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Guest Editorial: *Why Investigate Spontaneous Cases?*

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ABSTRACT: Psychological researchers are showing renewed interest in spontaneous cases, but few newcomers to this branch of our subject have had experience in the actual investigation of cases. What is worse, many do not seem to understand the importance of investigating cases instead of just accepting them as submitted by correspondents or turned up in surveys. Many cases in which someone makes a claim for a paranormal communication prove, on investigation, to provide no evidence supporting the claim. Moreover, uninvestigated cases are likely to have important omissions in the information provided when they are submitted. These deficiencies may lead to erroneous conclusions. However, investigated cases that are voluntarily reported to a research center may also have biases and be unrepresentative of the full range of experiences we need to study. We should conduct new surveys of spontaneous cases in which the cases turned up will be thoroughly investigated.

In an earlier contribution to this column (Stevenson, 1987) I described and approved the increasing attention that parapsychologists are now giving to spontaneous cases. In the present contribution, I wish to emphasize the importance of our *investigating* cases, instead of accepting at face value those that interested persons happen to report to a research center.

Parapsychologists began to turn their attention away from spontaneous cases and toward experimental studies almost two generations ago. Few parapsychologists working today have had any experience in investigating spontaneous cases. This is doubly unfortunate. In the first place, many cases have not been investigated because there is a lack of persons available and qualified for such work. What is worse, however, many parapsychologists do not even appreciate the importance of investigating spontaneous cases. I think this is shown in a widespread ignorance of the differences between cases identified in a survey (or submitted voluntarily to a research center) and cases that have received thorough investigation.

How important are these differences? To this question I reply that investigated cases may differ from uninvestigated cases in at least three im-

portant respects: in authenticity,¹ in the validity and reliability of the types identified in a series of cases, and in the comprehensiveness and value of the information derived from cases that may be analyzed in efforts to understand paranormal processes.

Before taking up these three topics I shall first describe what I mean by a thorough investigation of a case. My criteria include the following elements: personal (face-to-face) interviews with the percipient and with as many other first-hand informants as one can meet, checking of witnesses' and informants' statements against each other and against any pertinent written documents, and independent verification (also with interviews and the examination of documents) of the events that are said to correspond to the subject's paranormal perception.

Correspondence, questionnaires, and telephone calls may precede (and sometimes follow) personal interviews, but they cannot substitute for them. In several ways, face-to-face interviews permit the investigator to obtain essential information that usually remains hidden without them. First, the investigator can appraise the witness's competence with regard to accuracy of memory and the interference of motives for bias in observing and reporting. Second, few percipients are able (or willing) to write out a full account of their experience; when writing, if they write at all, they tend to summarize, and they often forget to mention important details that come out during an interview. An interview under relaxed conditions enables a full account of the experience to be communicated and recorded. (The interviewer can use a questionnaire or a checklist in a supplementary way to assure coverage of all important points.) Third, the interviewer can clarify the meanings of his or her terms and ask for clarifications from the informants of words and phrases that they may use in ways that seem special to them. Finally (and not least important), many informants have legitimate and sometimes urgent questions they would like to ask about their experiences, and we owe them the best answers we can furnish.

Personal interviews require time and that means money, but there is no help for that. A junior investigator at another research center once dis-

¹ By authenticity I mean that the informants' accounts of the case correspond closely to "the case as it actually happened." (In practice, judgments about authenticity depend upon careful assessment of different sources and kinds of evidence checked against each other.) By paranormality I mean that the subject could not have obtained the information he or she had about the events of his or her perceptions (or memories) through normal sensory channels. A case can be authentic without having evidence of paranormality, as, for example, when the agent and percipient belong to the same family and might have normally exchanged information that figured in the percipient's experience. For a further discussion of the important distinction between authenticity and paranormality, see Stevenson, Palmer, and Stanford (1977).

Although advocating the investigation of cases for authenticity, in this editorial I have not addressed the question of which investigated cases should be judged authentic enough for inclusion in a series of cases to be analyzed. An approach to this difficult problem was suggested in Stevenson, Palmer, and Stanford (1977).

cussed with me a study she was conducting of spontaneous cases. She said that she was interviewing the percipients over the telephone, and I said that this was inadequate. She replied that she knew this, but that her research center could not afford the expense of personal interviews. I wondered whether this same center would publish results of experimental work that had not been done properly for lack of funds. There was a half-heartedness about this young investigator's approach that almost seemed to say: "What is not worth doing is not worth doing well."

Now I turn to my reasons for emphasizing the importance of investigating cases.

AUTHENTICITY IN INVESTIGATED VS. UNINVESTIGATED CASES

All experienced investigators of spontaneous cases know that the careful investigation of cases submitted voluntarily reduces the number of seemingly paranormal cases. We do not have accurate figures with which to assess the extent of the loss that investigation produces. Investigators of cases often have not kept account of the numbers of cases they have discarded; and persons who have conducted surveys have almost never investigated the cases they identified in their surveys. What we need is a systematic survey of cases, combined with the careful investigation of every case identified during the survey. Until we have such an investigation, we have only hints dropped here and there about the size of the problem with regard to authenticity. It must, however, be one of major proportions, and we can gain some impression of its magnitude from the information given in three articles dealing with spontaneous cases. I shall summarize briefly their relevant data bearing on this question.

Speaking particularly of unwitting falsification in reports submitted to the SPR, West (1948) wrote: "The published cases are only the cream from a much larger number which either lack confirmation or which investigation exposes as tall stories. Only about one per cent of the psychical incidents reported to the Society for Psychical Research can be authenticated well enough for publication" (p. 279).

In the late 1950s, the SPR initiated a survey of spontaneous cases by means of appeals to the general public to submit cases to the Society. About 1,500 cases were submitted, and the Society's investigators made attempts to obtain further information by writing letters to several hundreds of the correspondents. To these they received only seven replies. After mentioning this in her report of the survey, Green (1960) continued: "After the following-up the next step was to sort the material. This revealed that there were only about 300 cases—roughly 20 per cent of the 1,500 odd originally sent in—which were detailed enough to be worth analysis" (p. 97).

In 1957, the ASPR made a similar appeal (through newspaper articles) for cases and received about 1,200 submissions (Dale, White, & Murphy,

1962). The investigators who examined these cases said of them: "A very considerable number of these were hopelessly vague or fragmentary, or were accounts of personal experiences containing no apparent reference to the paranormal, or contained direct evidence of mental abnormality. . . . There were, nevertheless, about eighty . . . cases of good quality . . . about one hundred . . . cases likewise of interest but less adequate from the point of view of authentication. . . . [and] about 100 . . . cases which were incapable of authentication but which possibly contained paranormal elements" (p. 5). It should be noted that the 280 cases screened out of the original 1,200 submissions had not yet been investigated. Investigation eliminated still more cases. In the end, Dale, White, and Murphy published reports of only 17 cases, although these were selected from a larger number that passed the tests of investigation; the authors did not state how many of the 280 cases they had investigated and how many of these had withstood the scrutiny of the investigations.

The foregoing observations should surely warn us against drawing conclusions from uninvestigated cases. This policy of not drawing conclusions was adopted by L. E. Rhine when she first began to study and analyze the reports of spontaneous cases sent by correspondents to the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University. Rhine asserted that the cases were of no value in themselves except to provide suggestions for experiments (L. E. Rhine, 1951; see also J. B. Rhine, 1948). Later, she changed her views about the value of spontaneous cases (L. E. Rhine, 1969), and in her last book about them (L. E. Rhine, 1981), she boldly drew conclusions about the factors and circumstances involved in paranormal communications. Yet she did this from her own collection of uninvestigated spontaneous cases.

THE RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE TYPES IDENTIFIED IN INVESTIGATED AND UNINVESTIGATED CASES

Since the early days of psychical research, investigators have attached importance to observations of features that recur in large series of cases. This has led to the delineation of "standard" types of cases. Many investigators—myself included—believe that the occurrence of similar features in cases reported by widely separated informants having no contact with each other (and with no common source of information) supports the authenticity of cases conforming to the types identified. (Other investigators, including West [1948, p. 273, 294], caution against overconfident interpretations based on conformity to type.) The concept of type is now widely used in many investigations of spontaneous cases. Unfortunately, the types derived and promoted today nearly all derive from uninvestigated cases rather than from investigated ones. This is a particularly prominent feature of many reports obtained in surveys with questionnaires. Much of the confusion that now exists in the literature on out-of-body

experiences (OBEs) results from the different definitions of this experience adopted by different investigators. This confusion—complicating enough by itself—becomes magnified by uncertainty concerning the meanings that different respondents have attached to the definitions and questions provided by the surveyors. I mentioned earlier that clarification of meanings is one of the important functions of interviews. Disciplinarians of science frequently admonish us not to count oranges and apples in the same inventory; but unless we explain what we mean to our respondents, they can offer us not just apples and oranges, but many other fruits as well, and some of them rotten.

This elementary point seems completely unknown to some authors in this field. One team of investigators has generated numerous papers based on a mail survey of persons (readers of a tabloid newspaper) claiming to have had OBEs; so far as their own reports speak to the point these authors seem never to have interviewed a single one of the respondents to their mail survey. Yet we are asked to take seriously their massive inverted cone of interpretations and conjectures resting on a tiny base of responses from persons the investigators have never met.

It is perhaps expecting too much to hope that investigators of different series will always have asked the same questions of respondents, so that the series can be validly compared. It is not asking too much, however, to require that within any single series of cases, the persons surveyed attach approximately the same meanings to the questions asked. We can usually only assure this by face-to-face interviews with the respondents.

Weiner and Haight (1983) have cited a comparison I made between four series of uninvestigated cases that showed close similarities in the frequencies of the subjective forms of the experiences (Stevenson, 1970, p. 2). These similarities are interesting and merit further study; they suggest a widely distributed tendency to cast experiences suggestive of ESP into similar forms. However, they say nothing about the presence or absence of ESP in such experiences; only investigations of the experiences themselves can provide the basis for a judgment on that important matter.

I do not think anyone can reasonably disagree with what I have said so far in this section; but I have not yet given specific examples of how types derived from uninvestigated cases actually may differ significantly from those derived from investigated ones. However, two investigations give more direct evidence of the errors that can arise from accepting the statements of informants without further inquiry.

A study by Alvarado (1986) of ESP during OBEs provides my first example. Alvarado asked persons who claimed to have had OBEs to fill out a questionnaire about their experiences. This included a three-part question about the claim to have experienced ESP during the OBE and about verification of the claimed ESP. Although 33% of the 61 respondents claimed that they visited "distant places while out of their bodies and saw or heard things happening there," only 5% satisfied the criteria for having experienced ESP.

A second example derives from Palmer's (1979) survey of spontaneous cases among townspeople and students of Charlottesville, Virginia. Of 622 respondents, 52 (8.4%) claimed to have had memories of a previous life. Palmer kindly made available to me 13 of these respondents' questionnaires that had sufficient additional detail to warrant further scrutiny. No fewer than nine of these respondents claimed to remember a previous life as "a well-known or important person," and four of them claimed to remember two or more previous lives. These two features are exceedingly rare among the cases of young children who claim to remember previous lives, both in Asia and in countries of the West, including the United States (Stevenson, 1974, 1983). The cases suggestive of reincarnation identified in the Charlottesville survey clearly belonged to a group quite different from the investigated cases with which we are familiar. To have included them uncritically in a series of investigated cases would have diluted the evidence of typical features in the latter without identifying what may be valuable, although different, features in the former.

INSUFFICIENCY OF INFORMATION IN UNINVESTIGATED CASES

Anyone can readily appreciate that uninvestigated cases might lack information one would like to have; it is more difficult to understand that the missing information may lead to wrong conclusions derived from the information one does have.

A good example of this kind of error comes from the onesidedness of the information available in nearly all uninvestigated cases. The usual informants for such cases are the percipients themselves; occasionally a family member or friend of the percipient will submit a report of a case, but an agent or target person almost never does. This means that uninvestigated cases are viewed from the perspective of the percipient; thus the role of the agent tends to be neglected or ignored altogether. I think L. E. Rhine's failure to investigate her cases led her to overemphasize the activity of the percipient and even to conclude that agents were largely passive participants in ESP whose activity mattered little or not at all (L. E. Rhine, 1957, 1981). There may well be cases in which agent activity plays little or no part. However, two series of investigated cases have shown that the agent may make an important contribution to the development and features of a case. Gibson (1944) appraised the motives to communicate of the percipients and of the dying or deceased persons (agents) in the cases of *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886). He found that in 70% of the cases the deceased or dying person had a strong motive to communicate, whereas only 7% of the percipients seemed to have a strong motive to perceive the agent as an apparition. In a series of cases of telepathic impressions I found that the percipient tended to take action about his or her impression (for example, to turn back from a vacation and go to the help of the agent, who was in trouble) more often when the agent

was actively thinking about the percipient than when he or she was not; the difference between the two groups was statistically significant (Stevenson, 1970).

I can draw another example from a different type of case. I have known for many years that violent death figures prominently in cases of the reincarnation type in every country where I have studied them (Stevenson, 1980, p. 356). The high frequency of violent death can be readily noticed from examining the pages of preliminary information that my associates and I fill out when informants tell us about cases (for example, in Asia) that we do not have time to investigate when we first learn about them. This preliminary information amounts to a brief report of an uninvestigated case. The subsequent investigations of the cases have shown important differences in the incidence of violent death among different types of cases. For example, unsolved cases (those having no identified deceased person who corresponds with the subject's statements) have a much higher incidence of violent death than have solved cases (Cook, Pasricha, Samararatne, Win Maung, & Stevenson, 1983). The reasons for this difference are not pertinent here; however, the difference seems important for the understanding of the cases, and it would not have been discovered without investigating a large number of them.

In conclusion, I would like to add that uninvestigated cases may have a place in sociology and even in the psychology of belief. Also, what people believe may significantly influence what they actually perceive. However, we must not confuse a person's belief that he or she has had some paranormal experience with evidence that he or she has had one; and we can only judge whether he or she did (or did not) have one by carefully investigating the basis of the informant's claim. If we do not do this we may be doing something of interest and value, but it will not be psychical research.²

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² To avoid an appearance of pretending to originality in the admonition I have given here, I should mention that similar warnings about the risks involved in analyzing uninvestigated cases have been given earlier by Dingwall (1961), White (1964), and Anderson and Anderson (1982).

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