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DR CAROLINE WATT, PERROTT-WARRICK SENIOR RESEARCHER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH'S KOESTLER PARAPSYCHOLOGY UNIT, PROVIDES INSIGHT INTO HOW THE PHENOMENA OF REMOTE INFLUENCING AND PRECOGNITIVE DREAMS CAN BE STUDIED AND, PERHAPS, UNDERSTOOD

Outside influence

While many definitions of parapsychology tend to emphasise what it is not, rather than what it is, the term may be explained as signifying the study of mental phenomena that are excluded from, or inexplicable by, orthodox scientific psychology.

These seemingly 'inexplicable' phenomena are investigated by various scientists and academic institutions throughout the world, one of which is the University of Edinburgh's Koestler Parapsychology Unit in Scotland.

The unit consists of academic staff and postgraduate students who teach and research various aspects of parapsychology, including the possible existence of psychic ability, belief in the paranormal, the psychology of anomalous experiences, pseudo-psychic deception and self-deception, and the social and historical relevance of parapsychology.

Asked by PEN about two specific areas of parapsychology – remote influence and precognitive dreams – Dr Caroline Watt, Perrott-Warrick senior researcher at the Koestler Parapsychology Unit, reveals how experiments are being conducted to investigate how, if at all, one person is able to influence the thought of another, and how the Perrott-Warrick Dream Registry hopes to further understand dreams which appear to foretell future events.

Can you explain how experiments are designed to test for remote influence?

Typically three people are involved – the experimenter, a participant acting as 'influencer' and one acting as 'influencee'. The two participants are placed in separate rooms, so that they cannot communicate with one another using normal sensory means (for example, the rooms will have no adjoining walls).

In any experiment, there has to be a dependent variable (DV) – that is, the thing that is being measured. In remote influence studies, there are various kinds of DV. The one most commonly used is psychophysiology – a measure of the autonomic nervous system responses of the influencee. Within this, the most commonly used psychophysiology measure is electrodermal activity (EDA), which is essentially a measure of how much a person's palms are sweating. This kind of measure fluctuates rapidly, and parapsychologists think it might be a sensitive unconscious indicator of remote influence.

In tests for remote influence, electrodes are attached to the influencee's palms. They are then asked to sit back and relax for the duration of the study (typically 20-30 minutes). The influencee knows that someone in a distant room will be trying to influence their psychophysiology, but they do not know at what points in the experiment this will be happening. This means that the influencee cannot therefore self-regulate in order to try to fake a remote influence effect.

Meanwhile, the influencer is seated in a separate room and has no means of communicating with the influencee. Typically, the influencer watches a monitor displaying the live output of the influencee's EDA. At randomly designated periods, a computer programme instructs the influencer either to attempt to mentally influence the influencee's EDA (for example, to either calm or activate the influencee), and, at different periods, they are also instructed not to attempt any kind of influence. A computer automatically records the influencee's EDA readings along with the schedule of randomised influence/no influence epochs.

This is repeated a number of times, using different influencee/influencer pairs, and approximately 50 pairs are used in a typical experiment.

At the end of the experiment, the EDA during the influence periods would be statistically compared with the EDA during the no-influence periods. All else being equal, and since both the experimenter and the influencee were blind to the timing of the influence periods, there should be no systematic relationship between the influencee's EDA and the influence periods. If remote influence is operating, however, then there should be a statistically significant difference between EDA during influence versus no-influence periods.

Has significant evidence in favour of remote helping been found in these experiments?

In one particular study, I used the focusing of the influencee's attention as the DV, though otherwise the basic design was the same as that described above. In this particular case, the influencee was asked to focus attention on a candle and to press a button every time they noticed that their attention had drifted away from the focus. Thus, the DV was a count of the number of distractions reported during the experimental period.

In remote influence experiments, a computer programme instructs the influencer to attempt to mentally influence the influencee's electrodermal activity (EDA)



At random intervals, the influencer attempted to help the influencee to maintain their focus, the prediction being that there would be fewer distractions reported during the 'help' periods than during the 'no help' periods.

Having twice conducted this experiment, I found no evidence of remote helping. However, the third time I conducted an experiment which featured remote helping as the task it was in a study that was looking at experimenter effects, that is, the study was interested in whether certain experimenters would get different results when the same task was applied.

This is an interesting question that deserves further research, because many parapsychologists have observed that certain experimenters consistently obtain positive results, while others seem consistently to obtain null results in their psi studies.

I therefore selected experimenters on the basis of their beliefs about the paranormal – some were strongly sceptical, and some strong believers. I trained them to run a remote helping session, which they ran with novice participants. Although the experiment was double-blind and used all the same kinds of security measures as previously described, I found that the believer experimenters obtained evidence of remote helping and the sceptical experimenters did not.

This phenomenon does not appear to be peculiar to your experiment, as the same type of result has been reported elsewhere.

Indeed, it is something that is often reported by parapsychologists, but not much systematic research has been conducted on it. I suppose one practical difficulty is that you would need to get sceptics to act as experimenters, which they might not be inclined to do as a result of their scepticism.

While that is, perhaps, a predictable answer, I think more research is needed on this question. If consistent evidence was found that an experimenter's beliefs can directly influence their object of study (beyond the kind of psychological influences that psychologists are already familiar with), this would have profound implications because of the possibility that such a phenomenon could, in theory at least, be applied to all areas of scientific research.



There are a number of psychological factors that could increase the likelihood that a person will experience what they perceive to be a precognitive dream

world dream experiences. Most parapsychologists therefore prefer to run controlled studies under laboratory conditions, where someone is asked to dream about a target (for instance, a video clip) that will be randomly selected and played to them, for the first time, the following morning.

A number of studies conducted at the Maimonides Medical Centre in the 1960s and 70s produced positive results from this kind of study, whereas later attempts have not been so successful. The question now is to understand why there is this difference.

Within my own experience, I have led an online dream precognition study which did not find any evidence that people's dreams related to the future target video clip.

What will your new research into precognitive dreams include, and what do you hope/expect to find?

My work covers the two aforementioned main areas – psychological factors, and genuine precognition, and I have already found some evidence that people's perceptions of dream-event correspondences are affected by memory biases. People remember 'confirmed' dreams better than dreams that were not confirmed. Work is also under way in the other areas.

The only real hopes and expectations I have for my research is that the studies are sufficiently well designed that my conclusions will be valid and therefore useful. Other than that, my research will simply tell the story of what I found and how I found it, whatever that may be.

In addition to the research I am currently conducting into (precognitive) dreams, I also run a short online course that is open to anyone, with the goal of providing a balanced introduction to the field of parapsychology.

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Could you explain some of the major theories behind precognitive dream experiences, perhaps including a discussion of your previous work in this area?

This is a relatively new area for me – I am currently about halfway through a three-year programme of research into the topic, which is supported by the Perrott-Warrick Fund. There are three main theories, only one of which is paranormal.

The first theory, of course, is that it is by chance alone that people's dreams will occasionally coincide with real-world events. After all, most of us dream several times each night, so that's a lot of dreams worldwide.

Secondly, there are a number of psychological factors that could increase the likelihood that a person will experience what they perceive to be a precognitive dream. Typically, we forget our dreams. However, if an event happens that reminds us of a previous dream, then although we had forgotten the dream, we may decide with hindsight that the dream actually predicted the subsequent event, and I certainly believe that selective recall plays a role.

Furthermore, it is possible to incorporate weak sensory information into our dreams. For example, if a TV is playing a news story in the next room, and one can subtly hear it, one's dreams can incorporate the news story without our conscious awareness. It is little surprise, then, that we are shocked when we later awaken and see a news report that appears to have been predicted by our dream.

In addition to this, some people are particularly good at finding correspondences between their dreams and subsequent events. These people tend to be very creative, but sometimes they may be adopting loose criteria for what counts as a 'match' between the dream and later events. For instance, a person might dream about missing a bus that they had been running for, and later watch a 100m race on TV. Some people might be inclined to see a connection between the dream and the TV race, and others might dismiss it.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, is the possibility that people really can obtain information about otherwise unpredictable future events, and, moreover, that they can incorporate that information into their dreams.

Due to the various psychological and statistical factors outlined above, it is very difficult to assess this 'psi' hypothesis with spontaneous real-