

PRESIDENT'S LETTER: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM CASE COLLECTIONS?

CHRIS ROE

In a previous letter I talked about the importance of developing a thorough understanding of psi phenomena as they occur in the real world. For many of us, these are rare spontaneous occurrences that happen unexpectedly and punctuate an otherwise quite 'normal' existence. Nevertheless, they can have a profound impact on us, hinting that they can tell us something fundamental about what it is to be a living, conscious being. Paying attention to accounts of such experiences is valuable in reminding psychical researchers of why the work we do in trying to understand psi is potentially so important.

Individual reports of experiences are usually referred to as 'cases', and attempts to analyse groups of cases to see how they are similar (or different) with a view to identifying underlying causes or necessary conditions, are usually called case collections. Probably the most extensive and influential case collections were compiled by SPR founder members Edmund Gurney, Frederic Myers and Frank Podmore, and by the American parapsychologist Louisa Rhine. These researchers took very different perspectives on the evidential value of such cases and this underpinned the approaches they took to their analyses.

The SPR's work is documented in *Phantasms of the Living*, which reports on a large-scale survey of non-pathological hallucinations. The term 'hallucinations' was not used dismissively (e.g., to indicate that experiences were mere imagination or even the result of psychosis), but rather reflected a theoretical perspective within which veridical information received paranormally (such as by telepathy) could be brought to conscious awareness in an idiosyncratic, dramatized form. Thus, the perception of an apparition of a loved one in crisis could be veridical in the sense of communicating accurate information without necessarily being 'real' in the sense that it would be physically detectable (e.g., to a camera). Each solicited account of a spontaneous experience was subjected to rigorous efforts to authenticate the account; for example, by personally interviewing and cross-examining percipients, seeking corroborating testimony from other witnesses, and a very careful judgement as to whether the events described could be accounted for in conventional (non-psi) terms. This momentous effort entailed a great deal of time and effort to interview and correspond with persons involved. Despite these stringent criteria, 702 veridical cases were sufficiently well attested and impervious to normal explanations to be considered evidence for the occurrence of telepathic hallucinations. The focus was very much on establishing the evidentiality of these cases, and great pains were taken to provide some kind of statistical baseline for the possibility that they could simply reflect chance coincidence of an experience with a distant event to which it seemed related. This was at the expense of being able to identify necessary or sufficient conditions for phenomena to occur, or to map the wide range of forms that they might take (the selection criteria clearly led to some kinds of experience being preferred to others — William James suggests this in his book review, published in *Science*).

In contrast, Louisa Rhine adopted quite a passive approach to curating and evaluating spontaneous cases. Her accounts generally came from unsolicited letters sent to the Parapsychology Laboratory in response to the high-profile experimental work that was going on (primarily ESP tests using Zener cards) and the very promising statistical results it was achieving. She did little — if anything — to authenticate the cases or to evaluate whether they could reasonably be explained in conventional terms. Unless there was clear evidence to the contrary, she accepted that accounts had been sent "in good faith and by apparently sane individuals". Thus, the collection and her analysis of it, could not be regarded as evidential in the sense that it could establish the existence of psi in the real world; for Rhine, unequivocal evidence could only come from laboratory experiments and the function of case collection

analysis was to ensure that those experiments retained the conditions necessary for psi to occur. As she explained in *Hidden channels of the mind*, “it was partly in a search for clues for new insights by which to guide the framing of experiments that attention was turned to personal experiences ... But besides that, another reason for the study was to get a more rounded, full-bodied conception of the effects trapped so laboriously in the laboratory” (p. 10).

Rhine was well aware of the problems with evaluating cases — not just that some might be frivolous and others earnestly mistaken, but also that accounts are inevitably incomplete (given the multitude of factors that pertain) so that we are not in a position to make a judgement about possible causes. However, in combining cases, the ‘static noise’ of poor perception or memory would recede and the meaningful pattern that reflected the phenomena’s *modus operandi* would be thrown into sharp relief. She explained, “by the succession of numbers of closely similar items, meanings stand out which the individual pictures alone do not show. One could proceed here on the assumption that if ESP occurs in nature, it does so more than once. If it is a human ability, even an uncommon one, then ... the true aspects should add up, and the mistakes of individual memory, observation, etc., should, in effect, cancel out” (op cit., p 21).

Much of her analysis (in 15 of 18 reports) focused on characteristics of the experience for the percipient, and her interpretation was shaped by her two-stage model of psi. Strongly influenced by Tyrrell’s thinking about psi as unconscious, Stage 1 of the model concerns the reception of information and its tagging as important, but these processes occur below the level of subjective awareness and so are not available for scrutiny. Stage 2 consists of the process by which the information is made conscious, and follows the same pathways (with the same top-down and bottom-up influences) as other psychological processes (along the lines that I discussed in my last letter). Rhine believed that information acquired in stage 1 was essentially complete and accurate, so that any omissions or distortions that form part of the percipient’s experience reflect the processes (and biases) of stage 2. Thus, she organised her cases of ESP into four categories:

- *intuitions* involved impressions without an imagery component and seemed to come suddenly and unexpectedly, with few details but often a felt compulsion to act
- *hallucinations* had imagery components that were so like genuine sensory experiences that the percipient did not at the time recognise the experience was not ‘real’
- *realistic dreams* had the character of waking perceptual experiences and often related to future events
- *unrealistic dreams* were more symbolic or surreal in content but still had a decipherable meaning for the percipient

These cases demonstrated that percipients could have embodied experiences as well as ‘cognitive’ ones, and also drew attention to the role of mild altered states of consciousness in facilitating spontaneous experiences (65% of cases involved ASCs, particularly dreams). Interestingly, she developed a notion that the percipient’s own psychokinetic ability might be one means by which unconscious information was made conscious (e.g., by causing a clock to stop or a picture to topple from a mantelpiece). These contrasted with hallucinatory phenomena, where a perceived sound typically would not be heard by others in the vicinity (unless they also were emotionally close to the supposed target person).

Reading meaning into such patterns depends on the extent to which we are comfortable with Rhine’s assumption that compiling large numbers of cases would protect against bias, but that assumes that individual biases are random rather than reflective of a culture or set of expectations. In particular, we might be concerned that as Rhine began to discuss details of her findings from case collection analysis, especially in a popular form such as for magazine articles, this could conceivably have initiated a response bias in which members of the public

inferred from those articles what might ‘count’ as a relevant experience and so self-censor in line with those perceived expectations. This could be tested by seeing whether characteristics of case collection became more homogeneous over time, or if there was a surge in the number of cases of a particular type following an article that used it as an example of the kind of thing Rhine was interested in.

Alternatively, we can test whether collections of cases gathered by other researchers with different public ‘agendas’ produce a different characteristic pattern. It seems as though that is not the case for a number of collections that have been compared (particularly by Ian Stevenson and by Sybo Schouten), but there are other collections to which this could be extended. At the university of Northampton, we have been working with two case collections that are markedly different in character and could shed further light on the authenticity of Rhine’s analysis.

Firstly, we approached the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) for permission to utilise their on-line archive, which contains over 6,000 first-hand accounts from people across the world who have reported a spiritual or religious experience. The RERC was founded by Sir Alister Hardy in 1969 to study contemporary accounts of such experiences, with an emphasis on their nature and function. The cases are transcribed versions of letters from members of the public in response to media appeals by Hardy and others, asking for accounts of experiences that underpin their faith in ‘something other’ that goes beyond the biophysical notion of the human being. As a consequence, although the majority have a clear religious or spiritual focus, there is a subset of cases that involve parapsychological phenomena. We read through all these accounts and identified 817 cases as suitable for analysis. They were coded according to content so that we could map the relative frequency of different types of phenomenon but also note any interesting co-incidences of features. We found that the most common types of experience were apparitions (in 55% of our subsample), followed by ESP cases (44%),¹ out-of-body experiences (12%), near-death experiences (9%), and deathbed experiences (5%). In this analysis apparitional experiences were predominantly visual, which is unlike Rhine’s collection but is in keeping with other after-death communication surveys.

Secondly, we have been working with a collection of letters sent to the playwright J.B. Priestley, who had a lifelong interest in man’s relationship to time (it was a central theme in many of his most popular plays, such as *An Inspector Calls*). He explored this more directly in his nonfiction book, *Man and Time*, and while working on this book Priestley appeared on television and radio to ask the audience to send him “accounts of any experiences they had that appeared to challenge the conventional and ‘common sense’ idea of Time” – primarily involving precognitions or time slips. The response to the appeal was substantial, and almost 1,500 letters survive, held in the archives of the Society for Psychical Research at Cambridge University Library, and among Priestley’s papers in Special Collections at the University of Bradford. Priestley devoted two chapters to the letters in *Man and Time*, but did not subject them to any systematic analysis. On this, he said “I offer no careful analysis, no exact figures. If without such treatment they cannot be accepted as evidence then we shall have to do without evidence. To tell the truth, after they reached 1000 I stopped counting them, because this kind of activity bores me, and my secretary, after helping me with the first great rush, had other things to do”, so there is great scope for detailed analysis. We have transcribed all the letters and we are in the process of producing a searchable database that will make research on the collection more straightforward. It will be interesting to see whether these cases exhibit similar patterns to the ‘classic’ case collections, and in particular to explore how this might inform experimental work, as Rhine intended.

¹ NB these categories are not mutually exclusive since in the same letter someone could describe an apparition and an instance of ESP, so total percentages can exceed 100%

