote	10	0	Non-profit
Mark Ireland Certified Mediums (MICMP)	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	Remote	15–20	0	Non-profit
National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC)	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	In-person and remote	80–85	100	Non-profit
Shay Parker's Best American Psychics (SPBAP)	Yes	No	Yes	*	*	Yes	Remote	*	0	Private
Spiritualists' National Union (SNU)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	In-person and remote	0–100	30–220	Non-profit

*Data not provided by the certification organization.

Ethics training

Four organizations (66%) did not provide or require formal ethics training to obtain certification. When asked this question, the NSAC shared that “ethics are principles that are conveyed throughout the various courses rather than specific components of the curriculum,” and the FFF shared that “the ethics of candidates for certification were assessed during the application and interview stages.” SPBAP provided a basic class on being a professional psychic; however, specific information was not provided regarding the content of this class, or whether this class included ethics training.

Personal interview

Three of the organizations (50%) required candidates to undergo a personal interview prior to sitting for certification, while two organizations (33%) did not, and one organization (17%) did not respond to queries from our research team.

Test location

Three organizations (50%) tested mediums remotely, either via video call software (the FFF and the MICMP) or via telephone (SPBAP). Two organizations (the NSAC and the SNU) offered testing both in person and remotely, and no data was provided by BOBPD.

Pass rate

Four (66%) of the certifying organizations provided the pass rate. The FFF reported the most competitive pass rate as 10% of the mediums who embarked on their certification process since 2005. The MICMP certified between 15% and 20% of the mediums sitting for certification. For those seeking certification through the NSAC, 85% successfully completed the open essay, and 80% passed the written examination. For the SNU, the Teachings and Practice of Spiritualism 1 (TPS1, intermediate level) and 2 (TPS2, intermediate level) mandatory written courses have a 100% pass rate. Its Platform Accreditation Scheme (PAS) carries a 60% pass rate for first-time candidates and 100% for second attempts. The SNU could not provide an accurate pass rate for the Certificate in Speaking for the National Spiritualist Union (CSNU) private sittings, mentioning that few individuals sit this examination, with only one person tested in the last two years and failing twice. The ‘CSNU demonstrating’ pass rate is 75% for the first attempt, with no second attempts. For the Diploma in Speaking for the National Spiritualist Union (DSNU) private sittings, the pass rate is 0%, with only one person sitting this examination in the last three years. Finally, the pass rate for ‘DSNU demonstrating’ is 50% for first-time candidates and 90% for the second attempt.

Cost

Three certifications (50%) were free of charge, and the FFF and MICMP list certified practitioners on their websites at no charge. SPBAP features a list of certified mediums on their website for an annual fee ranging from \$299 to \$2,500. However, specific details about how the exact fee is determined were not provided. Two organizations (33%) charged candidates for certification (the NSAC and the SNU). The NSAC applied a testing fee of \$100 with a yearly renewal fee of \$35, while charging only 50% of the standard renewal fees for those aged 60 and older holding credentials for 20 years, and for those aged 65 and older holding credentials for more than 25 years, with no fee for those aged 70 and older holding credentials. The SNU fees are as follows: (1) the TPS1 course for members is £40.00 (with printed notes) and £25.00 (with PDF notes) and for non-members it is £50.00 (with printed notes) and £35.00 (with PDF notes); (2) the TPS2 course has identical fees to TPS1; (3) PAS (speaking) registration is £110 and the final assessment is £36.00; (4) the PAS (speaking and demonstrating) registration is £180 and the final assessment is £72; (5) the CSNU(ps) private sittings registration is £50.00 and the final assessment is £40.00; and (6) the CSNU(d) demonstrating registration is £50.00 and the final assessment is £40.00.

Business structure

Among the six qualifying medium certification organizations identified, four (66.6%) were non-profit organizations and two (33.3%) were for-profit organizations. One (17%) was classified as a limited liability company (BOBPD), and one (17%) as a privately owned company (SPBAP).

Detailed certification criteria and testing process

A summary of the certification criteria and testing processes captured in this study is listed in alphabetical order for each of the six certifying agencies. Note that publicly accessible information was not available for all organizations, nor did all organizations respond to our research queries for clarifying information. Finally, the information provided for each program below reflects the details available at the time of data collection; note that program offerings may change over time.

Bob Olson's Best Psychic Directory (BOBPD)

Candidates must be listed in the directory first by completing an online form. To be certified, candidates must pass a fifteen-point test and prove to Bob Olson that they are legitimate enough to be added to a 'tested as legitimate' online listing, which features psychics and mediums who have successfully passed the testing phase. No further information was provided to our research team regarding the fifteen-point test and the criteria for 'proving' whether the medium was 'legitimate.'

Forever Family Foundation (FFF)

To apply for certification, mediums must first be members of the FFF for at least three months. This period allows them to familiarize themselves with the organization's goals, mission, and work. Following this, candidates must complete an in-depth eight-page application and attend a personal interview. If the Medium Evaluation Certification Committee approves their application, candidates are invited to participate in a certification session. The testing process consists of five 15-minute readings conducted under controlled conditions, each with a different sitter (the living person who attends the reading and receives the information given by the medium). Four sessions involve both the medium and sitter seeing each other via a video platform, while one session is audio only. These readings are scored by the sitters, and the scores are combined to form a composite score. To earn certification, the candidate must exceed the established threshold for minimum proficiency. Sitter selection is carefully managed to ensure that mediums have no prior knowledge of or access to them. Sessions are anonymous, using only first names to ensure privacy. Sitters are selected based on their familiarity with someone who has passed, though there is no requirement regarding the time since the person's passing. Typically, the deceased person is closely related to the sitter, but this is not mandatory. Before joining the sitter list, individuals receive extensive training on the mediumistic process and specific scoring procedures, focusing on what constitutes valid evidence. During evaluations, specific and obscure information is rated more highly than general facts. All sessions remain confidential; results are only shared between the sitter and the medium, and sessions are not recorded for privacy reasons. General messages from deceased persons that do not provide specific information regarding their physical life, such as their name, profession, etc., are not scored since they cannot be verified for accuracy. Similarly, psychic information not directly linked to a discarnate entity is excluded from scoring. Mediums are prohibited from asking leading questions or inquiring about whom the sitter wishes to contact.

Mark Ireland Certified Mediums Program (MICMP)

Applications for both mediums and sitters are submitted online. Only experienced and currently practicing mediums with consistently positive feedback and a returning clientele are eligible to apply. These mediums must conduct four blinded test readings for four different sitters whom they do not know. Sitters must meet specific criteria: they should have had a close relationship with someone who has passed, be open-minded, and be willing to transcribe and grade the recorded session. The passing must have occurred at least three months before the test readings. Sitters should be balanced individuals capable of discernment and not currently experiencing deep grief. They receive an eight-page document detailing protocols and scoring methods. Mediums seeking certification must perform four blinded test readings for four different sitters via a video call, each lasting 45–60

minutes. During readings, mediums should refrain from asking many questions or posing statements as questions. Introductions are limited to first names, and the reading is to start with no video. The medium spends approximately 5 minutes sharing initial information. If they connect successfully, this part of the process continues without interruption. If the medium is not able to connect with an identifiable deceased loved one, the sitter may ask the medium to attempt to connect with a specific deceased person. Only the first name of the intended deceased person is to be shared.

Each reading is recorded and transcribed for grading accuracy and specificity. Correct statements are calculated against the total, excluding indeterminable ones. If indeterminable statements exceed 33%, a scoring adjustment is made by deducting one point per percentage point over 33%. To pass, a medium must score a minimum average of 75 points across the following three criteria: accuracy, meaningful evidence, and summary subjective grade from the sitter. Each of these categories is given one-third weighting of the total scoring, with bonus points available for the quality/quantity of the evidence provided. The accuracy criteria encompass general information about a deceased person, while meaningful evidence captures in-depth information, and the summary subjective grade from the sitter is an overall assessment of the quality of the reading by the sitter. A medium must pass the first reading in order to continue to the next three test readings.

National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC)

The NSAC offers official credentials to candidates who wish to become certified mediums, as well as training, through the NSAC's educational body, the Morris Pratt Institute (MPI). Those seeking credentials with the NSAC for Certified Medium must successfully pass the related lessons provided by the MPI. Candidates must be members of the NSAC for at least 2 years at the time of the application.

The application must be accompanied by at least six evidential affidavits from the applicant's church or any other NSAC church that the candidate serves, church board approval and a letter, and the application fee. Once received and approved by the Director of the Department of Education, the candidate completes an essay within 45 days, and must find a proctor for the written examination, which entails questions on spiritualism and knowledge of the NSAC. Testing can be done at the applicant's church or any other NSAC-approved location, and the proctor must have the NSAC credential they are testing for, or above. No further information was provided on the scoring criteria or how the final determination for credentialing was made.

Shay Parker's Best American Psychics

Candidates must complete an online member application to join the directory, must undergo an interview, and then wait to be contacted with

testing times and dates. To achieve certification status, candidates undergo two test readings. Both readings are conducted over the telephone for 30 minutes each. One test reading is done with a staff tester and one with a volunteer sitter. No further information was provided regarding testing sessions or scoring criteria.

Spiritualists' National Union (SNU)

Prior to completing full certification (CSNU), candidates must hold TPS1, TPS2, and the PAS in speaking and demonstrating. TPS1 is the accreditation-level academic element of the PAS, and is the starting point for all speaker and demonstrator exponents. The course has eight sections and includes a written examination to confirm testing/skills assessment. TPS2 is the certificate-level academic element of the CSNU and the SNU International (SNUi) Certificate of Recognition (CSNUi). It is the second level for all speaker and demonstrator exponents. The course has eight sections and includes a written examination to confirm testing/skills assessment.

The PAS is a continuous assessment scheme whereby the candidate must complete twenty-five church or online services, and nine sections covering nineteen subjects. The candidate must complete these subjects by gathering evidence of competence against the assigned criteria. Before applying for the final assessment, a candidate must have completed TPS1. For both the speaking and demonstrating assessments, a candidate must complete a private interview and an oral test of ten questions based on the content of TPS1 and knowledge of the SNU, give an address of not less than 10 minutes or a demonstration of evidential mediumistic communication consisting of two separate sitters, and give a prayer suitable for a Spiritualist service.

The CSNU includes a private sittings (CSNU(ps)) designation and a demonstrating (CSNU(d)) designation, and each requires a separate testing process. For the CSNU(ps), candidates are issued with a logbook that contains the information and training sessions required that must be met to the satisfaction of the trainer. For the final assessment, the candidate must complete a private interview and an oral test of ten questions based on courses studied and knowledge of the SNU, and give a separate evidential private sitting to two sitters unknown to the candidate, each of 20 minutes duration. CSNU(d) candidates are also be issued a logbook that contains the information required for the award, including training sessions over seven subjects. To complete the test for the demonstrating designation, candidates must complete a private interview, an oral test of ten questions based on TPS2 and knowledge of the SNU, and are required to participate in a role-play scenario answering a question based on a typical misunderstanding of mediumship. In addition, the candidate will demonstrate mediumship consisting of two separate evidential communications to two sitters within 15 minutes and give a prayer suitable for a Spiritualist service.

TABLE 3

Scored evaluation results

Certification	Aggregate scores across judges					
	Skills assessment	Protocol transparency	Grief training	Ethics training	Personal interview	Total score
BOBPD	6	6	0	0	0	12
FFF	12	6	0	0	6	24
MICMP	12	6	0	0	0	18
NSAC	10	3	0	2	1	16
SPBAP	8	6	0	0	6	20
SNU	11	6	2	0	6	25

The Diploma of the SNU (DSNU) is the highest award. Prior to applying for these awards in a designation, a candidate must hold the CSNU. The in-depth training and testing to achieve a DSNU go beyond certification status and, thus, are not reported in this study.

Scored evaluations

Three researchers independently rated the certification programs using the emergent scoring matrix. The aggregate results of the scoring matrix are presented in Table 3.

DISCUSSION

The growing public interest in mediumship and trance channeling services has corresponded with the emergence of various certifications. Since research on medium/trance channeler certification is novel, we needed to lay the basis for possible future evaluations. Therefore, we developed a five-component scoring matrix to compare the certification programs against clear outcome criteria. This scoring matrix was designed to reduce bias and protect against researcher influence. Study limitations included a small sample size, incomplete data for some evaluation categories, and vast differences in the quality and breadth of data available for comparisons. Only six medium certifications met the study inclusion criteria, and no trance channeling certifications were included.

A further limitation of this study is that the search strategy was restricted to programs explicitly using the term ‘certification,’ which may have excluded organizations employing alternative terminology such as ‘registration’ or ‘accreditation.’ While this restriction was intentional to preserve conceptual clarity and comparability, future research could examine a broader range of credentialing labels using distinct evaluative frameworks. Additionally, there

was an absence of reliable data on the total number of certified mediums, trance channelers, and trainees across organizations, as such information was not consistently tracked or publicly available, limiting our ability to contextualize the scale of practice.

Of the certifications available for evaluation, several outcomes of interest lacked information, which may have impacted equitable scoring. Scoring may also have been impacted due to the vast differences and lack of standardization in skills testing. Mediumship is a nuanced practice, and both the certification of mediums and the evaluation of certification programs are correspondingly complex. The FFF and the MICMP scored the highest in the skills assessment category. Both programs tested mediums through remote readings, including an off-video step, with sitters unbeknownst to them, using composite scores, weights, and/or bonus points in scoring mediums. Additionally, these programs provided instructions/training to the sitters on specific scoring processes, while neither offered to train mediums before the testing phase. The use of a base score, weights, and bonus points to assess a medium's ability to relay accurate information about the deceased person is consistent with the literature on the need for "criterion-referenced passing points," "verified with documented evidence to confirm the competence of the candidate," and "validity of the pass/fail decision" (Fabrey, 2017, p. 222). In addition, it is to be expected that the accuracy of a reading can reinforce the positive healing effect of a mediumship reading on the bereaved (Beischel et al., 2014). Nearly all programs scored the maximum score in transparency. However, there were vastly varying degrees of depth and detail regarding the full transparency of certification protocols. In hindsight, this category may have benefited from being weighted in the scoring matrix. For instance, even programs that produced a high score in transparency did not publicize full transparency for all the decision points along the certification process. Zemel and Wahbeh (2023) reported that many practicing mediums/trance channelers believe that grief and ethics training should be mandatory for consumer protection. However, based on the available data in this study, no English-speaking certifications currently include formal grief and/or ethics training as part of their certification process. This evaluation category may have benefited from agency interviews to fully explore the possible incorporation of grief sensitivity and ethical considerations (such as discussions, program/membership materials, group communications, etc.), but these did not constitute formal training.

Impact of paid certifications on pass rates and the certification strategy

Notably, paid training and/or paid certifications may impact candidates' pass rates. In this study, organizations with mandatory course completion and paid certifications associated with a higher pass rate included the NSAC and the SNU, while agencies with non-mandatory course completion and

certifications free of charge associated with a lower pass rate included the FFF and the MICM. This pattern could reflect several dynamics. First, paid training programs may better prepare candidates through structured education, thereby increasing competency and pass rates. Second, financial investment may create self-selection effects, where only more committed or experienced candidates pursue certification, or, alternatively, where organizations feel pressure to certify those who have paid for training. Thirdly, differences may reflect fundamentally different certification philosophies: some organizations prioritize rigorous filtering of natural ability (producing lower pass rates), while others emphasize skill development through education (producing higher pass rates after training). Understanding these dynamics is essential for determining whether high pass rates indicate effective training or potentially lowered standards, and conversely whether low pass rates reflect appropriate rigor or inadequate candidate preparation. Future research should examine the relationship between training models, financial structures, pass rates, and, ultimately, the competency and ethical preparedness of certified practitioners in real-world practice.

Establishing collaborative oversight

Any future development of universal certification guidelines and oversight would require some sort of officiating body, and this in turn would require cooperation among existing certifying organizations with diverse histories, philosophies, and stakeholder communities. Potential strategies include forming voluntary consortia or working groups, developing tiered or modular standards to ensure core competencies while allowing flexibility, and maintaining publicly accessible registries of organizations meeting evidence-based criteria. Neutral third-party evaluators could provide ongoing assessment, and piloting standardization within specific domains (e.g., grief support or ethical guidelines) may build trust before comprehensive reform. This could be a major organizational and administrative hurdle in addition to the methodological one addressed in this paper of testing certification practices. The alternative could be to simply supply recommendations to the existing bodies and keep an online record of those in compliance as a guide for the consumer. Standardization may be important, but without adoption by certifying bodies such efforts would have limited practical impact.

Standardizing certification across organizations with differing goals

Religious organizations (e.g., the NSAC and the SNU) integrate certification with theological education, denominational practices, and the testing of mediums, while secular organizations (e.g., the FFF and the MICMP) focus on validated mediumistic skills, and public service. These differences shape program design, with religious programs emphasizing philosophy, liturgical competencies, and mediumship testing, and secular programs largely

emphasizing mediumship testing. Reconciling these priorities is essential: universal standards must respect religious education while ensuring demonstrable skills, ethical practice, and grief-informed care without imposing uniformity or fragmenting the field.

Although research on consumer perspectives regarding certification of mediums/trance channelers is limited, studies of related helping professions suggest that the paying public generally supports regulation and oversight to ensure quality and safety. A systematic review of stakeholder attitudes on the regulation of traditional and complementary medicine practices found that a large majority of consumers in multiple countries support regulation of such practices to protect the public from unqualified or unethical practitioners, with reported consumer support frequently above 60% (Carè et al., 2021). Surveys of psychic service users focus primarily on motivations for seeking services and perceived benefits, rather than attitudes toward certification or oversight (Farhall et al., 2022). These sources indicate that while there is some evidence that consumers value professional standards in broadly analogous domains, no peer-reviewed empirical research has directly surveyed or analyzed how the paying public perceives certification of spiritual medium practitioners. This represents a clear gap in the literature and a useful area for future research.

While scholarly or professional organizations could, in principle, facilitate evaluative or coordinating roles, many such bodies in this field operate on volunteer labor with limited financial and administrative capacity, highlighting the need for dedicated resources if sustainable oversight mechanisms are to be developed.

CONCLUSIONS

Our attempt to identify and evaluate English-speaking medium/trance channeler certifications covered six medium certifications, evaluated over five core components. The highest total aggregate score was given to the SNU, followed by the FFF. There was variety in the quality of descriptive data available for each certification, making it difficult to score in a way that was equitable and reduced bias. Much future work is needed in standardizing medium/trance channeler certifications to ensure public protection, most notably grief training, ethics training, and transparency of more uniform skills assessment protocols.

Corresponding author

JULIETTE GALLO

*Institute of Noetic Sciences
Novato, CA, USA*

Email: juliettegallo14@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0699-7756>

REFERENCES

- Alvarado, C. S. (2010). Investigating mental mediums: Research suggestions from the historical literature. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 24(2), 197–224.
- Beischel, J. (2007). Contemporary methods used in laboratory-based mediumship research. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 71(1), 37–66.
- Beischel, J., Boccuzzi, M., Biuso, M., & Rock, A. J. (2015). Anomalous information reception by research mediums under blinded conditions II: Replication and extension. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 11(2), 136–142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2015.01.001>
- Beischel, J., Mosher, C., & Boccuzzi, M. (2014). The possible effects on bereavement of assisted after-death communication during readings with psychic mediums: A continuing bonds perspective. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 70(2), 169–194. <https://doi.org/10.2190/om.70.2.b>
- Beischel, J., & Zingrone, N. (2015). Mental mediumship. In E. Cardeña, J. Palmer, & D. Marcusson-Clavertz (Eds), *Parapsychology: A handbook for the 21st century* (pp. 301–313). McFarland.
- Olson Media (n.d.) Bob Olson's best psychic directory. <https://bestpsychicdirectory.com>
- Bourguignon, E. (1973). *Religion, altered states of consciousness, and social change*. Ohio State University Press.
- Buckendahl, C. W. (2017). Credentialing: A Continuum of measurement theories, policies, and practices. In S. Davis-Becker & C.W. Buckendahl (Eds), *Testing in the professions: Credentialing policies and practice* (pp. 1–19). Taylor & Francis.
- Carè, J., Steel, A., & Wardle, J. (2021). Stakeholder attitudes to the regulation of traditional and complementary medicine professions: a systematic review. *Human Resources for Health*, 19(1), 42.
- Fabrey, L. J. (2017). Using standards to evaluate credentialing programs. In S. Davis-Becker & C.W. Buckendahl (Eds), *Testing in the professions: Credentialing policies and practice* (pp. 210–227). Taylor & Francis.
- Farhall, J., Pepping, C. A., Cai, R. Y., & Cugnetto, M. L. (2022). Use of psychics for stress and emotional problems: A descriptive survey comparison with conventional providers and informal helpers. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 49(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-021-01166-y>
- Forever Family Foundation (n.d.). Where science and spirituality work hand in hand to bring comfort to the bereaved. <https://www.foreverfamilyfoundation.org>
- Friedrich, J., Cederna, P. S., Fox, C., & Song, D. H. (2024). Transparency in plastic surgery program accreditation. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 13(6), 379–382. <https://doi.org/10.4300/jgme-d-24-00388.1>
- Gattaz, W.F., Costa M.A., Salatino-Oliveira A., Gonçalves D.G., Talib L.L., & Moreira-Almeida A. (2025). Candidate genes related to spiritual mediumship: a whole-exome sequencing analysis of highly gifted mediums. *PMID*, 47, 39874024. <https://doi.org/10.47626/1516-4446-2024-3958>
- Ginsberg, R. (2021). *The medium explosion: A guide to navigating the world of those who claim to communicate with the dead*. Waterside Productions.
- Giron, S. E., Dishman, D., McMullan, S. P., Riel, J., Newcomer, T., Spence, D., & Choudhry, S. A. (2021). Longitudinal assessment: A strategy to improve continuing professional certification. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 37(6), 1140–1148. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2021.09.002>
- Greenfield, S., Osborn, G., & Roberts, S. (2012). From beyond the grave: The legal regulation

- of mediumship. *International Journal of Law in Context*, 8(1), 97–114. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744552311000383>
- Gutierrez, C. (Ed.). (2015). *Handbook of spiritualism and channeling*. Brill.
- Held, L. (2019, March 19). Psychic mediums are the new wellness coaches. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/19/style/wellness-mediums.html>
- Hugh, J. (2022). Design concepts and embodiments. In J. Hugh (Ed.), *Engineering design, planning, and management* (2nd ed., pp. 73–105). Academic Press. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/engineering/score-matrix>
- Hunter, J., & Luke, D. (2014). *Talking with the Spirits: Ethnographies from between the worlds*. Daily Grail Publishing.
- IBIS World (2021, April 18). Industry market research, reports, and statistics: Psychic services in the US industry trends (2016–2021). <https://www.ibisworld.com/united-states/market-research-reports/psychic-services-industry>
- Kane, M. T., Clauser, B. E., & Kane, J. (2017). A validation framework for credentialing tests. In S. Davis-Becker & C. W. Buckendahl (Eds), *Testing in the professions: Credentialing policies and practice* (pp. 20–40). Taylor & Francis.
- Kolsoom, S., McKenna, L., & Davis, J. (2023). The evolution of registration standards for internationally qualified midwives in Australia. *Midwifery*, 119, 103606. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.midw.2023.103606>
- Mark Ireland Certified Mediums (n.d.). Certified mediums. <https://www.findacertifiedmedium.com>
- Mikles, N. L. (2023). Three spirit mediums: A case study on grief, death, and alternative religious traditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Nova Religio*, 27(2), 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2023.27.2.86>
- National Spiritualist Association of Churches (n.d.). National spiritualist association of churches. <https://nsac.org>
- Osborne, G., & Bacon, A. M. (2015). The working life of a medium: a qualitative examination of mediumship as a support service for the bereaved. *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture*, 18(4), 286–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2015.1022520>
- Pelser, D., Chavez, C., Allison, L., Cleppe, V., & Beck Dallaghan, G. L. (2019). Professional development for clerkship administrators: a 16-year overview of the clerkship administrator certificate program. *Medical Education Online*, 25, 1710327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10872981.2019.1710327>
- Peri, K., & Eisenberg, M. J. (2024). The value of board recertification among physicians. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, 15, 595–598. <https://doi.org/10.2147/AMEP.S464360>
- Rock, A., Beischel, J., & Schwartz, G. E. (2008). Thematic analysis of research mediums' experiences of discarnate communication. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 22(2), 179–192.
- Roxburgh, E. C. (2010). *The psychology and phenomenology of spiritualist mental mediumship* (doctoral thesis). University of Northampton.
- Roxburgh, E., & Roe, C. (2011). A survey of dissociation, boundary-thinness, and psychological wellbeing in Spiritualist mental mediumship. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 75(2), 279–299.
- Shay Parker's Best American Psychics (n.d.) Shay Parker's Best American Psychics. <https://bestamericanpsychics.com>
- Spindola?Rodrigues, K. C., Reis, R. de C., de Carvalho, C. M., de Siqueira, S. D. N. L. L., Rocha Neto, A. V., & Almeida, K. J. (2022). Cognitive health and differential cortical functioning in dissociative trance: An explorative study about mediumship. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 874720. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.874720>

- Spiritualists' National Union (n.d.). Embrace the journey of spiritualism. <https://www.snu.org.uk>
- Testoni, I., Pompele, S., Libérale, L., & Tressoldi, P. (2022). Limits and meanings to the challenging territory of mediumship: A qualitative study with grievors. *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 18(3), 97–109.
- Thomas, H. C., Meador, K., Payne, K., & Drolet, B. C. (2021). Interdisciplinary ethics certificate program for graduate medical education trainees. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 13(6), 863–867. <https://doi.org/10.4300/jgme-d-21-00474.1>
- US Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs (2024, April 15). *Canadian man sentenced for operating \$175M psychic mass-mailing fraud scheme* [Press release]. US Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/canadian-man-sentenced-operating-175m-psychic-mass-mailing-fraud-scheme>
- Wahbeh, H., & Butzer, B. (2020). Characteristics of English-speaking trance channelers. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 16(5), 304–09. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2020.02.002>
- Wahbeh, H., Cannard, C., Okonsky, J., & Delorme, A., (2019). A physiological examination of perceived incorporation during trance. *F1000 Research*, 8, 67. <https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.17157.2>
- Wahbeh, H., Radin, D., Mossbridge, J., Vieten, C., & Delorme, A., (2018). Exceptional experiences reported by scientists and engineers. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 14(5), 329–341. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2018.05.002>
- Wilde, D. J., Murray, J., Doherty, P., & Murray, C. D. (2019). Mental health and mediumship: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 22(3), 261–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2019.1606186>
- Windbridge Research Center (n.d.). Frequently asked questions. <https://www.windbridge.org/faq/>
- Zemel, S. K., & Wahbeh, H. (2023). Ethical readiness and professionalization among mediums and channelers in the United States. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 87(2), 151–167.
- Zemel, S. K., & Wahbeh, H. (2025). Code of ethics for mediums and channelers. *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, 21(3). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.explore.2025.103159>

RESEARCH NOTE: FOOTNOTES TO THE CHASE VAULT MYSTERY AT CHRIST CHURCH, BARBADOS

BY BRIAN RIDOUT

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, a review of the Barbados Chase Vault mystery, concerning coffins that were repeatedly thrown around in a sealed vault, allegedly by supernatural activity, was published in the *JSPR* (Ridout, 2018).

The latest contribution to the mystery is an academic study published in the journal *Folklore*, which attempts to explain the story in a socio-cultural context (Finneran & Welch, 2020). These authors conclude that the story was most likely fabricated or embellished by Lord Combermere, governor of the island, to justify anti-Obeah legislation and increased internal surveillance. If the disturbances did occur as described, then they would either have been deliberately undertaken as an expression of hatred by the enslaved population against the ruling planter class, or desecration by Combermere's own people to reinforce his actions.

The conclusion that the coffins story is fictitious was previously reached by the American professional paranormal investigator, sceptic, and prolific author Joe Nickell, after a 2-year investigation (Nickell, 1982). He believed that there were only two potential explanations for the mystery. These were floodwater, which he showed to be hydrologically impossible with the aid of the senior engineer from the Barbados Waterworks Department, or the story was an invention. He concluded that the tale was an "allegory relating to the 'secret vault' of Freemasonry" (Nickell, 1982, p. 86). His reasoning for the story being a myth was strongly influenced by various inconsistencies in the early accounts. He found it "a challenge to find two accounts of the tale that agree" (Nickell, 1982, p. 51).

These notes are intended to consider whether such inconsistencies can be explained and removed to leave a consistent account. If this is possible, then does the original evidence support dismissing the mystery as a myth or a hoax? If it can be demonstrated that the events did occur, and without human intervention, then the explanation must either be paranormal or some physical cause not considered by the earlier investigators.

Belief in poltergeist activity has always centred on the supposedly cruel Thomas Chase and his suicidal daughter. It is therefore relevant to ask what contemporary newspapers and archives can tell us about this man's character.

Ridout (2018) provided a physical explanation based on two phenomena, one of which was only recognized in the late 1950s. The first of these was the instability of lead-encased coffins because of bulging caused by generated gases. However, two coffins with slightly bowed surfaces, one on top of the other, would not move unless there was an applied force. The force suggested in the 2018 paper was a lightning-induced magnetic field.

This current paper contributes a detailed account of a lightning strike as an example of the power generated and its potential magnetic consequences.

ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS AND TRANSCRIPTION ERRORS

The first task must be to retrieve the original story from the errors and extravagancies accrued by frequent retelling.

The original written account was a note by Nathan Lucas, who was Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas in Barbados, and the parish priest, the Reverend Thomas Orderson. Both were present on 18 April 1820 at the last opening of the vault at the instigation of Lord Combermere, the governor of Barbados, when the vault entrance was found to be undisturbed, but the lead-encased coffins it contained were in disarray, with one nearly upright against the back wall.

Lucas asked Orderson for the history of the various disturbances, which he supplied as a written document, with a sketch showing the position of the coffins at the last internment in 1819 and the scene when the vault was opened in 1820. Lucas copied the Orderson account into his journal and incorporated the drawings.

The Lucas journal, containing the eyewitness accounts, is one of 35 volumes written by Lucas that were eventually deposited in the Barbados Public Library. However, the deteriorated condition of the volumes means that they have been unavailable to researchers for many decades. A transcription was published (Lucas, 1945), but copying was apparently a difficult task because the handwriting was badly faded (Handler, 2019), and it is possible that the original is now no longer legible. However, the volumes were microfilmed by a mobile unit from the University of the West Indies in 1960, and the film may still be available in the reference section of the library. This has not been viewed, and enquiries have not been answered, but research for these notes has now located an earlier transcription, and examination of the original is no longer necessary. These two transcriptions, made 40 years apart, confirm the existence and wording of the original account.

The earlier transcription was made by the Honourable Forster M. Alleyne of Porters, Barbados (Alleyne, 1908), who first found the Lucas journal account of the story.

Alleyne had heard about the mystery from Sir Robert Boucher Clarke, who had been an eyewitness in 1820, and he also found a reference in family correspondence. He became determined to prove that the events had occurred.

He searched the church burial register, church records, and contemporary newspapers, but found no reference, although he made the following useful comment (Alleyne, 1908, p. 30):

for I had only discovered several old copies of lists of the internments, evidently furnished by Dr Orderson, with comments on the disturbances among the coffins.

This refers to copies of the Orderson account that was incorporated into the Lucas manuscript (Lucas, 1945). We know this because Alleyne sent two of the copies to Andrew Lang, the folklorist, in England, who compared them with a third published copy in a paper he read to the Folklore Society in 1907. He found inconsistencies and errors (Lang, 1907), which subsequently led Gould (1928) to conclude that Orderson had grown weary of providing copies for the curious, and made mistakes. Nickell (1982) suggested that the available accounts of the story now had to be treated with caution, probably because they were an invention.

However, Orderson left Barbados in 1833, decades before the story was widely publicized. More convincingly, one of the copies, which also contained the additional information that the vault was finally opened because of noises heard in the night, was accompanied by a sketch showing all the coffins reversed when the vault was opened in 1820. This is the arrangement of the coffins frequently found in publications, but it is an impossible elaboration, added in later accounts by the dramatist Robert Reece, and dates the drawing to the 1860s (see the section ‘Early accounts and “improvements”’).

Orderson’s notes on the burials were certainly copied and circulated by the Reece family. The published versions (De Morgan, 1860; Redding, 1860; Reece, 1864, 1865) all began with the same statement: “the following details are copied from the original document, now in my possession under the hand of my reverend friend the late Rector- the Reverend Thomas Harrison Orderson” (Redding, 1860, p. 10). Redding stated that the copy she used was in the form of a pamphlet privately printed some years earlier by Robert Reece (there were three generations of sons called Robert).

Alleyne apparently despaired of finding an authentic account, but then heard that Nathan Lucas had been present in 1820 and that some of his manuscript volumes were in the possession of Mr Edward Racker, proprietor of the *Agricultural Reporter*. Racker lent him the volume containing the coffin mystery, which he confirms was in the handwriting of Nathan Lucas.

Alleyne announced his finding of an authentic contemporary account in the *Barbados Agricultural Reporter* for 8 September 1907. He then made a transcription that appeared as a *West India Committee Circular* on 21 January 1908 (Alleyne, 1908) and was repeated in *The Mirror (Trinidad and Tobago)* for 6 February 1908.

The two transcriptions of the Lucas account (i.e., Alleyne, 1908; Lucas, 1945) are identically worded, but the 1908 one contains an important omission that has added to the confusion in subsequent accounts.

The 1908 version states (Alleyne, 1908, p. 31):

Jul 6th 1812, Dorcas Chase, daughter of the Honble Thomas Chase was buried in the same vault. Upon the vault being opened for her reception, the two leaden coffins where evidently removed from the situation in which they had been placed.

The problem with this is that there had only been two burials up to that date, and one was without a lead covering. The presence or absence of more than one lead-covered coffin is central to the only practical explanation for the mystery.

The 1945 transcription reads (Lucas, 1945, p. 57):

Jul 6th 1812, Dorcas Chase, daughter of the Honble Thomas Chase was buried in the same vault; *and the two other coffins were in their proper places. August 9th 1812 the Honble Thomas Chase was buried in the same vault.* Upon the vault being opened for his reception, the two leaden coffins where evidently removed from the situation in which they had been placed.

The section in italics was accidentally omitted from the 1908 transcription, thus missing out the burial of Thomas Chase. This version, published in a *West India Committee Circular*, was used by Sir Algenon Aspinall, who was secretary to the committee, in his accounts of the story (Aspinall 1912, 1914, 1945) and Conan Doyle (1919) in his 'Law of the Ghost'. The latter also contained imaginative but unsubstantiated details that the story had accrued through popular retelling. 'Law of the Ghost' was published in *The Strand Magazine*, which Conan Doyle's various stories (particularly about Sherlock Holmes) helped make one of the most popular and widely read magazines in the Britain, thus helping to spread a muddled coffin mystery.

EARLY ACCOUNTS AND 'IMPROVEMENTS'

The first mention (rather than transcription) of the coffins mystery in print is in Sir James Alexander's (1833) *Transatlantic Sketches*. His introduction to volume one informed us that, being temporarily without a regiment in 1831, he embarked on a journey from England to British Guiana (now Guyana), then across the West Indies to North America. The purpose was to undertake commissions for the Royal Geographical Society and other bodies.

He stated that he stayed for 2 weeks in Barbados, which was probably towards the end of 1831. His account of the coffins story contained correct dates for the various internments, and has therefore come from a written source and not an entirely verbal one. Lucas had died in 1828, but Orderson remained at Christ Church until June 1833 (Shilstone, 1958), and seems to have retained a copy of the notes he sent to Lucas. If, as seems probable, Alexander consulted Orderson, then we can probably accept the conclusion repeated by later authors (starting with Schomburgk, 1844) that sand was scattered on the floor of the vault to detect footprints. Nickell (1982) doubted this because he notes that Alexander's wording is "the floor was of sand" (Alexander, 1833, p. 96) rather

than ‘sanded’. However, the floor is cut down into limestone, and so if it was sand, then this must have been added.

Unfortunately, Alexander (1833, p. 96) concluded: “the last time the vault was opened was in 1819, Lord Combermere was then present”. This should have been 1820, and the mistaken date confuses the last internment (in 1819, which he lists) with Combermere’s visit, which was prompted by his being informed of the events at a local lunch party (Lucas, 1945). This mistake has muddled the story in many subsequent accounts by suggesting that Combermere was present on both occasions.

Popular dramatic details that thousands congregated when the vault was opened on a pre-arranged date, and the immense coffin of Thomas Chase was leaning on end against the door so that entry was nearly impossible, are provided in Lord Combermere’s memoirs (Combermere, 1866). This might have been an important eyewitness account, but the memoirs were compiled by his third wife after his death in 1865. In September 1873, an extract from these, concerning the Chase vault, was published in *The Spiritualist*, and prompted an angry response from S. L. Cussons (1873), who stated that the story had been lifted from her published pamphlet *Death Deeds* without her permission. This pamphlet had been published under the initials of her previous name, K. R. (Redding, 1860).

The mystery had been told to Cussons by a “medical gentleman, a native of Barbados then residing in England” (Redding, 1860, p. 12), and the details had been corroborated directly by Lord Combermere, to whom she had sent a copy of the pamphlet.

The “medical gentleman” who told her the story may have been the younger Robert Reece, who studied medicine in England before becoming a successful dramatist. She was certainly told an interesting tale. Her detailed description of the vault is imaginary, and her description of the scene in 1820 is picturesque. For example (Redding, 1860, p. 10):

The old church standing forth in sombre relief, as if a connecting link between the living and the dead, made the scene altogether one that beggared description, while, perhaps, its peculiar interest was in the death-like silence of mute anxiety and superstitious awe.

Combermere’s involvement in this pamphlet is interesting. Redding notes in *Death Deeds* that she wrote to him seeking permission to quote him as an authority for the story, also probably for his recollections. He responded by sending her a copy of the short account from Schomburgk’s (1844) *History of Barbados*, which he presumably thought was an accurate summary of events. His name is on Schomburgk’s list of subscribers to the book, and so it is possible that Combermere provided the original information if Schomburgk had asked for recollections from his time as governor of the island. Redding appended this account to her pamphlet, but because it didn’t corroborate her exotic story,

she notes “but we regret the historian was not better acquainted with many of the most important facts before submitting them to public criticism” (Redding, 1860, p. 15).

Schomburgk mentions the events that prompted the 1820 visit to the vault, which agrees with that of Nathan Lucas (see below). Schomburgk (1844, p. 220) writes: “Lord Combermere was residing in 1820 in the neighbourhood of the church, and having been told of the mysterious circumstances, he made unexpectedly an application to the Rector to have the vault re-opened”. So, no prearranged date and time for thousands of onlookers to assemble, and there is no mention of a visit by Combermere in 1819. He only heard about the problem in 1820.

Schomburgk stated that one of the larger coffins had turned around and was blocking the entrance, which is consistent with the Reece drawing from *Death Deeds* (Figure 1). That drawing also shows an upright coffin, and Lucas (1945, p. 58) asks, “how could one of the leaden coffins be set up on end against the wall?” The drawing identifies the coffin as that of Thomas Chase, but this is highly unlikely because of the vault height (Ridout, 2018), and it was probably one of the children. However, *Death Deeds* combined Schomburgk’s statement with the Reece drawing in a dramatic account of how the ‘massive’ coffin of Thomas Chase stood on end against the entrance door, and this detail will be found in most versions of the mystery. The story is impossible because the vault was closed at the top of the entrance steps with a horizontal marble slab and at the bottom with a double brick wall. The entrance is also on the east side of the vault, which in Christian tradition is the direction the feet should face, so that the deceased can rise up and face towards Christ at the Second Coming. This means that the upright coffin must be against the back wall.

An important ‘improvement’ found in most accounts of the mystery from 1860 to the present day is the reversal of all the coffins (Figure 2). This commences in accounts attributable to Robert Reece junior, the popular Victorian dramatist (De Morgan, 1860, Redding, 1860, Reece, 1864, 1865). There is no obvious reason for this except to make the story more dramatic. The space available in the vault makes the reversal impossible, and certainly not without causing considerable damage to the brick vault lining, which is still in good condition (Ridout, 2018).

In the decades that followed, the story continued to accrue imagination. Conan Doyle, whose influence in spreading a story must have been considerable, had the “whole island convulsed” with the story and Combermere, on his 1820 visit, accompanied by “a formidable official party” (Conan Doyle, 1919, pp. 553–554).

Thus, the problem of finding two versions of the story that agree can be traced to a few early transcription errors and several imaginative additions. If the sources of these are demonstrated and they are removed, then the story cannot be dismissed because of inconsistency. The version that emerges, shorn

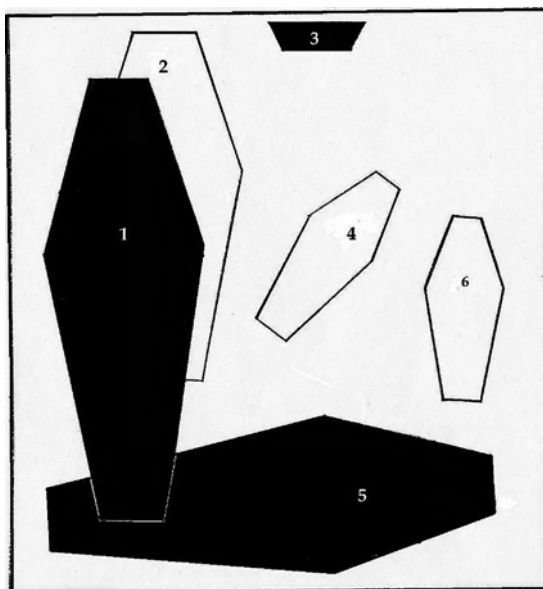
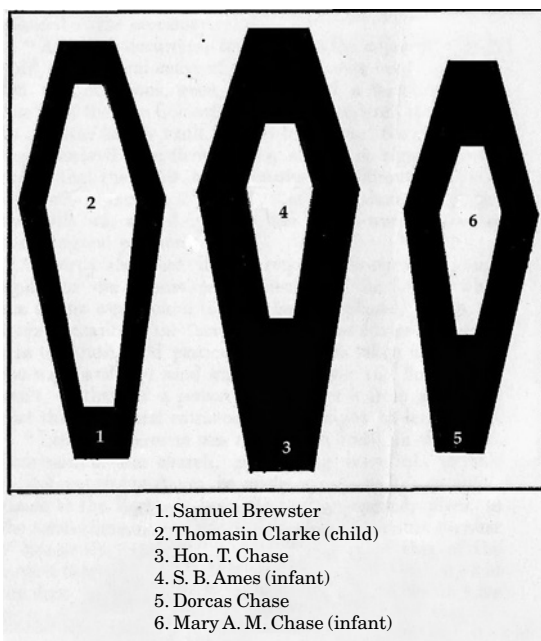


Figure 1. The first Reece drawings from Death Deeds, showing the positions of the coffins as left at the last internment in 1819 and as found during Lord Combermere's impromptu inspection in 1820. These seem to have been copied or adapted from the original Finch drawing by Robert Reece the barrister.

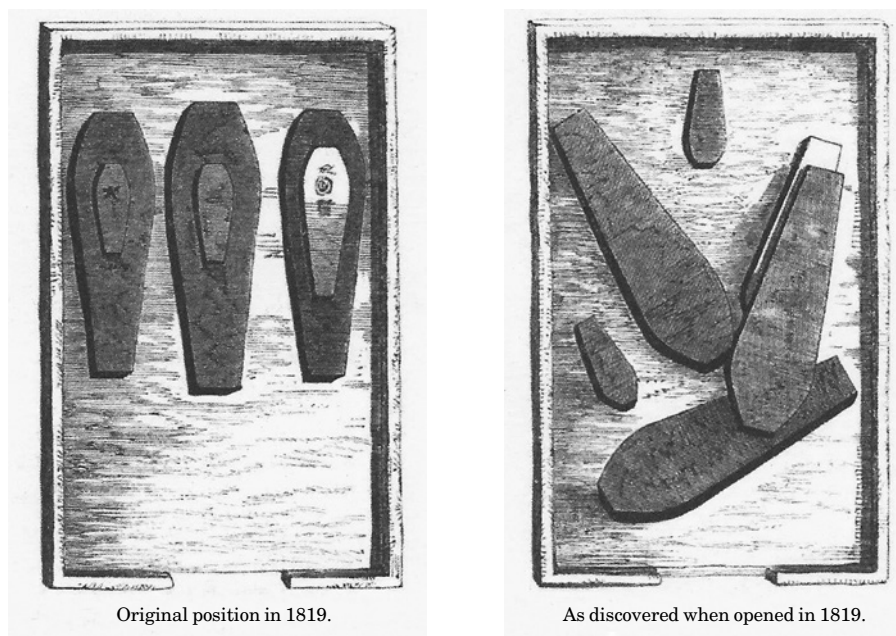


Figure 2. 'Original' and 'as discovered' drawings (Reece, 1865) by Robert Reece the dramatist (son of Robert Reece the barrister) showing the impossible reversed coffins, which have become the usual way of illustrating the Chase vault mystery.

of its inaccuracies and trimmings, is the account assembled from the two transcriptions of the inaccessible Lucas (1945) volume. The following account provides a summary.

In 1807, the Chase family applied to the Rector of Christ Church to use an empty vault that had belonged to the Elliot family, and the remains of Thomasina Goddard were interred in a wooden coffin. An infant, Mary Chase, was then added in February 1808, followed by Dorcas Chase in July 2012. These coffins were encased in lead, which would be typical for a vault burial. The massive coffin of Thomas Chase was added 1 month later, and the lead coffins had been disturbed—the infant's coffin having been tossed from the northeast corner to the opposite angle where it was head down. They were replaced in their proper positions.

In September 1816, the vault was opened again for another infant, and in November 1816 for Samuel Brewster. Both were in lead-covered coffins, and on both occasions the other lead coffins had moved.

The final interment was the wooden coffin containing Thomasina Clarke in July 1819. There was considerable confusion within the vault, and the wooden coffin of Mrs Goddard (which was probably partially decayed after 12 years) had fallen apart and was tied together between Miss Clarke's coffin and the wall.

In April 1820, Stapelton Cotton, First Viscount Combermere, accompanied by Roland Cotton (probably his young cousin Roland Edward) and Nathan Lucas, visited Elridge's Plantation near the church, to have lunch with Robert Boucher Clarke. The coffins mystery came up in conversation, and Combermere evidently thought, as governor, that it was appropriate to investigate. He sent for the Reverend Orderson, who met them at the vault together with Combermere's aide-de-camp, Major Finch. Lucas (1945, p. 56) adds the following:

On our arrival at the vault every outward appearance was perfect; not a blade of grass or stone touched; indeed collusion or deception was impossible; for neither ourselves nor the [workmen, they had taken '8 or 10'] knew anything of the matter; for the subject had hardly started in conversation before we set out for the inspection and the Church Yard cannot exceed half a mile from Eldridge's.

'Private marks' had been made in the mortar around the entrance slab to detect interference, and these had not been disturbed, but the coffins were in disarray. There were no footprints on the sand that had been scattered on the floor. Major Finch was instructed to make a drawing of the coffin positions, and then they were buried elsewhere.

The Lucas account, a section within a contemporary manuscript book in the handwriting of one of the witnesses to the event, demonstrates that the disturbances in the vault occurred. The two nearly identically worded transcriptions, made nearly 40 years apart, confirm the wording of the account, which (though the volume is extant) is no longer available for study. The omitted text in the first transcription that was replaced in the second demonstrates that the 1945 transcription was not just a copy of the 1908.

DID THE EVENTS REALLY HAPPEN?

The view discussed by Nickell (1982) and Finneran and Welch (2020), that the events never happened, would imply that Judge Lucas and the Reverend Orderson (who both provided the account) were inventive or deceived.

If the story was fabricated, then the other material within the thirty-five manuscript volumes requires consideration. Much of this concerns government administration and legislation. For example, Lucas transcribed all the surviving minutes of council meetings from the 17th and 18th centuries, material that has proved invaluable to historians (Handler, 2019). Judge Lucas seems to have been a meticulous man. Why would he and the parish priest invent a story, with a drawing, for his personal journal? It is unlikely that both Lucas and Orderson were deceived or colluded to fabricate such a story. Hence, it is more likely that the events occurred as they were reported.

If, unknown to Lucas and Orderson, the burials were deliberately disturbed, then the problem is still complicated. A team of men with a cask of cement for reinstatement would have to remove a large and heavy marble slab (1 m × 2 m) at the top of the stairs to the vault and a double brick wall at the bottom. Orderson notes the following in the Lucas (1945, p. 57) manuscript:

the descent into it [the vault] is covered with a large block of blue Devonshire marble, which will take some hours to be removed and replaced in its proper situation. It will take at least four able men to move the stone.

This task would have to be repeated four times between 1812 and 1820 without anyone noticing—particularly the Reverend Orderson, who presumably visited his church every day. It would also have been a very random statement, either by the enslaved people or Combermere's men, because its discovery relied on somebody dying, which might not have happened again for 10 years.

If the events actually happened and there was no human interference, then the only possibilities are a metaphysical cause, or a physical cause that earlier investigators did not think of.

THOMAS CHASE AND POLTERGEISTS

Thomas Chase, buried in 1812, became the central figure in the alleged poltergeist activity that has been the popular explanation for the coffin disturbances over the last 200 years.

His alleged involvement was explained by the Victorian dramatist Robert Reece, who suggested that Chase's eldest daughter Dorcas had starved herself to death because of her father's cruelty and that he had then killed himself. Reece (1864, p. 137) describes him as "of evil disposition, violent and intemperate". Contemporary opinion was, he informs us, that those who died of natural causes cannot tolerate the coffins of suicides in their vault, and there must be vigorous attempts at expulsion. Subsequent accounts have all accepted this assessment of Thomas Chase. The account provided by Curran (2013) and used by Finneran and Welch (2020) adds that he was the most hated man on the island.

One of the 'Laws of the Ghost' that Conan Doyle (1919, p. 547) deduced was that "a physical basis is needed for every physical manifestation". The physical basis he inferred for the coffin mystery was the "trapped effluvia" of the men struggling fearfully to open, rearrange, and re-seal the vault. He then discussed, although with no particular reference to the vault, how another form might be unused vitality from a life cut short by murder or suicide. Gould (1928), having applied the Sherlock Holmes dictum of removing all other possibilities, considered that Conan Doyle's residual life force theory needed to be taken seriously as an explanation for the Chase vault mystery. He seemed less attracted to the effluvia theory.

The suicide story, reported by Reece and considered by Gould, has the basic problem that suicide was a crime (i.e., *felo de se* = felon of himself), and both Dorcas and Thomas would have been denied burial in consecrated ground. This denial was not repealed until the Burial of Suicides Act of 1823. Nevertheless, it could be argued that his evil temperament, even if there were no suicides involved, induced some form of paranormal energy in the sealed vault. It is therefore necessary to consider the character of the Hon. Colonel Thomas Chase.

Various contemporary mentions of him in the National Archives at Kew, and surviving copies of the *Barbados Mercury and Bridge-Town Gazette (BMBTG)* provide some information about his life.

Thomas Chase was a member of the House of Assembly, and at a general assembly at the town hall on 5 April 1803 he took the oath as an elected representative for Christ Church Parish (Privy Council Office, 1803).

Later that year, a vacancy occurred in His Majesty's seven-man Legislative Council of Barbados, and Thomas Chase was proposed by the other council members (Letterbook, 1803a). This was accepted by the king on the 27 June 1803 "At the Court at the Queen's Palace", where he was judged to be a "fit person to fulfil the vacancy" (Letterbook, 1803b). He could now call himself The Honourable Thomas Chase.

There was considerable concern during the early years of the 19th century that the war with France, which had spread to some of the Caribbean Islands, might lead to an invasion of Barbados. The *BMBTG* for 19 April 1808 reports on a meeting of freeholders and parishioners at Christ Church Parish Church on 12 April (Volunteer Association of Christ Church Parish, 1808). They agreed that it was necessary to establish an Association of Volunteer Military Corps, and it was unanimously agreed that Thomas Chase should be Colonel of the Militia. The resolution was signed by all one hundred and sixty-five people present.

On 3 October 1807, a notice appeared that creditors and debtors of the estates of Thomazin Goddard and Richard Nurse should apply to the chambers of Thomas Chase, who was the qualified executor (Chase, 1807).

In December of that year, he presided as Chief Justice at the Court of Grand Session. The *BMBTG* for 17 December 1808 quoted his address to the grand jury verbatim (Court of Grand Session, 1808). He then presided over a long calendar of murders and lesser crimes.

The *BMBTG* for 10 October 1809 carried an invitation from him in his role as Chairman of the Charitable English Society. This invited all members, Englishmen, and their dependents, together with other loyal British subjects, to a dinner at Free-Mason's Hall to celebrate the fiftieth year of the king's reign (Chase, 1809).

Finally, on 24 June 1812, a note was sent to the Earl of Liverpool at the Privy Council, reporting that Mr Chase had retired from the Legislative Council because of "exceeding ill health which unfits him from all business" (Letterbook, 1812).

This is the period when, according to Reece, he was behaving so cruelly to his daughter Dorcas that she killed herself the following month. He died later that year, and there are no reasons to suppose that either of them killed themselves.

So, instead of a hated evil man, steeped in debauchery, who drove his daughter to suicide and then killed himself, we have a different person. This one was a respected member of the Legislative Council, lawyer and high court

judge, whom his local community turned to for leadership of their militia at a time of potential crisis. His treatment of his enslaved African people is not indicated, but it is probable that it was no better or worse than that of his other contemporary plantation owners.

His reputation seems to have been traduced to make the story more ‘gothic’, and this version continued to expand to support supposed poltergeist activity as an explanation for the mystery.

MODERN PHYSICS OFFERS AN EXPLANATION

The conviction that the Chase vault events did not happen also developed because of the difficulty in finding a rational cause and a disinclination to believe in evil forces capable of moving very heavy lead-encased coffins. However, the physical forces they considered were only those familiar to them—i.e., floodwater or earthquake.

But in the late 1950s a new discipline, the magnetic survey, using a magnetometer to detect variations in Earth’s magnetic field, was developed (Fassbinder, 2016). This allowed archaeologists to map buried features such as kilns, hearths, ditches, and wall foundations, which possessed different magnetic properties from the surrounding soil. Soon, anomalies were found, and further investigation showed many of these to be caused by lightning-induced magnetic fields. A lightning strike generates a colossal amount of energy, which spreads out as it dissipates, generating a massive magnetic field. This causes permanent magnetization in soils and rocks containing magnetic minerals, which is known as lightning-induced remanent magnetism (Bevan, 2009).

Subterranean damage caused by lightning is now a well-established phenomenon. For example, there has been considerable concern in recent decades about damage to underground pipes carrying oil and gas. Electromagnetic fields from nearby lightning strikes create voltage differences between the pipes and the surrounding soil. The consequences are complex, but can include the breakdown of protective coatings, meltdown, pinhole damage, and explosions (Rabbani, 2021).

An interesting example of the potential power and magnetic consequences of a lightning strike was described by a passenger onboard the packet ship *New York*, from New York to Liverpool in April 1827. Details were recorded because it was hoped that they might be useful in understanding lightning and reinforce the advisability of lightning rods on ships. These observations were published in the *Evening Mail* for 21 May 1827 (‘Tremendous Storm at Sea’, 1827):

The lightning, having struck the main-royal mast head, shattered the mast head and descending thence penetrated the deck into one of the store rooms, the bulkheads and fittings of which were completely demolished. Then separating, one section was conducted by a leaden tube to the side of the ship through which it passed out between wind and water starting [igniting] the ends of three five-inch planks. Another portion from the store room penetrating into the lady’s cabin shivered to

atoms the plate of a large mirror leaving the frame untouched. From the looking glass to the piano forte was an easy transition; it touched the instrument with no delicate impulse dismounting it and leaving it out of tune. Thence it passed through the entire length of the after- cabin and out through the stern window.

Fortunately, this lightning strike occurred at 5 a.m. No one was injured, but the ship was on fire. However, the rain was falling so heavily that they had no difficulty bringing the fire under control.

The captain was worried about further storms, and had a lightning conductor on board that he had not installed. This consisted of a 1.2 m “well-polished and pointed” rod of iron 1.25 cm in thickness. It was attached to an iron chain of similar thickness with 0.6 m links hooked together. The rod protruded 0.6 m above the main mast, and the other end was propped out on an oar over the stern of the ship by about 3 m and down into the sea. This conductor was hauled to the masthead, and lightning struck again at 2 p.m. (‘Tremendous Storm at Sea’, 1827):

A ball of fire seemed to dart down before us. Those on deck agreed that the whole ship seemed to be in a blaze from the vividness of the principal flash which they distinctly saw darting down the conductor and agitating the water. All parts of the ship, as before, were filled with smoke and smelling of sulphur.

The ship survived and no one was injured, but the chain conductor was in pieces, scattered over the deck. “The pointed rod was found to be fused, shortened by several inches and covered over with a dark coating; some of the links had been snapped off and others melted” (‘Tremendous Storm at Sea’, 1827).

The correspondent also noted (‘Tremendous Storm at Sea’, 1827):

It affected the polarity of all the compasses causing them to vary from the true point and between each other. They gradually resumed a bearing which we have steered, although still three points out as we have discovered.

All the steel parts of the ship’s chronometers and passengers’ pocket watches were found to have been magnetized.

The piano is a good example of the power generated by the lightning strike. The considerable weight and instability of upright pianos made them a significant potential hazard in rough seas, and they had to be firmly secured. Use of the word ‘dismounted’ by the correspondent indicates that the instrument could still be detached and was not bolted to the ship’s structure. It may have been fastened with metal hooks and eye plates, as commonly used for other maritime applications, but whatever the arrangement, it should have been immovable. Nevertheless, the lightning strike managed to detach it from its fastenings.

On 21 February 1828, T. Trail Stewart MD, whose sentence construction suggests was probably the original correspondent, read a detailed account of the incident to the Royal Society that was subsequently published in the *Journal*

of the *Franklyn Society*. Amongst the extra information he provides, he notes that the piano was “thrown down, its top torn off and broken in pieces” (Trail Stewart, 1828, p. 64).

However, the most useful additional information in his report concerns the ship’s damage inspection when it docked at Liverpool. There, it was found that a colossal magnetic field had been induced by the lightning strikes (Trail Stewart, 1828, p. 65):

Every instrument made of steel, such as the carpenter’s tools and the knives and forks; and also, those made of soft iron, even to the very nails in every part of the ship, had been rendered permanently magnetic. All the watches and chronometers, were either stopped or rendered useless.

In the Barbados coffin problem, if there was a lightning rod attached to a thick wire or chain running down the wall of the tower to an earthing rod in the soil, then this would be analogous to the metal fittings on the ship’s main mast yard (main-top-sail tie) and the ‘iron chain’ tie running down from the mast head to the deck. This, Trail Stewart found, had transmitted the lightning.

A lightning rod on the church tower unfortunately cannot be demonstrated, and so it is pertinent to set this uncertainty into context by enquiring how much lightning contributed to natural disasters in Barbados during the last half of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. Schomburgk (1844) provides some information in his *The History of Barbados*. He quotes a witness account containing the following description of a hurricane that destroyed the Parish Church in Christchurch on 10 October 1780: “The howling of the tempest; the noise of descending torrents from clouds supercharged with rain; the incessant flashing of lightning; the roaring of thunder; the continual crash of falling houses” (Schomburgk, 1844, p. 46).

The church was rebuilt with the one which concerns this story, but this was destroyed in 1831. His witness account of that storm reads: “The upper regions were from this time illuminated by incessant lightning, but the quivering sheet of blaze was surpassed in brilliancy by the darting of electric fire which exploded in every direction” (Schomburgk, 1844, p. 57).

Schomburgk’s descriptions of storms between those dates are peppered with lightning and, whilst most of the destruction to buildings was undoubtedly caused by the hurricane force winds, a contribution from the lightning cannot be excluded. He notes: “there is perhaps no other island in the West Indian Archipelago where thunderstorms are so frequent and attended by so much damage, as Barbados” (Schomburgk, 1844, p. 63).

So, there was certainly justification for installing one of Benjamin Franklin’s lightning rods, which had been available since 1752. However, their use on some churches was delayed because there was initially ecclesiastical concern that protecting churches against lightning was blasphemous, being contrary to

God's will (Ridout, 2018). The prevailing opinion in Barbados by the end of the 18th century is unknown.

Whilst the presence of a lightning rod, either installed when the church was constructed or as a later addition, cannot be confirmed, such a possibility is certainly plausible and provides a potentially more parsimonious interpretation of events.

The rod, together with its connecting chain and earthing rod, would conduct the vast current generated by lightning strikes into the ground. The current would radiate out until it reached the brick-lined vault and the lead-encased coffins.

A massive magnetic field would have been induced in the ground and vault, as it was in the ship, but lead does not become permanently magnetized like steel and iron. However, in the fraction of a second that the current flowed, the lead-encased coffins would become magnets. Because they were all orientated in the same direction, the charge at either end of each coffin would be the same, and like charges repel. However, a second mechanism is required before the larger coffins can move.

Gould (1928) emphatically rejected lightning and the gases generated by decomposition as possible solutions to the mystery. However, Captain Milner, who was in Barbados in 1856 and dined with "one of the witnesses" to the 1820 vault opening (who could only be Sir Robert Boucher Clarke, who introduced the story to Foster Alleyne), wrote that "the general idea was, that the gases generated in the coffins were the moving cause" (Milner, 1865, p. 196). This suggests that the potential problem was familiar.

Gases generated in lead-encased coffins certainly could cause instability by bowing the surfaces, so that they could easily swivel, particularly if one distorted coffin was placed upon another. Walker (1839, p. 58) noted in his *Gatherings from Churchyards*, that the 'bulging out' of the surface might mean that "the coffin may be turned around on its axis by the slightest touch of the finger". Sometimes, in Britain, coffins had to be tapped to prevent them from bursting, but this was not part of the Barbados burial practice, where the coffins were encased in lead at the graveside (Lucas, 1945).

Gould was probably correct that, under normal circumstances, gases generated inside the coffins should not cause them to move. However, the coffins, placed in three slightly unstable pairs, with a smaller one on top of a larger, could dislodge or swivel under the influence of an induced magnetic field. The consequences would vary with their weight, amount of distortion, and the space available. Thus, an external force would move the coffins around without disturbing private marks around the entrance slab to the vault, or leaving more than scuff marks on the sanded floor.

DISCUSSION

Nickell (1982), having examined all the documentation he could obtain, and considering all possible explanations, concluded that the story was a Masonic

analogy. His determination that the events did not occur was helped both by the discrepancies in the various accounts and by the lack of contemporary records, as previously noted by Alleyne (1908) in the introduction to his Lucas manuscript transcription.

However, Nickell missed the alternative conclusion, that the impact of the events at the vault on the people of Barbados has been greatly exaggerated by subsequent storytellers. There were not thousands of anxious spectators at the 1820 vault opening; there were the four members of a local lunch party, the parish priest, and the governor's aide-de-camp.

Similarly, Finneran and Welch (2020) were led astray by this storytelling, choosing a modern, inaccurate account as their basis for deducing a gothic, political explanation. However, if Combermere had designed the story to reinforce his anti-Obeah legislation, as they suggest, then he surely would have ensured that it was better disseminated. The events at the vault did not achieve much publicity until the 1860s, years after they would have served any useful purpose. The moving coffins presumably created a little local disquiet, but the notion that the population was panicked by the mystery is not supported by any evidence.

CONCLUSIONS

The strange events at the Chase vault, during the second decade of the 19th century, were documented by Judge Lucas and the Reverend Orderson, who were both witnesses at the final opening in 1820. There are no reasons to question the accuracy of their account, but it became so exaggerated that its veracity has been doubted. Similarly, the most important witness in 1820 was probably Lord Combermere, Governor of Barbados, and he endorsed Robert Schomburgk's version of events, rather than the dramatic story incorporated into his posthumous memoirs by his wife in 1866. Schomburgk's version was the same, though abridged, as the story recorded by Lucas and Orderson.

When all the transcription errors and embellishments are removed, the basic story is still extraordinary—coffins were thrown about in a sealed vault without any indications of human involvement.

The possible explanation for the Chase vault mystery offered here (as in Ridout, 2018) is a combination of physical causes that earlier commentators did not think of or dismissed. That is, an induced magnetic field, resulting from the earthing of lightning strikes on the adjacent church tower, acting on lead-encased coffins that were slightly unstable because of surface distortion caused by gases generated inside them.

Corresponding author

BRIAN RIDOUT

Email: consultants@ridoutassociates.co.uk

REFERENCES

- Alleyne, F. (1908, January 21). The Barbados coffin story. *West India Committee Circular*, pp. 29–32.
- Alexander, J. (1833). *Transatlantic sketches*. Richard Bentley.
- Aspinall, A. (1912). *West Indian tales of old*. Duckworth.
- Aspinall, A. (1914). The pocket guide to the West Indies. Rand McNally.
- Aspinall, A. (1945). An unsolved Barbados mystery. *Journal of the Barbados Museum Historical Society*, 12(3), 126–131.
- Bevan, B. (2009). The magnetic anomaly of a lightning strike. *Fast Times*, 14(1), 61–64.
- Chase, T. (1807, October 3). New advertisements. *Barbados Mercury and Bridge-Town Gazette*.
- Chase, T. (1809, October 10). Charitable English society. *Barbados Mercury and Bridge-Town Gazette*.
- Combermere, M. (1866). Memoirs and correspondence of Viscount Combermere from his family papers. Hurst and Blackett.
- Conan Doyle, A. (1919). The uncharted coast part 1: The law of the ghost. *The Strand Magazine*, 38, 543–550.
- Court of Grand Session (1808, December 17). *Barbados Mercury and Bridge-Town Gazette*.
- Curran, R. (2013). The scariest places in the world. Rosen.
- Cussons, S. (1873, October 1). Disturbances in a chapel vault in the Island of Barbados. *The Spiritualist*, p. 350.
- De Morgan, S. (1860). Singular displacement of coffins. *The Spiritual Magazine*, December, 549–551.
- Fassbinder, J. (2016). Magnetometry in archaeology. In A. Gilbert, P. Goldberg, V. Holliday, R. Mandel & R. Sternberg (Eds), *Encyclopedia of Archaeology*. Springer.
- Finneran, N., & Welch, C. (2020). Barbadian gothic: The moving coffins of the chase vault in socio-cultural context. *Folklore*, 131(1), 55–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2019.1637561>
- Gould, R. (1928). *Oddities a book of unexplained facts*. Geoffrey Bles.
- Handler, J. (2019). An early edict on slavery in English America. The Barbados resolution of 1636 and the island's slave laws. *Journal of the Barbados Museum Historical Society*, 65, 22–43.
- Lang, A. (1907). Death's deeds: A bilocated story. *Folklore*, 18(4), 376–390.
- Letterbook (1803a). *Recommendations for the appointment of Thomas Chase to the Legislative Council of Barbados*. National Archives, CO_28_25 CAS-168229-P35S1M9, fols 131–132.
- Letterbook (1803b). *Appointment of Thomas Chase to the legislative council of Barbados*. National Archives, CO_28_70 CAS-P3S1M9, fol. 168.
- Letterbook (1812). *Report that Mr Chase has resigned from the council on grounds of ill health*. National Archives, CO_28_25 CAS-168229-P35S1M9, fols 141–142.
- Lucas, N. (1945). The mysterious vault in the church yard of the parish of Christ Church in this island. *Journal of the Barbados Museum Historical Society*, 12(3), 55–58.
- Milner, J. (1865). A grave disturbance. *Once a Week*, 12, 96.
- Nickell, J. (1982). Barbados' restless coffins laid to rest. *Fate*, 35(4), 79–86.
- Privy Council Office (1803, April 5). *Order in Council appointing Thomas Chase as a member of the Council of Barbados* [Meeting minutes]. National Archives, CO 28/70 CAS-P3S1M9, fols 52–57.
- Rabbani, M. (2021). *Lightning induced damage mechanism of buried energy pipeline* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Deakin University.

- Redding, K. (1860). *Death deeds, an extraordinary incident connected with Barbados*. Charles J. Skeet.
- Reece, R. (1864, February 27). A grave disturbance. *The Lamp*, pp. 136–137.
- Reece, R. (1865). A grave disturbance. *Once a Week*, 12, 319–321.
- Ridout, B. (2018). An analytical review of the chase vault mystery. *Journal of the Society for Psychological Research*, 32(4), 219–237.
- Schomburgk, R. (1844). *The history of Barbados*. Longmans.
- Shilstone, E. (1958). Orderson family records. *Journal of the Barbados Museum Historical Society*, 25(4), 152–157.
- Trail Stewart, T. (1828). Account of the accident from lightning which happened to the packet ship *The New York*. *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, 6(1), 63–66.
- Tremendous storm at sea (1827, May 21). *Evening Mail*.
- Volunteer Association of Christ Church Parish (1808, April 19). *Barbados Mercury and Bridge-Town Gazette*.
- Walker, G. (1839). *Gatherings from church yards, particularly those of London*. Longman.

BOOK REVIEWS

TELEPATHIC TALES PRECOGNITION AND CLAIRVOYANCE IN LEGEND, LYRIC, AND LORE

By Daniel Bourke. Destiny Books. 2025. 320 pp. Paperback, ebook, and audiobook

Of all scientific frontiers, attempts to establish the existence of psi phenomena may have produced greater gains than any other in recent decades. An ever-growing handful of institutions continue to take the matter quite seriously, and, combined with the efforts of dedicated researchers, have pushed the conversation into territory our forebears would envy. To those tracking these developments, the question is not if these phenomena exist, but rather how they exist.

Collective culture is slowly coming to terms with the data. In the meantime, it seems more important than ever to reevaluate our past through the lens of this new emergent reality. How do the stories we've told—from the religious epic to historical fact to the passing anecdote—encode, reflect, and reveal humanity's latent psychic talents?

Enter *Telepathic Tales*, the latest offering from Daniel Bourke, 320 pages including endnotes, a bibliography, and an index. Over the course of a brisk, thoroughly cited 236 pages, Bourke leverages incisive comparativism in service of a compelling argument. Despite the different terms we choose for a variety of psychic experiences, these phenomena remain pervasive across all cultures and epochs and may well distil into a single word: *knowing*.

The book's foreword, penned by Dr Gregory Shushan, clearly establishes the tone and Bourke's aims. Shushan was an excellent choice: his extensive work examining near-death experiences and afterlife narratives from the ancient and indigenous worlds aligns well with Bourke's thesis. As someone who has not only skilfully employed but also defended comparative studies to great effect, Shushan conveys the central notion that precognition and clairvoyance are "panhuman phenomena" (p. x), as he puts it. In his own humble way, Bourke has applied the same sort of comparativism to this suite of extrasensory experiences.

To that end, Bourke's main text draws upon a diverse set of stories told by people (and *peoples*) from all walks of life. The eight chapters—focusing on

psychic forerunners, crisis apparitions, nearing-death awareness, deathbed visions, doppelgangers, and shades of the deceased, and knowledge of hidden objects, miraculous cures, and shared revelations—come from a staggering array of sources.

Sections within each chapter shed more light on specific variations of each phenomenon, digressions adding a welcome depth to the breadth already on display. Although a bit reductive to say so, *Telepathic Tales* could be considered a primer for the uninitiated, carefully and methodically walking readers through each psychic expression. Rather than getting bogged down in any region-, era-, or culture-specific terms for these experiences, Bourke showcases an impressive capacity to find the common throughline in story after story, compiling each subset into an overwhelming catalogue of evidence.

Bourke unites old and new, east and west, global north and global south, emphasizing that no one time, place, people, or culture can lay sole claim to extrasensory abilities. These are talents inherent to the human condition.

Somehow, even in the face of this monumental task, Bourke manages to maintain a balancing act: a readable tone while still thoughtful and elegant, with an economy of words buttressed by scholarly diligence. In lesser hands, readers would only be presented with the most-retold cases, a sort of ‘greatest hits’ of psi phenomena. While seasoned readers will certainly recognize accounts here and there, Bourke leans into rarely presented examples or manages to reframe stories many might regard as unrelated to the matter at hand.

A common refrain across the book is how often the lives of many Christian saints exhibited instances of clairvoyance and precognition, even if not conventionally conceived of as such. While parapsychologists may have already come to the same conclusion, it is always refreshing to see these modalities re-emphasized in this fashion. It stands to reason that any effort to incorporate psychic talents into our collective paradigm is best served by reconciling their existence with pre-existing belief systems. Populations seem much more amenable to new ideas when such opportunities are afforded.

Standout chapters include an entry on the *vardøger*, a phenomenon you may have encountered yourself. Essentially, this is a “spiritual predecessor” (p. 5) to someone’s arrival, foretold through a common sound—a car door slamming, boots across the foyer, keys dropped on a table—or, in more dramatic cases, a full-bodied apparition of the expected visitor. Despite how universal and common this experience appears to be, such cases are especially underrepresented in literature from the Anglosphere, and seeing so many gathered in one place is a joy.

Another worthwhile digression (one that I would have loved to have spent more time with, frankly) is Bourke’s interesting chapter *Revenants, Wraiths, and Disinterested Shades*. Bourke obliquely undermines the commonly held view that these apparitions are solely externalized and contextualises them within the framework of psychic visions. Simultaneously, he possesses an intellectual honesty that refuses to shy away from their embodied physicality.

As an example, “a Chuj Mayan memorate of a man who had not come home for a little longer than usual”. The man in question labours nightly “to work on the wool, as is his usual habit” (p. 127). Days later, the man’s remains are found. Such cases highlight an oft-overlooked aspect of these experiences, what Bourke calls their “simultaneously corporeal and incorporeal nature” (p. 129).

In an era that tends to think of visitations from the dead solely as ephemeral spectres, Bourke’s engagement with this apparent duality is welcome. My own personal biases interpret the paranormal as rarely an either/or affair. Many manifestations seem to straddle the corporeal/incorporeal line with aplomb, and our acknowledgement of this capacity may eventually allow progress into uncovering a host of mysteries, not only ghosts but also UFOs and cryptids as well. I am pleased that Bourke is willing to embrace such contradictions.

In addition to being an author, Bourke is also an artist, notably a poet and songwriter. Perhaps because of this affinity, Bourke’s carefully selected subtitle reveals his preoccupation with the appearance of telepathic talents not only in recorded fact but also their representation in what we may, in a gentle sense, deem fictions: religious texts, legends, and folktales. A wise choice, as these sources underscore both the pervasiveness of such narratives and the way they convey deeper—dare it be said, *archetypal*—truths.

Therein lies the primary complaint. These stories are rich, and so much of that richness goes unaddressed. Bourke effortlessly establishes the universality of our psychic capacity in these accounts. For the most part, however, that is where the discussion ends.

Telepathic Tales represents a successful effort to catalogue abundant examples of extrasensory experiences from every inhabited continent—and little more. Each chapter amasses so much evidence for a specific manifestation that any open-minded reader is well convinced of its existence long before the chapter concludes, only for Bourke to move on to the next subject with little discussion of the possible meanings, mechanisms, etc. For instance, what religious, folkloric, or neuroscientific reason might lie behind the apparent tendency for the souls of the dying to wander from their bodies? Regardless of their accuracy, plentiful explanations have been proposed. Yet these receive only passing mention.

Given Bourke’s obvious command of the subject material, I would have relished the opportunity to follow him on a journey to the more theoretical interpretations of his robust collection. It isn’t that his insights are entirely absent—Bourke weaves in a few here and there—but the book would have benefited from more, not only in the interest of thoroughness, but also to offer a change in how each chapter is paced, which largely consists of a string of accounts.

I am hesitant to belabour this point. I remain wary of what I call ‘seafood restaurant’ criticism: people visit an acclaimed seafood restaurant, order steaks, and complain about their meal. They base their assessment off their own

desires and expectations, rather than engaging with what has been presented to them as a speciality.

Most likely, this sort of granular analysis was never Bourke's intention. This is a survey, after all. Bourke set out to gather as much information as possible, and, in that respect, *Telepathic Tales* represents a resounding success.

Having acknowledged that, the more theoretically minded researcher might still find the book less useful than someone new to the topic. Nonetheless, the sheer number of experiences related guarantees that even those deeply immersed in the field will undoubtedly discover something new.

Daniel Bourke's *Telepathic Tales* comes to us at an appropriate time: in an era when we see more division than ever, some clamour for common ground. Bourke's work showcases that more unites us than divides us, and that truism includes extraordinary experiences. They happen to people regardless of where, when, or who they are. I applaud Bourke for his ability to articulate how psi is not only a universal human talent but also something of a birthright belonging to our entire species.

foodtaboo@gmail.com

JOSHUA CUTCHIN

GHOSTED: A HISTORY OF GHOST HUNTING, AND WHY WE KEEP LOOKING

*By Alice Vernon. Bloomsbury Sigma. 2025. 304 pp. Hardback, paperback,
ebook, and audiobook*

Ghosted, by Alice Vernon, is the latest addition to the Bloomsbury Sigma series devoted to popular science. The book is therefore written for a general audience, and while it touches on a wealth of relevant topics, those hoping for a granular history of psychical research will be disappointed. However, for those who wish for an engaging, anecdotal, and easy-to-read introduction to the field, and to the larger context of Spiritualism, *Ghosted* will fit the bill. Vernon, a lecturer in creative writing at Aberystwyth University, UK, with a research interest in psychical research, structures her book roughly chronologically, from the beginnings of Spiritualism with the Fox sisters to contemporary ghost hunters armed with the latest electronic gadgets and anxious to maximize their exposure on YouTube and TikTok.

Each of the chapters focuses on a specific topic: mediums, séances, and the problem of fraud; the early history of the Society for Psychical Research and later societies; haunted houses; spirit photography and electronic voice phenomena; Spiritualist cosmology, especially that of A. J. Davis and W. T. Stead; the revival of Spiritualism after the First World War; séances in the laboratory; poltergeists; spirit possession and haunted objects; and the recent phenomenon of ghost hunting reality TV. Along the way, a lot of familiar names are dropped (e.g., F. W. H. Myers, Harry Price, Eileen Garrett, and Harry Houdini) and familiar incidents recounted (e.g., the Raymond séances and the haunting of Borley Rectory), but all is told with tolerant good humour and a great deal of respect for the emotional needs of believers. Vernon introduces herself as a sceptic who is nevertheless open to the possibility of psychic phenomena, especially ghosts. Throughout the book, Vernon recounts her own equivocal experiences in this regard, including her certification training through the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena and subsequent forays with local ghost hunting groups. Vernon concludes her book with a meditation on the possible impact of technology, including AI, on the ghost hunting of the future.

A number of popular books in the last twenty years have covered much the same ground as *Ghosted*: for example, Deborah Blum's *Ghost Hunters: William*

James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death (2006), Mary Roach's *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife* (2005), Lisa Morton's *Calling the Spirits: A History of Seances* (2020), and Ben Machell's *Chasing the Dark: The Society for Psychical Research's 140-Year Investigation of Paranormal Activity* (2025). *Ghosted*, while it doesn't add too much that is new in this genre, nevertheless is a creditable addition to this list: deftly written, insightfully humane, and in its way comprehensive, this would not be a bad place to start for those wishing to explore the history of ghostly phenomena and psychical research.

brian.c.wilson@wmich.edu

BRIAN C. WILSON

ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER STYX: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON TERMINAL LUCIDITY AND OTHER NEAR-DEATH PHENOMENA

*Edited by Michael Nahm, Marjorie Woollacott, and Natasha Tassell-Matamua. Academy for the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences.
2025. 208 pp. Paperback and ebook*

A number of professionals across various fields have come together in this anthology to shed new light upon terminal lucidity, while also exploring some other near-death phenomena. Challenging still-prevailing ideas of death, this forward-thinking volume calls for the recognition and integration of these phenomena into the dying process. It also offers intriguing speculation regarding the extent to which they may support a post-materialist worldview. While the anthology has some loose ends and a number of balance issues, it is, nevertheless, a timely piece that brings much of value while opening doors for others to take up further research.

PART 1: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON TERMINAL LUCIDITY

Terminal lucidity is here categorised as a form of end-of-life experience (ELE), but remains somewhat nebulously defined (Fenwick & Brayne, 2011). Generally speaking, however, it is the unexpected return and surge of lost mental clarity, often very soon before death. Most strikingly, this can occur despite what are considered irreversible Alzheimer's, dementias, and other degenerative diseases associated with catastrophic brain damage, memory loss, and confusion. While there has been continued, if limited, conversation as to the nature of what is actually occurring, that *something* mysterious is occurring persistently across cultures and time now seems beyond debate.

Natasha Tassell-Matamua and Karalee Kothe open the work strongly with a chapter dealing with terminal lucidity in children, an almost entirely unexplored area. However, while some of the included accounts are certainly thought provoking, others are more open to interpretation as to whether or not they specifically fit the phenomenon in question. While again, there can be wiggle room in this regard, and the authors seem aware of their limitations, examples such as the final case of Jack (p. 14) don't seem to fit any definition of terminal lucidity. Rather, such examples seem more like the kinds of general visionary experiences of the dying so often recorded. I was hence confused as to their inclusion (the same is true of some other cases in the book). With

this said, the brilliance of the chapter is in casting light on terminal lucidity in children and drawing attention to their sometimes surprisingly nuanced conceptualizations of and experiences around death.

Following this are a number of excellent chapters offering numerous new case reports and witness perspectives on terminal lucidity, a goldmine for those interested. Chris Roe and then Maryne Mutis gather and present cases from carefully crafted surveys, offering interesting statistical insights into certain aspects of terminal lucidity's phenomenology, something overlooked in some of the previous research. Worth noting is also that many respondents considered what they witnessed to be indicative that consciousness is independent of brain activity, potentially bringing into question the extent to which terminal lucidity and related phenomena have engendered or bolstered afterlife beliefs historically (p. 32). Indeed, there are clear examples of this referenced in the book (p. 52). This would be a truly fascinating frontier to be explored. I am reminded in some ways of the early decades of near-death research, and while the number of cases is relatively smaller, this, to reiterate, is very much a work of asking questions and opening doors.

While indications towards the position had already been made, Marjorie Woollacott's chapter delves more pointedly into ideas of non-local consciousness, post-materialism, and their relation to terminal lucidity. Beyond familiar sceptical appeals to the frailty of human memory, observer bias, or soul of the gaps arguments (Shermer, 2025)—appeals that are often simplistic and risk pre-empting deeper analysis—it can at least be said that the phenomenon of terminal lucidity seems fairly well accommodated by a non-local explanation of consciousness. However, there have been a number of proposed alternative explanations (Zelevnikov-Johnston, 2025), and a more direct engagement with those here, even if brief, may have been a boon.

References are made to philosophical idealism, to Jamesian theories of consciousness, and to other frameworks and philosophies that seemingly accommodate terminal lucidity, though these ideas are only briefly explored. In addition, I would have liked to see more cases in this chapter to support its conclusion that “research on terminal lucidity does not support the commonly held belief that consciousness solely emerges from neural activity” (p. 57), although those few included are quite profound and certainly suggestive on their own.

While there are some brief insider references (such as clocks stopping during ELE events, and animals behaving strangely), part one is a strong showing with enough new material, analysis, and insight to warrant attention. I was pleased to see terror management theory spoken of in relation to the behaviour of nurses around the dying. Examination of experiences and behaviours around death, dying, and near-death phenomena in light of this theory may, in my opinion, prove extremely fruitful, and is something I hope is taken up more readily and often in the future.

PART 2: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON OTHER NEAR-DEATH PHENOMENA

To open part two, Michael Nahm defines *paradoxical awareness* as a general term covering terminal lucidity and other instances of lucid awareness in spite of brain conditions that usually “render impossible the abilities to reason coherently and form memories” (p. 62). The even more encompassing *paradoxical consciousness* is also elucidated. While the layered terminologies potentially remain mildly confusing, Nahm’s lucid writing speaks carefully to such things as they occur during conditions like coma, anaesthesia, and locked-in syndrome. While informative, this chapter should perhaps have appeared earlier, since it provides something of a primer for many of the subjects covered.

Marieta Pehlivanova and Bruce Greyson invite us into the realms of the near-death experience (NDE) and deal primarily with critiquing neurophysiological attempts to explain NDE phenomenology. While this has often been covered before, they orient their critique also around more recent work. Some of this work (e.g., Martial et al., 2025) expressly omits dualistic interpretations from the outset.

Pehlivanova and Greyson address the issues surrounding attempts to conventionally account for the NDE in this context (while other works entirely downplay or ignore the NDE’s more anomalous and paradoxical aspects). They dismantle what are often rather lacking arguments, which is especially clear in their treatment of ideas that NDEs are produced by temporal lobe dysfunction or ostensible spikes in the brain’s electrical activity at death (pp. 82–84), pointing out a distinct lack of supportive references. While some of the critiques are rather brief, Pehlivanova and Greyson ultimately make the case that “post-materialist” explanations also deserve consideration.

Alan Pearce deals with cases of reported consciousness during coma, including those who claim to have lived out full alternate lives while in medically induced comas. Pearce presents a number of accounts, some of which are quite extraordinary, such as that of a man who lives out a life on another planet (p. 97). There is a suggestion of the psychedelic compound dimethyltryptamine (DMT) taking on the role of mediator here. For example, some of these experiences “closely match” the accounts recorded by Strassman (2008); however, little is actually offered in support of this point (p. 103). A single comparative example would have been helpfully illustrative. Nevertheless, this subject deserves careful attention.

While intriguing, sobering, and greatly educational in its own right, Kali Dayton’s chapter calling for reforms in sedation and attentively detailing delirium, sedation, and their long-term negative effects seems somewhat out of place here. The contents belie the book’s title, and the chapter reads a little jarringly in relation to those surrounding it.

Hannah Maciejewski and Christopher Kerr describe the often profound pre-death visions and dreams. The majority of the cited dreams are considered

‘more real than real’ by the dreamers, something that intriguingly links them to NDEs and other experiences during altered states, which are often described in the very same language (e.g., McKenna, 1991; Strassman, 2008; Thonnard et al., 2013). Maciejewski and Kerr studied fifty-nine patients over four hundred and fifty-three interviews, carefully screening for delirium and other potentially confounding variables. The experiences commonly involved the comforting presence of deceased relatives and others towards the end. Many of the messages received in dreams and visions were those of a positive future beyond death itself. In concert with some of the book’s overall themes, these experiences speak to space for spiritual growth even at the end of life. However, while there is much of merit here, some of the conclusions seem questionable. For instance, that children have end-of-life dreams or visions means that “these experiences are related to the psychological and emotional transition to death and not to aging or physical decline” (p. 125). The logical conclusion, rather, would surely be that this simply suggests such experiences are not *solely* related to those things and certainly may also be otherwise engendered by ageing and physical decline in other cases.

Shared death experiences (SDEs) and the ELEs of animals, fascinating and understudied, are covered by William Peters, Monica Williams, and Nancy Philpott. Regarding SDEs, the percipients’ experiences themselves accompany the dying on their way to the other world, often even encountering the same things NDErs encounter, such as an uncrossable boundary (p. 138). Such accounts offer real food for thought—one wonders, for example, why a hallucinatory episode (if it were such at all) would so specifically mirror phenomenological aspects of the NDE at a contextually relevant time.

The authors move next into the ELEs of animals, something I personally found to be of great interest, as I have had just such an experience myself. Like much of the volume, this chapter, by Michael Nahm, Pam Smart, and Rupert Sheldrake, is a calculated and carefully suggestive contribution that addresses a real gap in the literature. The reader will find a number of accounts involving such things as possible terminal lucidity, near-death visions, premonitions, and others in animals. Some of the anecdotes are compelling; others are vague and less impressive, although the parallels between these experiences in animals and those of humans hold great interest and deserve to be studied further. While the authors are aware of the limitations of their work, they conclude that ELEs for humans and animals seem to be “remarkably similar” (p. 157).

Penultimately, we come to a chapter on after-death communications (ADCs) by Evelyn Elsaesser. She and her colleagues have done excellent and contemporarily unprecedented work in this area. These pages will be greatly educational to those unfamiliar, speaking to various instances of apparent contact between the living and the dead. However, I do not consider an ADC *generally* to be a near-death phenomenon, as they often occur long after the communicator has died. Indeed, the definitions of such ADCs given by pioneers

in this area do not include any temporal restrictions (e.g., Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1996, p. 15).

The final and rather ambitious chapter, by Vasileios Basios, describes his work involving quantum tunnelling random number generators (a hardware device producing truly random numbers by exploiting the inherently unpredictable quantum tunnelling effect) in the vicinity of the terminally ill. The devices were entirely passive, required no upkeep, and apparently detected “measurable deviations from pure chance in the temporal vicinity of the transition from life to death of human consciousness” (p. 174). Seemingly careful analysis and control methodologies were employed, and while greatly intriguing, this is very much tentative work and largely awaiting broader community critique and replication. With this said, the care taken in these experiments is certainly impressive and speaks to the seriousness with which this work has been undertaken and pursued.

CONCLUSION

At times a cutting-edge contribution, *On the Banks of the River Styx* should be especially considered by anyone wishing to expand their knowledge regarding terminal lucidity. Increasing knowledge in these areas could revolutionize clinical practice around death, dying, and particularly degenerative brain disease (and hence have implications for palliative care, dementia treatment, end-of-life protocols, etc.). For this reason, the work comes highly recommended not only to the newcomer or those more seasoned in these areas but also to clinical professionals and others in and around the medical profession.

While, in its format of short chapters, the extent to which this openly post-materialist volume supports the idea of non-local consciousness is more cumulatively suggestive than anything especially robust, it most certainly contributes to that conversation. While a little more attention to opposing arguments may have been beneficial, there is also something to be said for works that simply do not set out with this goal but rather attempt to redress some perceived imbalance across the relevant literature. It will then be for the discerning reader to decide its ultimate value within the broader landscape of both materialist and post-materialist philosophy and science alike.

daniel_bourke_89@hotmail.com

DANIEL BOURKE

REFERENCES

- Fenwick, P., & Brayne, S. (2011). End-of-life experiences: Reaching out for compassion, communication, and connection—meaning of deathbed visions and coincidences. *American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Medicine*, 28(1), 7–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10499091110374301>
- Guggenheim, B., & Guggenheim, J. (1996). *Hello from heaven!* Bantam Books.

- Martial, C., Fritz, P., Gosseries, O., Bonhomme, V., Kondziella, D., Nelson, K., & Lejeune, N. (2025). A neuroscientific model of near-death experiences. *Nature Reviews Neurology*, 21, 1–15.
- McKenna, T. (1991). *The archaic revival*. Harper.
- Shermer, M. (2025, October 28). The soul of the gaps: Why new claims about near death experiences, terminal lucidity, and other anomalous experiences are not evidence of a brain-independent mind, a soul, or an afterlife. *Skeptic*. <https://www.skeptic.com/article/the-soul-of-the-gaps/>
- Strassman, R. (2008). *Inner paths to outer space. Journeys to alien worlds through psychedelics and other spiritual technologies*. Park Street Press.
- Thonnard, M., Charland-Verville, V., Brédart, S., Dehon, H., Ledoux, D., Laureys, S., & Vanhaudenhuyse, A. (2013). Characteristics of near-death experiences memories as compared to real and imagined events memories. *PloS ONE*, 8(3), e57620. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0057620>
- Zelevnikow-Johnston, A. (2025, October 23). Is terminal lucidity real? *Preserving Hope*. <https://preservinghope.substack.com/p/is-terminal-lucidity-real>

ARADIA'S HIDDEN HAND: THE UNTOLD LIFE OF ROMA LISTER

*By Andrew D. Manns, edited by Kazim. Hexen Press. 174 pp. Hardback
(limited edition, 250 copies)*

Experts are almost unanimous in holding that a particular role at the roots of the modern Wiccan movement was played by *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*, a text published at the end of the 19th century by the American writer and folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland (1899). According to Leland, the work had been written by—or otherwise obtained from—a fortune-teller in Florence who had served for several years as his informant and then ‘disappeared’ shortly after delivering the manuscript to him. In reality, the Gospel, which outlines a utopian society dominated by female power and contains descriptions of pseudo-religious pagan rituals, appears more elaborate and sophisticated than one might expect from a poorly educated woman writing on her own. This circumstance, together with the scant information regarding the alleged author’s identity, has turned the text into an intriguing cultural and editorial enigma.

Among those who have attempted to clarify the true origins of *Aradia*, Andrew D. Manns has recently stood out. When re-examining the individuals who surrounded and helped Leland during his years in Italy, Manns realized that a significant role may have been played by Roma Lister. She was a little-known expert in ‘traditional knowledge’ who, between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, invigorated various occult circles active on the Italian and European scene. Lister was of English origin, but lived in Italy from childhood and was raised by women belonging to rural traditions, becoming deeply imbued with their customs and alternative systems of thought. These influences fostered in her a fascination with the occult that led her, throughout her life, to engage in esoteric, mediumistic, and witchcraft-related experiences. An early echo of this inclination emerged in 1893 when, still young, she was invited to publicly present a survey of ancient popular beliefs widespread in the area of the Castelli Romani—the territory south of the city of Rome where she had lived for a considerable period. The partnership between Leland and Lister had begun earlier and would continue until the beginning of the new century. It has recently attracted renewed interest, and her early work has been republished (Lister, 1893/2024).

Lister was at the centre of a varied network of encounters and associations with intellectuals and aristocrats of different nationalities who were fascinated

by the occult and frequented Italy at that time. Lister not only witnessed mysterious and ‘magical’ events produced by others, but was herself the author of mediumistic manifestations, particularly in the form of direct writing. This appears to lend support to the possibility that she may have ‘channelled’, while in a trance state, at least part of the text of *Aradia*.

Unfortunately, despite extensive research, Manns has not found the proverbial ‘smoking gun’ to prove his hypothesis; nevertheless, he has succeeded in presenting evidence that makes it highly plausible. In the first part of this volume he recounts, with agility and fluency, his exploration of the past, allowing us to discover the marvels and the enchanted occult atmosphere that for many decades permeated Florence; writers and wealthy individuals fascinated by occult and esoteric practices as much as by political tensions and family affairs; and representatives of the dominant culture who were simultaneously patrons and benefactors of artists, intellectuals, mediums, and seers—individuals often marked by double or even triple identities. Figures such as Lilian Whiting and Baroness Rosenkrantz, devoted to mediumistic experiences, re-emerge in this volume alongside the Italian theosophist Decio Calvari and the spiritualist and Freemason Giovanni Hoffmann, capable of magical-witchcraft practices, mediumistic evocations, and alchemical studies. At the centre of a complex web of subtle and mysterious reciprocal influences stands Roma Lister herself, who, in contact with those personalities, both inspired them and was in turn inspired.

The second part of the book, no less interesting than the first, consists of a collection of about a dozen writings by Lister (together with one text by another author). They are extremely difficult to obtain today and may still hold considerable interest for historians, anthropologists, and all scholars of occult practices. Apart from the 1893 report on the traditions of Castelli Romani—translated here into English for the first time—the remaining pieces are carefully selected excerpts from the two volumes of her personal *Reminiscences* (often, however, confused and imprecise) published by Lister (1926, 1927), as well as from an early 20th-century Italian journal that had only limited circulation. Some of these writings still describe magical and divinatory beliefs and practices handed down in areas of the Castelli Romani, while other passages concern the ‘adventures’ and evocations of immaterial entities and powers experienced by Giovanni Hoffmann, who emerges from these testimonies as a magician capable of mastering occult forces. The information contained in this second part of the volume is also abundant, offering a faithful representation of Lister’s attitudes and convictions.

One of the distinguishing features of Manns’s book is his effective and evocative approach to the subject. On the one hand, he succeeds in portraying with light and reliable tones the atmospheres and personal relationships among figures retrieved from a shadowy oblivion; on the other, he peppers the text with information and observations that can suggest new connections and insights

to the reader. Many examples could be offered. I found myself repeatedly interrupting the reading in order to investigate or verify sudden doubts or intuitions—but I shall limit myself to one, concerning Lister’s mediumistic experiences, which Manns describes by noting how she tended to adapt herself to the individuals with whom she ‘worked’ (pp. 46–50). This brought to my mind an observation I made while attending the séances of the Italian medium Corrado Piancastelli, characterized by a relatively shallow trance in which an ‘entity’ answered the participants’ questions, every time aligning itself in perfect harmony with the tone and intellectual level of the questioner.

I was pleasantly struck by the amount of ‘new’ material contained in this book. Although (I believe) I possess a reasonably solid knowledge of the occult currents in Italy of that historical period, spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries, I encountered numerous unexpected confirmations, especially regarding figures such as Giovanni Hoffmann, Lilian Whiting, and Baroness Rosenkrantz, about whom I had previously only found fragmentary traces. Not to mention Roma Lister herself, who finally assumes the historical and psychological importance she deserves, which has never truly been recognized before. Until now, it would have been unthinkable to retrieve further information about all of them, except in the unsuspected publications that Manns has now skilfully extracted. The result is that, as one turns the pages of this book, one enters a ‘nocturnal’ and elusive world, seemingly alternative to the ordinary one, which nevertheless did not remain beneath the surface of dominant history but, rather, ran alongside it and constituted a significant portion of it. Manns deserves recognition for having brought back to our attention much data and intellectual stimuli that may prove further inspiring.

mbiondi10@libero.it

MASSIMO BIONDI

REFERENCES

- Leland, C. G. (1899). *Aradia, or the gospel of the witches*. D. Nutt.
Lister, R. (1926). *Reminiscences: Social and political*. Hutchinson.
Lister, R. (1927). *Further reminiscences: Occult and social*. Hutchinson.
Lister, R. (2024). *Leggende classiche e superstizioni dei Castelli Romani* [The classical legends and superstitions of Castelli Romani]. Independently published. (Original work published 1893)

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor:

The ghostly nun of Borley Rectory

On 5 February, while working in the café at my gym, as I so often do, I had just ended a video call with a new potential student where we had been speaking about her family's past in the Second World War and at Dunkirk. A lady at a table near me made a comment on the conversation I'd just been having, and showed me she was reading the book *War Horse* (1982) by Michael Morpurgo. The lady, Mrs Jean Daws, is a resident of Mansfield, born in 1938. What really surprised me in our conversation—given that in my previous meeting I had been speaking about the process of university admissions and the Second World War—was that Mrs Daws quite randomly mentioned that her mother “saw the nun at Borley”. To which I replied, “In Essex? Your mother was at Borley Rectory before it burnt down?” Mrs Daws agreed to write up some notes on this for me so that I might share them here in the *JSPR*. A most pleasing coincidence.

Mrs Edith Evans (later Crossland, and the mother of Mrs Daws) was born in Mansfield in 1906 at Rock Hill Stone Houses (no longer standing) and passed away in 1986. Her mother died when she was young, and her father remarried. She owned a good workhorse as part of the family business, and one day, when going down to feed him an apple, he was gone—taken to the First World War, never to return. At around the age of 18–20 years, and a noted woman of good looks and a talented singer, Mrs Evans took herself down to London to sing and dance in the Gar Kiddy Troup. Her father sent for her return, for personal reasons, which left Mrs Evans working in the Swan Hotel in Mansfield, which did not bring her happiness. She fell in love with a military man, but only saw him on short breaks at home, trying to keep in touch as often as possible.

Then came the job opportunity that led to her unique experiences. A position came up at Borley Rectory in Essex, likely at this time to work for the Reverend Lionel Algernon Foyster and his wife, Marianne. Her duties were general housekeeping and looking after the Foysters' adopted daughter Adelaide and any other children who visited.

Mrs Evans reported that bells would ring in the house for service, but, on inspection, no one was there. As her daughter recounts:

One night at bedtime Mum had a bottle of medicine. She dropped the bottle, it broke, [and] her friend said “leave it till morning” and not to disturb anybody. In [that same] night a man came to Mum’s bedside, he said “follow me!” [The] next morning Mum told a co-worker about the dream. Mum’s foot was stuck to the sheet with blood! So it was not just a dream, the spots of blood went to a fireplace and down the hall.

Mrs Evans had reported to her son and daughter over the years another strange encounter at Borley Rectory. She had been sitting on the lawn, looking after Adelaide and other children, and saw a nun walk by on the other side of the hedge and then disappear. During the time of Harry Price’s investigations of the rectory, and indeed before, this was a well-noted apparitional sighting—‘the nun’s walk’ (Price, 1940, 1946). At dark, a horse and cart would rush by the lane. These experiences had frightened Mrs Evans. She left the service of the Foysters, and moved to Gleneagles Gold Hotel, where she met her future husband, and father to Mrs Jean Daws and her brother. During the time of the Reverend Foyster’s residence at Borley, he believed the ghosts had taken a liking to his wife, and had the building exorcised. It was reported that the activity lessened but then returned, and so, like Mrs Evans, the Foysters left through fear of the disturbances. The residents who followed were also unnerved by similar encounters, until the house burnt down in 1939 and the ruins demolished in 1944 (for *JSPR* coverage of the case, see Dingwall et al., 1969; Hastings, 1969, 1970; Owen & Mitchell, 1979).

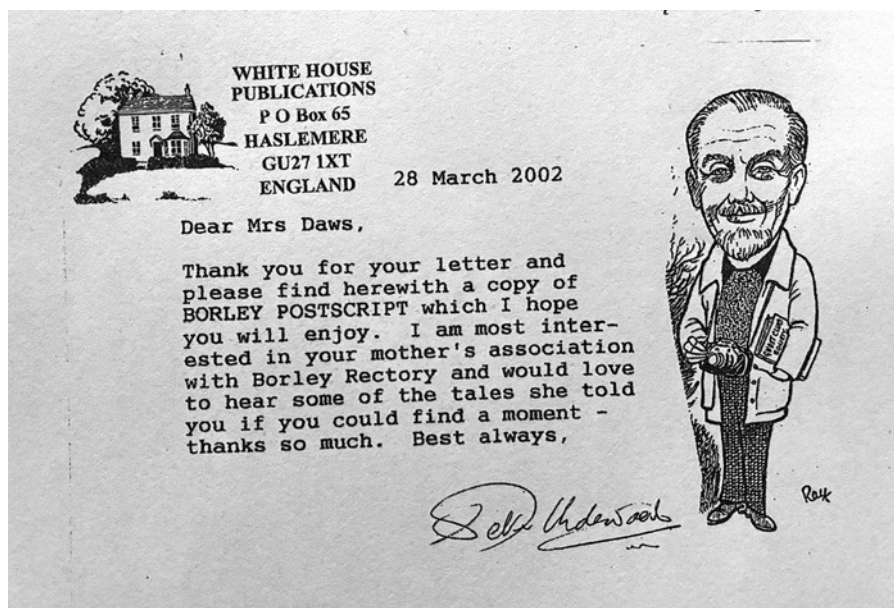


Figure 1. Example of the correspondence from Mr Underwood to Mrs Daws.

Over the years of hearing these stories, Mrs Daws decided to reach out to the ghosthunter and Society for Psychical Research member Mr Peter Underwood. He wrote several books on Borley Rectory, ending with the *Borley Postscript* (2001). He too showed interest in Mrs Evans's memories and experiences of the haunting, kindly forwarding a copy of his book to Mrs Daws in 2004 and remaining in contact till 2008 (Figure 1). And here, dear editor, in this letter are what remains of that account, thanks to the daughter, Mrs Jean Daws, who kindly took the time to speak to me quite by chance.

callum.cooper2@northampton.ac.uk

CALLUM E. COOPER

REFERENCES

- Dingwall, E. J., Goldney, K. M., & Hall, T. H. (1969). Mr Hastings and the Borley report. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 45, 115–124.
- Hastings, R. J. (1969). An examination of the 'Borley report'. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 55, 66–175.
- Hastings, R. J. (1970). Reply to the authors of the 'Borley report'. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 45, 230–237.
- Morpurgo, M. (1982). *War horse*. Kaye & Ward.
- Owen, I. M., & Mitchell, P. (1979). The alleged haunting of Borley Rectory. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 50, 149–162.
- Price, H. (1940). *The most haunted house in England: Then years' investigation of Borley Rectory*. Longmans, Green.
- Price, H. (1946). *The end of Borley Rectory: 'The most haunted house in England'*. Harrap.
- Underwood, P. (2001). *Borley postscript*. White House Publications.

To the Editor:

Response to Richard Wiseman's letter (The null hypothesis)

In his letter, Professor Wiseman raises a legitimate concern about confirmation bias in parapsychological research, but his proposed remedy—requiring authors to discuss the ‘non-existence of psi’—rests on a misunderstanding of what null results actually demonstrate in experimental science. The null hypothesis in any given study concerns the absence of a specified relationship under specified conditions—it cannot speak to the existence or non-existence of psi as a class of phenomena. To require researchers to interpret a failure to reject the null as evidence of ‘non-existence’ is to demand a logical leap that the data cannot support. As in any experimental field, a single null result is more accurately interpreted as a failure to replicate a specific effect rather than an erasure of a broader class of phenomena. The definitional issue compounds this: psi is intended to be a neutral term denoting the unknown factors underlying parapsychological phenomena (e.g., Rush, 1985, p. 7). Asking researchers to discuss the non-existence of an ‘unknown’ conflates the failure to demonstrate a specific effect with a definitive claim about the underlying nature of the phenomenon itself. If the genuine concern is that null results are insufficiently interrogated, the more productive editorial question is simply: what does the null result tell us about the specific conditions under which the hypothesised effect did not manifest? This is a question which is both scientifically meaningful and considerably more informative than a ritual acknowledgement of non-existence.

Paul.Stevens@centreforliminalstudies.com

PAUL STEVENS

REFERENCES

- Rush, J. H. (1985). What is parapsychology? In H. L. Edge, R. L. Morris, J. H. Rush & J. Palmer (Eds), *Foundations of parapsychology*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

NOTES FOR AUTHORS

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

TYPES OF PAPER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MANUSCRIPT PREPARATION

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

SUBMISSION PROCESS

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

COPYRIGHT

For all accepted submissions authors will retain copyright to their work and take responsibility for the views expressed. However, the SPR reserves the right to reproduce material published in the *JSPR* as part of another journal, and/or to make it available in electronic and/or print format. Once a submission has been accepted for publication in the *JSPR* it must NOT appear anywhere else (including an internet website) until the journal has been published. After publication in the *JSPR*, authors may use the material as they wish but should make appropriate reference to its prior publication in the *JSPR*: for example, "This paper (material) first appeared in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol..., pp..., and is reproduced here with permission."

Permissions

Corresponding authors are responsible for securing any/all written permission to reproduce any previously published or unpublished material for which copyright is currently held.

