REIMAGINING THE POLTERGEIST
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
AMERICA AND BRITAIN

by

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Abstract

In creating the psychokinesis hypothesis, twentieth-century American and British psychical researchers, psychoanalysts, and parapsychologists moved the poltergeist away from centuries of religious and spiritual attribution – that it was actions of unseen spirits of the dead, elementals, or demonic forces – into the realm of scientific boundary-work that explored unseen worlds: the human mind, consciousness, and invisible forces and organisms. Boundary-work involved a process of establishing and sustaining ideas that could be presented to the larger scientific community. Poltergeist researchers viewed themselves as pioneers who were expanding scientific knowledge, with a goal of establishing epistemic authority on the phenomenon. While spiritual attributions remained popular, as did suspicions of deceptive behaviour, poltergeist researchers managed to establish the psychokinesis hypothesis as a significant, well-known potential explanation for the poltergeist – one that suggested the human mind could affect the material environment. I argue that collaborative knowledge-making between researchers and the people who directly experienced poltergeist manifestations enabled the psychokinesis hypothesis. To this day, no one is certain what causes the poltergeist phenomenon, and very few individuals actively study it first-hand. The hypothesis was as much a mischievous force in the transformative dynamics of twentieth-century American and British culture and science as the poltergeist itself was in disrupting individual lives.
Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Christopher Laursen.

This dissertation is based on archival research, e-mail and phone interviews, and questionnaires. The interviews and questionnaires were approved by the University of British Columbia’s Research Ethics Board [certificate H12-00741], under the title Mischievous Forces, with the Principal Investigator, Dr. Joy Dixon.


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Permission for use in this dissertation of the photograph in Chapter 3 granted by the Online Editors, Columbus Dispatch, Columbus, Ohio, 24 June 2016.
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List of Abbreviations

AAAS ................................. American Association for the Advancement of Science
ASPR ........................................................ American Society for Psychical Research
CSICOP ..... Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal
JASPR ................................. Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research
JSPR ................................................... Journal of the Society for Psychical Research
PA ................................................ Parapsychological Association
PRF ............................................................. Psychical Research Foundation
PSPR ................................................... Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research
SPR ........................................................ Society for Psychical Research
Acknowledgements

My journey began with the extraordinary life experiences shared with me by my grandmother Birgit Roemer (1921-1995) when I was 13 years old. All of my research springs from that moment. From a young age, in my first career as a journalist, and through my academic training, I have been very attentive to when people open up and share their extraordinary, often life-changing experiences with me – things they couldn’t quite explain, but that made them wonder about human nature and the natural world – and beyond.

I acknowledge that the material herein tells only part of the story of experiences and studies of the poltergeist in the twentieth century – focusing on the development of a popular hypothesis that these physical manifestations were the product of psychokinesis. There are many narratives and analyses that could have been included, but I hope that the one I have chosen to tell – as imperfect as it may be – stimulates new questions that may help us better consider what happens when people encounter rare, elusive, and controversial phenomena. I encourage any reader to share their knowledge, opinions, and experiences with me.

This dissertation is largely the result of an engaging, thorough, and thoughtful collaboration with my PhD advisor Joy Dixon. The materials I worked through have taken me in many directions (some better than others), and Joy’s questions and suggestions drew me to concentrate on those materials that had the most impact in the telling of this history. I am grateful to Joy for her tremendous patience with me, a writer trained as a journalist who gets thrilled by every good lead. Joy has guided me toward being a much better, much more focused writer and researcher. My three committee members have provided very useful insights along the way. Bob Brain illuminated crucial themes in this dissertation in how knowledge was being made and refined in different epistemic frameworks, and how the common concern of all of the historical actors was to find answers to questions about human nature. Leslie Paris gave me indispensable knowledge on the history of youth, sexuality, and post-war American culture. She challenged me with healthy scepticism, emphasizing the ambivalence around such extraordinary narratives for historical actors and readers alike. Her considerate and lively approach lifted me up when I truly needed it. Carla Nappi has always made it cool to confront the more controversial aspects of history. She has encouraged me to explore the creative and expressive sides of academia, helping me shape my methods in ways that bridge scholarship and media work. She, along with Bruce Rusk and Habibna, provided me with much laughter and delight, giving me a comfortable home when I did research in North Carolina in 2012. I am truly indebted to these professors. They enlightened me to focus on what matters in a doctoral project and to always consider my project in a broader historical context – not an easy feat with such an elusive, contested history.
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To Mormor,
who showed me
“There is more to this world than we can ever fathom,”

and to Kristofir,
who makes the impossible possible.
INTRODUCTION:  
The Meaning in the Mischief

Suppose that, by some mysterious means, you could project your energy outside your own body. Suppose that by imagining you are walking outside a house, while you in fact sitting inside it, you could create the physical noise of footsteps outside the door. By a fierce unconscious wish to hurt someone, you could cause a book to raise into the air and hit the object of your animosity. Such phenomena would be poltergeists.

– Jules France, psychiatrist
“What Are Poltergeists?”
Fate magazine, April 1951

As 1966 turned to 1967, the Florida souvenir warehouse Tropication Arts became the site of strange events. There was a peculiar increase in the incidence of items breaking. As the weeks went on, amber-coloured beer mugs, highball tumblers, sailfish-shaped ashtrays, rubber alligators, plastic binoculars, zombie drinking glasses, back scratchers, and other things fell or flew off the shelves. It became apparent that this only happened when a 19-year-old shipping clerk, Julio Vasquez, was around. Initially, co-workers blamed him for what was happening. Julio resented the accusations. Yet no one could prove trickery. Talk of a ghostly haunting began to circulate among the employees.

Academic parapsychologists who researched the mechanisms of alleged psychical phenomena were invited to investigate the strange object movements. They were experts

1 Jules France, “What Are Poltergeists?,” Fate 4, no. 3 (April 1951), 62, an article largely inspired by the work of Nandor Fodor. For more on Fodor, see Chapter 2, Psyche.
on such strange physical events, popularly known as “poltergeists” – from the German *poltern*, to make a loud noise or uproar, and *geist*, meaning ghost. The parapsychologists observed what was going on, measured distances and directions in which objects moved, and mapped out the physical manifestations in relation to the people who were present. They posited that the events were somehow directly linked to Julio. He was invariably present when objects moved. There also appeared to be an emotional connection. Before things happened, Julio was tense; after an object movement, he felt relieved. One day, as Julio placed a toy alligator on a shelf, he joked to the parapsychologist William Roll, “I make magic.” At that moment, a zombie glass unexpectedly fell off the shelf behind him. Another time, Roll was watching Julio approach him with a broom in his hand. “I hope something fall down,” Julio said. A beer mug fell. Such evidence of “mind over matter” suggested that the potential for psychokinetic control – moving objects at a distance – could be developed from poltergeist cases. I call this the psychokinesis hypothesis.

Roll’s Psychical Research Foundation, founded from the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University in 1961, was among the few funded organizations that had the resources and expertise to consistently investigate spontaneous poltergeist cases in twentieth-century America and Britain. More than anyone before him, Roll developed and tested the psychokinesis hypothesis. Psychokinesis, also referred to as PK or telekinesis, was a concept that described an ability or disposition of a person that enabled them to intentionally or

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1 In parapsychology, psychical phenomena, or psi, are experiences or dispositions in which people know things outside of their normal senses (extra-sensory perception, telepathy or clairvoyance) or beyond the normal parameters of space-time (precognition and psychokinesis). Parapsychologists treat such phenomena as “preternatural” in that they occur within nature, but have yet to be explained within current science models. Parapsychology has worked to create models that may enable understanding of these phenomena. Definitions here are drawn from Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), and from my interview with the German clinical psychologist Walter von Lucadou, 20 April 2015.
unconsciously affect the physical world by some form of energy or psychic force. The psychokinesis hypothesis held that the production of poltergeist manifestations depended on the presence of a specific individual, like Julio, who researchers called a “poltergeist agent” or a “focus person.” Through first-hand observation, testing, and analysis of historical case studies, proponents of the psychokinesis hypothesis suggested that human affect – in particular repressed or intensified emotions – appeared to be the common element when the poltergeist manifested. They sought evidence that focus persons could gain conscious control over psychokinetic faculties.

The psychokinesis hypothesis contributed to a larger scientific project: to expand knowledge about human nature, the natural world, and evolutionary potential. Innovative research on the poltergeist was in tension with established natural laws in which toy alligators and beer mugs did not fall off of warehouse shelves on their own but remained stationary unless they were positioned precariously, someone moved them, or the earth were to shake. At the same time, such anomalous, spontaneous, recurrent manifestations had been reported in the past, and there had been relatively little reported evidence of apparent deception or natural cause. In their analysis of 500 SPR poltergeist cases, Alan Gauld and Tony Cornell found fraud was detected in 41 of them (8 percent). See Gauld and Cornell, Poltergeists (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 243.

In order to study the poltergeist and psychokinesis, Roll collaborated directly with individuals who directly experienced the phenomenon. This was

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3 In his analysis of 116 historical and contemporary poltergeist cases, William Roll found that in 19 cases, “the focal person, or in one case a relative, produced one or more events by trickery.” See Roll, “Poltergeists,” The Handbook of Parapsychology, edited by Benjamin B. Wolman (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1977), 392-393. In their analysis of 500 SPR poltergeist cases, Alan Gauld and Tony Cornell found fraud was detected in 41 of them (8 percent). See Gauld and Cornell, Poltergeists (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 243.

tricky. Julio, for example, endured upheavals in his life as a refugee separated from his family in Cuba, and before the poltergeist events began, he felt suicidal.\(^5\) In February 1967, just as the investigation at Tropication Arts appeared to yield evidence favouring the psychokinesis hypothesis, Julio was suspected of breaking into the business and stealing a typewriter. He was fired. Julio then participated in controlled testing at Duke University, but no further evidence emerged to support the psychokinesis hypothesis. Such were the challenges of dealing with people at the centre of a strange phenomenon that manifested in the midst of their life’s difficulties. Roll, more than anyone before him, persisted, collecting as much data as he could in these case studies, and forging the psychokinesis hypothesis within the disciplinary framework of parapsychology.

I argue that collaborative knowledge-making between researchers and experiencers was the mechanism that enabled the formulation of the psychokinesis hypothesis. By the late 1950s, the hypothesis became a widely known potential explanation for the poltergeist. It effectively competed with long-standing popular notions that discarnate entities (like spirits of the dead or demons), environmental causes (like earth tremors or structural instability), or deception (conscious or unconscious) caused poltergeist manifestations.\(^6\) In exploring this phenomenon, parapsychologists tried to follow the scientific methods of experimental psychology, applying detached observational and measuring technologies with the goal of isolating, controlling, and replicating phenomena. That method was in opposition to the subjective meanings that focus persons gave the poltergeist events – and to the elusive

\(^5\) Roll, The Poltergeist, 173.
\(^6\) Given that the Psychical Research Foundation focused on studying issues of survival after death, Roll remained open to the possibility that a discarnate entity was involved in poltergeist cases, but suggested that there still needed to be a mechanism like psychokinesis involved. See Roll, The Poltergeist, 9-10.
spontaneity of the poltergeist itself. The unpredictability of the phenomenon and the focus persons alike prevented poltergeist researchers from reliably studying the poltergeist through a psychological/physical scientific framework.

This study contributes to a historiographical tradition in which boundary-work, whether it was successful or not, matters in the making of knowledge. The boundary-work investigated here centres on a hypothesis that straddled ontological divides: natural and physical sciences, sciences of the mind, religious and spiritual beliefs, and the diverse lifeworlds of experiencers. The poltergeist events, occurring unexpectedly, disrupted notions of a stable reality. The audience for this study are historians of religion who are examining personally and socially transformative spiritual and extraordinary experiences in relation to the sciences and culture. I largely draw from the historiography of science and psychology and frame it within questions being asked by historians of religion on the relationship between knowledge-making and experience. The “paranormal” is an immensely popular topic; this study is likely to attract scholars and non-scholars alike, including people who have experienced or studied the poltergeist themselves. My goal here is not to prove or disprove the poltergeist phenomenon. It is to examine and ask questions about the claims made. I have no stake in any particular claim, nor have I personally experienced such a phenomenon. This study raises new questions about the interactions between those who directly experience and those who investigate the poltergeist phenomenon, which continues to be reported around the globe to this day.  

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7 The Australian independent researcher Paul Cropper is presently the world’s most active poltergeist investigator, focusing on documenting and comparing cases that take place outside of Europe and North America. For more on his work, see Tony Healy and Paul Cropper, Australian Poltergeist: The Stone-Throwing Spook of Humpty Doo and Many Other Cases (Sydney: Strange Nation, 2014).
I argue that the most significant data emerged from case studies in which researchers applied an empathetic approach in order to collaborate with experiencers – especially from those cases where, radically, experiencers became active participants in the design of the studies. While those latter cases were the most scientifically controversial, the experiencers themselves found it easiest to come to terms with the poltergeist events, even finding a greater purpose in their lives as a result. By actively guiding their experiences with the poltergeist, active participants were part of what William Roll called the “consciousness revolution,” a time in which people thought differently “about themselves and the world around them. Many people,” Roll noted, “seek out experiences which give them a sense of transcending their individual selves.” The outcome of those cases became more than a quest to comprehend the phenomenon; it was also an effort to find out how to enhance one’s own potential to control and direct psychokinetic energies.

150 Years of Reimagining Psychical Phenomena

This study is about how, through the psychokinesis hypothesis, scientists and experiencers in twentieth-century America and Britain influentially reimagined the poltergeist. The poltergeist is a rare physical phenomenon in which objects were seen recurrently moving with no apparent cause, anomalous sounds were heard, and spontaneous fires lit. More unusual events reported included objects appearing or disappearing suddenly, the emergence of objects from solid surfaces like walls and ceilings, pools of liquids forming, painful physical marks appearing on people’s bodies, flashes and

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8 Roll, The Poltergeist, 11-12.
forms of light, and intelligible communication with knocking sounds – even mysterious written notes or disembodied voices. Over five hundred modern cases have been documented in the archives of the Society for Psychical Research alone. Most cases were likely unreported. When they were documented, the physical manifestations occurred repeatedly, generally in a single location – mostly people’s private homes, sometimes in workplaces. They usually happened over a short period of time, four to eight weeks on average. Given its rarity and elusiveness, the poltergeist has been most prevalently categorized within the realm of supernatural or paranormal things, usually attributed to spirits of the dead, elementals, or demonic or diabolic activities. \(^9\)

Most relevant to the making of the psychokinesis hypothesis, the focus of this study, 1848 was the year that the word “poltergeist” was introduced into the English language, sparking secular studies of the physical phenomenon. That year, the English writer Catherine Crowe adopted the German word “poltergeist” to describe the phenomenon in her popular book on the supernatural, \textit{The Night Side of Nature; or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers}. In it, Crowe aimed to establish a “presumption” that these things, in her words, “\textit{may be so, and that it is well worth our while to inquire whether they are or not.”} \(^{10}\) Through her introduction of the term “poltergeist” in relation to potentially psychokinetic individuals – mid-nineteenth-century cases of French “electric girls” who apparently had the ability to

\(^9\) For religious interpretations of the poltergeist, including the Christian reformer Martin Luther’s coinage of the word in the sixteenth century and the rise of spiritualism in the mid-nineteenth century, see Christopher Laursen, “The Poltergeist at the Intersection of the Spirit and the Material” in \textit{Super Religion}, edited by Jeffrey J. Kripal (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan/Cengage Learning, 2016).

intentionally affect their physical environments by invisible means – Crowe invited new ways of studying the physical phenomenon as something different than a ghostly haunting.

Seven years after Crowe’s book was published, British scholars and scientists organized themselves to study ghostly and psychical phenomena, leading to the formation of the Ghost Club in 1862, with the writer Charles Dickens as a prominent member.\textsuperscript{11} Two decades later, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded. The SPR’s founders included scientists and scholars. The SPR aimed “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 recognized hypothesis.”\textsuperscript{12} In other words, the SPR set out to study human-centred phenomena that established scientific disciplines could not explain. Research in phenomena like telepathy and hallucinations appealed to psychologists like William McDougall, Théodore Flournoy, Gardner Murphy, and the New York-based American SPR co-founders William James and Joseph Jastrow. Externalized vital forces and ectoplasm attracted physiologists, neurologists and biologists such as Charles Richet, Albert Freiherr von Schrenck-Notzing, Hans Driessch, and Hippolyte Baraduc. Psychokinesis, materializations, and other physical effects drew physicists including William F. Barrett, Lord Rayleigh, Oliver Lodge, and William Crookes.\textsuperscript{13} Many of these scientists felt compelled to study psychical phenomena for “intellectual, religious, moral and emotional reasons,” the

\textsuperscript{11} See The Ghost Club website, \url{http://www.ghostclub.org.uk/history.html}, accessed 1 July 2016.
historian of science Richard Noakes (2014) writes, often to seek “compatibility of scientific
and Christian conceptions of the cosmos.”14

Through their investigations and experiments, psychical researchers sought to explain
phenomena that had previously been considered in spiritual or mystical terms. They
transformed séance rooms into hybrid spaces where instruments and controlled procedures
were put into place, not only to take measurements and document, but to prevent
deception – which was regularly reported. In mediumship, the line between “authentic”
metaphysical phenomena and “staged” magic was blurred. Strict experimental parameters
tended to limit the appearances of psychical phenomena in controlled settings. This caused
disagreements among researchers and with their research subjects. No cohesive
methodologies were agreed upon.15

There were three major fields of science that sought to demystify the supernatural: life,
physical, and psychological. The historian of science Robert Michael Brain (2013) has shown
how the concept of ectoplasm, a physical substance produced from mediums’ bodies during
séances, was accommodated within views widely held by physiologists and biologists that
protoplasm, essentially cellular matter, was the central component to life itself. Ectoplasm,
Charles Richet argued, was an “extreme instance of normal nerve physiology,” “an
opportunity to study the workings of protoplasm under special conditions.”16 If such
psychical phenomena were evidence of heightened or extreme natural states, scientists felt

14 Noakes, 53-54.
15 Noakes 46-47; and Elizabeth R. Valentine, “Spooks and spoofs: relations between psychical research and
academic psychology in Britain in the inter-war period,” History of the Human Sciences 25, no. 2 (2012), 71-73.
Also see Sofie Lachapelle, “Confronting Ghosts, Mediums, and Fakirs,” Conjuring Science: A History of Scientific
16 Robert Michael Brain, “Materialising the Medium: Ectoplasm and the Quest for Supra-Normal Biology in Fina-
de-Siècle Science and Art,” in Vibratory Mechanism, edited by Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower (New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 125, 129.
justified in studying them. Extraordinary discoveries by physicists during these decades, including of X-rays, electromagnetic waves, and radiation, “suggested a vast and unexplored world of unseen forces,” making psychical studies conducive to physicists’ work.\(^\text{17}\)

Mediumistic demonstrations of moving objects at a distance, allegedly through psychokinesis, were of particular interest to physicists. The problems of measuring and recording “unseen forces” plagued not only psychical research experiments, but also the everyday work of physicists. In psychical research, physicists sought solutions that could advance their overall studies.\(^\text{18}\)

At the turn of the century, psychological and psychical research shared common ground in their studies of abnormal mental states. The terms “psychological” and “psychical” were even used interchangeably during that time to denote “mental” rather than “physical.” As the historians of science Andreas Sommer and Elizabeth R. Valentine (2012) each have shown, by the 1920s, experimental psychologists, abandoning philosophical concerns, placed greater emphasis on the framework of established, accepted natural sciences; these psychologists valued “detached observation, accurate measurement and recording” through “technical equipment and specialized training.”\(^\text{19}\) American and German psychologists who championed a natural sciences approach, such as Wilhelm Wundt, Joseph Jastrow, and Hugo Münsterberg, distanced themselves from the humanities-oriented, experience-centred studies of William James.\(^\text{20}\) As a result of this natural sciences approach, experimental psychology blossomed in universities, becoming academically established in

\(^{17}\) Brain, 119.

\(^{18}\) Noakes, 47.

\(^{19}\) Valentine, 69.

the decades following the Second World War. It gained authority by presenting answers to questions of interest to a wide audience on the workings of everyday life and human behaviour, whereas psychical research and parapsychology remained focused on extraordinary, often sensationalized anomalies.21

Scientists sought ways in which phenomena could be reproduced under observable and controlled conditions, but the phenomena remained elusive. Impressive, inexplicable manifestations were entangled in mediums' spiritual beliefs and their relatively common tendency to deceive, making it highly difficult for researchers to establish reliable knowledge about them. After the First World War, such doubts were intensified through public exposures of fraudulent mediums, particularly those criminally charged with extorting grieving citizens. By the 1930s, fewer scientists involved themselves in investigating psychical phenomena.22 Public interest and membership in psychical research organizations peaked in the 1930s, and then declined and levelled out through the following decades.23 A new academic study, parapsychology, emerged as a way to standardize research on spontaneous psychical phenomena experienced by members of the public, such as telepathy, premonitions, and the poltergeist.

In the 1930s, American parapsychology was founded by J.B. Rhine in the Department of Psychology at Duke University. Following the methods of experimental psychology and the natural sciences, Rhine and his colleagues statistically evaluated replicable experiments of telepathy and psychokinesis involving both average and exceptional human subjects.

Conducting research through this laboratory-based experimental approach, a handful of

21 Valentine, 69-70, 83-84.
22 Brain, 132-136; Noakes, 47-52; Valentine, 71-73.
23 Valentine, 71-73.
parapsychological labs opened in American and British universities, a process that continued into the 1980s: the University of Virginia (Division of Perceptual Studies, founded 1967), Stanford University (the Stanford Research Institute, 1972-1991), Princeton University (Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research, 1979-2007), and the University of Edinburgh (Koestler Parapsychology Unit, founded 1985). The Parapsychological Association, a professional organization founded in 1957, gained membership in the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1969. But parapsychology has remained a very small discipline that has been largely ignored by the greater communities of psychologists and scientists.  

By the 1960s and ‘70s, independent, experientially focused research centres such as the Esalen Institute (founded by human potential researchers Michael Murphy and Dick Price in 1962) and the Institute of Noetic Sciences (founded by the astronaut Edgar Mitchell in 1973) concentrated on questions of human nature broadly defined through both philosophy and the sciences. Those approaches directly involved members of the public who sought knowledge beyond that established by mainstream sciences and religions. Furthermore, a renewed public interest in psychokinesis resulting from the television appearances of the Israeli mentalist Uri Geller in the 1970s compelled some British and American physicists to study macro-PK effects such as “paranormal metal bending” with children as test subjects in academic laboratories. Such effects were not convincingly replicated under controlled

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24 See Chapter 3.
conditions. More substantial micro-PK studies had emerged starting in the 1950s, in which parapsychologists collaborated with biologists and physicists. Micro-PK experiments involved human subjects concentrating in an effort to affect cellular organisms and subatomic matter. Those studies yielded more compelling statistical evidence, but they have yet to gain ground in the mainstream sciences. Parapsychology and psychical research rarely gained science funding. The historian of science Sofie Lachapelle (2011) explains that this is because the audience consisted mainly of interested lay people, especially individuals seeking scientific proof of life after death, energy healing, or psychic abilities. Philanthropists among those individuals helped fund such research. Despite vigorous participation from noted multidisciplinary scientists in its first half-century, psychical research had not managed to produce findings that appealed to the greater scientific community. Rhine’s approach was to follow psychology’s experimental direction toward natural science and, despite statistical evidence presented by his lab which he claimed supported the existence of psychokinesis, these findings did not reach far beyond parapsychology itself. Studies of extraordinary experiences grew outside of the academy, in independent research organizations like New Horizons and the Mind Science Foundation. Through them, novel ways of experiencing and experimenting with psychical phenomena

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grew in post-1960s cultural shifts in which the public themselves began exploring human potential – largely inspired by countercultural thinkers who were frustrated by the authoritative claims of established science, religion, and the state.

**Argument: Collaborative Knowledge-Making**

There are two major themes that I investigate in this study of the making of the psychokinesis hypothesis in twentieth-century America and Britain: knowledge-making and experience. In terms of knowledge-making, I argue that poltergeist researchers pursued this hypothesis to contribute to a larger project to comprehend the whole of human nature, the natural world, and evolutionary potential. For these researchers, there was something about the poltergeist that spoke to what human beings were – and what they could become if they were to gain control of psychokinetic faculties. Researchers sought to isolate the poltergeist in settings where it could be measured, perhaps even induced – preferably in laboratories. However, poltergeist researchers found the elusive, spontaneous nature of both the phenomenon and the focus persons highly difficult to manage and observe. In each chapter, I show how this problem was consistently at odds with the conditions of typical scientific protocols to predict or control phenomena in order to effectively study it. When researchers and experiencers actively collaborated and found innovative ways to manage and observe the physical manifestations, they tended to defy scientific conventions. As a result, those radical cases were controversial among psychical researchers and parapsychologists. At the same time, they were well received by people who valued new
forms of knowledge that combined direct experience with innovative, experimental approaches.  

In this study, I position poltergeist experiencers, whose presence has often been minimized in published and archived case studies, as the central historical actors. Developing and testing the psychokinesis hypothesis relied on the consent and participation of diverse individuals who unexpectedly found their homes or workplaces to be ground zero for the disruptive manifestations of the poltergeist. No other historical actor experienced the poltergeist events as consistently and directly as these individuals. In each chapter, I focus on the extent to which experiencers were passive or active, absent or present in collaborating with researchers in the making of the psychokinesis hypothesis. In Chapter 1, I review the emergence of the hypothesis. In those early studies, experiencers were largely treated as passive subjects to be observed and judged by British researchers like Frank Podmore, William F. Barrett, and Harry Price – while the American writer Charles Fort emphasized how experiencers tended to be socially and scientifically marginalized. Chapter 2 looks at the 1930s through the 1950s, during which time, inspired by the ideas of the psychical researcher Hereward Carrington, Nandor Fodor tested the psychokinesis hypothesis within a Freudian psychoanalytical framework. This enabled experiencers to explore the relationship between their unconscious and the poltergeist events with therapeutic guidance, but ultimately, the diagnoses and findings were decided by Fodor himself. Chapter 3 deals with the American parapsychological studies of William Roll and his colleagues in the 1950s through the 1980s, in which an empathetic field research approach enabled greater access to and cooperation from poltergeist experiencers, providing an

See Chapter 4.
unprecedented opportunity to expand data on the poltergeist. While experiencers more actively collaborated in this research, they remained confined by parapsychological experimental parameters. Where post-research outcomes are known, we find that experiencers were often stigmatized by the poltergeist events, sometimes ostracized by others who doubted them. Many preferred to altogether forget their poltergeist experience, moving from their homes, fearing its recurrence. While the poltergeist cases were active, focus persons became the centre of attention, which I argue simultaneously empowered them as extraordinary and marginalized them as outsiders.

The most extensive data emerged from a small handful of atypical poltergeist cases in which experiencers took on a radical role as equal and active participants working with empathetic researchers. In Chapter 4, I highlight three cases in which, as a result of this approach, poltergeist or PK-type events extended over years rather than weeks, giving more extensive opportunities to study what was happening. Experiencers demonstrated their potential to yield promising research outcomes when they were permitted to take an active role in experimental design – what the historian of religions Jeffrey J. Kripal calls “experience as experiment.”

In the post-war decades, affluent experiencers and scientists explored the poltergeist events in a cultural climate where direct experience mattered as much in new studies of consciousness and spirituality as did traditions of objectivity and objectification. This shift signalled a coming into “the self” and an emphasis on directing one’s own life and process of knowledge-making rather than depending on established institutions and traditions. The making of the psychokinesis hypothesis ultimately reveals

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how “the self” and “science” were dramatically transformed, from a situation where disciplinary authorities controlled knowledge-making protocols to one where experiencers themselves could direct their own process of seeking knowledge.

**Historiographical Contribution: Why Post-War Boundary-Work Matters**

This study contributes to a historiography that shows how boundary-work matters in making knowledge about human experiences and the natural world. It combines an analysis of two kinds of boundary-work: that of the boundary scientists in making the psychokinesis hypothesis, and that of poltergeist experiencers in authorizing expert interventions, collaborating, and actively participating in experimental design. Drawing from the sociologist Thomas Gieryn (1999), in her study of German parapsychology, the historian of science Heather Wolffram (2009) questions “how scientific boundaries are established, sustained, enlarged, policed and breached in pursuit or denial of epistemic authority.” She writes that boundary scientists “sought to expand science’s frontiers” to develop a more complete understanding of human nature and the natural world. Parapsychologists, for example, viewed themselves not as scientific outsiders but “pioneers of a new science” that sought to methodically explain psi phenomena. They needed to forge their own

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32 Wolffram, 296.

33 Wolffram, 18.
disciplinary norms in an effort to advance studies of elusive phenomena like the poltergeist and psi that did not fit easily within existing scientific paradigms.  

Historical studies of boundary-work support an understanding of scientific knowledge as integrated into, not separate from, greater cultural forces. Scientists have had to – as the historian of science Richard Noakes (2008) points out – “mobilise more than just measurements, instruments and theories, but also the literary, financial, institutional, political, and other ‘non-scientific’ aspects of their culture.” My study is among the very few to examine boundary-work in psychical research and parapsychology after 1939. In doing so, I draw on two studies in particular that exemplify post-war boundary-work in action outside of parapsychology: the independent scholar Immanuel Velikovsky’s influential but controversial claims about ancient global catastrophes on the one hand and the revival of quantum physics in the 1970s on the other. Both scenarios trespassed on the established boundaries of science, but with different outcomes. In 1950, Velikovsky wrote about how “ancient mythological, scriptural, and historical sources from a variety of cultures contained repeated homologous descriptions of major catastrophes,” including a comet that


nearly collided with the earth and settled into orbit as Venus.37 Michael D. Gordin showed how scientists deployed the politicized term “pseudoscience” to discredit Velikovsky and mark his ideas as unsound. “Pseudoscience,” Gordin wrote, “is a term, I maintain, without real content, and yet the notion performs active work in the world, separating off certain doctrines from those deemed to be science proper,” to push such claims “off the grid altogether.” Popular interest in Velikovsky’s book helped energize a countercultural and post-modern challenge to truth-claims made by the scientific establishment, but by Velikovsky’s death in 1979, his ideas largely faded from cultural consciousness.38 However, other post-Second World War boundary-work did become widely accepted as scientific knowledge. David Kaiser’s 2011 study demonstrates how the counterculture (including parapsychology) and capitalism converged to revive quantum physics in the 1970s. Kaiser shows how the philosophical thought experiments that gave rise to quantum physics in the 1920s languished as applied sciences gained dominance in the mid-century. In the wake of socio-cultural transformation in the 1960s, San Francisco-area academic institutions became sites to resolve social and scientific problems. This provided young scientists and their students with a space to challenge the limitations of classical physics and find practical applications for new quantum knowledge.39 Post-war boundary-work, whether it faded like Velikovsky’s catastrophism or flourished like quantum physics, worked on questions outside of accepted scientific knowledge. Boundary claims faced opposition from communities of scientists who felt the disciplinary boundaries they had established were being trespassed.

38 Gordin, 1.
Introduction: The Meaning in the Mischief

upon. These claims reached beyond scientists, and appealed, in various ways, to non-scientists who sought answers to unresolved questions about human nature and the natural world. Such epistemic tensions also arose in poltergeist and parapsychological studies, however, those areas of study have remained both scientifically marginal and socially popular, in boundary-work limbo, so to speak. This is largely due to the fact that while the greater scientific community has shown little interest in parapsychological work, members of the public, including experiencers, have a significant stake in that research.

Those who experienced the poltergeist directly also engaged in boundary-work. They sought to comprehend the events in relation to how they had known the world. In order to understand this process, I have adopted the experience-centred approach developed by the folklorist David Hufford in his 1982 study of sleep paralysis. Sleep paralysis is an unsettling but widely reported phenomenon in which people awaken from sleep, cannot move or cry out, and feel as if “someone” had come into their room and is holding them down. Hufford began his ethnographic study in 1970s Newfoundland where the phenomenon was attributed to the “Old Hag” or being “hagged,” terms that simultaneously identified both the anomalous experience and the personification of an “attacker.” Sleep researchers used Hufford’s analysis to advance new neurological theories and therapeutic approaches to help people who experienced the phenomenon.40 Experience-centred studies present data that potentially can be assessed across the humanities and sciences. Since Hufford, ethnographic histories have taken scholarship deeper into experience, placing it within

broader historical contexts, such as Michael Brown’s 1997 study of channelling and Joyce Elaine Noll (1991) on African-American psychics.41 The most recent experience-centred studies include collaborations in which experiencers relate and think on what happened and what it meant to them in direct conversation with the scholar applying historical tools of analysis. Kripal’s 2016 collaboration with the experiencer Whitley Strieber – intended for wider audiences as well as scholars – stands as a prime example of this kind of approach. In it, Strieber relates ongoing encounters he has had with strange beings, with Kripal, in alternating chapters, evaluating those experiences in their historical context.42 Scholar/experiencer collaborations may be among the most fruitful directions for experience-centred analyses as they promote direct dialogues and analysis. While this study does not involve that level of ethnographic collaboration, it has involved interviewing a number of poltergeist experiencers to better comprehend their perspectives.43

In making knowledge from both experiences and scientific studies, boundary-work is a crucial step, even if the results remain uncertain. By examining the process of boundary-work as a collaboration between researchers and experiencers, I contribute to a literature in which scientific knowledge-making is shown to be dynamic, negotiable, and imperfect. Choosing such an elusive phenomena as the poltergeist for this study shows how boundary-work can extend over a long period of time, with research remaining in epistemic limbo. My study asks how collaborative knowledge-making between boundary scientists and experiencers enabled the psychokinesis hypothesis as part of a project to expand knowledge

43 Notably with Shirley Hitchings for Chapter 4, and other experiencers who answered a questionnaire approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board, certificate H12-00741.
about human nature. In order to assess that question, in the next two sections I discuss how I employ a specific set of methodological tools. First, I look at the affective and material turns. In the section after, I examine the ontological turn.

Methodology: Affect and Materiality

I am inspired by, and wish to expand upon, methodological tools employed by historians in two very different fields: the history of emotions and of materiality in religions. This allows me to emphasize both the affect and the physicality of experiences that drove the making of the psychokinesis hypothesis. Proponents of the hypothesis argued that affective states among poltergeist focus persons – repressed or intensified emotions – were correlated with the manifestation of material events – the poltergeist phenomenon.

The “affective turn” originated in historical studies of emotions. Peter N. Stearns (2015) writes that emotions are a human physiological and cognitive response to stimuli. In recent decades, social historians have actively attended to individual historical actors’ emotions, finding that their emotions clearly formed motivations for action. Historians of emotions have revealed broad socio-cultural trends around emotionality, such as how twentieth-century American and British professionals sought to gain greater control over their emotional lives in order to appear more confident and level-headed, a significant cultural shift away from religiously centred moral credentials and toward what were

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45 Stearns provides a historiographical overview.
characterized as reliable psychological dispositions. These histories have influenced anthropologists, sociologists, and some cognitive scientists to recognize the role that emotions have on culture and vice versa. Their studies comprehend how emotion shapes family and work life, social relations, religious devotion, and politics. Drawing from this affect-centered approach, I emphasize how boundary scientists sought both individual and comparative evidence about emotional states to support the psychokinesis hypothesis, as well as how experiencers were affected by the poltergeist manifestations.

In recent years, historians of science have also examined the ways in which scientists encountered, negotiated, and studied emotions in their work. Paul White (2009) writes that these historians recognized “the co-dependence of the cognitive and the affective in the production of knowledge, the formation of judgments, and the making of meaning.” In addition to the scientific practices of observation, experiment, and theory, scientists also engaged in “practices of the self” in their knowledge-making. That is, when scientists attempted to be objective in their work, they contended with and even suppressed their emotional selves. They also had to deal with the emotions of their living experimental subjects, both human and non-human.

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48 See the focus section “The Emotional Economy of Science” in *Isis* 100, no. 4 (December 2009), as well as the scholarship on emotions and the sciences by Otnell Dror, in particular “The Affect of Experiment: The Turn to Emotions in Anglo-American Physiology, 1900-1940,” *Isis* 90, no. 2 (June 1999), 205-237.
50 White, 793.
Data in favour of the psychokinesis hypothesis grew as researchers viewed experiencers’ emotional states as crucial to their study of the poltergeist. In the first half of the twentieth century, poltergeist researchers like Frank Podmore and Nandor Fodor tended to position emotions as suspicious, untrustworthy, and pathological whereas after the Second World War, parapsychologists like William Roll and George Owen embraced the dynamic role of emotions which contributed to expanding their data about the poltergeist. Post-war researchers trusted human emotions as a way to measure, predict, and even potentially control psychokinesis. In the last chapter, based on first-person accounts, I focus on how experiencers allowed affect and intuition to guide them through poltergeist events. Emotions were more than chemical physiology or a simple response to stimuli – they helped measure and predict poltergeist events.

Equally important is a material turn that takes into account the physicality of both the poltergeist experiences and the ways that the phenomenon was studied. On the latter point, I am influenced by the attention historians have given to instrumentality in psychical research and parapsychology. The historian of religion and media Jeremy Stolow examines how technologies were created to render “divine entities” present. Take for example his study of how the nineteenth-century American spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis’s “magnetic cord” intended to harmonize the dispositions of séance participants, thereby enhancing spirit communication. Stolow argues that such technologies, not unlike religious icons and rituals, were made to increase the reliability of modern-day spiritual experiences.
work. The technologies were inspired by the ways scientists used instruments to study, interface with, and manipulate human, non-human, and natural worlds.\textsuperscript{53} Robert Brain, for example, attends to materiality not only in the technologies deployed by séance-room scientists, but also in the physical manifestations themselves. Brain’s visceral descriptions of ectoplasm’s materiality helps to explain why scientists framed the substance as biological evidence and used it to fit psychical claims into the natural world. Furthermore, scientists’ photographic documentation of ectoplasm simultaneously became a tool employed by spiritualists to endorse the scientific possibilities of mediumship.\textsuperscript{54} In these studies, knowledge-making is embodied through materiality.

I am particularly inspired by religious studies that focus on the material to move beyond the dominant mode in studies of religion of inquiring about “beliefs,” where a private spiritual interiority has been privileged over “how religion appears and becomes tangible in the world.”\textsuperscript{55} Religious scholars Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (2012) write that “championing materiality signals the need to pay urgent attention to a real, material world of objects and a texture of lived embodied experience.”\textsuperscript{56} In poltergeist cases, material objects \textit{acted} in unexpected ways.\textsuperscript{57} Typically inanimate things became animated. Such strangeness forced experiencers and researchers to rethink the nature of things, and of

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\textsuperscript{53} Stolow, 2-3, 5, 15; 85-87.
\textsuperscript{54} Brain, 115, 117.
\textsuperscript{56} Houtman and Meyer, 4.
\textsuperscript{57} In this study, I do not go as far to evaluate these things or the phenomena as actants as Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory might call for. Giving the poltergeist agency would open a variety of fascinating new questions, but for this study, I wish to maintain my focus on the ways in which knowledge was made between researchers and experiencers in poltergeist cases. For more on Latour’s approach, see Bruno Latour, \textit{Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
\end{flushright}
materiality itself. These animated objects made historical actors wonder what unseen entities or forces might be present, incarnated through material environments. Attention to the materiality of the phenomenon thus adds another layer in better understanding the lifeworlds, concerns, and questions of historical actors in poltergeist case studies.

In the 1977-78 Enfield poltergeist case, a lamp sliding across a table made a man question everything he knew. As a family member visiting the household, he recalled standing a few feet away from the lamp. He saw it move on its own to the edge of a table. He tried to push the lamp back, but reported that it vibrated violently and fell to the floor. He told the psychical researchers investigating the case: “I still didn’t really believe, until I saw one or two of the things that I did see, and which today I’m still convinced that I didn’t see, but I know I did. That’s a bit hard to explain.” Even when personally observing such inexplicable events, the physical manifestations in these case studies were so outside of the norm, so contrary to a stable material worldview, that many observers were deeply confounded. They could not believe what they saw. The very people who witnessed these material manifestations felt ambivalent. Proponents of the psychokinesis hypothesis set out to relieve their unease and fear, and situate it as something natural. Since the hypothesis has yet to prove itself as a reliable theory, it competes with other interpretations. The reality of the poltergeist remains contested.

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Contested Realities: Turning to the Ontological

If we assume that poltergeist events were all fraudulent, as the psychical researcher Frank Podmore did in 1896, we foreclose a conversation on the complexities of knowledge-making around controversial human experiences. The assumption of overall fraud renders invisible the concern of this historical study: the very real ways in which these events, whatever they were, impacted individual lives and processes of knowledge-making. My analysis does not depend on whether or not truth-claims were veridical or whether historical actors were being honest or not. In this analytical space – one that emphasizes ontology and examines historical actors’ competing views of their various “realities” – we enhance an assessment of how culture (worldviews) influences consciousness (lifeworlds), and how consciousness, in turn, affects culture.

If the poltergeist manifestations were very real to those who directly experienced them, judging them as otherwise imposes a historicist agenda that denies “past peoples the power to determine the truths of their own experience.” To overcome such historicism, the classical historian Greg Anderson (2015) calls for scholars to take an “ontological turn” in their practice, to “make sense of each past lifeworld in its own metaphysical environment.” The ontological turn requires historians to treat whatever historical actors believed existed as “an active, constitutive ingredient of whatever was really there at the time.”

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59 Frank Podmore, “Poltergeists,” *PSPR* 12 (1896), 45-115; see Chapter 1.
60 On the interplay between culture and consciousness, see Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 201-203, 223.
61 Anderson, 790.
62 Anderson, 790.
63 Anderson, 790.
their reported experiences, then historians can better comprehend what their lives were like for them, as well as how researchers negotiated the process of making knowledge from those unconventional experiences.

Post-colonial scholars have been among the first to actively implement self-reflexive strategies in an effort to be sensitive to the ontologies of the marginalized people they study. This approach is eloquently conveyed by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) who relates an anecdote about how the Irish poet W.B. Yeats met “a certain Mrs. Connolly” who related her stories of fairies. Chakrabarty writes that as Yeats was about to leave her little cottage, he asked:

“One more question Mrs. Connolly, if I may. Do you believe in the fairies?” Mrs. Connolly threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, not at all Mr. Yeats, not at all.” W.B. paused, turned away and slouched off down the lane. Then he heard Mrs. Connolly’s voice coming after him down the lane. “But they’re here, Mr. Yeats, they’re here.”

Mrs. Connolly’s reply brings to mind the infamous line in the 1982 movie by Tobe Hooper and Steven Spielberg, *Poltergeist*, with a little girl sitting in front of a television set communicating with a spirit dimension that is about to physically colonize their home:

“They’re here.” On this presence, Chakrabarty remarks,

As old Mrs. Connolly knew, and as we social scientists often forget, gods and spirits are not dependent on human beliefs for their own existence; what brings them to presence are our own practices. They are parts of the different ways of being through which we make the present manifold; it is precisely the disjunctures in the present that allow us to be with them.  

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65 Chakrabarty, 111-112.
In poltergeist cases, the disjuncture is in the material manifestations. Objects act in atypical ways; the inanimate becomes animate. What experiencers and researchers make of these disjunctures reveals their ways of being – their ontology – their processes of making sense of human nature, self, and the world. What brings the psychokinesis hypothesis into practice, then, are the interactions between poltergeist researchers and experiencers. But, as I emphasize in the various interpretative outcomes of three case studies in Chapter 4, paraphrasing Chakrabarty, the supernatural can inhabit the world in many ways, “not always as a problem or result of conscious beliefs or ideas.” In other words, such things as poltergeists are beyond only belief. Materially present, the phenomenon becomes part of people’s ways of being – their lives. That is the point of the ontological turn. To take us into the lifeworld of these historical actors experiencing and studying something that is (really) there.

As there is plurality in worldviews – for example diverse religious and non-religious people co-exist and intermingle at this moment in time – the ethnohistorian Keith Thor Carlson (2005) argues that “Historical messages and narratives are conveyed in multiple manners,” where “definitions of what constitute real and true” varies between historical actors. The ontological turn calls for historians to be attentive to differences, and hold them side-by-side rather than judging them according to what the historian of Catholicism Robert A. Orsi calls the “modernist impulse” – our own exercise in boundary making “to tame what is wild and threatening and dangerous specifically to us” because our intellectual

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66 Chakrabarty, 111.
and religious upbringings tell us those things are irrational or sacrilegious. Chakrabarty argues that heterodox lifeworlds have long been “subordinated by the ‘major’ narratives of the dominant institutions” because they were not only inadmissible or unassimilable – they were a potential threat to their domination. Chakrabarty writes that when one invests “in a certain kind of rationality and a particular understanding of the ‘real,’” it serves to obscure things, events, and ideas that have been historically excluded from “reality” on a purely epistemological basis. The modernist impulse has long acted as an excuse to ignore and exclude certain historical actors because they do not fit into a rationalist or Christian worldview. If historians are self-reflexive to their own ontological impulses, they open layers of historical interpretation from which a more pluralistic, and potentially more thorough, account arises. The past unfolds in ways that challenge and enrich historical practice. Carlson, for example, showed how Salish representatives negotiating land with King Edward VII of England in 1906 were attentive to powerful signs and messages from the spirit world. The Salish, he found, assumed that the British shared their spiritual ontology. Such revelations reframe historical events, and help us better understand points of cooperation and conflict. Similarly, the historical geographer Daniel Clayton (1999) analysed, side-by-side, interpretative variances between accounts of contact between Captain James Cook, British officials, and the Nuu-chah-nulth people of Nootka Sound in 1778, revealing how long-standing narratives in history books favoured the official

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69 Chakrabarty, 101.
70 Chakrabarty, 98.
71 Carlson, 30.
account. Through that strategy, Carlson intends “to launch meaningful cross-cultural
dialogue,” historically and in the present day, “rather than stifle it.” Historical events are
newly illuminated in a way “that is recognizable to indigenous people without compromising
its intelligibility to non-Native society,” thereby situating both cultures side-by-side, without
conflating them or giving ontological preference to one over the other.

In this study, I take you into lifeworlds where people reported controversial phenomena,
between materiality and immateriality, which challenged their senses and ontologies.

Thinking on Anderson’s ontological turn, the historian of sexuality, religion, and science Joy Dixon (2015) emphasizes how metaphysical phenomena “did very real work” for people who experienced them. The social and cultural historian Alex Owen (2004), for example, stepped into the “immediate experiential dimensions” of Aleister Crowley’s controversial, early twentieth-century occult practices, revealing new meaning and significance that explained how he put his selfhood above the laws and social mores of bourgeois Edwardian society. At other moments, the existence of historical actors or phenomena has been contested. In her study of Victorian-era theosophy, the historian Gauri Viswanathan (2000) emphasized the agency of the Mahatmas, Indo-Tibetan Hindu adepts who deeply influenced theosophical texts and teachings, despite lingering questions about whether or not they existed since they were never seen in person.

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73 Carlson, 4-5.
If historians include what has been excluded, disregarded, or marginalized, what happens? We open questions about realness itself. Anderson writes, “To help us retrieve all those pasts that we have lost in translation, we need a historicism that can make sense of each... lifeworld on its own ontological terms, as a distinct real world in its own right.” Realness is not “an objective, pre-given material condition but a process,” he writes, “an ongoing effect produced by the dynamic entanglement of thought and materiality.” The effort to understand the poltergeist historically is a representative microcosm of the process of comprehending the nature of materiality. To quote the historian Carla Nappi (2009), the goal here is “not to individuate or identify a uniform system of reason... but to show the pulses and mechanics of knowledge-making with all of its inconsistencies and revelations.” Diverse, imprecise processes were activated by experiencers and various experts to make sense of the poltergeist. In defiance of the perceived order of things, the poltergeist events brought experiencers and researchers into a materiality that they did not fathom before it happened to them. Confusion and contestation resulted. It had an impact on experiencer’s lives, and made new knowledge. Explaining how that happened is at the core of this study.

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77 Anderson, 789.
78 Anderson, 789.
Chapter 1

PERSON: Poltergeist Agent

Possibly these poltergeist phenomena may be due to some of these, perhaps mischievous or rudimentary, intelligences of the unseen: I do not know why we should imagine there are no fools or naughty children in the spiritual world; possibly they are as numerous there as here.

— The physicist William F. Barrett
“Poltergeists, Old and New,” 1911

...the view is often expressed that Poltergeists are mischievous spirits, possibly rather undeveloped, which remain confined to a particular house or locality and are able to utilise certain people, especially adolescent children, as physical mediums.

— The ghost hunter Harry Price
Poltergeist Over England, 1945

Between 1896 and 1945, four men popularized the idea that living persons, mainly young people, were necessary to the production of the poltergeist: the British psychical researchers Frank Podmore and William F. Barrett, the American writer Charles Fort, and the English ghost hunter Harry Price. In their boundary-work to redefine the poltergeist, they challenged assumptions that the physical manifestations were caused by a spiteful spirit of the dead, a demonic disruption, or a wicked witch’s curse. In locating and examining the focus person at the centre of poltergeist events, each of them staked a claim

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in defining human nature. Podmore (1896) argued that focus persons, exhibiting mental and physical abnormalities, all behaved deceptively – nullifying the poltergeist as a psychical phenomenon. Barrett (1911) countered that deception could not explain most of the reported manifestations. As an established physicist working in a multidisciplinary community of scientists in psychical research, he pointed to an apparently organic relationship between human consciousness and physical environments. In the 1920s and ‘30s, Fort critiqued mainstream scientists for largely excluding and denying the possibility of extraordinary phenomena like the poltergeist and psychokinesis, thereby obscuring potential aspects of human nature. He speculated that if people and scientists were to harness such an evident psychical force, the outcome would likely be destructive. Poltergeists and psychokinesis could become weapons of war. No one brought the poltergeist and its psychokinetic potential into the public eye more than Price, who in 1945 wrote a popular book that sensationally combined case studies and the latest speculation. Price also presented the poltergeist as an element of nature that exploited the energies of mediumistic focus persons. The people who directly experienced the poltergeist, however, had little input into this epistemic shift. They were largely treated as passive subjects to be observed and judged by researchers like Podmore, Barrett, and Price – a problem with which Fort was particularly concerned. Fort wrote that just as strange phenomena themselves were excluded from notions of reality, so too the people who were thought to make the phenomena happen were likewise marginalized.
Frank Podmore and the “Naughty Little Girls”

In 1896, the English psychical researcher Frank Podmore (1856-1910) compared contemporary poltergeist cases, including ones that he personally investigated – the first researcher ever to do so. Upsetting his colleagues who thought the poltergeist promised new knowledge about mind-matter relationships, Podmore wrote that “the real motive” behind the poltergeist was “meaningless acts of mischief,” “the excessive love of notoriety which is occasionally associated with other morbid conditions, especially in young girls.”

Behind the poltergeist were human tendencies to act mischievously and gain attention from others; to Podmore, that was what the poltergeist revealed about human nature.

The idea of “young girls” as the deceptive centre of “poltergeist” mischief was situated in broader Victorian-era cultural and medical assumptions about the mental and physical fragility of females and children. Nineteenth-century clinicians compared the trances, bodily rigidity, catalepsy, and ecstatic states diagnosed as hysteria to similar behaviour observed among mediums in spiritualist circles. Mediums and hysterics alike powerfully expressed themselves outside of Victorian gender norms. When their husbands attempted to have them committed by psychiatrists as hysterical, the mediums Louisa Lowe and Georgina Weldon, for example, publically defended their sanity and empowered social status. Spiritualists commonly integrated themselves into socially progressive movements

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5 McGarry, 125-126.
6 On Louisa Lowe, see Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 168-201; and on Georgina Weldon, see Judith
of the time, such as women’s emancipation.\textsuperscript{7} Many psychical researchers and clinicians also saw their work as contributing to scientific and social progress.\textsuperscript{8} Podmore, however, tended to side with the status quo rationality of medical doctors and psychiatrists who identified mental maladies in alleged poltergeist focus persons.

Podmore and his colleagues reported directly observing deceptive behaviour. For most psychical researchers, if deception were evident, they erred on the side of the entire case being fraud. Such caution emerged from studies in which investigators, like the physicist William Crookes who investigated the controversial spirit materializations of the medium Florence Cook in the 1870s, were largely seen by their colleagues as credulous, duped by the charismatic allure of female mediums.\textsuperscript{9} To guard against deception in mediumship research, psychical researchers increasingly employed strict controls (such as putting luminous bands around mediums’ limbs or constraining them with ropes), various instruments of measurement, and photography equipment in séance rooms.\textsuperscript{10} Even then, deception continued to be reported in psychical research experiments.

While Podmore’s accusations of deception were not unusual among psychical researchers, his characterization of all poltergeist cases as fraud stirred up strong reactions.

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His colleagues argued that Podmore was trying to close the door on a phenomenon that had significant potential to reveal new insights into human nature and the natural world. Outright deception, his colleagues and critics countered, failed to account for many of the strange sounds, object movements, and spontaneous fires – all without apparent cause – reported in these cases. Podmore’s scepticism, on the other hand, successfully alerted his colleagues to the drawbacks of eyewitness testimony, the potential for deception, and the dangers of working with paranormal assumptions. Subsequent poltergeist case investigators became more attentive to likely causes before proclaiming a case as being genuinely “paranormal” – that is, outside of normal explanation.

The psychokinesis hypothesis emerged directly from psychical researchers’ reactions to the points Podmore raised claiming poltergeists were deception. Podmore presented abundant evidence that there was almost always an individual around whom the phenomenon centred. Thereafter, psychical researchers turned their attention to that individual who they called the “poltergeist agent” or “focus person.” Rather than seeing deception, subsequent researchers argued that the poltergeist was co-created through psychical interactions between the focus person and their physical environment.

**The Resident Sceptic**

Podmore was the Society for Psychical Research’s resident sceptic. He raised probable causes rather than claiming phenomena to be genuinely paranormal. Podmore doubted the legitimacy of spiritualism, preferring to study telepathy, something reported by the wider public and on which controlled laboratory-based experiments could be designed. Podmore’s interests in psychical research initially took shape when he was eighteen. His
first spiritualist séance left a profound impression on him as to the existence of life after death. But by the time he was twenty-four in 1880, disillusionment over séance-room trickery made Podmore leery of claims people made about spontaneous psychical phenomena. He became a vocal opponent of mediumistic fraud. In an 1896 analysis of poltergeist cases, he identified how there invariably appeared to be a focus person at the centre of the physical events, most often a young person. As someone who had witnessed trickery both in séance rooms and poltergeist cases, Podmore believed that the most reasonable explanation for the physical events was that these mediums and focus persons alike were deceptive.

Podmore was meticulous in his psychical studies. He is best known as the co-author of Phantasms of the Living (1886), produced with the psychologist Edmund Gurney and the classical scholar Frederic W.H. Myers. In the two-volume study, based on 700 cases collected by the SPR, the authors assessed a range of ghostly encounters which frequently involved people seeing apparitions of individuals who they knew were living, or who were on their death bed. These were greatly significant findings as they suggested that ghost-seeing involved telepathy. Podmore was key in “the collection, examination and appraisal of evidence” in Phantasms of the Living according to his colleague Eleanor Sidgwick.11 Through that work, he had established himself as a critically minded researcher in the SPR.

Podmore was himself of academic and social distinction. The son of a clergyman, he was an Oxford man who had founded the university’s Hare and Hounds Club.12 He was the Higher Division Clerk at the General Post Office. In January 1884, Podmore – alongside other middle-class intellectuals who sought gradual socialist reform over violent revolution

– co-founded the Fabian Society. The society supported the concept of a welfare state, viewed the British Empire as a project of global modernization, and contributed ideas that formed the Labour Party in 1900, but it also promoted eugenics.\(^\text{13}\) Podmore typified the intellectual life of many of his SPR colleagues as proponents of modern social and scientific advancement who sought to broaden knowledge about human nature.

**Doubted Testimonials**

While the poltergeist initially seemed to be inexplicable to Podmore, discrepancies in witness testimonials led to him suspect that memories and observations were fallible. In his first poltergeist investigation (Worksop, Northamptonshire, 1883), Podmore was baffled by the question of the cause of the physical events reported; he found no evidence of trickery. He defended the family who were accused by local newspapers of committing fraud. The family patriarch Joe White, a horse dealer, told Podmore about how strange events began when the kitchen table suddenly “tilted up at a considerable angle.”\(^\text{14}\) Family members reported how a corkscrew, clothes pegs, a salt cellar, and even “hot coals were thrown down” the stairs into the kitchen.\(^\text{15}\) Several reputable observers—a medical doctor, a policeman, and a Salvation Army woman—witnessed objects moving with no apparent

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\(^{15}\) Podmore, “Report on the Worksop Disturbances,” 202. Podmore’s emphasis is retained in the quote about “hot coals.”
explanation, adding to the credibility of the testimony. “No one professed to have any idea of what mechanical means could have been employed,” Podmore wrote, and “there was a total absence of any apparent motive on White’s part.” Why, he argued, would a man purposefully cause significant damage to his home, breaking objects while reaping “no corresponding advantage”?  

However, in the accumulation of ten more poltergeist case studies in the following years, three of which were personally investigated by Podmore, he became convinced that psychical researchers could not rely on eyewitness testimonials. Podmore made this case:

in the course of the 13 years which have passed since I wrote my [Worksop] report, we have received some striking object-lessons demonstrating the incapacity of the ordinary unskilled observer to detect trickery or sleight-of-hand: and we have learnt to distrust the accuracy of the unaided memory in recording feats of this kind, especially when performed under circumstances of considerable excitement.  

Podmore found that witnesses did not accurately corroborate who was in the room or what happened. He was concerned that newspaper accounts further slanted how people remembered events. People commonly reported objects “moving slowly through the air, or exhibiting some peculiarity of flight,” which Podmore thought was a “sensory illusion, conditioned by the excited state of the percipients.” The historian of science Alison Winter (2012) showed that around this time, memory was increasingly becoming an object of study among psychologists, particularly in relation to eyewitness testimony provided in court rooms. Psychologists like Hugo Münsterberg (1863-1916) at Harvard University developed a new science of perception in studies of hypnosis, dissociation, and false or

18 Podmore, “Poltergeists,” 57.
altered memories. Since then, a number of studies have shown that people’s observational skills are problematic and often inaccurate, putting into question the process of jurisprudence itself. Podmore’s critiques drew on the growing uncertainty about the accuracy of memory. Psychologists found that witnesses were prey to influences that actively reshaped how they remembered events. In attempts to satisfy the investigator’s questions, witnesses may add or embellish details. Through suggestive or confusing questions, investigators could subtly or overtly prompt certain answers to be made by witnesses. Furthermore, psychologists discovered that humans make sense of what happened through a combination of direct observation, their preconceptions, and what others claimed, making it difficult for witnesses to accurately recall events as they actually occurred. To remedy this, greater emphasis was placed on technologies to “objectively” record what happened – through photography, films, audio recordings, and other tools of measurement. In the century following Podmore’s report, great emphasis would be placed on using these technologies to show and measure the poltergeist in action – to little avail. Without technologies to record and measure the alleged poltergeist events, the weight of evidence favoured trained observers over experiencers’ testimonials. Podmore considered experiencers, particularly those less educated or of lower social standing, to be unreliable. Experiencers’ testimony was only valued when corroborated. He cast suspicion

21 Winter, 12.
23 For example, see my discussion of the Tina Resch photograph and the work of William Roll in Chapter 3.
on experiencers who often were not of the same social, racial, and educational standing as the predominantly male, Anglo-Saxon intellectuals who studied psychical claims.24

Podmore worked toward collecting evidence that could be accepted by the larger community of scientists, therefore legitimating psychical research itself as a science. His findings on the poltergeist, however, tended to be based on his own suspicions rather than empirical evidence. Like professional scientists, many SPR members considered empirical testing the scientific standard by which evidence should be established.25 What counted as “scientific” was filtered through the cultural or ideological lenses of those judging the evidence. The science historian Sherrie L. Lyons writes, “Prior theoretical and/or psychological commitments, the politics of professionalization, and cultural norms about morality and the human condition all play a role in determining scientific credibility.”26 She argues that under those conditions, evidence was often contradictory, the terms of what counted as valid were regularly modified, and technologies, especially in their early forms, were “not necessarily better in supplying reliable information.”27 Podmore’s scepticism brought psychical researchers together to discuss an issue where agreement was absent. His own experiences witnessing legerdemain among mediums, however, fuelled his doubts and perhaps made him hypercritical when he suspected trickery.

24 For example, as Joy Dixon showed in her study of the SPR’s investigation of theosophical claims in 1884-5, testimonials from English, American, and European witnesses were held in higher esteem than those of Indian witnesses, whose evidence was considered to be “superstitious and credulous.” See Dixon, Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 36. For more on racial, social, and gender differences in Victorian and Edwardian period practices of spiritualism and psychical research in Britain and America, see Walkowitz, Owen, and McGarry.


26 Lyons, 174-75.

27 Lyons, 201-2.
Devious Agents

Podmore observed focus persons acting deceptively, which to him revealed something about their nature: they sought attention. If eyewitness testimonials were faulty and other standards of scientific observation and measurement unevenly applied, then how to determine what was causing the physical events? Although Podmore could not originally come up with a compelling causal explanation in the Worksop case, by 1896, he realized that he had overlooked a prime suspect:

it is to be noted that Eliza Rose – the daughter of an imbecile mother – was present, by all accounts, at most of the disturbances; that they began shortly after her entrance to the cottage and ceased with her departure; and that she was regarded by White himself as the prime cause of all that happened.

Thinking on that case, Podmore drew the conclusion that became key to his understanding of the phenomenon:

Rose herself, as the instrument of mysterious agencies, or simply as a half-witted girl gifted with abnormal cunning and love of mischief, may have been directly responsible for all that took place.²⁸

Comparing poltergeist cases, Podmore argued that there typically was just such a cunning, mischievous, attention-seeking, often mentally unstable child around whom the manifestations erupted. Often, such a child was an outsider in their family.

Podmore identified the focus persons at the centre of these cases and ascribed to them characteristics that marked them as deceivers. His assumptions about focus persons fit rationally within Victorian modes of character judgement. Sharonna Pearl (2010) argues that in the Victorian period, “the privileged classes... employed classification heuristics

²⁸ Podmore, “Poltergeists,” 58.
based on visual and etiquette codes that reinforced status social hierarchies” and “reduced others to component parts... as a form of belittlement and dehumanization.”29 The psychical researchers investigating late Victorian poltergeist cases read claimants positively as educated, elite, sane or negatively as uneducated, poor, crazy, and even criminal – a judgement that helped determine whether or not the paranormal claims were to be considered as genuine or not. Podmore noted that the poltergeist was predominantly reported among lower class, less educated, often illiterate people from rural, “rustic” locales. For example, the Worksop case involved witnesses “of the humbler class” who were unable “to write a connected account of what happened.”30 Furthermore, witness predispositions, such as the belief that the devil was responsible, “rendered them too much indisposed to accept any ordinary explanation of any of the occurrences to which they referred,” he argued.31 For Podmore, witnesses’ ontological commitments made their paranormal claims dubious. He saw the scientifically trained observer as having greater authority than experiencers, particularly those who he found to be superstitious.

Podmore’s judgements ultimately rested on what he saw as consistent evidence that certain individuals in these cases were acting deviously. For example, the psychical researcher Mr. F.S. Hughes (Wem, Shropshire, 1884) noted how a nurse girl employed by an upper-class family was caught throwing a brick; she later confessed and demonstrated her trickery to the press.32 In an Irish case (Waterford, 1892), a neighbour testified to seeing a boy, Johnny, rolling a ball and hurling a jam jar when he thought no one was looking, and then denying trickery. The neighbour’s husband said he saw Johnny throw a tin gallon can.

He noted, “I am prepared to swear to these matters and think the boy should have been prosecuted.” Podmore concluded, “There seems to be no evidence that phenomena ever occurred beyond the reach or the power of Johnny, and whatever agency produced the phenomena used very human means.” Deceit was commonly observed and reported by the investigators of these eleven cases, and for Podmore, that was the strongest explanation for the so-called poltergeist.

Podmore diagnosed focus persons with defective character traits, medical problems, and mental health issues. His claims operated in a context where clinical narratives were transmitted into popular culture through the press, literature, photography, and art. Often, he simply emphasized how children were observed being naughty – something to which investigators and readers alike could probably relate. His descriptions of focus persons in these cases straddled ontological divides of psychiatry, religion, superstition, and the nature of childhood versus adulthood. In Arundel (1884), a “bewitched” 13-year-old girl was viewed as being hysterical, and the SPR investigator, Lt.-Col. G.L. Le M. Taylor of the Royal Military College, thought it “mostly likely that the affair was begun in fun, continued in fraud, and closed in fright.” In Bramford (1887), a ten-year-old boy confessed to having moved objects, and Podmore speculated about how he and his sister had successfully fooled their family. Again, hysteria was mentioned; the sister “suffered from transient attacks of blindness.”

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33 Podmore, “Poltergeists,” 77-81.
36 Podmore, “Poltergeists,” 73-77.
apparently outgrown her strength; and is compelled, under medical advice, to lie down on her bed for an hour or two every afternoon.”

An 1894 case was the only one that involved a family that Podmore considered to be “of superior education and social position.” He judged their 15-year-old son to be “so nervous and delicate that he slept in [his mother’s room] at night,” prone to somnambulism, and falling into “a semi-conscious state.” For Podmore, these behaviours were sufficient evidence that the boy was deceiving his mother, who herself was “gullible in relation to spirit communications.”

These focus persons were generally characterized as medically unwell outsiders. In Podmore’s analysis of a case at Ham near Hungerford, Berkshire (1895), witnesses described the experiencers’ daughter Polly as “eccentric and deformed.”

The investigating SPR member Mr. Westlake wrote:

Polly, a little dwarfed black-haired girl, turning 12, sits in the chimney corner and nurses the cats Topsy and Titit – she is the centre of force – then (in the absence of strangers) the coals fly about and all moveable objects are thrown down ad libitum, and ad nauseam according to their account.

Polly had only recently learned to walk. She was described as having “eyes, very sharp, and watches one like a cat a mouse.” Westlake reported, “I had a clear view of her hands in contact with the objects and saw them quickly moved.” Yet Polly always denied deception. “The child seems to combine with a defective intelligence a considerable amount of cunning, while the garrulity and exaggerated statements of the mother deprive her testimony of any value,” Westlake concluded.

In comparing these cases, Podmore argued that there was nothing paranormal to be found; they all involved abnormal behaviour.

37 Podmore, “Poltergeists,” 103.
Given his diagnoses, Podmore positioned medical doctors as crucial authorities to observe poltergeist cases. They were viewed as “unaffected by any feeling of excitement or fear” in contrast to emotionally charged family members. In Podmore’s view, focus persons’ “mental and physical abnormality,” “desire to cause a sensation,” and “excessive love of notoriety” exploited the naiveté of family members who believed something paranormal was happening. He set focus persons apart from people who were “apparently free from morbid influences.” In his assessment, Podmore characterized emotionality as unreliable in contrast to the dispassionate objectivity of medical authorities. Doctors had the power to make an official medical diagnosis that weighed significantly in Podmore’s conclusions about poltergeist focus persons. In one case (Arundel, 1884), the doctor tied the focus person’s hands and heard no further strange noises; he was satisfied that the girl had made the noises and simply left and “had nothing more to do with the affair.” Even when a doctor declared a focus person to be “quite normal” (as in Wem, 1883), the psychical researcher could circumvent the diagnosis based on their own observation and interviews with witnesses to assess the same person as “unusual.” Much as the Victorian public had taken on interpreting faces to judge the dispositions of strangers through physiognomy, psychiatric and medical diagnoses of normal and abnormal mental states were taken on by people without psychiatric training. In Podmore’s comparative analysis of poltergeist cases, he employed such “psychiatric” judgements to reinforce his psychical research methodology and expose fraud in allegedly paranormal cases. If the persons who

42 Podmore, “Poltergeists,” 73.
44 Podmore, “Poltergeists,” 95.
47 See Sharonna Pearl, About Faces, on the popularity of physiognomy, a popular practice that the public viewed as being scientific, but that faded with the rise of other disciplines to explore the human personality, such as psychoanalysis.
appeared to be at the centre of the physical manifestations had abnormal characteristics, and especially if they were caught throwing an object or suspected of making a noise, then to Podmore the whole case constituted fraud.

The Response from Psychical Research Colleagues

Podmore’s 1896 comparative study and his conclusion that the alleged poltergeist was all an act of deception alarmed many members of the Society for Psychical Research who saw potential for the poltergeist to reveal more about human nature and the natural world. SPR members were not prepared to explain a long-standing mystery so simply. 48 SPR members thought trickery was unlikely, even impossible, in many poltergeist cases given the common observations of objects flying through the air in inexplicable ways, at slow speeds, bending around corners, appearing from solid surfaces, and occurring in places where no people were present. The level of skill required to produce such manifestations was beyond the conjuring capabilities of ordinary people and would, they argued, require great practice and skill. 49 Writer, literary critic, and anthropologist Andrew Lang – himself the author of a highly-regarded 1894 critical analysis of the 1762 Cock Lane poltergeist, Cock Lane and Common Sense – wrote that Podmore’s analysis was “not verifiable.” 50 Lang was concerned that Podmore’s conclusion of trickery would spawn collective doubt about poltergeist cases that were still well worth studying. The trickery supposition, according to Lang, was as bad

48 When Podmore presented his paper to the SPR on 24 April 1896, one member argued that trickery surely could not account for all poltergeist phenomena, but Prof. Sidgwick and Mr. Westlake both corroborated Podmore’s findings of trickery. See the overview of Podmore’s presentation under “General Meeting,” JSPR 7 (May 1896), 246-248. Over the following two years, SPR members lashed out at Podmore’s findings.
50 Lang, review of Podmore’s Studies in Psychical Research, 604.
as assuming that spirits were at work, for neither was verifiable.51 “Mr. Podmore seems to me to be sacrificing to common sense, which wants an explanation, and a normal explanation, and does not care whether it is verifiable, or even plausible or not,” he wrote.52 Where hypotheses could not be verified, researchers’ attitudes should be agnostic, Lang argued, later adding, better to have “no theory of these things” than a faulty one.53 Lang, having studied the poltergeist himself, was certain that there was something more complex than deception at work in these cases. His training in the humanities convinced him that a single explanation would not effectively account for all that was happening. His work on the Cock Lane poltergeist had shown that such cases were well-suited to study by folklorists. By comprehending the ontologies of “folk” logic, one could better understand the cultural circumstances through which the poltergeist was experienced – and therefore how specific interpretations came about. Lang sought to have folklorists, anthropologists, and psychical researchers collaborate to more effectively study such phenomena and how people tried to make sense of them.54 He could not leave judgement of an entire phenomenon to the opinion of Podmore.

Podmore, not himself a trained scientist but certainly a man who demanded clear, indisputable evidence of psychical claims, maintained his strong dismissal of the paranormality of the poltergeist. He reacted by critiquing the interpretative flexibility of Lang’s literature and folklore disciplines in which “each inquirer is free to select whatever facts best fit his views, and still leave enough for those who come after to confute him

51 Lang, review of Podmore’s Studies in Psychical Research, 604-607.
52 Lang, review of Podmore’s Studies in Psychical Research, 605.
53 Andrew Lang, Correspondence, “Mr. Podmore, Poltergeists, and Kindred Spirits,” JSPR 9 (Feb. 1899), 31-32.
54 See Andrew Lang, Cock Lane and Common-Sense (New York/London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894).
withal. But no doubt there are rules of the game to be observed." Podmore did not feel that the humanities were an appropriate field in which to assess paranormal claims. For him, psychical research required scientific thinking, falsification, and dismissal of cases with questionable evidence. He argued that “it must be demonstrative, that is, the things attested must be of such a kind that no other interpretation is possible.” Given the evidence from his comparison of the eleven poltergeist cases, he wrote, “For myself, I am grieved to think that the Poltergeist should go. He was a more picturesque figure than the naughty little girl who takes his place. There are too many naughty little girls on this planet already.” In other words, Podmore accused Lang of trying to preserve a mythical poltergeist and an enchanted world in a context where Victorian society, long driven by codes of religious morality, was being transformed by science and secularization.

Most members of the SPR rejected Podmore’s rationalist and materialist scepticism. They called for “a more plausible line of criticism” from Podmore. The naturalist and evolutionary biologist Alfred Russel Wallace, for example, found Podmore’s evidence for trickery “utterly inadequate and unscientific” and “unworthy of a place in the Proceedings of the Society.” He argued that Podmore omitted the best evidence in the matters he discusses, giving prominence to every possible supposition of imposture on the part of the agents and of incompetence on the part of the observers, and then stating his adverse conclusions with a confidence and authority which should only be displayed

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56 Podmore, review of Lang’s The Making of Religion, 133.
57 Podmore, review of Lang’s The Making of Religion, 134.
59 Everard Feilding, “Correspondence: Mr. Grottendieck’s Poltergeist,” JSPR 12 (June 1906), 279-281.
60 Alfred Russel Wallace, “Correspondence: Mr. Podmore on Clairvoyance and Poltergeists,” JSPR 9 (Feb. 1899), 30.
after a full presentation and unprejudiced discussion of the whole evidence available.\textsuperscript{61}

To advance knowledge of human nature, psychical researchers ideally considered all available evidence agnostically. Studying humans required working directly with human subjects, and Podmore’s colleagues saw him as someone who threatened collaborative possibilities with experiencers, the very people who could directly attest to psychical phenomena, by portraying them as unreliable. Podmore remained firm, reiterating that the most likely explanation was that people themselves had caused all of the manifestations, by “exertion of… proper muscular powers, without assistance from disembodied spirits, or even from pseudopodia, odyllic force, astral emanations, or other supernormal supplement.” They were made by a “human boy or girl” as “the sole agent in all such disturbances,” while credulous observers interpreted them as hauntings.

We have, speaking broadly, \textit{no evidence} (and by ‘no evidence’ I mean no good evidence: and by ‘good evidence’ I mean evidence from competent witnesses, at first-hand, and written down within a few hours of the events) for anything having been done which could not have been done by a girl or boy of slightly more than the average naughtiness.\textsuperscript{62}

The tone of Podmore’s writing suggested steadfast scepticism that served a mischievous purpose. He wanted more thorough investigations of phenomena such as the poltergeist that took into account the fallibility of witness testimony, the importance of acquiring evidence as close in time to the actual events as possible, and attention on the person who appeared to be at the centre of events. His doubting language persistently and playfully

\textsuperscript{61} Wallace, “Correspondence: Mr. Podmore on Clairvoyance and Poltergeists,” 22.
\textsuperscript{62} Frank Podmore, “Correspondence: On Poltergeists,” \textit{JSPR} 9 (June 1899), 91-94.
infuriated his colleagues. Ultimately though, Podmore’s scepticism brought forth renewed and improved investigative methodologies, which seemed to be what he ultimately sought.

**Barrett’s “Human Radiant Centre”**

To many members of the SPR, the poltergeist remained a promising phenomenon to study in order to better comprehend human nature and the natural world. In 1911, a year after Podmore’s death, founding SPR member Sir William F. Barrett responded to Podmore’s critiques in the article “Poltergeists, Old and New.” Barrett (1844-1925) was a Royal Society fellow, a professor of physics at the Royal College of Science in Dublin, and a proponent of survival after death. In the article, Barrett evaluated a new set of contemporary cases and assessed whether or not trickery was evident. He found that, overall, the events were inexplicable, and furthermore, these types of physical events had been common across historical reports made around the world. Barrett agreed with Podmore that psychical researchers must attempt to respond more quickly to poltergeist cases, ideally while they are active. They should transcribe detailed primary testimonials as soon after the events as possible and try and observe the manifestations for themselves. Careful documentation, including drawing floorplans of the home in which events occurred, could help determine typical patterns. If possible, investigators should investigate the cases on a longer, ongoing basis. Most importantly, they should pay closer attention to the person who appeared to be at the centre of the physical manifestations.

Barrett viewed the focus person as the “human radiant centre,” “the determining factor,” and the “nucleus” of the event. From his perspective as a physicist in times during

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64 Barrett, “Poltergeists, Old and New,” 378-80.
which scientists focused on the possibilities of evolutionary theory, he argued that “evolution in animate and inanimate nature is unlikely to be confined to the visible universe.”65 As with the evolutionary change which progressed invisibly to the human senses across millennia, there were myriad unseen processes at work. Focus persons in poltergeist cases provided a clue to what those forces could be. Barrett likened psychical research to meteorology, through which “long-continued patient observation and classification will ultimately reveal the complex and orderly physical causes at work in our fitful weather.”66 But in order to decipher these things, there needed to be something more than just comparative observation. Psychical research involved exploring outside of the “definite intelligible laws” recognized by scientists. Barrett argued in favour of a more creative approach. To him, the “scientific use of the imagination is necessary” in studying “bizarre psychical phenomena.” Barrett went no further than exercising his imagination through an analogy. “We ourselves and the whole world may be but nucleated cells in a vaster living organism, of which we can form no conception. Some incomprehensible intelligence is certainly at work in the congeries of cells and in the galaxy of suns and stars.”67 In Barrett’s view, there was something greater to discover through the study of preternatural events that spoke to interactions of human consciousness with some “mischievous or rudimentary intelligences of the unseen,” whatever they may be. People were ignorant as to the cause of the physical manifestations, but it was apparent that the focus person was the essential ingredient in poltergeist events. “At present our obvious

65 Barrett, 411-412.
66 Barrett, 411.
67 Barrett, 411.
duty is to collect, scrutinize, and classify these phenomena,” he concluded, “leaving their explanation aside until our knowledge is larger.”

Without Podmore’s super-scepticism, would Barrett have had a response to give? Barrett’s response redefined how psychical researchers investigated the poltergeist in the twentieth century. He encouraged investigators to take all evidence into account and to collect testimonials in a timely fashion. The focus person was the “nucleus,” the “determining factor” of the events, and therefore was as important an object of study as the physical manifestations themselves. The renewed study of the poltergeist thereafter involved studying both the physical events and the person who appeared to be at the centre of them. The psychokinesis hypothesis was born from a combination of doubtful scepticism and imaginative ways of thinking. Through those approaches, the concept would develop into a major way of thinking about the poltergeist phenomenon – one that became well known in popular culture through two men who relished the weird: Charles Fort and Harry Price.

**Charles Fort and the “Poltergeist Girls”**

The American writer Charles Fort (1874-1932) argued that focus persons tended to be socially and scientifically marginalized. If focus persons had psychokinetic abilities, he speculated they were likely to be exploited by dominant authorities. From the 1910s to the 1930s, Fort studied anomalous phenomena using quick wit and social satire. While his rhetoric tended not to reach the scientists who did psychical research, he did influence science-fiction writers who, through their pulp magazine stories, novels, and movies, widely

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68 Barrett, 412.
popularized the psychokinesis hypothesis. By the 1950s, the public was more likely to understand the psychokinetic possibilities of the poltergeist through watching a 1956 movie like *Forbidden Planet* (about a scientist who loses control of his Freudian Id which was embodied as a destructive, poltergeist-like monster) as they were reading about the psychokinesis hypothesis in, as I describe in the next chapter, Hereward Carrington and Nandor Fodor’s 1951 book *Haunted People*.

As the historian of religions Jeffrey J. Kripal notes, Charles Fort’s cosmology worked mischievously between the ontological realms of science and mysticism. He proposed that the poltergeist was likely a psychokinetic force that could possibly bring forth both wonders and dangers if it became a realized human ability. His treatises on “wild talents” like psychokinesis (PK) challenged optimistic modern narratives about the evolutionary progress of science and humanity. Through his pragmatic pessimism, Fort pointed to the ways that humans developed destructive war machines, evident in the mass annihilations brought forth in the mechanized First World War. PK, Fort feared, could become weaponized in ways that might level mountains and cities. He wrote this a decade ahead of the Second World War and the super-destructive atomic bombs that ended it, several years ahead of the Duke University experiments from which J.B. Rhine argued that PK was a real ability, and forty years ahead of actual Cold War military studies of how PK might be weaponized.

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69 Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 123. I approach Fort’s conceptualization of the psychokinesis hypothesis within a cosmology which included otherwise excluded phenomena. I am inspired by how the microhistorian Carlo Ginzburg examined the lifeworlds of the sixteenth-century Friulano miller Menocchio (*The Cheese and the Worms*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) and male witches from the same region and time period called the *benandanti* (*The Night Battles*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), both of whom faced inquisitional hearings on charges of religious heresy. Similar to the cases in Ginzburg’s studies, Fort’s counterculture cosmos revealed discontents about authorities, in Fort’s case, mainstream science and religion in the 1910s through the 1930s.

Fort’s words reflected countercultural concerns about the direction of modernity during the post-Great War age of global imperialism. His pessimism about dogmatic science was countered by contemporaneous optimists, such as the science-fiction writer H.G. Wells, who viewed science as helping society, ending war, and curing disease. \(^{71}\) The intellectual opposition critiquing science after the Second World War tended to be culturally marginal figures, such as avant-garde media-makers and occultists. \(^{72}\) Human nature and knowledge-making, Fort argued, sought both to innovate and to exploit. The result of this dual nature, historically, had been cultural domination and human suffering.

Using humour and exaggeration, Fort’s methodology was to disrupt his reader’s notions of reality. In his seemingly haphazard prose, he combined strange data, harsh critiques of science and religion as the dominant forces of society, and imaginative speculation. Fort collected reports on a broad spectrum of anomalous things that people had reported since the mid-nineteenth century, such as unknown airships (before they were called UFOs); stones, fish, and frogs falling from the heavens; mirages of landscapes and cities appearing in the sky; the teleportation of objects and persons; people with strange abilities; and the poltergeist. These were all fleeting, rare things with unclear causes that were often just explained away. Fort wrote about how those anomalous things that he called “the data of the damned” were excluded from serious consideration by political, religious, and scientific twentieth-century military technologies, see Barton C. Hacker, “The Machines of War: Western Military Technology 1850-2000,” *History and Technology* 21, no. 3 (September 2005), 255-300.


authorities for the sake of maintaining their epistemological domination. Strange anomalies were damned, but they nonetheless reportedly existed and recurred. They were regularly documented in the press, in experiential testimonials, and through psychical research and other boundary sciences. Fort wrote about how people who were at the centre of the poltergeist manifestations were themselves damned, marginalized, and portrayed as dangerous outsiders by the press. Observers, press, and authorities often reduced the reported anomalous events to products of deception, hallucination, and superstition. The ontologies of experiencers were excluded, belittled, or treated with suspicion. Aware of the imbalance in accounts and analyses of these cases, Fort turned his attention to how phenomena and people were being damned.

The Unassimilable

Fort’s “science mysticism,” as Jeffrey Kripal calls it – not quite science, but something more than science fiction – aimed to present “damned facts” that were observed and reported but were not effectively explained – or more commonly, were explained away. In the course of over 1,000 pages between his four books – *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932) – Fort examined things for which there were no proofs, all collected by Fort from newspapers, science journals, and books.

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74 See Introduction for more on Greg Anderson’s treatment of the ontological turn in his essay “Retrieving the Lost Worlds of the Past: The Case for an Ontological Turn,” *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (June 2015), 787-810.

over a 27-year period spent studying at the New York Public Library and British Museum.\(^{76}\)

Applying a comparative approach, Fort wrote using humorous exaggeration to explore potential explanations for anomalous things that were excluded from dominant perspectives. Of pebbles mysteriously flying about a New Jersey farmer’s field that were reported in newspapers in 1884, Fort wrote as though they were a remnant of the tectonic shifts that shaped the planet:

> It could be that, in reading what most persons think are foolish little yarns of falling stones, we are, visionarily, in the presence of cosmic constructiveness – or that once upon a time this whole earth was built up by streams of rocks, teleported from other parts of an existence. The crash of falling islands – the humps of piling continents – and then the cosmic humor of it all – or utmost spectacularly functioning, then declining, and surviving only as a vestige – or that the force that once heaped the peaks of the Rocky Mountains now slings pebbles at a couple of farmers, near Trenton, N.J.\(^{77}\)

Flying pebbles potentially signified the same forces that originally made Earth. By making such a connection, Fort justified the study of such anomalies, even if they did not fit with how people understood the physical world. Studying anomalies would, Fort argued, help explain more about our world and human nature. The problem was that those who governed knowledge-making – scientists, scholars, doctors, religious authorities, politicians, and the press – did not take these anomalies seriously. Given how unusual the anomalies were, authorities usually shrugged off these accounts as if they were stories made up by people simply seeking attention, or who were delusional. This prevalent attitude did nothing to understand mysteries that, while rare and unusual, were frequently reported through history and around the globe. Without any serious attention given to anomalies,

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\(^{77}\) Fort, *Lo!*, 571.
the New Jersey residents who witnessed how “stones continued to fall from a point overhead” “in places where there were no means for concealment of mischievous or malicious persons” were simply left baffled. “Nothing more was found out.” Such was the fate of most anomalous things that were ignored, excluded, and even repressed by “Dogmatic Science.” Fort wanted to change that by finding the common characteristics of the anomalies and speculating in an entertaining fashion on what they could be.

Fort had a knack for displacing things from commonplace explanatory frameworks, for example rejecting the idea that the pebbles were flung by spirits, devils, or deceptive individuals. He expressed new ways of thinking about them to show that they really could be anything, even the very forces that created the planet. Anomalous things ran against the grain of accepted knowledge. Early on in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), Fort wrote that “Poltergeists do not assimilate with our own present quasi-system, which is an attempt to correlate denied or disregarded data as phenomena of extra-telluric forces, expressed in physical terms.” Fort found the very label *poltergeist* to be “evil or false or discordant or absurd.” It was a simplified term given to “the unassimilable, or that which resists attempts to organize, harmonize, systematize, or in short, to positivize – names that we give to our recognitions of the negative state” – whatever was not yet explained. In other words, the concept of a “noisy ghost” and the various explanations of it were mere red herrings that drew people away from thinking about what was really going on when these physical events erupted. Names like “poltergeist” became imbued with meanings employed by authorities to gain and maintain power. Fort argued that humans govern the world around them by labelling things and people. Without a label, the object exists in “the negative state,” as

78 Fort, *Lo!*, 560.
something that is not yet understood. Yet Fort argued that “poltergeists may become assimilable” if they were seriously studied.

Then they’ll be as reasonable as trees. By reasonableness I mean that which assimilates with a dominant force, or system, or major body of thought – which is, itself, of course, hypnosis and delusion – developing, however, in our acceptance, to higher and higher approximations of realness.\footnote{Fort, \textit{The Book of the Damned}, 174-75.}

In other words, even if an explanation of the poltergeist was agreed upon by dominant authorities, it did not mean that explanation was definitive. The “higher approximation of realness” that enabled authoritative knowledge remained a product of explanatory “delusion” – it could not necessarily explicate “cosmic constructiveness” – which, Fort implied, was something perhaps beyond what humanity could ever fathom.

\textbf{Marginalized Experiencers}

Fort’s analyses showed how the people who happened to be present in poltergeist cases were subjected to others’ suspicions, and were even marginalized by authorities. For example, he wrote about how in a case of mysterious stone falls in the 1920s, the South African police arrested two black men based on contradictory testimony, possibly incited by bribery from a police detective.\footnote{Fort, \textit{Lo!}, 565.} In another South African report, even after a suspected maid’s hands were bound by a police chief inspector, stones continued to fall mysteriously, and yet, Fort wrote, “the maid was taken to the police station and a confessional was extracted.” So concluded the newspaper story.\footnote{Fort, \textit{Lo!}, 563.} The marginalization in these cases was compounded by the disfranchisement of black South Africans by white authorities. In South
Africa and elsewhere, offering a tidy explanation, authorities often marginalized the people who directly experienced – or even those who happened to be in proximity to – anomalous happenings such as the poltergeist in order to reinforce their dominant epistemologies.

Too often, authorities forced women in particular to confess to causing the poltergeist events, as had happened during the early modern European and American witch hunts. Fort wrote of a case in Peoria, Illinois, in 1874, where a 13-year-old housemaid was suspected of causing manifestations – moving furniture and mysterious raps. At one point, someone held her hands as a loud crash was heard and the piano started making noises. Still, the maid was accused, and she ended up confessing to everything. “There are dozens of poltergeist cases, in which the girl – oftenest a young housemaid – has confessed to all particulars,” wrote Fort. In Thorah Township in 1891, now part of Durham, Ontario, an adopted daughter, 14, was at the centre of spontaneous fires. “As soon as one was extinguished, another started up,” Fort wrote. When burning furniture was carried outside, the fire went out on its own. By the time a Toronto Globe reporter attended to the case, “The girl had been sent back to the orphan asylum, from which she had been adopted, because the fires had been attributed to her. With her departure, the phenomena had stopped. The reporter described her as ‘a half-witted girl, who had walked about, setting things on fire.’” The newspaper reporter presented evidence that the girl, although apparently “half-witted,” was well versed enough in chemistry to set everything around her on fire without being caught. In these two cases, Fort identified how a certain type of “outsider” girl was most commonly to blame in poltergeist cases, akin to Podmore’s

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85 Fort, Wild Talents, 923-24.
“naughty little girl.” In Fort’s view, the poltergeist as a physical phenomenon seemed most drawn to people who were already socially marginalized in various ways; black South Africans, women, domestic staff, and orphans all were accused of causing the manifestations.\(^6^6\)

The events were often too much for experiencers to bear: they moved away from their homes, and in some cases fell ill or, in rare cases, died. Fort emphasized how people were shunned and even ostracized in historic poltergeist cases.\(^6^7\) He included these outcast focus persons as part of the “procession of the damned,” “the excluded” – more than just “damned facts” but people who were damned by “Dogmatic Science.” But as an aggregated mass, the procession of the damned challenged notions of a stable reality; together, they revealed “the flux between what isn’t and that which won’t be, or the state that is commonly and absurdly called ‘existence.’”\(^6^8\) Thinking on Dipesh Chakrabarty, Fort’s “data of the damned” clearly revealed “life-worlds subordinated by the ‘major’ narratives of the dominant institutions.”\(^6^9\) Revealing experiencers as being marginalized by established scientific, religious, and cultural institutions (such as the press) shows them to be a group bonded by the commonalities of what happened to them. According to Fort, however, the damned would not stay damned. They were unstoppable, persistently appearing, begging recognition as part of the whole of human nature and existence.\(^7^0\)


\(^6^7\) Fort, *Wild Talents*, 948.

\(^6^8\) Fort, *The Book of the Damned*, 3-5.


\(^7^0\) In the Internet age of the 1990s onward, experiencers have emerged as a more empowered group of people. They remain largely damned by the establishment, but they now have the potential to collectively
In determining what constituted “damned facts,” Fort wrote that there were focus persons in poltergeist cases who appeared to be intrinsically connected to the physical manifestations for limited periods of time. These were quite often young people, mostly girls. Their relationship to the physical phenomena suggested unknown powers of mind. He wrote,

Mostly, in poltergeist cases, I see nothing to suggest that the girls – boys sometimes – are mediums, or are operated upon by spirits; the phenomena seem to be occult powers of youngsters.  

In this statement, Fort aimed to challenge spiritualism which he saw as yet another structured belief system that sought to gain domination in the greater society. He suggested that something beyond present scientific or religious understanding operated in these poltergeist cases. Fort speculated:

I’d conceive of the existence of a force, and the use of it, unconsciously mostly, by human beings. It may be that, if somebody, gifted with what we think we mean by ‘agency,’ fiercely hates somebody else, he can, out of intense visualizations, direct, by teleportation, bombardments of stones upon his enemy.

This was the psychokinesis hypothesis as formulated by Charles Fort, derived from his readings of psychical research and his comparison of case studies. From this starting point, he anticipated future efforts to harness the psychokinetic talents of a poltergeist focus validate their experiences in their connections in user-oriented digital media, thereby opening new ways in which to study rarer phenomena. My collaborative essay with the speculative fiction writer Eden S. French, “The Transmediumizers,” *Damned Facts: Fortean Essays on Religion, Folklore, and the Paranormal*, edited by Jack Hunter (Paphos, Cyprus: Aporetic Press, 2016), 97-112, and a forthcoming chapter in a book on the supernatural and digital media further explore how experiencers are empowered through online networking.

person—something that he suggested would eventually overtake the limitations of the existing religious and scientific paradigms.

**Disrupting Era-Intelligence**

Fort emphasized how societies tended to limit themselves according to the dominant paradigms of their time. “There is no intelligence except era-intelligence,” Fort wrote. “I think as I think, mostly, though not absolutely, because of the era I am living in.” Ways of knowing changed according to the dominant way of thinking, which varied from era to era, from culture to culture, and was governed by specific authorities. That which did not fit into the dominant way of thinking was “damned” and excluded. As Kripal (2010) summarizes it, modern Western society had moved away from the “Old Dominant of Religion,” which Fort “associates with the epistemology of belief and the professionalism of priests.” From there, it entered “the present Dominant of materialistic Science, which he associates with the epistemology of explanation and the professionalism of scientists.” The present “Dominant” arrived with Charles Darwin’s publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859), which introduced evolutionary sciences as an entirely new way to understand the origin of and changes in life on earth.93 This sounds much like a secularization thesis where, in the modern era, religion was being superseded by science. This view was similarly expressed by the Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer (1854-1941) in *The Golden Bough*, written, expanded, and abridged between 1890 and 1937. He too saw religion “displaced by science.” In Frazer’s view, science was not an ultimate means to an end, but another thread in the web of “higher thought” about nature. “The dreams of magic may one day be the

93 Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 111-121; quotes by Kripal from 112-113; quotes on era-intelligence by Fort are from *Lo!*, 428 and 604-5, respectively quoted in Kripal, 111-112.
waking realities of science,” he suggested. Moving beyond Frazer, Fort speculated on how such “waking realities” were signalled through the persistent recurrence of “damned facts.” Those facts challenged the limitations of knowledge in the “Dominants” of religion and science.

Beyond the “Dominant” of science, Kripal writes, Fort speculated on “the New Dominant of what he called Intermediatism, which he associates with the epistemology of expression or acceptance and the professionalism of a new brand of individuating wizards and witches.” Fort also referred to this as “the Witchcraft Era.” If the first two “Dominants” of religion and science

excluded data to survive as stable systems, the New Dominant works from the systematic principle of Inclusionism, that is, it builds an open-ended system and preserves it through the confusing inclusion of data, theoretically all data, however bizarre and offending, toward some future awakening.

In this awakening, “damned facts” would become freed from the exclusive absolutes set by orthodox religion (belief, faith) and materialistic science (explanation, reason).

“Intermediatism” brought forth “a more humble acceptance and a more daring expression” of metaphysical things, an inclusive, closer approximation of what constituted the whole of nature. Fort saw that things which did not fit in to the present “Dominant” of materialistic

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94 Fort makes no mention of Frazer’s work in his texts, but the parallels are worth comparison. Fort’s work was a response to proponents of the secularization theory for whom scientism was a dogma. Frazer argued that societies moved through three stages: magic, religion, and science. In the age of magic, magicians authoritatively practiced rites and incantations to benefit or injure individuals or whole communities. Frazer viewed magic as a misconception of natural law. Furthermore, one could easily imitate magic, exposing the practice as “purely imaginary.” In realizing magic’s overall non-efficacy, Frazer wrote that those who organized religions ascribed the creation and control of nature to “great invisible beings,” gods or a God with powers superior to humans. However, through “patient and exact observation,” science identified immutable laws through which nature operated and evolved, enabling worldly progress, but not necessarily mastering “the great forces” of “this starry universe in which our earth swims as a speck or mote.” James George Frazer, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, Abridged Edition (New York: MacMillan Company, 1922), especially the chapters “The Magician’s Progress” and “Magic and Religion,” 45-59, and “Farewell to Nemi” which sums up his views, 711-714.

95 Kripal, Authors of the Impossible, 113.
science might be included through the work being done in fields like psychical research, evolutionary biology, and quantum physics. As Kripal and Colin Bennett (2002) argue, Fort was an early post-modern thinker, challenging socially constructed knowledge as illusory and controlling.

Through the concept of “Intermediatism,” Fort speculated on what would happen if psychical abilities became socially and scientifically accepted. Harnessing focus persons’ psychokinetic powers could, he argued, dramatically reshape the world. “Poltergeist girls” in the “Intermediary Age” could become “witches, or wizards.” As was posited in the psychokinesis hypothesis, Fort argued that emotions were central to PK. Rather than letting the power of emotions go to waste, one could control and concentrate them into a PK force: “Human hopes, wishes, ambitions, prayers and hates – and the futility of them – the waste of millions of trickles of vibrations, today – unorganized forces that are doing nothing. But put them to work together, or concentrate mental ripples into torrents, and gather these torrents into Niagara Falls of emotions....” What possibilities would emerge? He wrote,

A table, weighing 60 pounds, rises a few feet from the floor – well, then, it’s some time, far ahead, in the Witchcraft Era – and a multi-cellular formation of poltergeist-girls is assembled in the presence of building materials. Stone blocks and steel girders rise a mile or so into their assigned positions in the latest sky-prodder. Maybe.

Living in New York as grand feats of engineering, skyscrapers and bridges, emerged from Manhattan, Fort joked that “I now have a theory that the Pyramids were built by poltergeist-girls. The Chinese Wall is no longer mysterious.” Like a fiction writer, Fort employed his imagination to speculate on how things might be (or might have been) if PK

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97 See Bennett, *Politics of the Imagination*.
were realized on such a great scale. In the wake of Fritz Lang’s 1927 epic motion picture *Metropolis* which pitted marginalized people against the behemoths of modern engineering and technology, Fort imagined that if one person could generate a poltergeist, then surely a group of PK agents could construct world wonders. Fort thought that collective PK would yield the most astounding results.

...sometime in the Witchcraft Era – and every morning, promptly at nine o’clock, crowds of human wishers, dignified under the name of *transmediumizers*, arrive at their wishing stations, or mental power-houses, and in an organization of what are now only scattered and wasted hopes and hates concentrate upon the running of all motors of all cities. Just as they’re all nicely organized and pretty nearly satisfied, it will be learned that motors aren’t necessary.99

In “Intermediatism,” Fort envisioned poltergeist focus persons becoming empowered as “transmediumizers,” as super-humans who could mediate between their mental intentions and the material. Collectively, he suggested, they could remake the world.

Through “transmediumizers,” the entire paradigm of how things were built and operated in the future could be changed through mind over matter. But Fort challenged optimistic ideals that the power of the “poltergeist girls” would only be used for the greater good. He pragmatically reflected on how religions, scientists, and rulers had collaborated to maintain their authoritative paradigm, productively and destructively. If mind over matter could be harnessed, Fort argued that it would be utilized in warfare. Psychokinetic talents could be converted to weapons of a scale that greatly surpassed the power of machines that existed in the interwar decades:

military demonstrations of the overwhelming effects of trained hates –
scientific uses of destructive bolts of a million hate-power – the blasting of
enemies by disciplined ferocities –

And the reduction of cannons to the importance of fire crackers – a
battleship at sea, or a toy boat in a bathtub....

And then, Fort sarcastically countered with what an optimist might say:

But of course not that witchcraft would be practiced in warfare. Oh, no:
witchcraft would make war too terrible. Really, the Christian thing to do
would be to develop the uses of the new magic, so that in the future a war
could not even be contemplated.

But, Fort retorted, “Intermediatism” did not guarantee peaceful coexistence. It would bring
with it a whole new set of problems. As a pragmatist, Fort knew that the age-old struggle
for dominance and power would continue into the new era. His science-fiction vision of
what could happen next was equal parts comedy and horror:

Later: A squad of poltergeist girls – and they pick a fleet out of the sea, or out
of the sky – if, as far back as the year 1923, something picked French
aeroplanes out of the sky – arguing that some nations that renounced fleets
as obsolete would go on building them just the same.

All of this destruction could be accomplished by teenaged poltergeist girls who had become
military pawns – soldiers conditioned to do battle without question. After all, young men
barely out of adolescence had been conscripted to fight the bloody battles of the First
World War, and women had taken on the jobs they had vacated.

Girls at the front – and they are discussing their usual not very profound
subjects. The alarm – the enemy is advancing. Command to the poltergeist

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100 Fort, *Wild Talents*, 1042.
girls to concentrate – and under their chairs they stick their wads of chewing gum.

A regiment bursts into flames, and the soldiers are torches. Horses snort smoke from the combustion of their entrails. Reinforcements are smashed under cliffs that are teleported from the Rocky Mountains. The snatch of Niagara Falls – it pours upon the battlefield. The little poltergeist girls reach for their wads of chewing gum.  

The passage showcases Fort’s penchant for provocative humour and the great scale of his imagination. While psychical research and quantum physics heralded a new era by challenging the vehemently materialistic present “Dominant,” there would still be those vying to utilize newly discovered forces to gain and build their power.

Speculative Visions

While scientists mostly ignored Fort, his speculative ideas became major themes in fiction, where the psychokinesis hypothesis had the most significant public reach. In stories, novels, and movies after 1950, PK vengeance themes combined Fort’s speculative caution with what was happening in psi research at the time. In 1952, Jack Vance was the first fiction writer to write of such psychokinetic individuals in his novella “Telek,” published in

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103 Fort, Wild Talents, 1042.
Drawing from Fort’s suspicions that psychokinetic powers were atavistic, Vance wrote, “They’ve always been with us, all of history, latent in our midst.”¹⁰⁵ Later in the story, a character realizes, “There’s a large literature of early experiments and observations. The so-called spiritualist study of poltergeists and house-demons might be significant.”¹⁰⁶ Vance’s fiction mirrored emerging ideas that the poltergeist was a sign of psychokinetic presence. Like Fort, Vance wondered, what would happen if PK were unleashed? He pushed Fort’s speculation further by imagining how social dysfunction would occur if PK became a realized evolutionary potential. Emphasizing Fort’s theme that power simply shifted from one “Dominant” to another, Vance illustrated Fort’s concept of the collective power of transmediumizers remaking society and the world in an age of “Intermediatism,” and how those without such powers of mind would become powerless.

The following year, James Gunn’s novella “Wherever You May Be,” published in Galaxy Science Fiction, further developed these themes. In Gunn’s story, a psychologist passing through rural southern Missouri discovers a young woman, Abigail, with psychokinetic and clairvoyant powers. “He had stumbled on something that would set the whole world on its ear, or perhaps stand it on its feet again,” Gunn wrote.¹⁰⁷ The psychologist finds that psychokinetic abilities depended on Abigail’s emotional state. He decides to manipulate her moods to collect evidence of her powers to try and explain them, feigning love for her to exploit her abilities. But ultimately, the psychologist becomes the pawn of the “all-knowing, all-powerful” Abigail – a fate “worse than hell.”¹⁰⁸

The most influential nod to Charles Fort’s warnings of the destructive potential of PK was that of the horror writer Stephen King’s *Carrie* (1974). King refers to Carrie’s “wild talents” in the first pages of the book. He reveals how, in her childhood, her home had been the focus of lithobolia, “a rain of stones [that] fell from a clear blue sky... damaging the roof extensively and ruining two gutters and a downspout” (a “News item from the [fictional] Westover (Me.) weekly *Enterprise*, August 19, 1966”). The passage reads like something taken directly from Fort’s *The Book of the Damned*. The psychokinetic anti-hero Carrie – an awkward teenage girl who is continually bullied by her widowed, excessively evangelical Christian mother and her insensitive schoolmates – is introduced as a person of special scientific interest, the subject of academic papers and respected university press books.

What King was writing was more than fiction – it had a basis in real experiences reimagined with Fortean flair. This made the horror of Carrie’s murderous psychokinetic vengeance against her classmates at the high school prom all the more effective. The psychokinesis hypothesis became widely known from *Carrie* and other similar films, novels, comic books, and video games – all stemming from the science mysticism of Charles Fort. Most fictions did not portray an altruistic human nature in relation to PK powers, but rather such powers being used toward totalitarianism and destruction. They accentuated Cold War fears of how megalomaniac individuals could wield powers that threatened liberal societies.

Fort may be the greatest mischief maker of all in this history. He subverted dominant epistemologies through humour and imagination. He assessed anomalous things as a

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collective mischievous force. Fort’s attention to “damned facts” challenged both the “Dominants” of scientific materialism and religion. To him, new sciences like parapsychology and quantum physics could move beyond the boundaries of materialism and bring about a new age, “Intermediatism,” in which psychical talents would become included, studied, and practiced as part of human nature. Fort’s whimsy generally did not appeal to scientists who sought to demarcate science from that which mimicked it, what has, in a derogatory way, been called “pseudoscience” or “fringe science.”111 Those who opposed and tried to debunk and shame the “fringe” had a unified project of demarcating what constituted an authentic, acceptable science in which phenomena must be observable, testable, and replicable. In Fort’s view, those were the people who actively excluded the “data of the damned” as being superstitious, hallucinatory, and delusional.112 To this day, as the historian of science Michael Gordin writes, “demarcation happens every day in the laboratories, field sites, and classrooms of the world.”113 In terms of what scientists considered valuable in scientific debates, paranormal phenomena simply did not make the cut.114 Fort’s approach was to liberate the “data of the damned” so that knowledge of human nature could expand holistically. More than anything, Fort’s “humourist science,” as the historian of media Louis Kaplan called it, inspired speculative writers to put forth such

111 Michael D. Gordin, *The Pseudoscience Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1, 202-203. Gordin, 7-13, notes several attempts to define demarcation between science and non-science. From the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper who in the 1920s emphasized falsifiability as key to demarcating science from non-science to the philosopher Larry Laudan in the 1970s who argued that only significant epistemological differences could demarcate sciences. Gordin argues that none of these attempts succeeded in clearly demarcating science from non-science. Gordin, 13, writes, “Although every individual seems certain that he or she is doing an admirable job of demarcation when surveying the realms of knowledge, consensus is hard to find.”

112 See Gordin, 206-208, on how “denialist science” that defends industry, for example around issues of tobacco smoking or climate change, is a far more critical issue in terms of scientific demarcation. For more on denialist science, see Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

113 Gordin, 209.

ideas in fiction and film that was consumed by the mass American and British public in the decades following the Second World War. Such fictions spoke to the appeal of such “wild talents” existing. As we will see in the pages ahead, psychical abilities were actively being explored in the boundary sciences, which for some of those researchers, made the turn to a post-science “Intermediatism” seem imminent.

**Harry Price: “Confessions of a Ghost Hunter”**

If Fort’s visions were best translated into public consciousness through a blurring between fiction and reality, the sensationalist British ghost hunter Harry Price (1881-1948) set out to make the supernatural natural. As a popular frontline investigator of the paranormal, Price saw the psychokinesis hypothesis as the most promising way to unveil the mechanisms of the poltergeist. He tried to bring the physical sciences and psychology together via psychical research. Price asserted that the poltergeist was not a spirit of the dead, but was closely related to human psychology and that its apparatus could be discovered through a combination of field investigations and laboratory experimentation. Through his investigations, Price began to apply the psychokinesis hypothesis in ways that were widely publicized, especially through his popular book *Poltergeist Over England* (1945), published by the British weekly magazine *Country Life*. Price’s 1948 obituary in the London *Times* portrayed him as someone who since his youth “was moved to curiosity and wonder about various happenings and appearances that were unaccountable from the premises of natural science, and as a practical not less than an imaginative man he followed the line of

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those investigations that were more or less susceptible of physical proof."¹¹⁶ Few paranormal claims impressed Price as much as phenomena such as hauntings, poltergeists, and psychokinesis – all areas through which he believed those physical proofs could potentially be discovered.

After a series of notable experiments with the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in which Price sought to expose mediumistic fraud, he formed his own National Laboratory of Psychical Research in 1926. The lab was the first of its kind in Britain to conduct controlled experiments. Among his inventions was a “telekinetoscope” in which a test subject would attempt to psychokinetically “depress an electrical contact inside a soap bubble” without bursting it.¹¹⁷ He designed strict controls for testing mediumistic claims, which earned him a reputation as an “incorrigible sceptic” among spiritualists.¹¹⁸ From these experiments, Price proclaimed that he had debunked various claims: the faked photographic plates of the “spirit” photographer William Hope; the German medium Rudi Schneider escaping from physical constraints during a 1932 séance; and Helen Duncan’s spirit ectoplasm (which he showed was regurgitated cheesecloth).¹¹⁹ Despite his scepticism, many psychical researchers thought that Price himself was committing trickery in various experiments and investigations. Most famously, in 1937-38, he rented what was popularly known as “the most haunted house in England,” Borley Rectory in Essex, where he employed a team of

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¹¹⁹ Thirteen years later, in 1944, Duncan was the last person to be imprisoned under the Witchcraft Act of 1735, convicted for fraudulent mediumship. Her imprisonment led to the act being repealed. See Nina Shandler, The Strange Case of Hells Nell: The Story of Helen Duncan and the Witch Trial of World War II (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006). On Schneider, see Anita Gregory, The Strange Case of Rudi Schneider (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985).
observers to conduct day and night surveillance for one year. After Price’s death, the
evidence he had presented in favour of the haunting was discounted as fraudulent or as
having a natural explanation by SPR members Eric Dingwall, Kathleen Goldney, and Trevor
Hall. The authenticity of the haunting of Borley, which burned to the ground in 1939,
remains contested to this day. In these cases, there was a fine line between considering
something authentic, misinterpreted, or as the result of outright trickery. Price sought to
critically examine paranormal claims, but in making his own claims about authentic
paranormal activity, he was not immune to the criticisms of others.

Partly as a result of his interest in physical phenomena, Price was among the most
important poltergeist researchers in the first half of the twentieth century. His ideas were
firmly rooted in decades of personal experience investigating cases involving poltergeist and
psychokinetic phenomena. The poltergeist, he argued, was not a spirit of the dead as was
popularly thought but “a fact in Nature” – in other words preternatural. He came to this
conclusion after comparing case studies from around the world and throughout history in
which he noted the cross-cultural stability of the physical events. “It is not the man who
believes in Poltergeists who is credulous: it is the man who doesn’t,” he wrote. Poltergeists,
like violent storms, rainbows, and earth tremors, were spontaneous things recorded across
time and space, once considered supernatural, but now there were natural explanations to

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120 See Eric Dingwall, Kathleen M. Goldney, and Trevor Hall, The Haunting of Borley Rectory: A Critical Survey of
the Evidence (London: Society for Psychical Research, 1956), further critiqued in Eric Dingwall and Trevor Hall’s
Four Modern Ghosts (London: Duckworth, 1958) – both of which cast serious doubt on the genuineness of
Price’s claims of the rectory being haunted. Borley Rectory (built 1862) was the site of one of the most
debated investigations into alleged hauntings, which is often referred to as a poltergeist (see, for example, the
summarized his investigation in Ten Years Investigation of Borley Rectory (London: Longmans, Green, 1940),
later reprinted by Time-Life Books in 1990 as The Most Haunted House in England, which likely inspired the
title for the popular “reality" ghost hunting television series, Most Haunted. In 1939, the rectory burned
down, and was demolished in 1944, after which Price published The End of Borley Rectory (London/Toronto:
G.G. Harrap & Co., 1946). Many other books on Borley have since followed.
be found. However, Price, like other researchers, could not explain the “mechanism” of the poltergeist. To figure it out, he corresponded with academics, scientists, and paranormal enthusiasts who worked in different disciplines. Their combined expertise was rudimentarily assembled in Price’s *Poltergeists Over England* as a way to present the possibility that cross-disciplinary analysis could unearth a solution.\(^{121}\)

Inspired by emerging thinking on the psychokinesis hypothesis at the time, Price favoured a psychological or mind-oriented relationship between a focus person and the phenomenon. If the mechanisms were beyond the known laws of physics, the psychological commonalities of focus persons in these cases seemed to provide significant clues to the operation of the poltergeist. Price wrote,

> Poltergeists are able, by laws as yet unknown to our physicists, to extract energy from living persons, often from the young, and usually from girl adolescents, especially if they suffer from some mental disorder. They are able, by some means, and by using these young people as a fulcrum, lever, or support, to increase and nourish this energy, and to direct intelligently this stolen power. They are able to use this power telekinetically for the violent propulsion or displacement of objects, for purposes of destruction, and especially for the production of every variety of noise – from the ‘swish’ of a silk skirt to an ‘explosion’ that makes the windows rattle. And they can do many other strange things....\(^{122}\)

Like Podmore, Fort, and the leading proponents of the psychokinesis hypothesis at the time – the American psychical researcher Hereward Carrington and the psychoanalyst Nandor Fodor, examined in the next chapter – Price argued that psychological problems were common among poltergeist focus persons. But his perspective deviated significantly from his colleagues’. Price portrayed the poltergeist itself as an external agent that was probably using the passive focus person’s energy to manifest. His thesis emerged between two poles.

At one end was a spiritualist view that the energy of individual mediums was used by spirits of the dead to manifest. On the other was a psychological perspective increasingly common among psychical researchers that the mediums’ powers of mind somehow generated the forces necessary to affect their physical environments. While sceptical of mediums’ claims, as a “ghost hunter,” Price generally favoured the idea that external, invisible entities operated in the physical world – not necessarily spirits of the dead but conscious forms, perhaps even lifeforms of some sort. Poltergeists themselves were beings with agency.

Price’s conscious forms were closely related to theosophical concepts of “thought-forms,” something conscious that occupied a conceptual space between a thought and a spirit. In their 1905 book *Thought-Forms*, the British theosophists Annie Besant (1847-1933) and C.W. Leadbeater (1854-1934) defined thought-forms as an elemental essence, “that strange half-intelligent life which surrounds us in all directions, vivifying the matter of the mental and astral planes” – realms separate from terrestrial existence. In 1944, the American lecturer in etymology and semantics and theosophical teacher Helen Savage (1899-1993) described the poltergeist as a thought-form: “elementals – inhabitants of the astral light – that collected the thoughts and images in the minds of those present.” In that sense, people might be thinking of someone who they loved who had died; imagining the deceased person to be haunting them, those people’s thought-forms created poltergeist manifestations. According to Savage, the medium around whom the poltergeist centred was unaware of “who is acting as the ‘contact point’ with the astral world. Such a person’s constitution acts as an electric wire, so to speak, conducting astral forces onto the physical plane.” The movement of objects could be caused by “astral limbs, extruded in a sort of dream fashion, which lift books from a table, knock down pieces of china, and so on.”

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thought most poltergeist manifestations were caused by “frolicsome nature spirits” that were “attracted to psychically sensitive people.” Therefore, the passive medium was drawing “nature forces,” but not consciously. Even though the thought-form had agency as an external elemental force, it closely related to the concept of “human radiance” and the unconscious mind that potentially generated psychokinetic energy. While Price had no apparent affiliation with theosophy, his concept was very similar to how they conceptualized thought-forms.

Despite his disavowals of spiritualism, Price maintained that the poltergeist had some connection to physical mediumship that took place in séance circles in which objects moved or appeared as if out of thin air. He wrote, “the spontaneous paranormal displacements of objects at séances given by physical mediums are known as telekinetic phenomena – though Poltergeists produce the same effects.” As an investigator of physical mediumship, Price was comfortable making the séance circle an experimental site to test the poltergeist focus person. Among Price’s most famed experimental subjects was the 12-year-old Romanian “Poltergeist Girl” Eleonore Zugun. She was literally rescued from persecuting neighbours who thought she was a witch in league with the devil. If Price were to discover evidence of psychokinesis in relation to the poltergeist, he needed to isolate the phenomenon under controlled conditions. Zugun provided such an opportunity for Price.

Eleonore’s case began when she was staying with her grandparents in a Romanian village in the mid-1920s. She had many missiles – mainly stones – fall at her feet. Price wrote, “The simple peasants thought that the girl was ‘bewitched’, or possessed by the Devil,” or Drăcu, as the locals called him. With manifestations continuing, she stayed with

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125 Further consideration of thought as a form that affects the physical world is given in Chapter 3.
her parents’ neighbour, where they “threatened to put her in an asylum.” Price wrote about how priests conducted masses and exorcisms, and how university researchers conducted experiments. “But the phenomena still occurred.” Price wrote:

Certain papers declared that the whole thing was a swindle; others were convinced that Eleonore was mad; while those newspapers which had investigated for themselves, said the phenomena was genuine. However, the girl was declared insane, and was incarcerated in the local asylum – where she was confined, alone, in a dark room – treatment comparable with the witchcraft persecutions of the seventeenth century.  

Romanian priests had failed to quell the diabolism. The local press and psychiatric doctors became the authorities that determined Eleonore’s fate.

When the case made it into the German-language press, psychical researcher Fritz Grunewald investigated and convinced Eleonore’s father to remove her from the asylum. After three weeks observing Eleonore at a convent, Grunewald returned to Berlin to compile his findings – and died. Eleonore was once again at the mercy of villagers. The Countess Wassilko-Serecki, a Romanian residing in Vienna, rescued and adopted Eleonore to advance psychical research into her case. She invited Price to investigate in April 1926. In September, Price moved Eleonore to London. He wrote, “Eleonore looked even more robust than when I saw her in the previous spring; and, although she was now turned thirteen years of age, there was no sign of the menses.”

Puberty was central to Price’s idea of the relationship between living people and the poltergeist. Again and again in his research through the 1930s and 1940s, he would encounter youths – both girls and boys – at the brink of puberty or just having entered

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128 A full account was published by Price in his *Leaves from a Psychist’s Case-Book* (London, V. Gollancz, 1933).
puberty. Price argued that while young girls were so often at the centre of these cases, they were usually not consciously being deceptive: “one can always tell where the genuine phenomena end and the spurious begin.”

He reiterated, “Though we know there is this connection” to puberty and sex, “we cannot explain it.” Price also wrote about the famed 1878 poltergeist case involving Esther Cox of Amherst, Nova Scotia. Manifestations started just after her boyfriend attempted to rape her in the woods; she resisted and he fled.

Walter Hubbell, who wrote a book based on the case, The Great Amherst Mystery (first printed in 1879), noted that manifestations seemed to occur in a 28-day cycle, like menstruation. Price was “convinced there must be something, either psychological or physiological, in a young girl’s organism, that turns her into a girl-witch or Poltergeist-attractor.” Price widely popularized this line of thinking that a pubescent girl was typically a poltergeist agent – a concept that he borrowed from its originator Hereward Carrington (1921). This idea was further cemented in popular consciousness through Stephen King’s 1974 novel and Brian de Palma’s 1976 film adaptation: the character Carrie’s psychokinetic fury took hold after her first menstruation humiliatingly occurred in the girls’ shower at school. As will be detailed in the next chapter, growing scientific interest in adolescent sexuality was significant to these types of connections being made by Price and others.

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130 Price, Poltergeist, 371-72.
131 Price, Poltergeist, 371.
132 Price, Poltergeist, 376-377; also see Walter Hubbell, The Great Amherst Mystery: A True Narrative of the Supernatural (New York/Chicago: Brentano’s, 1888). This claim was actually unheard of in poltergeist cases which typically continued steadily for weeks or months rather than recur on a monthly basis.
133 Price, Poltergeist, 373.
134 Hereward Carrington wrote that there was a connection between female adolescent sexuality and the poltergeist in a paper presented to the first-ever gathering of international psychical researchers in Copenhagen in 1921, which he reprinted verbatim in several articles and books into the 1950s (see Chapter 2). Price also reprinted this paragraph by Carrington in Poltergeist Over England.
Most fascinating to Price in the Zugun case was how painful markings would spontaneously form on her body. The markings seemed to suggest a relationship between the psychosomatic physical manifestations of hysteria and the psychological roots of the poltergeist.\footnote{These had been reported in early modern witch trails that involved poltergeist-like phenomena as well as in hysteria studies conducted by fin-de-siècle psychiatrists. Such dermatological phenomena would appear again in a Maryland poltergeist case in 1949 in which words would form on the young boy’s body during exorcism rites, a case that inspired William Peter Blatty to write a similar scene into The Exorcist. There is a physiological condition, dermatographia, in which people can draw on their skin – similar to the conditions reported in the Zugun and Maryland cases, and worth further consideration in relation to studies of psychosomatic medicine. See, for example, Tracie Hunte, “Artist: ‘I Use My Skin as a Canvas,’” ABC News, 14 March 2008, accessed 1 July 2016 at http://abcnews.go.com/Health/story?id=4446929. For more on this condition in studies of hysteria, see Janet Beizer, Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 21-25.} Spontaneous and painful “weals, teethmarks and scarifyings” appeared on Eleonore’s skin that she blamed on Drăcu. Price likened the marks to stigmata. He found that when the Countess hypnotised Eleonore, she could suggest that the marks occur, and they would quickly appear and then disappear. Mr. G.E. Brown, identified simply as a scientist, wrote to Price that “there is a hysteria at the base: not advanced or pathological hysteria, but a decided thinning of the crust or division between the thinking mind and the underlying dreaming mind.”\footnote{This concept is further explored in Chapter 3. Price, Poltergeist, 269-270.} Price noted such effects in the case of the Belgian stigmatic Louise Lateau and in the cases examined by the French psychologist Pierre Janet.\footnote{Price, Poltergeist, 272. On the Louise Lateau case, see Sofie Lachapelle, “Between Miracle and Sickness: Louise Lateau and the Experience of Stigmata and Ecstasy,” Configurations 12 (2004), 77-105.} Price made further note of physiological effects, such as an increased pulse rate, that would accompany manifestations.\footnote{Price, Poltergeist, 266.} Eleonore’s case presented a variety of exceptional evidence to fuel Price’s ideas that a whole range of factors were at play in poltergeist and psychokinetic phenomena. The strange physical manifestations that occurred around Eleonore created significant tensions with her family, neighbours, and a chain of local authorities such as priests, press, and psychiatrists. They each had their own idea on how to
resolve the problem according to religious and psychiatric epistemologies and ontologies. When Zugun was incarcerated in an asylum, Grunewald and the Countess negotiated her release. They set her apart as special in ways that would benefit psychical research and the emerging psychokinesis hypothesis. The British press caught on to the word “poltergeist,” introduced by Price as a way to counter newspapers’ more accusatory nickname for Eleonore, “The Devil Girl.” Then, when Eleonore entered puberty, the phenomena ceased altogether.\(^{139}\) Despite ongoing controlled experiments to explore Zugun’s potential psychokinetic talents and her psychosomatic marks, her case was left unresolved. Once the phenomenon stopped, there was nothing further to observe.

Harry Price took the best available evidence of his time regarding the poltergeist and compiled it into his widely read *Poltergeist Over England*, a book that was filled with lively illustrations and spooky anecdotes. He assembled the most cutting-edge concepts about the poltergeist – including those of Frank Podmore, Andrew Lang, William Barrett, and Charles Fort, plus significant historical actors who we will meet in subsequent chapters, Hereward Carrington and Nandor Fodor. *Poltergeist Over England* was written for the masses, particularly those who were enthusiastic about the paranormal and wanted to investigate it for themselves, not for the comparatively conservative psychical research establishment in Britain. Price favoured a bolder approach that was welcomed by his colleagues in the American Society for Psychical Research for which he was foreign research officer from 1925 to 1931, as well as by some academics at the University of London and in Germany. In 1937, he re-established the oldest modern paranormal research organization, The Ghost Club, which was faltering at the time. His methodologies and insights set a number of well-known investigators on their path, including Peter Underwood, R.S.

\(^{139}\) Price, *Poltergeist*, 277.
Lambert, and Andrew Green, all of whom actively applied and improved Price’s methodologies in post-Second World War Ghost Club investigations. Together, their work forms the basis of today’s widespread pastime of “ghost hunting.” Price demonstrated a savvy handling of both the press and academia in hands-on experiments and field investigations that sought physical proof of the paranormal. He was, at heart, an independent ghost hunter, not someone who toed anyone else’s line. While suggesting the poltergeist itself somehow had agency, his review of current research in *Poltergeist Over England* helped popularize the psychokinesis hypothesis as the best way forward in poltergeist studies. An endorsement from such a well-known psychical investigator created a foundation for the psychokinesis hypothesis to be more commonly pursued in psychical and parapsychological research from the 1950s onwards.

**Conclusions: Installing the Reimagined Poltergeist**

Frank Podmore, William Barrett, Charles Fort and Harry Price each had a crucial role in the making of the psychokinesis hypothesis. They popularized the idea that the poltergeist was co-created between an individual and an unknown mechanism or force, however experiencers, as Fort critiqued, tended to be treated as passive subjects in psychical studies. While Podmore’s debunking perturbed his SPR colleagues, I argue that his mischief-making incited better practices in studying anomalous phenomena. He warned psychical

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researchers about the dangers of assuming something was paranormal when there was
evidence suggesting otherwise. He also pointed to issues of accuracy and discrepancy in
witness testimonials. The practice of writing to record events as they happened became a
crucial documentary tool, as did creating floorplans to determine patterns in reported
manifestations. Most importantly, Podmore drew his colleagues’ attention to the person
who appeared to be at the centre of the poltergeist manifestations: the poltergeist agent or
focus person. Barrett agreed these were all critical protocols in investigating the poltergeist.
The focus person, as the “nucleus” of the event, held significant clues to the mechanism of
the phenomenon, he argued. Barrett implored colleagues to use science and imaginative
speculation to investigate and raise new questions about the poltergeist. Fort was all about
imaginative speculation, predicting, as a science-fiction writer would, what would happen if
psychokinesis became a controlled ability. Since “poltergeist girls” tended to be
marginalized, he imagined that if their abilities were socially and scientifically accepted, they
would be exploited by state and military authorities. The poltergeist and psychokinesis, he
warned, had both constructive and destructive potential. Harry Price combined
sensationalism and public science to promote the psychokinesis hypothesis. He proposed
that the poltergeist was a natural phenomenon, something like a thought-form, a
subconscious being that was neither spirit nor simple energy exteriorized from a human, but
that needed a focus person to manifest. He introduced a mass readership to Podmore and
Barrett’s debates, to Fort’s science mysticism, and to the psychosexual concepts proposed
by Hereward Carrington and Nandor Fodor. As I show in the next chapter, Fodor’s testing of
the psychokinesis hypothesis within a psychoanalytical framework made it viable in
parapsychological studies of the poltergeist.
In the 1920s and ‘30s, the boundaries of scientific knowledge of human nature expanded significantly through new studies of sexuality, hormones, and consciousness. In this context, the psychical researcher Hereward Carrington gathered ideas together to try to comprehend what the energy or force of the poltergeist might be. He located them in the repression and expression of human sexual development. Nandor Fodor developed Carrington’s ideas within Freudian psychoanalysis, a more liberal discipline than psychical research, to consider the repressed sexual traumas that he thought caused the poltergeist. Situating the psychokinesis hypothesis in an established psychoanalytic framework helped Carrington and Fodor’s ideas to gain credibility and become adapted into parapsychological studies by the 1950s. For the first time, through Fodor’s work, poltergeist experiencers actively explored the relationship between their subconscious and the poltergeist events with therapeutic guidance. Ultimately, though, the diagnoses and findings were decided by Fodor himself, published in his papers and books.

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Tension on the Boundaries

Innovative poltergeist studies in the 1930s were caught amidst epistemic tensions and the reinforcement of disciplinary boundaries across the sciences. For Freud, delineating the boundaries of the emerging psychoanalytic discipline had been crucial to establishing its therapeutic credibility in the medical sciences. In 1925, he wrote to his colleagues that he found that critiques of psychoanalysis in England were based “on the imaginary idea that psycho-analysis operates with agents (‘the psyche’) which are supposed to be independent of the body” – ideas that, as we will see, both Fodor and Carrington speculated on in their contributions to the psychokinesis hypothesis. Given Freud’s disapproval of that concept, he recommended that psychoanalysts avoid studying telepathy to prevent further confusion. In general, Freud opposed entangling psychoanalysis with any other disciplines such as psychical research, philosophy, or politics. He worried such interdisciplinary work could be its downfall. While Freud could not accept merging psychoanalysis with psychical research, as I detail below, he did agree that Fodor was onto something valid. As a result of this encouragement, Fodor’s brief correspondence with Freud was his primary inspiration for becoming a psychoanalyst.

Tensions that also existed in the boundary-work between psychical researchers and spiritualists intensified in the 1920s and ‘30s. Psychical researchers had studied spiritualist mediums since the mid-nineteenth century, but spiritualism’s public credibility and popularity were increasingly questioned during the interwar decades. Numerous people

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2 This was a central concern that Freud raised in the paper he read in 1921, “Psycho-Analysis and Telepathy.”
3 Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, Volume 3: The Last Phase, 1919-1939* (New York: Basic Books, 1957), 393. John Forrester argues that the method of psychoanalysis was similar to gossip and telepathy, but that both were a threat to the regulation of psychoanalytical discourse. Telepathy, he notes, is similar to the psychoanalytical concept of transference. See Forrester’s chapter, “Psychoanalysis: Gossip, Telepathy and/or Science?,” in *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan, and Derrida* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1990), 243-259.
were criminally charged with extorting those grieving the loss of their loved ones during the First World War, and spiritualist claims were investigated by the Anglican Church in England.\(^4\) While psychical research waned in the interwar decades, spiritualism remained widely practiced in private home circles.\(^5\) During those decades, psychical studies were divided between those adopting experimental approaches to study psi phenomena, such as J.B. Rhine’s Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University\(^6\) and Harry Price’s National Laboratory of Psychical Research,\(^7\) and organizations that were sympathetic to the aims of spiritualism and sought evidence of survival after death, such the British College of Psychical Studies and the International Institute for Psychical Research, for which Fodor was Director of Research from 1934 to 1938.\(^8\) In those years, spiritualists fortified their authority for those seeking answers about an existence beyond mortality.\(^9\) In 1932, the weekly newspaper *Psychic News* was founded to represent spiritualists’ interests globally.\(^10\) Spiritualists had established a voice, and they collectively worked to protect their standing. As with any religion or science, spiritualists policed the boundaries they had established to protect their beliefs from things that were considered to be abhorrent to their values.

In 1936 to 1938, when Fodor proclaimed that studying sexuality was central to comprehending mediumship and the poltergeist, *Psychic News* writers and the International Institute of Psychical Research’s board launched an offensive. To them, sex and spiritualism


\(^5\) Hazelgrove, 14-15.

\(^6\) See Chapter 3.

\(^7\) See Chapter 1.


\(^9\) See Hazelgrove.

\(^10\) *Psychic News* continues to publish to this day. After briefly ceasing in 2010 when liquidated by its owners, the Spiritualists’ National Union, *Psychic News* was revived in 2011. Its website is [http://www.psychicnews.org.uk/](http://www.psychicnews.org.uk/).
should not mix and they publicly critiqued Fodor’s claims. Fodor made the case that *Psychic News* writers unfairly portrayed him as biased and hostile to mediums, calling him unfit to direct the International Institute.¹¹ Mediums who testified at the trial denied that “mediumship has anything to do with sex,” except, as one claimed, “probably in poltergeist phenomena.”¹² In 1937, another medium, Horace Leaf, had argued in the pages of *Psychic News* in favour of Fodor, relating him to Freud who was highly criticized “when he first came out with his sexual discoveries” at the turn of the century.¹³ The jury favoured Fodor’s defamation suit, and the justice awarded him the relatively small sum of £105.¹⁴ To Fodor, however, this was a victory that enabled him to break free of the constraints on British psychical researchers who were sympathetic to spiritualism. He relocated to New York City in 1939 and established new studies in American psychoanalysis which actively explored issues of sexuality and psyche – a space in which the psychokinesis hypothesis could be more effectively tested. The dispute with spiritualist sympathizers proved that he was onto something new that could explain the poltergeist, and that this project could best be pursued in the more liberal field of psychoanalysis.

To gain access to the conceptual resources in Freudian psychoanalysis, Fodor pathologized the poltergeist, linking the physical manifestations characteristic of poltergeist

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¹¹ “King’s Bench Division,” *The Times* (London, England) 48244, 3 March 1939, 4. Among his character witnesses was C.V.C. Herbert, the research officer for the Society for Psychical Research.


¹⁴ In another case, Harry Price’s colleague the psychical researcher R.S. Lambert successfully sued the Home Office advisor on film censorship, Sir Cecil Levita, for trying to have Lambert fired from his job at the BBC. Levita was sued for £7,500 – quite a sum at the time – which inspired the BBC to reform and liberalise its staff relations. Lambert and Price co-investigated a controversial poltergeist case on the Isle of Man in which a family encountered poltergeist-type incidents along with an uncanny, disembodied voice that unnerved and perplexed them. They attributed the voice to a mongoose that they reportedly saw on their property. See Christopher Josiffe, who made an excellent summary of the case in “Gef the Talking Mongoose,” *Fortean Times* 269 (December 2010), 32-40, which will be revised as a full-length monograph, forthcoming 2016; and Alan Murdie’s column “Ghostwatch,” *Fortean Times* 315 (June 2014), 18-19.
activity to the repressed psyche. As scientific discussions of the psychology and physiology of sexuality expanded in the first half of the twentieth century, psychoanalysts accepted emerging ideas and data related to psychosexual repression that in turn enabled new ways of thinking about the poltergeist as something co-created by the interaction between the human psyche and some mysterious force. If the poltergeist was a psychosomatic, physical externalization of some type of internalized, repressed energy then, Fodor argued, the “talking cure” could potentially treat it as it would any other mental malady. However the mechanism of the poltergeist – the main concern of psychical researchers – could not be effectively revealed through such an approach which emphasized cure rather than explanation. While cautiously supported by American psychoanalysts, Fodor’s approach was highly controversial among British psychical researchers and spiritualists who found his focus on sexuality distasteful. By the late 1950s however, the boundary-work accomplished by Fodor provided a methodological framework that enabled a new generation of American parapsychologists to make significant psychological correlations between focus persons and poltergeist events.

The Hidden Forces of Sexuality

In the 1920s, the British-born American psychical researcher and writer Hereward Carrington (1880-1958) combined emerging scientific knowledge about human sexuality, behaviour, and physiology to argue that the energy of the poltergeist was sexual. Carrington proposed that repressed sexuality could be unleashed as a psychokinetic force to produce the poltergeist manifestations. This idea worked with his goal to move beyond repressive psychocultural norms that prevented people from realizing higher psychological
development – what after the Second World War would become framed as a movement to achieve greater human potential and self-realization.\textsuperscript{15} Rather than invoking the concept of a spirit or soul, Carrington envisioned energies flowing through the human body. He wondered what would happen if these energies could be controlled to attain psychical or revelatory experiences – and what would happen if they were repressed. In many ways, Carrington was the first psychical researcher to seriously examine psychological connections to the poltergeist, introducing a sketch of a hypothesis in 1921 that, while not further developed in his own work, would significantly contribute to the psychokinesis hypothesis. He initially shared this idea at the first-ever conference gathering of international psychical researchers held in Copenhagen:

An energy seems to be radiated from the body, in such cases, which induces these phenomena; and it will be observed that this phenomenon takes place at about the age of puberty, when the sexual energies are blossoming into maturity within the body. It would almost seem as though these energies, instead of taking their normal course, were somehow turned into another channel, at such times, and were externalized beyond the limits of the body, – producing the manifestations in question. The spontaneous outburst of these phenomena seems to be associated with the awakening of the sex-energies at that time – which find this curious method of ‘externalization.’\textsuperscript{16}

At the centre of the poltergeist phenomenon, Carrington proposed, was the adolescent. In poltergeist studies by Andrew Lang (1894), Frank Podmore (1896), and William Barrett (1911) outlined in Chapter 1, it was clear that young people comprised the majority of focus persons in these cases. In the 1920s, Carrington focused on a physiologically and mentally disruptive element that related to the common biology of this age group: puberty. The dramatic transformations of puberty were a topic being actively investigated by

\textsuperscript{15} See Chapter 4 for more on this movement.

\textsuperscript{16} Hereward Carrington, \textit{The Story of Psychic Science (Psychical Research)} (New York: Ives Washburn, 1930), 146.
psychologists, scientists, and public educators around the time Carrington wrote this passage.17 Carrington’s idea about puberty and the poltergeist was widely reprinted across the literature about the strange physical phenomenon.18 By imagining the “sexual energies” of puberty “turned into another channel” and “externalized beyond the limits of the body,” Carrington simultaneously directed attention to the biology, psychology, and hidden energetic capabilities of the adolescent focus person.

Carrington’s personal history and the studies of adolescence at the time provide context for the formulation of his concept of “sexual energies.” Born in St. Helier, Jersey, in the Channel Islands, Carrington became interested in psychical research and conjuring at a young age. When he was eight, he read the study by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) on people’s encounters with apparitions – *Phantasms of the Living* (1886). As a teenager, he was sceptical about mediumistic phenomena and read books by magicians that described séance room trickery. He became an adept conjuror himself during this time,

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17 Puberty was a topic discussed in different ways before G. Stanley Hall’s work (see below) that directly influenced his cultural and moral approach to the topic. For more on American cultural perspectives on the transition from boyhood to manhood leading up to Hall’s work, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), in which he outlines how, culturally, nineteenth-century American male youths moved from “savage” childish behaviour toward “civilized” mature responsibilities such as leaving home, working, and marriage (especially 53-55, and on the context around the work of G. Stanley Hall focused on young males and manhood, 255-274). For more on what led up to Hall’s work and his “remaking of manhood,” see Gail Bederman, “‘Teaching Our Sons to Do What We Have Been Teaching the Savages to Avoid’: G. Stanley Hall, Racial Recapitulation, and the Neurasthenic Paradox,” *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 77-120.

which turned out to be one of his most useful skills in psychical investigations. Yet he was also intrigued by the possibilities of spirit communication and actively pursued evidence of it over a sixty-year period. After moving to the U.S. in 1899, Carrington worked as a journalist and was an active member of the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR). In 1921, Carrington founded the American Psychical Institute and Laboratory in New York, the only research laboratory of its kind in the U.S. at the time, preceding both Harry Price’s lab in London (Chapter 1) and the one that J.B. Rhine established at Duke University in the following decade (see Chapter 3). In founding a laboratory, he aligned his work with the sciences, even though he was not formally trained as a scientist. Carrington was a member of a *Scientific American* committee (1922-24) that investigated psychical claims. The committee also included magician Harry Houdini, physicist Daniel Frost Comstock, psychical researchers Walter Franklin Prince and Malcolm Bird, and psychologist William McDougall (who eventually hired J.B. Rhine at Duke University). The magazine offered a $2,500 reward to anyone who could produce a visible psychic manifestation. Ultimately, no one was awarded the prize money, but the *Scientific American* project advanced Carrington’s reputation as a collaborative researcher.

Carrington sought to bring together a range of disciplines as a way to advance psychical studies. This was both his strength and his weakness in thinking about sexuality, physical forces, and the poltergeist together. He was a prolific author, publishing around fifty

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19 Carrington’s life, particularly his early years, was summarized in *The Biographical Dictionary of Parapsychology* (New York: Helix Press, 1964), edited by Helene Pleasants.

20 Inspired by this type of competition, until 2015, a $1 million reward was offered by the American conjuror James Randi through the James Randi Educational Foundation to any person who could prove a paranormal claim according to their testing guidelines. Randi had been offering such cash rewards since the mid-1960s, but never ended up paying anyone for their demonstrations of alleged psychical powers. See [http://web.randi.org/](http://web.randi.org/).

21 In 1951, Carrington wrote in the ASPR’s *Journal* that the ideal qualities of a psychical researcher should include “knowledge of trickery and the psychology of deception, accurate observation, infinite patience,
monographs on psychical research and conjuring as well as on diet, fasting, and hygiene.\textsuperscript{22} His approach brought some of the most cutting-edge scientific and philosophical ideas of the time into discussions of psychical research. He was exposed to these ideas through his journalistic work. Carrington had a tendency to take certain elements from these ideas and connect them to his thinking on psychical phenomena. When criticized, he emphasized that his findings were all tentative and worthy of follow-up.\textsuperscript{23} In his boundary-work, he combined what he thought were the strongest ideas of the moment to rethink psychical mysteries in ways that otherwise had not been considered.

Carrington’s frank discussion of “sexual energies” was rooted in his work in social hygiene, which aimed to educate the public about sexual health and morality.\textsuperscript{24} Social hygiene organizations sought to educate people about sexual health, particularly in an effort to curb sexually transmitted diseases. Their members commonly discussed issues around calmness, extreme caution, a grounding in biology, psychiatry, etc. and some knowledge of laboratory technique.” As summarized in a review of *Journal for the American Society for Psychical Research* 45, no. 2 (April 1951) that appeared in *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research (JSPR)* 36 (July 1951), 475. Carrington also wrote many journal, magazine, and newspaper articles.


\textsuperscript{23} In 1914, the non-profit American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) was founded to advance the movement that had originated in the late nineteenth century. The ASHA, today known as the American Sexual Health Association, operated out of New York City, where Carrington himself resided at the time. There is some evidence that Carrington was an active member, perhaps even a life member, of the ASHA or another national hygienic organization. The American Social Hygiene Association’s journal reviewed Carrington’s book *Modern Psychical Phenomena* (1919) in which he presented evidence that an individual’s gender identity continued on in the afterlife; see “Notes,” *Journal of Social Hygiene* 6, no. 1 (January 1920), 150. See obituary for Hereward Carrington in *JSPR* 40, no. 700 (June 1959), 98, in which they identify him as a life member of the “American Hygienic Society,” which may have actually been the ASHA or a similar organization. Despite increasing discussion about human sexuality in the early twentieth century, the “scientific” language of social hygiene was also used by eugenicists who, for example, led sterilization campaigns. See Virginia Smith, *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); *A Century of Eugenics in America: From the Indiana Experiment to the Human Genome Era*, edited by Paul A. Lombardo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); and Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
children’s and adolescent sexuality that previously had been suppressed publicly as it was widely considered to be the parents and guardians’ responsibility to teach and control their children’s sexuality. Social hygiene efforts combining sexual health and morality made for the first sex education in American public schools by the 1920s. Carrington’s work in this frontier field gave him authority to express ideas about adolescent sexuality that otherwise might not have been developed in psychical research.

In a time during which adolescence and puberty became defined in the human sciences and psychology, Carrington introduced the idea that externalized sexual energies among young people might be related to the poltergeist. As a social hygienist, Carrington was likely to have been exposed to the ground-breaking work of the psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924). In his 1,300-page, two-volume monograph Adolescence (1904), Hall studied the physiological and emotional effects of puberty. During adolescence, Hall suggested, individuals experience the most dramatic period of physiological and mental change of their lives in the form of puberty. Puberty brings intense and uneven growth, often marked by physical “growing pains” and awkward social relationships with family and peers. Sexual sensations strongly manifest. Hall was particularly adept at describing the “psychic traits of puberty,” the emotional “storm and stress” that often appeared during this period of physiological transformation and led to behavioural problems, particularly among boys who

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Hall thought were more prone to periods of delinquency. Although social reformers expressed concerns during this period about how girls increasingly fraternized in public spaces, thereby challenging traditions as they moved from the protective home to marriage, Hall focused his research on males. Problems among adolescents tended to emerge from susceptibility to peer and cultural influences, sensation-seeking, and pushing the boundaries of parental and social control. Hall found that depression and self-absorption were common alongside biological changes as adolescents sought both social acceptance and individuation. Hall argued that if the child were denied the developmental transformation from childhood to adulthood during adolescence, then problems would arise later in life. To Carrington, it seemed quite likely that repressed sexual energies in adolescence could create a psychokinetic force, thus making spontaneous poltergeist manifestations.

Early twentieth-century educators sought to restrain the spontaneity of adolescence. Before Hall’s Adolescence, moralists, most often Protestant clergy, were the most prominent authors of books advising youth. Hall, a Protestant himself, was informed both by science and by his own moral reaction to urbanization and modernity at the turn of the century. At the same time, Hall characterized adolescent sexuality as normal and healthy. “Sex is the most potent and magic open sesame to the deepest mysteries of life, death, religion, and love,” he wrote. “It is, therefore, one of the cardinal sins against youth to

26 See Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, “G. Stanley Hall’s Adolescence: Brilliance and Nonsense,” History of Psychology 9, no. 3 (2006), 188.
27 Spurlock, 17-18.
repress healthy thoughts of sex at the proper age.” At the same time, he morally objected to masturbation and premarital intercourse, and promoted “denial and diversion” – channelling one’s sexual energies into a combination of activity and repose. Family members, educators, writers, and social activists expressed larger social concerns that adults were losing control over youth. The American social reformer Jane Addams (1909), for example, viewed adolescent boys as particularly troublesome and impulsive: they set fires, stole things, and threw stones – they were, in fact, not unlike poltergeists. Carrington’s ideas about repressed youthful emotions externalizing as a poltergeist had strong appeal in light of times when adolescent freedoms, repression, and mischief were popularly discussed. The poltergeist was like a warning of what could happen should an adolescent not have healthy channels through which to express their emotions and sexuality.

While Carrington was mostly interested in explaining “sexual energies” in materialist terms, Sigmund Freud, writing at the same time, challenged biological assumptions about sexuality. Freud relocated sexuality in the unconscious mind, the mysterious source of

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30 Hall revealed relatively little about girls’ sexuality. For example, he published tables showing the age at which menstruation typically began without offering much further explanation. Spurlock found that after 1900, “delinquent girls” were viewed as a greater problem than boys who had been the primary concern in the nineteenth century for crimes such as stealing. Spurlock writes that “girls faced the ambiguous charge of immorality,” not necessarily from committing a sex act outside of marriage, but from showing “signs” that they had or would. In the United States, the Mann Act of 1910 gave broad legal “powers to interfere with the movement of young women for any ‘immoral purpose.’” See Spurlock, 17-22; and Kett, “Reflections,” 358. Also see Arnett, 191 and 193 in which he quotes Hall from Volume 2 of Adolescence, 109.


32 Spurlock, 16.

desire and instinctual drives. To him, psychosexuality was a far wider concept than could be pursued through the physical sciences. However, the majority of psychical researchers pursued physicalism, not the interpretive approaches of psychoanalysis, as the standard by which observational and experimental evidence would be collected and presented. A lack of attention to sexuality in psychical research and parapsychological literature reveals how despite evidence of a subjective relationship between the psychical and the sexual, researchers largely steered clear of it to preserve a more objective, less controversial approach that could gain acceptance among other scientists. Overall, Carrington supported the advances of psychoanalysis in “dispelling much of the cant and hypocrisy regarding Sex from the public mind,” although he disapproved of reductionism among psychoanalysts and of the view that their theories could explain away the poltergeist. Freud’s concept of repressed sexual energies made sense to Carrington because troubled, pubescent youth seemed most often at the centre of poltergeist cases. Carrington favoured the idea that focus persons had repressed sexual energies during puberty which then

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35 Quote from Carrington, *The Story of Psychic Science*, 145. Carrington argued that Freudian psychoanalysis opened ways to connect anomalous phenomena to “sexual energies.” Sexuality had rarely been thematically discussed in peer-reviewed psychical research and parapsychology publications. It was first briefly mentioned in an overview of German psychopathology studies in a series of articles in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* in the 1910s, including ones written by Freud and the medical physician Thomas Walker (T.W.) Mitchell on medical studies in relation to hysteria and studies of human consciousness. The only thorough discussion of sexuality, parapsychology, and the poltergeist came much later, in the mid-1980s, in essays by Diana Robinson in conjunction with the research of William Roll.
externalized through anomalous physical manifestations. Such energies, he argued, could be explained scientifically.

While vague about what the poltergeist’s “energy” was – other than it was “not due to any known force” – Carrington concluded that the consensus among researchers was that “an externalization” of “energy takes place, which somehow affects matter in the immediate vicinity of the medium.” He added, “No experienced investigator attributes such phenomena to the intervention of ‘spirits.’ We assume that some physico-biological energy is employed, generated within the medium’s organism, and externalized from it, into space.”

Following earlier ideas about a vital, fluidic, or ethereal force, he thought that in order to affect matter, the “force” must be “solidified” somehow. In séances, the force was not random, but seemed to be guided by intelligence, which “appears to be the conscious mind of the medium.” Carrington followed a hypothesis of a vital force commonly posited around mediumship at the time – but the concept circulated well beyond psychical research circles and was far from being heterodox. The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) originated the concept of vitalism as a “force” that guided the creative and evolutionary impulses of life on earth. In the early twentieth century, academics actively conversed about vitalism.

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time speculated that a vital force animated humans in ways that went beyond the materialist explanations in physics and biochemistry at the time. The popularity of vitalism enabled Carrington to engage in an active debate on the causes of physical forces that eluded scientific explanation. The vital force, he argued, made life itself. It was “capable of existing outside of the body and independent of it,” an idea that could explain, for example, out-of-body experiences. In Copenhagen in 1921, Carrington told his colleagues that the vital force depended on a living person for it to manifest. As a “separate force,” “a thing, an entity,” it was “capable of controlling the nervous mechanism under certain conditions, and acting as the intermediary between it and the mind.” In other words, the “force” co-created the poltergeist in conjunction with human consciousness. Carrington did not conflate the vital force with the psyche itself as Freud had complained, but he considered it as a way to open discussions on how repressed sexuality could become spontaneous psychokinesis.


41 Hereward Carrington, Eusapia Palladino and Her Phenomena (New York: B.W. Dodge, 1909), 297, quoted in Alvarado and Nahm, 94-5. The neurosciences have since revealed mechanisms of the nervous system that enable motor and sensory abilities that were much less understood during Carrington’s time, and while there have been significant advances in understanding human consciousness, many aspects of its mechanisms remain theoretical, speculated upon, contested or unexplained. For an up-to-date overview, see Mitchell Glickstein, Neuroscience: A Historical Introduction (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2014).
Psychokinesis, Carrington posited, related to a “secret energy” that could potentially be mastered through “higher psychical development.” In Carrington’s writing on Indic practices such as yoga, vegetarianism, and fasting, we find the root of his concept of “sexual energies” as it related to vitalism and the poltergeist. Through the practice of kundalini yoga in particular, one could reveal and control a “secret energy,” “very closely connected with the creative energies, the sex-energies of the body.” Carrington wrote that the goal was to “awaken,” “vivify,” and “direct” the secret energy, a process through which clairvoyance and other psychical abilities would be experienced. Carrington’s ideas on yoga integrated concepts from the 1919 publication of an influential text, The Serpent Power by Arthur Avalon, that aimed to make mystical Hindu concepts palatable to English audiences. Carrington’s Higher Psychical Development attempted to bridge the long established Tantric practices such as yoga and meditation, in which sexuality was central, with the study of psychical research. He related siddhis – extraordinary powers that arise through yoga and deep meditation – to psychical abilities and experiences. People must master their “sexual energies” or psychical trouble could ensue. Carrington argued,

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You must either use up the sex-energies of the body in healthful exercises and activities [as suggested in G. Stanley Hall’s concept of diversion], or in their normal channels of expression [presumably sex]; or through these psychic avenues; and if you do not expand them in any one of these three ways, then you have curious mental and physical troubles, perversions and abnormalities, and so forth.

The troubles of the poltergeist arose in the repression of sexual energies. Given the prevalence of pubescent youths at the centre of these cases, Carrington wrote, “The spontaneous outburst of these phenomena is, I am sure, associated with the awakening of the sex-energies at that time, – which find this curious method of ‘externalization.’” To further understand how those energies worked, Carrington looked to emerging biological sciences for clues.

Carrington suggested that his inspiration for the “sexual energies” hypothesis of the poltergeist lay in contemporary endocrinological studies. In a *Scientific American* article, “The Mechanisms of the Psychic,” he wrote:

Recent physiological researches as to the activities of the ductless glands, and particularly the sex glands, have shown the enormous influence of these glands upon the physical and even upon the psychic life.

To Carrington, the endocrine system seemed key to comprehending “sexual energies.” It was comprised of glands that released hormones into the bloodstream (ductless glands) rather than externally through ducts, such as saliva, sweat, and mammary glands (the

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45 In the late 1920s, a few years after Carrington’s articles, endocrinologists discovered neurohormones. Lloyd D. Fricker provides a historical overview in the second chapter, “Neuropeptide Discovery,” of *Neuropeptides and Other Bioactive Peptides: From Discovery to Function* (Morgan & Claypool Publishers, 2012), 15-32. For further historical context around endocrinology, see Alison Li, “J.B. Collip, A.M. Hanson and the Isolation of the Parathyroid Hormone, or Endocrines and Enterprise,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 47 (October 1992), 405-438.
exocrine system). A few months later, he summarized emerging insights from endocrinology in another *Scientific American* article entitled “The Ductless Glands: Recent Discoveries Concerning These Mysterious Regulators of the Human Body.” Carrington wrote that revelations about this endocrinal realm and the extent to which it influenced physiology, mental processes, and personality opened physical routes to the subtle forces that were central to vitalism and kundalini. Glandular influences on variations in human personality and memory fascinated Carrington, but he cautioned against jumping to conclusions that they determined a person’s “entire mental and normal life,” emphasizing that there was – “even leaving out the account the vast mass of ‘supernormal’ phenomena” – much yet to be explored in “the inter-relationship of brain and mind.”

Despite this caution, endocrinal sciences were making “enormous progress” in understanding the “mechanism of the bodily and mental activities.” As he had indicated in “The Mechanism of the Psychic,” this new science could help explain the dynamic relationship between the human body, plasmic materializations, sexual energies, and psychic phenomena such as spontaneous psychokinesis. To Carrington, new knowledge about ductless glands and their regulation of puberty illuminated a new possibility that could explain why the poltergeist most often unleashed around adolescents.

Carrington’s “sexual energies” hypothesis travelled and was transformed in the following decades. However, at the time, the disparate combination of concepts without a specific, experimental follow-up frustrated many of his readers. Reviewers of his books tended to critique his tendency to “unduly simplify” the problems he was exploring, his lack of critical precision, and the way he passed over weaknesses or failures in his psychical.


experiments. Several reviewers wrote that Carrington’s works lacked focus, consistency, and balance in analysing psychical phenomena. There was a need to provide specific, verifiable evidence in psychical research – and this had been something that Carrington, despite his voluminous published output, had not succeeded in doing.\textsuperscript{49} Despite such critiques, Carrington’s idea about “sexual energies” is among the most reprinted in the literature on the poltergeist. The idea seems to have also influenced a notion that remains prevalent that the poltergeist is the product of adolescent girls, occurring around the time of their first menstruation, which, as explained in Chapter 1, may have originated from the horror author Stephen King’s 1974 novel \textit{Carrie} about a teenaged girl who unleashes a psychokinetic fury on people who ostracized her as an outsider.\textsuperscript{50} Carrington’s idea sparked the reimagining of the poltergeist. Collaborating with Carrington in the 1930s to the 1950s, Nandor Fodor advanced the concept that sexuality was integral to the making of the poltergeist through the boundary-work of psychoanalysis.


The Poltergeist on the Couch

To advance the budding idea of a link between sexuality and the poltergeist further required an individual who was more actively experienced with poltergeist investigations, psychical theorization, and psychoanalysis. Nandor Fodor (1895-1964) became the most significant proponent of the theory that repressed energies were being externalized as a poltergeist. Carrington planted the original seed of an idea, and starting in the 1930s, Fodor observed, tested, and amended it through his Freudian psychoanalytical perspective. Fodor focused on psychoanalyzing poltergeist focus persons rather than determining the mechanisms of the physical manifestations. Psychical researchers and parapsychologists tended to shy away from the subjective interpretations of psychoanalysis in order to preserve the objectivity of their observations and documentation of anomalous phenomena. Fodor’s boundary-work, in contrast, resulted in tensions as exemplified in the 1939 lawsuit against Psychic News. His approach threatened spiritualists who sought to normalize mediumistic abilities as evidence of an afterlife and psychical researchers who wanted to preserve not eliminate “genuine” phenomena so that they could study it firsthand. To Fodor, the best service that could be provided to focus persons was to help them resolve the psychological problems that seemed to psychosomatically externalize as a physical force in poltergeist cases.

Born in Hungary, Fodor’s interest in the supernatural arose at a young age after he read a folk tale about a boy who “had the time of his life” playing with a poltergeist. “The bed was on the move; he rode it upstairs and downstairs with whoops of joy. The ghost threw
skulls and bones at him; he gleefully tossed them back.”⁵¹ Like Carrington, Fodor began his career as an American newspaper journalist. In that capacity, he met Carrington in 1926 along with “one of Freud’s chief disciples in psychoanalysis, Sándor Ferenczi.”⁵² The meetings stimulated his dual interests in psychical research and dynamic psychiatry. In 1934, he became the Director of Research for the International Institute of Psychical Research in London (through which he occasionally collaborated with Carrington’s American Psychical Institute). Operating concurrently with Harry Price’s lab – but not as zany and sensational – the International Institute sought to experiment with cases of mediumship and hauntings. Like Price, Fodor also made a trip to the Isle of Man to investigate the case of Gef the Talking Mongoose (1931-36), but unlike Price, he encountered a major stumbling block to his psychical research career that propelled him to become a full-time psychoanalyst in the United States. As I explain further below, British psychical research, he found, was too constricting and conservative. This schism made Fodor an outsider among psychical researchers and it directly inspired an entirely new way of studying the poltergeist that, as I show in Chapter 3, became standardized throughout American parapsychology after 1958.

In 1951, the psychoanalyst Fodor and psychical researcher Carrington revised and compiled the papers they had each produced over the previous three decades in their book *Haunted People: Story of the Poltergeist Down the Centuries* – the first publication fully dedicated to exploring the psychokinesis hypothesis. The book included Carrington’s lengthy 1935 essay “The March of the Poltergeist” in which he reviewed 375 cases from the fourth century (located at Bingen-am-Rhein in present-day Germany) to the famed

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Maryland case of 1949 that inspired *The Exorcist*.\(^{53}\) The second half of the book is occupied by Fodor’s essays in which he developed his psychoanalytical concepts about the poltergeist, an interpretative methodology that was later adapted in parapsychological studies. Strikingly, Fodor’s two theoretical essays in *Haunted People* had been published in peer-reviewed psychiatric journals, *The Journal of Clinical Psychopathology* and *The Psychiatric Quarterly*. These contributions marked Fodor as a professional doctor who was actively incorporating the poltergeist into broader discussions around psychology and psychiatry at the time. In doing so, he dramatically and explicitly expanded upon Carrington’s “sexual energies” idea, making sexual repression, unsettling puberty, troubled adolescence, and another evident aspect – mid-life crises – standard to the interpretation of what fuelled the poltergeist. *Haunted People* was the first book to explore the potential psychological connections with the poltergeist, and it was successful enough to be reprinted twice, including as a Signet mass market paperback in 1968.\(^{54}\) Combining Carrington’s position as a prominent and respected psychical researcher and Fodor’s innovative psychoanalytical approaches, their ideas would later be simplified through standardized observation and psychological testing in Roll’s parapsychological studies of the poltergeist.

Fodor sought to bridge psychoanalysis and psychical research to illuminate the relationships between psychology and psi. To him, the two fields studied the same thing – the unconscious – from different angles. His project began in earnest when he moved from Britain to the U.S. to become a psychoanalyst in 1939 just as Europe entered the Second World War. He became the most creative thinker on the poltergeist phenomenon from the

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\(^{53}\) In *Haunted People* (New York: Dutton, 1951), Carrington also wrote three brief chapters on the historic Phelps poltergeist case from Stratford, Connecticut in the 1850s; a Transylvanian case investigated by the SPR’s Evrard Feilding; and a case of lithobolia from Mauritius in 1937.

\(^{54}\) In 1945, Harry Price’s *Poltergeist Over England* was the first book that introduced Carrington and Fodor’s ideas to the mass public.
1930s through the 1950s, and one of the most controversial given his unabashed psychoanalytical approach. Fodor defined psychoanalysis as “the analysis of the human mind – the process of revealing and bringing into the conscious mind the unknown, hidden influences that previously lay in the subconscious.” It could “delve into the unconscious origins or many of them and, at times, can give a fantastically revelatory solution to undesirable psychic outbreaks.”\(^\text{55}\) This was the crux of Fodor’s approach: identify the focus person and psychoanalyse them to reveal the traumatic source of the psychical manifestations, which hopefully would empower the patients to resolve the trauma and the manifestations. “Its purpose is catharsis,” which Fodor defined as an “emotional release.”\(^\text{56}\)

Spiritualist mediums, Fodor wrote, feared losing their psychic abilities through such a process, but poltergeist people wanted the disruptive physical manifestations to cease. The mechanisms of the poltergeist were still not clear but, through psychoanalysis, the cure seemed to be. His approach, however, ran counter to the motives of psychical researchers who needed a way to study “genuine” phenomena as they happened. If there were a “cure,” there would be no poltergeist manifestations to study.

Fodor’s main criticism was that psychical researchers were most concerned with the “fraudulent or genuine character of the mediumistic performance,” which limited the scope of investigating anomalous phenomena. Psychology, on the other hand, which focused on subjects’ behaviours, was well suited to evaluate psychical manifestations in relation to the unconscious. He wrote in 1945:

> When things do not happen according to expectations, as they seldom do, the scientists get nervous. Being always apprehensive of the danger to their reputation, they withdraw from the investigation at the first breath of a

\(^{55}\) Fodor, *The Haunted Mind*, 3; also see Fodor, *The Unaccountable*, 102-111.

\(^{56}\) Fodor, *The Unaccountable*, 102.
scandal. Sooner or later, there is a scandal in every psychic investigation. As a result, psychical research is now more or less shunned by science and is mostly conducted by men with insufficient training.

From this cul-de-sac, psychical research cannot hope to escape until it will include a genuine psychological investigation.  

According to Fodor, psychologists were “just as much interested in the mental processes which are active behind fraudulent phenomena as in those behind the genuine ones.” He added: “Psychologists will no more reject a medium for conscious or unconscious imposture than they would reject an analytic patient for lying.” His opinion was a dramatic departure from psychical research that only sought to understand the mechanisms of “genuine” phenomena. To psychologists, the major concern was identifying the trauma that was bringing about the phenomena, whether it was mediumistic altered states of consciousness in the séance room or the adolescent at the centre of poltergeist manifestations. In both cases, the phenomena were thought to emanate from the medium rather than a “hypothetical disembodied entity.” Fodor wrote,

One can even venture to say that the mediumistic activity may represent a form of self-therapy, that it permits the affected persons an adjustment to life by sublimating individual traumata along channels of social usefulness, and by strengthening the importance of their own ego.

In a sense, Fodor was suggesting that if focus persons realized that the physical manifestations of the poltergeist were representative of repressed traumas, they could authorize their “mediumistic” abilities in ways that could empower them. As a psychoanalyst, Fodor recognized and encouraged this “self-therapy” as a form of empowerment in his own research from the 1930s onwards. His psychological approach

promised to advance research into the poltergeist, which was increasingly viewed as psychologically rooted and meaningful psychokinesis. Fodor’s approach brought the “force” and its causes – although not its mechanisms – more directly into the purview of psychology. Fodor saw psychoanalysis as a means to resolve the poltergeist and the focus person’s psychological issues that were associated with it.

In his psychical investigations in the 1930s, Fodor saw curative possibilities for people who were experiencing the poltergeist. He viewed them as patients. He combined the ideas of Hereward Carrington with Freudian psychoanalysis to test the concept that a trauma in the focus person’s past was what unleashed the physical and psychological manifestations known as poltergeist activity. The psychophysical expressions of the poltergeist were symptoms of a psychological ailment not being treated effectively. Repressed sexuality was the central trauma to examine. Psychical researchers, including Carrington, had long recognized that there were connections between what had been diagnosed as hysteria (abnormal psychology) and psychical states, where, for example, clairvoyance was demonstrated or spontaneous telekinesis was reported.\(^\text{59}\) Carrington

\(^\text{59}\) These types of incidents in which psychical phenomena intersected with mental illness have appeared in numerous historical analyses, particularly in interdisciplinary hysteria studies and the history of psychiatry. Perhaps the first historian to examine these linkages was Henri F. Ellenberger in The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry (New York: Basic Books, 1970) who looked at the development of psychiatry from shamanic and religious roots, through mesmerism and hypnotism, and the clinical studies of hysteria. After his work, many other historians have examined hysteria, including how extraordinary abilities were documented in the case studies. There are many excellent works in this historiography in which the lines between psychical and psychiatric were evidently blurred. Among them: Adam Crabtree often treats the psychical and the psychiatric in his historical works, among the most notable of which is From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); Alison Winter looks at the mysterious effects of animal magnetism in Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Sofie Lachapelle examined how Belgian medical doctors and Catholic officials negotiated around an alleged case of stigmata in “Between Miracle and Sickness: Louise Lateau and the Experience of Stigmata and Ecstasy,” Configurations 12 (2004), 77-105; Emese Lafferton studied how a patient negotiated her mental state with her doctors in an excellent two-part article, “Hysteria and Hypnosis as an Ongoing Process of Negotiation: Ilma’s Case from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Part I” and “Hysteria and Hypnosis as an Ongoing Process of Negotiation: Ilma’s Case from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Part II,” History of Psychiatry 13 (2002), 177-196 and 305-326; Anne Harrington provides a review of how doctors sought to understand psychosomatic effects in The Cure Within:
Psyche: Haunted People

(1930) wrote that “abnormal and supernormal phenomena appear to be strangely blended”; they could not be easily separated.  In his 1948 essay, “The Poltergeist, Psychoanalysed,” Fodor further exemplified this with an undated account of soldiers hospitalized in Guernsey for chorea, a nervous disorder marked by involuntary, spasmodic movements. Drawing on a case study from dental surgeon E. Howard Grey’s book *Visions, Previsions and Miracles* (1915), Fodor noted that inexplicable knockings were heard around the men, and their medical doctor, Dr. Purdon, used a sphygmograph – a Victorian instrument for measuring arterial blood pressure – on the patients to correlate the sounds with their nerve “explosions.” The doctor treated the men with full doses of potassium iodide, sodium salicylate, and arsenic; “the men improved and the raps became less frequent.” Grey himself noted a personal experience that occurred around his daughter after she had a dental procedure. He heard explosive taps and other auditory sounds while she was asleep, including in the room on the floor below hers.

“It is from such beginnings that the full-blown Poltergeist trouble is born,” Fodor commented. “The observation of the latter leaves no doubt whatsoever that an unconscious tempest is raging behind it.” Fodor connected the externalized unconscious forces in poltergeist cases to the “manifestations of major mental disorder of schizophrenic, though temporary, character, not the product of anything supernatural.” He called this “Poltergeist Psychosis,” and argued in his autobiography that psychiatry was enriched by this term. While psychiatry did not actively take on this concept, Fodor’s work formally recognized the focus person not only as the

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*A History of Mind-Body Medicine* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008). No doubt a very interesting study could be made of the psychical effects historically observed in psychiatric cases.


Purdon also diagnosed one of the men with epilepsy, a factor later evaluated in poltergeist cases by William Roll (see Chapter 3). Nandor Fodor, “The Poltergeist, Psychoanalyzed,” *The Psychiatric Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1948), 195-196, also reprinted in *Haunted People*, 179-80.

primary object of study, but as someone whose well-being was at stake – concerns taken more carefully into consideration in subsequent parapsychological studies.

Fodor saw Freudian dynamic psychiatry as key to developing an explanation of these disruptive forces as a form of psychosis.63 Contrary to the view that adolescents were most often focus persons, while still working as a psychical researcher Fodor had two major British cases in 1938 involving adult women. Alongside experiencing apparently paranormal events, he wrote that the women were also suffering psychological problems. Although he was not yet an accredited psychoanalyst, Fodor focused his attention on assisting them as patients. In the case of “Miss Whalen” (a pseudonym) of Chelsea, London, Fodor told her that she was haunted by her own past; that while she had been successful in keeping some unhappy memories from entering into her consciousness, she had failed to keep them bottled up; that her libido had side-slipped and walked out on her as a ghost, wasting her vitality in a vain attempt to convey a message in the same way – as in other cases – a symptom would.64

Fodor deciphered the symbolism of the strange phenomena experienced – knocks at the door followed by footsteps in the house, disappearing objects, and keys kept in drawers found in keyholes – to events from her life. He claimed that the mere suggestion of these connections lifted Miss Whalen’s depression: it “vanished as if by magic, her eyes lit up, the color came back to her face and she agreed that I might be right.” The solution was to put up a sign at the door: “Please ring the bell.” The phenomena thereafter ceased. He believed that this revelation slammed the door shut to her unconscious, which had

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64 Fodor, “The Poltergeist, Psychoanalysed,” 197.
wandered away from her physical being. To Fodor, the case was closed. What marked Fodor’s psychoanalytical approach as different from other poltergeist investigations was that he turned his attention to the main experiencer, and correlated mental afflictions with the paranormal events. Fodor suggested to Miss Whalen that her unconscious was unleashed, which apparently cured and even empowered her – at least from Fodor’s perspective. As a Freudian, Fodor identified repressed sexuality as at the centre of poltergeist cases, a view that may not have circulated widely among psychiatrists since the poltergeist was relatively rare. Pushing the boundaries of observational and experimental psychical research, he pathologized the poltergeist as a symptom of psychological repression and pointed to a way in which it could be cured.

Carrington and Fodor published the first lengthy exposition on psychosexuality and the poltergeist, *Haunted People* (1951). But the phenomenon’s mechanisms, the main interest of psychical researchers and parapsychologists, remained largely speculative. In a 1945 essay reprinted in *Haunted People*, Fodor wrote that poltergeists were known for “the malicious persecution of a young boy or girl of a pubertal age. Because of [this], poltergeist phenomena are often ascribed to the sideslipping of tempestuous sexual energies at the time when they first ripen in the human body.” To explore this further, Fodor retrospectively engaged with previous investigations he had made in which he’d originally

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65 This concept inspired the way that psychiatrist Jules France depicted the poltergeist in *Fate* magazine in 1951, the passage quoted at the top of the Introduction. “What Are Poltergeists?,” *Fate* 4, no. 3 (April 1951), 62.

66 Fodor’s approach is similar to how Freud approached dreams as symptoms, the interpretations of which would help resolve mental traumas, such as anxiety and hysteria. See Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Third Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1913), see for example 84, 199-200, 448-450. For more on how Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* changed in its multiple printings, see Lydia Marinelli and Andreas Mayer, *Dreaming by the Book: Freud’s The Interpretation of Dreams and the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement*, translated by Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2003).

67 Note that Fodor is applying the same explanatory language here as he did with the Miss Whalen case. Fodor, “The Problems of Occultism,” *Haunted People*, 99, originally published as “The Psychoanalytic Approach to the Problems of Occultism,” a paper read before the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy, 30 March 1945, and published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychopathology* that July.
thought discarnate entities were at work. “The word ‘ghosts’ no longer has for me the literal meaning which I was apt to ascribe to it,” he wrote of an earlier report of a 1934 poltergeist case involving a 16-year-old girl in Saragossa, Spain. Based on that case and others, Fodor agreed that puberty had something to do with it, but how?

Why the age of puberty should be marked, in certain instances, with such uncanny phenomena, no one is able to answer. But it is a legitimate inference that the life force which blossoming sexual powers represent is finding an abnormal outlet. Biologically, the disturbances spring from the organism of the afflicted person. But whether the mischievous intelligence can also be traced to the psyche of the adolescent really forms the crux of the poltergeist problem.68

Fodor wondered how the psyche could externalize in a way that created perceptible and physical manifestations. Since Freud was opposed to such a concept of the psyche operating independently of the body, Fodor looked to the British classicist and co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research Frederic W.H. Myers for possibilities.

Fodor was inspired by Myers’ idea of “psychical invasion” presented in his book Human Personality and Its Survival of Death (1903). Myers called this concept “psychorrhagic diathesis.” According to Myers, as Fodor summarized it, a “phantasmogenetic center” was created “in the percipient’s surroundings by some dissociated elements of the agent’s personality which in some way are potent enough to affect and modify space.” Myers considered it a “subliminal” (unconscious) operation, not necessarily a profound incident but rather a special idiosyncrasy on the part of the agent, which tended to make his phantasm easily visible. He coined the word “psychorrhagy” from the Greek. It means: “to let the soul break loose,” and he believed that he had discovered a new physiological fact.69

68 Fodor, “The Saragossa Ghost,” Haunted People, 92-93.
Diathesis was a pathological term that denoted a predisposition or tendency of the percipient to experience something mentally or physically abnormal. Myers considered it to be a condition that the experiencer was born with, much like families who claimed that psychical talents were passed from one generation to the next. Myers was open to the idea that the phantasm appeared either as a hallucination “on the mind” or “directly on a portion of space,” which helped explain how multiple people at times reported seeing the same apparition. Myers defined psychorrhagic diathesis as a “habit or capacity of detaching some psychical element, involuntarily and without purpose, in such a manner as to produce a phantasm.” Myers suspected this could help explain reports of doppelgängers or crisis apparitions. He cited an 1892 case in which three different percipients simultaneously saw a phantom of a man falling off his horse in two different locations; the horse’s rider claimed the thought of falling of his horse had crossed his mind while he was hunting some distance away. In other words, phantoms were a product of telepathy, a view that Myers, Podmore, and Edmund Gurney argued in favour of considering that most apparitions reported in their 1886 SPR study were “phantasms of the living” – the apparitions that appeared to the percipient were often people they knew who were in crisis or about to die. Thoughts and emotions appeared to be crucial to occurrences of “psychorrhagic diathesis.”

Fodor wondered if these mechanisms proposed by Myers could be related to the poltergeist, particularly if some trauma acted as a catalyst in bringing about the physical manifestations. If such a traumatic dissociation of the unconscious could occur and potentially create a phantasm of the living, then it could also be the mechanism of the poltergeist. Fodor hypothesized that it may be

the explosive loosening of an infantile part of the psyche in which severe conflicts are kept repressed. This torn-off part of the mind would be strictly conditioned in its development by the conflict-material which the main personality (in a therapeutic reaction to a disintegrating shock) had expelled and is preventing from returning into consciousness. If the conflict-material consisted of a virulent hatred of the strong parent, and guilt feeling on that account, the poltergeist would automatically work out both emotions by revenge and self-castigation, and consume itself by discharging the dynamic components of its existence.  

In significant ways, this passage foreshadowed what the American parapsychologist William Roll would argue in his findings of poltergeist investigations after 1958, where psychological tensions between children and repressive parents seemed to be a common factor.

Fodor found a framework in psychoanalysis that gave him a legitimate way to theorize sexuality and the psyche in relation to poltergeist manifestations. The Freudian lens focused attention on issues of sexual repression. Fodor’s psychoanalytical colleagues, including, as we will see, Freud himself, were largely supportive of his novel approach. After he died in 1964, an associate at the *Psychoanalytical Review*, the New York-based journal he co-edited, wrote that Fodor

invariably appreciated originality of thought and his liberal viewpoint provided a healthy counterbalance for conservative opinion. He had little patience for turgid metaphysical speculation; his infallible journalistic sense biased him strongly in favor of clear and direct statement.  

Where psychoanalysts welcomed Fodor’s “liberal” and “direct” approach to sexuality and the poltergeist, psychical researchers tended to oppose or altogether ignore such evidence. Psychical researchers were among those who represented “conservative opinion.” Given his unorthodox approach, some of them sought to discredit Fodor as a psychical researcher.

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71 Fodor, “The Case of the Bell Witch,” *Haunted People*, 144.
Navigating Issues of Morality

The Fodor lawsuit introduced earlier in this chapter signalled how heterodox approaches in psychical research were seen to challenge conservative moral values. Fodor’s Freudian investigation of how sexuality, mediumship, and the poltergeist were interrelated disturbed those who governed the International Institute of Psychical Research, for which he was the Director of Research. Fodor was breaking with the Institute’s sympathetic stance toward spiritualism. Its board primarily sought evidence that the human personality survived bodily death – that there was an afterlife. Fodor, however, was delving into the psyche and sexuality of mediums and poltergeist focus persons. Most mediums and their supporters did not want to have their sexual lives discussed in the context of psychical research, nor did they want their mediumistic capabilities to be pathologized. Such claims were a threat to a public reputation maintained in spiritualism, which was very much rooted in Victorian-era Christian morals.  

The most explicit convergence of issues relating to sexuality, the poltergeist, and mediumship was recorded in Fodor’s investigation into the events surrounding “Mrs. Forbes” (a pseudonym) in 1938 England. Like the aforementioned case from Chelsea in which Miss Whalen’s “libido had side-slipped and walked out on her as a ghost,” the Forbes case in Thornton Heath also involved a mature woman, not an adolescent. Mrs. Forbes’ traumas were explicitly sexual. After having a miscarriage and subsequently experiencing sterility, her marriage was failing. She had become “invalid” and “frail.” She awoke from

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nightmares with marks on her skin. She went to physicians who found cellular carcinoma—a malignant tumour—in her left breast, which was surgically removed.\(^7^4\) As a result of these medical and emotional traumas, Fodor wrote that Mrs. Forbes had “made herself into a living dead person, a kind of Zombie, a ghost.” He interpreted the sounds of knocks and footsteps that plagued Mrs. Forbes and her husband “as alarm signals designed to wake herself up to the danger of a complete schizophrenic retreat. The phenomena observed around her fitted into the schizoid category even though her dynamics remained a mystery.”\(^7^5\) She suffered from “hysteric blindness,” attempted to stab her husband, and ran out into the street in her nightgown.\(^7^6\) To Fodor, the problem was clear: how to cure the hysterical zombie by returning the unconscious “spirit” that had detached itself (perhaps via psychorrhagic diathesis) from Mrs. Forbes’ physical person.

Fodor was eager to expand the boundaries of psychical research through the Forbes case. He combined psychoanalysis with active experimentation in an investigation of her psychokinetic potential. As a psychical researcher for the International Institute, he found it difficult to justify a psychoanalytical approach to its directors. His role was to be an objective observer, but he wanted to do more. He wanted to see if Mrs. Forbes could gain control over the spontaneous poltergeist manifestations. He wrote:

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\text{I wished to test, before all, whether the poltergeist would follow Mrs. Forbes to the Institute and produce phenomena there. The ordinary ghost is said to haunt a house, the Poltergeist to haunt a person, which in itself is a phenomenon worth investigating. I found that Mrs. Forbes was followed by the Poltergeist, whereupon a series of experimental sittings, replete with excitement and adventure, were initiated.}^{7^7}\]

\(^7^5\) Fodor, “The Problems of Occultism,” *Haunted People*, 100.
As with Harry Price’s investigation of Eleonore Zugun described in Chapter 1, Fodor claimed that the séance experiments themselves proved sufficient to bring Mrs. Forbes out of her zombie state. He argued that they benefitted her. For example, “When her family tried to stop her from continuing the experiments at the Institute, the poltergeist turned against them with such destructive fury that they had to give in, whereupon the trouble immediately ceased.”78 According to Fodor, the experimental séance sittings provided the opportunity for Mrs. Forbes to productively transform these mysterious energies into mediumistic talents. A variety of unusual apports appeared in the séance room during these experimental sittings: polished elephant’s teeth, old Turkish silver coins, pottery shards from ancient Carthage, a Roman lamp, African fetishes, a prehistoric flint axe, and a variety of gems, stones, and jewellery.79 Mrs. Forbes appeared to be the next great physical medium. She demonstrated a potential to control the “forces” associated with the poltergeist.

Unlike séances held in darkened rooms, these sittings were held in daylight “in a room built on the proportions of a cathedral,” a grand stage for Mrs. Forbes to produce physical phenomena. Yet, Fodor found that the experiments merely masked the deeper problems with which Mrs. Forbes struggled. During the investigation, like many mediums, Mrs. Forbes was subjected to being searched for objects that she might deceptively place in the experimental space. Women would scrutinize her naked body before the séances, except for a genital cavity search. Fodor wrote:

Amidst all these mysteries evidence was slowly accumulating that Mrs. Forbes was suffering from a serious state of dissociation and that consciously and unconsciously, with a diabolic ingenuity, she exploited every opportunity

for fraud. The conditions of control were gradually pushed to the point where nothing but a genital examination remained wanting. For reasons of delicacy, all my lady associates fought against this test. They argued that the size, shape and number of apports militated against genital concealment. They were afraid it would be the last straw to break the camel’s back.\textsuperscript{80}

To prevent upset with a genital exam, Fodor ordered a portable x-ray outfit that would be “secretly set up next to the séance room.” With Mrs. Forbes dressed in tights under a robe, no apports arrived during the séance. Mrs. Forbes “felt distressed and uncomfortable. She had to be if the objects were within her body and she had to walk with them up and down.”

The developed x-ray plates showed that she was concealing an object inside of her vagina.

“She needed the skill of a magician for the feat, but she had it,” Fodor commented.

The evidence, by the standards of psychical research, was damning and it invalidated all previous observations that were in her favor. Scientifically, the case was dead. Psychologically, it was beginning. Psychical research strictly as a physical inquiry is like a snake biting its own tail; it recoils on itself. By expecting erratic and uncontrollable phenomena to occur at a stated time, it frustrates its end from the very beginning. It fosters narcissism of the mediums to a point where they feel they must satisfy the demand for phenomena even at the greatest risk to themselves.\textsuperscript{81}

The investigation had a negative impact for Mrs. Forbes. Speaking to her on the phone, Fodor wrote that “Her voice was barely audible. She was afraid of going insane.”\textsuperscript{82} Mrs. Forbes suspected a vampire visited her at night, paralysed her body, and drained her blood. She claimed she was sexually assaulted by the vampire-like being. Fodor wrote that he thought wounds on her body were self-inflicted bodily mutilation. He conducted extensive interviews, word association tests, and analyses of her nightmares, evaluating the symbology of these paranormal claims and dreams to suggest she had buried a memory of

\textsuperscript{80} Fodor, “The Problems of Occultism,” Haunted People, 104.
\textsuperscript{81} Fodor, “The Problems of Occultism,” Haunted People, 104-5.
\textsuperscript{82} Fodor, “The Problems of Occultism,” Haunted People, 105-6.
rape. Fodor compared the situation to “incipient schizophrenia.”

To Fodor, this data suggested psychological problems rooted in repressed sexuality.

The Forbes case was becoming more psychiatric than psychical. Fodor submitted his report to a group of psychiatrists for further opinion. The doctors applied various psychiatric diagnoses. Dr. Gustav Bychowski commented on hysterical autoplasty or automutilation in which Mrs. Forbes first turned violently against her husband, and then herself. He noted the hysterical blindness, and suggested undeveloped multiple personalities. Dr. Paul Redfern suggested the source of the hysteria “lies in the medium’s unconscious with its deep specific urges which are repressed and therefore unknown to the carrier,” and likened the production of “apports” from her vagina at the International Institute to a kleptomaniac unconsciously shoplifting and then unexpectedly finding the objects they had stolen, an idea that resonated with Fodor. Dr. Joseph Wilder suggested some other phenomena, such as the anomalous smell of violets, could have been caused by drinking turpentine, after which one’s urine has such a floral scent. He emphasized how difficult it was to separate reality from fantasy in this case, a common problem faced by psychoanalysts. Despite such difficulties, Fodor was feeling increasingly drawn to the curative aspects of psychoanalysis. In that approach, he saw the potential to cure psychosis rather than to explore the mechanisms of producing these recurrent psychical phenomena. While still fascinated with the phenomena themselves, he saw an opportunity to help people whose personal distress was somehow creating these anomalous, physical manifestations. But within the parameters of psychical research, Fodor could not “cure” Forbes.

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Cases such as that of Mrs. Forbes and Miss Whalen were groundbreaking. Fodor made a convincing case that poltergeist-type events and hauntings were produced in the human mind and personality. But there the stories of Mrs. Forbes and Miss Whalen ended. There was no indication of psychiatric follow-up to ensure their continued therapy or well-being. The extent to which they were actually cured by Fodor or whether their symptoms and paranormal occurrences continued was not documented. Fodor sought to pathologize and cure the poltergeist symptoms, but his ideas were not adopted by other therapists. Part of the reason for this was that while Fodor found alliances with psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, he had not the credentials to “treat” these women. His psychoanalytical interests were opposed by some psychical researchers who were only interested in “genuine” data on psi or life after death, not to probe the psychology of human subjects.

Fodor wrote that his findings on the Forbes’ case “were highly distasteful to my colleagues and superiors in the International Institute, as they would weaken the spiritistic hypothesis and also brought in elements that offended the high moral tone of the members of the board.” They wished to close the case and “intimated that my conclusions were reprehensible.” Fodor continued:

To them, any questions of the mental background or personality of a medium under examination or of a family experiencing a haunting were beside the point – a distracting influence of no bearing on the reality of the psychic event. To the prim, elderly ladies who supported the International Institute for Psychical Research, the mention and investigation of any sexual factors in a case of psychical phenomena was an inexcusable, shocking development.

85 Fodor, The Haunted Mind, 6.
87 Fodor, The Haunted Mind, 6.
Fodor decided it was a good time to take a vacation. On his return he found that his book-length manuscript on the Forbes case “had been impounded (without being read, of course). Immediately after, the crisis” – the controversy over Fodor’s standing as a psychical researcher – “deepened”; the spiritualist press accused Fodor of discrediting mediumship. “I forced the council to return my manuscript.” This marked the end of Fodor’s role as research director of the International Institute.

In the two years before the Forbes controversy, Fodor had engaged in a war of words with spiritualists and psychical researchers sympathetic to the aims of spiritualism. After Fodor published a 1936 article “Crisis in Spiritualism” in *Armchair Science*, a popular science monthly, writers for the British spiritualist weekly *Psychic News* attacked Fodor’s methodologies. “The underlying principle, that a true investigator must publish his findings even though they may go against the beliefs of some of his colleagues and superiors, was thus affirmed,” he wrote in 1959. Psychical researchers were so preoccupied with anomalous “phenomena that they have forgotten all about the medium.” Furthermore, Fodor argued that spiritualist sympathizers “don’t like and can’t very well bear the truth. Their emotional nature protests against the acceptance of any unpleasant fact unless it is presented coated in sugar.” He argued that “science will have to struggle very long” if it were to gain results through experiments with spiritualists, whose belief in spirit phenomena Fodor found to be “based more on faith than on evidence.”

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88 After it was recovered, Fodor’s manuscript was published as *On the Trail of the Poltergeist* (1958).
89 As noted above, Fodor successfully sued *Psychic News* for libel in March 1939, not long after he left the International Institute. Fodor was awarded £105 in damages. Fodor, *The Haunted Mind*, 14. Also see Fodor, “Crisis in Spiritualism,” *Armchair Science* (November 1936), 346-347, 376.
91 Fodor, *The Unaccountable*, 110.
Social, gender, and sexual norms were being challenged through séances. In Victorian times, mediumistic practices empowered spiritualist women to organize and contribute in significant ways to the greater project of women’s rights and emancipation. Well into the twentieth century, gender and sexual transgressions continued to be reported in séances. For example, spirit personalities of the opposite sex reportedly spoke through mediums. As was evident in Fodor’s investigation of Mrs. Forbes, psychical researchers were party to the sexual transgressions that took place in séance-based experiments. His procedure of having Mrs. Forbes stripped and searched was not unusual. Such practices attempted to include medical examinations to exclude deception, but they also deviated from normal interactions between women and men. Other physical mediums such as Kathleen Goligher and Eva C. had been stripped naked and had their bodies searched. During séances they were bound (sometimes naked) by ropes to prevent deception. Certain mediums were reported to freely express sexual behaviour and some produced ectoplasmic forms from their genitals.

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92 Molly McGarry writes that “Spiritualists reappropriated the characteristics that had been used to deem women unfit for public life, transforming them into ideals of spirituality and sources of power and authority” that “violated the gendered proscriptions of Victorian culture.” For example, there were also “a small number of male mediums who found the belief system similarly suited to their temperaments and tendencies,” such as “a more receptive, emotional or passive presence” as opposed to what the American medium Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910) called “masculine or positive and intellectual temperament.” Critics, including psychiatrists, therefore labelled spiritualism as “irrational,” “effeminate,” “transgressive,” “excessive,” and associated it with hysteria and sexual aberration. In McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 158-9, 161. For more on women’s emancipation and spiritualism, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits*.

93 The French scientist and psychical researcher Charles Richet coined the word ectoplasm to describe a viscous substance thought to be a physical manifestation of spirits that extruded from the orifices of some mediums during séances. Ectoplasm formed into shapes like body parts or faces, and was photographed as evidence of the existence of spirits, but was controversial as certain mediums were caught cheating, using cheesecloth and other substances to “make” ectoplasm. Since around 1800, the concept seemed valid to many scientists who theorized that a physical, spiritual “fluid” existed within the human body, including clinical researchers who conducted studies of hysteria later in the century, work inspired, as the historian Robert Michael Brain has shown, by advancements in cell biology during this time. See Brain, “Materialising the Medium: Ectoplasm and the Quest for Supra-normal Biology in Fin-de-Siècle Science and Art,” in *Vibratory Modernism*, ed. Anthony Enns and Shelley Trower (London: Palgrave, 2013), 115–44. On the broader context of Richet in psychical research, see Sofie Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metaphysics in France, 1853-1931* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).
In his own mediumship studies, Carrington noted that sometimes the medium had “a true orgasm” that coincided with “the production of a physical phenomenon of exceptional violence.” While such practices and activities were documented, the source of these sexual expressions and tensions remained a controversial topic, evident in Fodor’s conflict with spiritualists and psychical researchers. However, after the libel trial in 1939, Fodor found a space for his ideas in the established discipline of psychoanalysis where he could evaluate his psychological investigations of Whalen and Forbes.

**Freud as the Cautious Father Figure**

Fodor attempted to bridge psychical research and psychoanalysis, thereby expanding the boundaries of both. Freud, however, was protective of the psychoanalytical discipline he had created. He opposed notions that the psyche was as an agent that operated independently of the body. Therefore, he seemed an unlikely candidate to express words of cautious encouragement about the psychokinesis hypothesis. Perhaps surprisingly, however, when Fodor sought Freud’s support in his analysis of the Forbes poltergeist case, he found the father of psychoanalysis to be supportive.

Freud has been popularly depicted as sceptical about paranormal claims. There is a famous story about an encounter that took place in his Vienna office when Carl Jung visited in 1909. What happened that day is sometimes referred to as Jung’s “poltergeist.” As recollected in Jung’s autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963), Jung asked Freud about his views on parapsychology. Freud replied that it was nonsense. As the

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94 Carrington, *The Story of Psychic Studies*, 146. As described at length in the next section, issues of female sexuality would again emerge in psychoanalyst Nandor Fodor’s work and further propel the development of a psychological explanation of the poltergeist. For a photographic record of such séance experiments, see *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, edited by Clément Chéroux et al.

95 For more on such controversies, see McGarry.
conversation became more heated, Jung felt a hot sensation in his diaphragm, and suddenly a loud bang sounded from the bookcase near the men. Jung exclaimed, “There is an example of so-called catalytic exteriorization phenomenon!” Yet Freud remained sceptical. Jung predicted another bang would emanate, and sure enough it did. This, for Jung, was a significant moment of synchronous psychokinesis that helped accentuate his point about the validity of parapsychology. After Jung departed, Freud attempted to recreate the sounds, and concluded that they must have had a natural cause. He recommended that Jung “keep a cool head, for it is better not to understand something than make such great sacrifices to understanding.” The anecdote accentuates how the two psychoanalysts differed. Where Freud focused on negative sexual and traumatic repression, Jung saw the unconscious as a vast reservoir of potential creativity.

Jung is often portrayed as championing psi as a creative energy, and Freud as its opponent, but in fact the situation was more complex. Both Hereward Carrington’s and Nandor Fodor’s interactions with Freud revealed a psychoanalyst who was in fact more open to occult explorations than was popularly thought. In 1938, Freud escaped Nazi-controlled Austria and arrived in London. That autumn, Fodor was feeling low after being forced to resign from the International Institute for Psychical Research. With the book-length manuscript about the Forbes case returned to him, he sought affirmation that he was

97 Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, Volume 3, 383-4, from a letter to Jung dated 16 April 1909. 98 In 1921, Hereward Carrington invited Freud to join the advisory council of his newly founded American Psychical Institute. Freud declined the offer, but wrote, “I am not one of those who, from the outset, disapprove of the study of so-called occult psychological phenomena as unscientific, as unworthy, or even dangerous. If I were at the beginning of a scientific career, instead of as now, at its end, I would perhaps choose no other field of work, in spite of all difficulties.” Fodor, Haunted Mind, 12-13; confirmed in Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, Volume 3, 391-92. As described below, the publication of the third volume of Ernest Jones’s Freud biography, published in 1957, made clear Freud’s long-standing interest in psychical research.
on the right track in his psychoanalytical approach. “It was actually my wife who conceived
the idea of appealing to Freud, and she made the initial visit,” Fodor recollected. After that
visit, Freud wanted to see Fodor’s “controversial manuscript” about the Forbes case for
himself. “I hastened to send it – in fear and trepidation,” Fodor wrote; the manuscript was
mailed to Freud on 22 November 1938. Fodor was clearly uncertain of how Freud would
receive his manuscript.

Freud’s reply clearly conveyed scepticism, but he was also very supportive of Fodor’s
approach. To begin, Freud maintained his official line, as he had done with Jung decades
earlier, that the “supernormal,” and the poltergeist in particular, was not something that he
took seriously:

Perhaps you cannot imagine how vexatious the reading of such documents of
experiments, precautions, evidence of witnesses and so on is for a reader to
whom to start with the acceptance of supernormal happenings does not
mean much, especially when they are concerned with such stupid tricks of a
so-called poltergeist.

Yet he added, reading Fodor’s manuscript on the Forbes case, “I have held out, however,
and have been richly rewarded” given the manuscript’s psychoanalytical value.

The way you deflect your interest from the question of whether the
phenomena observed are real or have been falsified and turn it to the
psychological study of the medium, including the investigation of her
previous history, seems to me to be the right step in the planning of research
which will lead to some explanation of the occurrences in question.

In other words, Freud approved of psychoanalysis as a way to help determine the
psychological factors underlying alleged paranormal events. This was beyond the scope of
most psychical research studies which were more interested in whether or not the reported
anomalous phenomena were genuine. Freud critiqued the Institute that opposed Fodor’s research approach:

> It is greatly to be regretted that the International Institute for Psychical Research was not willing to follow you in this direction. Furthermore, I regard as very probable the result you come to with the particular case.

> Naturally it would be desirable to confirm it through real analysis of the person, but that evidently is not feasible.

In *On the Trail of the Poltergeist* (1958), the book published about the Forbes case, Fodor regarded Freud’s letter as “my vindication.”99 “I rushed to his house and received the manuscript from him. He was kind and gracious, encouraging me to stick to my guns and fight for the truth as I saw it,” he wrote in *The Haunted Mind* (1959).100 Freud’s letter affirmed Fodor’s drive to become a psychoanalyst who studied “haunted people.” The subsequent court hearing in which Fodor was awarded damages for being defamed by *Psychic News* only cemented his decision to practice psychoanalysis in the United States, where, at the time, J.B. Rhine was leading new, academic studies of parapsychology that were beginning to support a psychokinesis hypothesis. Fodor argued that psi was produced by an interaction between people and an unknown source, much as the poltergeists in the Forbes and Whalen cases were made between the women’s repressed psyches and whatever the “force” was that reportedly affected their physical environments.

Jung’s “poltergeist” and Freud’s interactions with Fodor show both Freud’s scepticism and his curiosity about the work of psychical researchers. For Fodor, Freud was a father figure who was cautious about claims about psi. After *Haunted People* was published in 1951, two significant monographs highlighted Fodor’s role as a bridge between these two aspects of


Freud, as both the defender of psychoanalysis and the seeker of psychical truths. The first was an anthology of essays, *Psychoanalysis and the Occult* (1953), edited by the Freudian ethnopsychoanalyst George Devereux (1908-1985), who was well known for therapeutic work among American indigenous people and in Indochina. The anthology included critical psychoanalytic essays on claims of premonitions and telepathy, including two by Nandor Fodor, “as contributions to the theory and practice of clinical psychoanalysis.” All six of Freud’s published essays relating to the occult and psychical research were included.101

Accentuating his own agnostic position on psi, Devereux wrote, “The scientist must be sceptical of everything – even of his own scepticism. Until he has a genuine and final answer to a problem, he should abide by Moses Maimonides’ maxim: ‘Teach thy tongue to say, I do not know.’”102 The Colorado-based psychiatrist Jule Eisenbud (1909-1999) lauded Freud for moving mental therapy beyond the treatment of “the frankly insane” to neuroses in the general population, which enabled more ready recognition of “psi occurrences.” He credited Freud’s essay “Dreams and Telepathy” (1922) with opening new pathways in the investigation of such phenomena.103 The book positioned psi experiences as viable territory to explore through Freudian psychoanalysis.

The other major book preceding Fodor’s was the third volume of *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (1957) written by Freud’s long-time colleague, the British neurologist and psychoanalyst Ernest Jones (1879-1958). Jones admitted his own prejudices that psychical

studies and experiences were “relics of a more primitive type of thinking” – criticism shared by many of his scientific contemporaries. He wrote that Freud exhibited “an exquisite oscillation between scepticism and credulity so striking that it is possible to quote just as many pieces of evidence in support of his doubt concerning occult beliefs as of his adherence to them.”  

What Jones revealed very much matched the tone of Freud’s letter to Fodor on the Forbes poltergeist case. While constantly working to overcome his own superstitions (which he thought were a product of “the irrational beliefs of childhood”), Freud was open to telepathic possibilities, although he found most claims made by mediums to be “foolish” and “desperately insignificant.” He viewed premonitions and intuition as relating more, as Jones wrote, to experiencers’ “thoughts, fears and wishes which have undergone repression; not recognizing their presence in his unconscious, and yet feeling signs of their presence, the subject concludes that they are operative in the outer world.”

Discussing experiencers, Freud saw that both acceptance and rejection of the anomalous phenomena encountered were operative. Experiencers – and Freud himself – expressed doubts, yet they were simultaneously open to the paranormal possibilities signified by anomalies. Freud would often respond to Jones’s doubts about his “taller stories” with the Hamlet quote “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy” or “I don’t like it at all myself, but there is some truth in it.” He teased Jones with his interests in psi but, given his desire to firmly establish disciplinary boundaries for

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104 Jones, The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud, Volume 3, 375-76.
105 Freud’s concept is reminiscent of “thought-forms” said by theosophists to originate from the human psyche (outlined in Chapter 1 in the section on Harry Price), but Freud would have dismissed the possibility of their materiality. Jones, 378, 383; for more on Freud’s superstitions, see page 382.
106 Jones, 379. Jeffrey J. Kripal defines “both-and” thinking as “the paradoxical cognitive structure that robust comparison often produces.” In other words, two (or more) contrary things can exist at the same time. In this example, Freud found that people both rejected and accepted paranormal ideas around anomalous experiences. Definition in Kripal, Comparing Religions (Malden, MA/Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 402.
107 Jones, 381.
psychoanalysis, he would make no commitment to a position regarding such experiences. In his exchanges with Fodor, Freud crucially recognized that there could be connections with psi phenomena and psychological repression, but he simultaneously warned that psychoanalysis should not be diluted by other disciplinary approaches.

Conclusions: From One Space to the Next

Psychoanalysis was a conceptual space in which people with psychological concerns could seek guidance and treatment. Sigmund Freud had established the field as a way to talk through problems that were buried in the unconscious, including sexual issues that were otherwise controversial in public discussion. In the first half of the twentieth century, social hygienists, psychoanalysts, and scientists opened conversations on sexuality that positioned it as a crucial part of human nature and health. Science was not immune to moralism around sexuality, as was evident in the aims of hygienists and sex educators to control sexual behaviours, particularly among young people. Hereward Carrington and Nandor Fodor agreed that the poltergeist phenomenon appeared to occur around instances of heightened sexual repression. They noted that most cases centred on adolescents, but also sometimes it occurred around middle-aged women. In some cases, anomalous events associated with the poltergeist and physical mediumship, such as those of Eleonor Zugun investigated by Harry Price, appeared to vanish at puberty, or, in the case of the mediumship of the German Rudi Schneider, when Schneider got married. However, suggestions that sexuality was crucial to studies of mediumship and the poltergeist deeply concerned certain British psychical researchers and mediums in the 1930s. This convinced

108 See Chapter 1 on Price’s investigation of Zugun.
Fodor that his ideas were best developed through a field that innovated around explorations of sexuality and the psyche: Freudian psychoanalysis. Through psychoanalysis, Fodor analyzed the poltergeist as a form of “psychosis,” advancing the psychokinesis hypothesis that physical manifestations were the product of an interaction between a psychologically repressed focus person and some type of unleashed “energy.”

Psychoanalysts, however, were not interested in the mechanisms of the poltergeist, seeking instead ways to cure psychoses. The psychological connections posited by Fodor through his analyses of poltergeist focus persons inspired a more formal evaluation. As I show in the next chapter, starting in the late 1950s, American parapsychologists applied an empathetic approach, standardized psychological testing, and detailed observation to evaluate ongoing poltergeist events in a way that could be accepted by the greater scientific community. Those studies tended to look at the overall psychological dynamics between household members in poltergeist cases of which sexuality was only a part. For that matter, sexuality was rarely mentioned at all after Fodor’s work.
Chapter 3

SCIENTISTS:
Between Homes and Laboratories

It is true a few parapsychologists appear to be convinced by the reports of PK effects on static targets. Such conviction would, however, involve a lowering of the standards by which the other types of psi ability have been acceptably established; there are still a number of improvements of technique to apply in the perfecting of a clear case; the really definitive testing is yet to come.


In the 1950s through the 1980s, the American parapsychologist William Roll significantly expanded data on the relationship between poltergeist manifestations and focus persons to support the psychokinesis hypothesis. Through an empathetic field research approach, he gained greater access to and cooperation from poltergeist experiencers, and therefore his research was more substantive than any previous investigations. Working in the “natural habitat” of experiencers’ homes enabled direct observation of the materiality of the poltergeist events and the affect that he thought triggered its manifestations. However, field research was in epistemic tension with the primary mandate of parapsychology: controlled laboratory experimentation. “It must be remembered,” Duke University’s Parapsychology Laboratory co-founder Louisa E. Rhine wrote, “that only in the laboratory research are the results on a reliable statistical basis.”

Like other human sciences, parapsychology pursued rigorous objectivity, and to assert its neutrality, natural science was idealized in the pursuit of its studies of human nature. While Roll embedded himself into

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poltergeist households, most scientists advocated a practice of standing apart from their human subjects’ lives and the society in which they lived.\(^3\) Parapsychology, as the academic disciplinary home for studies of psi and the poltergeist, had taken on the materialist models of experimental psychology in an attempt to gain credibility as a natural science. This tension between field research in homes and experiments in labs took place during post-Second World War decades in which, as the historian of psychology Jill Morawski writes, the human sciences continued to be “inflected by twinned affects of hope and fear.” On one hand there was “renewed faith that scientific knowledge would better the social world,” and on the other, there was uncertainty and wariness “about the human condition and about obtaining veridical knowledge of humanity.”\(^4\) The promising data that Roll captured in home environments ultimately slipped through his fingers when translated into laboratory spaces. Curious to discover what it was they were experiencing, most poltergeist experiencers collaborated with Roll, but once in the laboratory, their alleged psychokinetic potential did not manifest within parapsychological experimental parameters. While data collected in homes supported a psychokinesis hypothesis, lab experiments cast further doubts. This spoke to the problems of humans studying humans and elusive phenomena in their “natural habitats” versus in controlled laboratory spaces throughout the twentieth-century.


At Home with the Flying Telephone

On 6 March 1984, the Columbus [Ohio] Dispatch front page featured a picture of 14-year-old Tina Resch (1969-) sitting in her home, in a recliner, an expression of surprise across her face as a telephone receiver, straining at its coiled cord, stretched over her lap, photographed in mid-flight by the photojournalist Fred Shannon (1921-2007). The headline: “Strange happenings unnerve family.” The photograph seemed to capture the poltergeist in action. Before Shannon made the photograph, the phone had launched multiple times from the table beside Tina as he, Tina’s family, and the reporter Mike Harden (1946-2010)

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5 Mike Harden, “Strange happenings unnerve family,” Columbus Dispatch, 6 March 1984, 1.
watched. Making the image was not easy. No physical manifestations happened whenever Shannon waited patiently, camera held up to his eye, his finger on the camera trigger, hoping to capture a poltergeist event. After twenty minutes, he lowered the camera, at which point the phone flew again. At that moment, he had an epiphany. There was something “tricky” about the poltergeist. “If he were ever to get it on film, he’d have to be tricky himself,” wrote the parapsychologist William Roll who, days later, enticed by the photo evidence, would start to investigate the case. Again, Shannon sat with the camera to his eye observing for five minutes while nothing happened. “To thoroughly outfox the force, he turned his head to the kitchen while watching Tina through his peripheral vision. Within seconds he saw a blur and hit the trigger.” The result was the photograph. For the Resch family, the journalists, and Roll, the photograph validated the poltergeist events.

In what context was the photograph accepted as visual evidence? At the time, parapsychology was the most promising scientific register in which to investigate the events in the Resch household. Since the 1920s, mostly in laboratory and in some field investigations, American academic parapsychologists had studied anomalous events that appeared to be linked to human consciousness and mind, which they termed “psi.” Psi included phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and the mind-over-matter effects known as psychokinesis (PK). Roll had become noted as the predominant investigator of the poltergeist phenomenon, having by 1984 published a full-length monograph, *The Poltergeist* (1972), and many peer-reviewed articles on the subject. In his

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6 William G. Roll and Valerie Story, *Unleashed: Of Poltergeists and Murder: The Curious Story of Tina Resch* (New York: Paraview Pocket Books, 2004), 79-81. After the photo was taken, two Children’s Services workers, Kathy Goeff and Lee Arnold, witnessed further events. Observing family tensions in the household, they expressed concern for the Resches’ emotional well-being during this visit.

7 Roll & Storey, *Unleashed*, 79.

publications, Roll proposed the psychokinesis hypothesis, what he called “recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis” (RSPK), as the most convincing explanation for the poltergeist phenomenon. Through the hypothesis, Roll explored the possibility that the poltergeist was a co-creation between a focus person like Tina and an unknown mechanism that resulted in material manifestations. In particular, Roll documented evidence that affect – emotional states between the focus person and those in their household or workplace – directly related to the occurrence of the manifestations.

Through a two-year parapsychological investigation that started in the Resch household on 12 March 1984, Roll worked to advance the psychokinesis hypothesis. He applied an empathetic approach – a warm, personable demeanour that gained the Resch family’s trust. Furthermore, he used empathy as a cognitive tool to study their emotional lifeworld. Over a week, he tried to blend in to the household to observe and document the family’s interactions and affect. Drawn by Roll’s empathetic approach, the family agreed to have Tina participate in counselling, psychological tests, and laboratory experiments. Like other participant-observer researchers such as anthropologists, Roll had to balance empathetic interactions with human subjects with a focus on his parapsychological goal, to study the relationship between the poltergeist and focus persons as evidence of psychokinesis.

Empathy became a crucial tool for Roll during a time when it was finding a significant place in psychology and clinical doctor-patient relationships. The historian of human

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9 Since the Psychical Research Foundation had limited funds, the Columbus Dispatch flew Roll and an assistant from Durham to Columbus in their own plane so he could investigate. Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 6.
11 In aesthetic theory, the word “empathy” was translated from the German word Einfühlung – “feeling into” – in the dissertation “On the Optical Sense of Form” by the philosopher Robert Vischer (1873). As a cognitive tool, the study of empathy has grown among humanities scholars and scientists alike over the past decade or
Elizabeth Lunbeck shows that empathy was implemented as a cognitive tool by the Austrian-born Chicago psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut (1913-1981). Before Kohut, psychotherapists considered empathy to be highly controversial. In the early 1930s, the Freudian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi (1873-1933) attempted to mobilize empathy in therapeutic practices to do a “conscious assessment” of the inner world of patients. He sought to counter the “emotional coldness” of therapists that prevented them from gaining the compliance of the patient in the process of therapy. This was met by stern disapproval from Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who feared that the use of empathy would justify “the subjective factor” in analysis. Moreover, Freud was concerned that empathy would blur the boundaries between analyst and patient such that the patient could misconstrue their relationship with the therapist as romantic. Ferenczi was labelled a heretic and became discredited partly because he promoted an empathetic approach. This was yet another symptom of Freud’s efforts to protect psychoanalysis, similar to his rejection of interdisciplinary collaborations with psychical researchers as described in the previous chapter. Psychical researchers and parapsychologists, in pursuing objectivity, tended to keep their distance from psychoanalysis, which drew from symbolic interpretations of subjective patient narratives. Nonetheless, Nandor Fodor’s psychoanalytical work on the

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13 Lunbeck, 261.
15 Lunbeck, 257-259, 261.
16 Lunbeck, 262, 264.
psychokinesis hypothesis inspired some parapsychologists to probe focus persons’ affect in post-war poltergeist studies.

While Roll’s work is widely praised among his fellow parapsychologists, his hypothesis that Tina unconsciously “unleashed” psychokinesis attracted sceptics who sought to challenge such paranormal claims. The Buffalo-based University of New York philosopher Paul Kurtz (1925-2012), founder of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) – quite literally a “psi cop” that sought to expose fraudulent psychics and paranormal claims – criticized Roll for giving in to Tina’s “trickery.” Kurtz replicated the phone photograph himself in the organization’s publication, *The Skeptical Inquirer*. Kurtz and other critics also did not value the weight of witness testimony; they wanted physical evidence. In the face of such intense scepticism, Roll morally supported the family and argued for the legitimacy of studying the events.17 He wrote that critical, doubtful attitudes would only serve to inhibit the production of the phenomenon. He found that there was no advantage in having individuals in the household who did not empathize

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17 Joan Resch decided to turn away the conjuror James Randi who showed up at the door to debunk the case; see Mike Harden, “Visiting magician told to disappear,” *Columbus Dispatch*, 14 March 1984, 1B. In correspondence, Paul Kurtz to William G. Roll, 16 March 1984, Kurtz blamed Roll for preventing Randi, the astronomer-physicist Steve Shore, and the Case Western Reserve University astronomer Nick Seduleak from entering the Resch premises; also see Roll & Storey, *Unleashed*, 120-22, which does not indicate any such interference. In a letter dated 25 May 1984, Kurtz invited Roll to participate on a panel on the Columbus case at the CSICOP annual meeting at Stanford University in November. See also Roll to Kurtz, 14 December 1984, in which Roll thanked Kurtz for suggesting “a joint study of Tina,” but he expressed that he was uncertain if Tina could control alleged PK abilities, and further that Tina and her parents might be cautious about being tested by people “who are convinced she is fraudulent.” Kurtz recreated and critiqued the *Columbus Dispatch* photograph in “The Columbus ‘Poltergeist’ Case,” *The Skeptical Inquirer* 8 (Summer 1984), 294-95. For more on CSICOP, which in 2006 changed its name to the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), see [http://www.csicop.org/](http://www.csicop.org/). For a media piece that reflects the sensationalist tone of journalism that often uncritically favours Kurtz’s perspective, see “Attacking the New Nonsense: A committee of skeptics challenges paranormal claims,” *Time*, 12 December 1977, 100. Correspondence from Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) Correspondence, 1984-1985 & undated, Box 185, Folder 16, William G. Roll Papers, MS-0014, Ingram Library Special Collections, University of West Georgia, Carrollton, Georgia.
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or take the events seriously. Furthermore, in the parapsychology laboratory, physical manifestations were highly difficult to control, measure, and replicate. They remained unpredictable. Evidence favouring the psychokinesis hypothesis in the field and in the lab did not convince prominent sceptics.

Another problem was that the study could not be disentangled from Tina’s personal circumstances. Despite Roll’s efforts to normalize the poltergeist events, in December 1985, Tina could no longer handle the ostracization she faced as a social outsider. She slit her wrists and ended up in a psychiatric ward. Tina was the adopted daughter of John and Joan Resch, who fostered many children, including those with special needs. She had a turbulent childhood, and the poltergeist, which brought so much attention to her, compounded the difficulty of life. In June 1990, Tina moved to Carrollton, Georgia, where Roll taught psychology and parapsychology at West Georgia College. She was impoverished, so Roll assisted her in finding housing and offered moral support. In April 1992, Tina’s three-year-old daughter Amber died from bleeding and swelling of the brain when Tina was not home. Tina was convicted of murder on October 1994, and her boyfriend David Herrin, who was with Amber at the time, was sentenced to 20 years for “cruelty to children.” He was released in 2011, but Tina remains in a Georgia prison today, her life sentence contested by activists who argue that she was not given due legal process. Her

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19 Roll and Storey’s Unleashed documents many moments where Tina was taunted, belittled, or disbelieved by schoolmates, journalists, and critics. See, for example, Tina’s problems at school, 29-33, 149-150, 208, 215-216.
20 Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 225.
21 Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 234-237. By this time, Tina had been married and divorced, and went by her ex-husband’s surname, Boyer. West Georgia College is now known as the University of West Georgia.
22 Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 1-2, 238.
2015 application for parole was denied. Where the outcome for most poltergeist focus persons is unknown, Tina’s experiences – from the poltergeist to imprisonment – are documented in significant detail. Her life events contributed to maintaining, perhaps increasing, controversy around the parapsychological study. In Tina’s case, people’s perceptions of evidence as credible or implausible depended on their opinions about her actions and character, and their own beliefs and doubts about the claims being made.

The flying telephone photograph does not represent undisputable evidence of a poltergeist in action. The historian of science Jennifer Tucker writes that photographs “gained and lost authority as evidence as they travelled across different domains of manufacture and use.” Its appearance on the front cover of a city newspaper positioned the photograph as a sensational curiosity rather than as scientific evidence. Since the formation of disciplines such as the sciences, criminology, and journalism in the late nineteenth century, photographs were bound up with their specific “practices of observation and record keeping.” The photographic image itself was not an objective representation. It was mediated by the photographer, the participants, by viewer’s interpretations based on their politics and rhetoric, and by the claims being made about the image’s subject matter. This photo was taken in the privacy of the Resch’s livingroom, away from the public gaze, out of the controlled space of a scientific laboratory. All of these factors played into how those who saw the image judged it as evidence of the poltergeist

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23 Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 274. The Free Tina Resch Boyer public Facebook group, accessed 1 July 2016, https://www.facebook.com/groups/125286263452, has advocated for Tina’s release. Updates on her legal status are regularly posted by the researcher James A. Conrad on his website, accessed 1 July 2016, http://jamesaconrad.com/Tina/Tina-Resch-Boyer-legal-case.html. Disclosure: one of the activists, Toronto-based Robin Pyatt Bellamy, learned of the Columbus poltergeist case in a private conversation with me circa 2006-7, but I have not been involved in these advocacy activities, nor with Bellamy’s work.


and the psychokinesis hypothesis or as something else. Photographs of controversial
incidents, such as the flying telephone, ectoplasm spilling from medium’s mouths, or
shadowy figures said to be lake monsters raise more questions than answers. Although
the taking of the photograph of the flying telephone was witnessed by multiple people, its
evidential value was diminished when judged against a damning video image of Tina who,
not knowing she was being filmed, knocked a lamp off of a table. After that, she was
considered by critics to be a fraud. Roll argued that such imitative moments were
common in poltergeist cases when nothing was happening and focus persons felt the
pressure to impress observers. Yet even when things flew near Tina in controlled
laboratory spaces, they could not be effectively measured or documented outside of
eyewitness testimonials, maintaining rather than resolving the controversy.

The Laboratory-Based Framework

The laboratory, not the field, was the centre of parapsychological research. It was in lab
spaces that parapsychologists conducted material experiments that could be replicated by
other researchers. Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory co-founder J.B. Rhine
claimed that his statistical analysis of evidence demonstrated the reality of psi – extra-

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26 For further questions raised on the meaningfulness and reliability, or lack thereof, of photography in relation
to alleged paranormal phenomena and other controversial events, see Alex Owen, “‘Borderland Forms’: Arthur
27 Roll & Storey, Unleashed, 98, 183-84; Kurtz, 294. Tina knocked the lamp over after an afternoon with media
in which nothing happened. This was filmed by an unmanned ABC Television news camera.
29 Also see Julio Vasquez laboratory incident, described below.
sensory perception and psychokinesis. For Rhine, psi signified hitherto unknown human potential. Psi studies sought to contribute to the great question, “What are we human beings, you and I?” This, Rhine argued, was an “urgent” problem after the Second World War. He wrote, “Our floundering human relations today are clearly the result of one basic cause: We simply do not know how to treat people – on what principle, what philosophy of man, what assumptions about his nature. We do not know enough about him. We have only conflicting ideas and beliefs.” Conflicts could be overcome, Rhine argued, if only the sciences could better comprehend human consciousness. To him, parapsychology could discover the mysteries of consciousness “not by authority, but by research.” Rhine argued that parapsychological tests needed to be simplified and standardized: “Simpler tests, simpler conditions, simpler apparatus are required.” Testing could be applied to anyone, not only those individuals who claimed to have extraordinary psi talents. Statistical analyses of long runs of tests were tedious but this was the methodology that could make the anecdotal, spontaneous, and immeasurable statistically significant, predictable, and measurable. J.B. aimed for the lab’s research to be “revolutionary,” but to be so, it would also have to adhere as closely as possible to experimental parameters that were acceptable to a greater community of scientists. If parapsychology gained credible status as a science, it could be awarded substantial funding to study human consciousness and potential on a larger, more influential scale. Then, Rhine hoped, laboratory work would significantly contribute to helping resolve the “urgent” problems on the nature of humanity.

32 Rhine, The Reach of the Mind, 92.
33 Rhine, The Reach of the Mind, 92-94.
34 Rhine, The Reach of the Mind, 3-12.
Scientists: Between Homes and Laboratories

Inspired by the academic growth of experimental psychology, the systematic laboratory-based paradigm of parapsychology was a response to the inconsistent vagaries of psychical research on spiritualism, especially in the decades following the First World War. The war brought unprecedented suffering, destruction, and loss of life that drove many to seek spiritual contact with their loved ones who had died in battle. Spiritualism’s popularity was then exploited by charlatans in the post-Great War years who, in turn, were often exposed by debunkers and the press. While spiritualism continued to be practiced in home circles, it became increasingly suspect as a site for scientific investigation. This was combined with the development of technologies to strengthen social cohesion, the sciences, and military after the great economic downturn of the 1930s. By the 1950s, with the introduction of computer technologies, quantitative studies changed how research was conducted in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. In historical studies, for example, quantitative methods assessing demographic or economic data opened new ways accurately assess the past, but qualitative evidence still remained vital in analyzing socio-cultural interactions.

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36 For the European contexts on the interwar decline of psychical investigation of spiritualism, see Sofie Lachapelle, Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metaphysics in France, 1853-1931 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Corinna Treitel, A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); and Heather Wolffram, The Stepchildren of Science: Psychical Research and Parapsychology in Germany, c. 1870-1939 (Amsterdam: Rodopi Bv Editions, 2009).


38 In the 1960s and ’70s, there was a move among “new social” historians to make their work as quantifiable as possible, redefining it more as a “climetric,” objective, value-free, materialist hard science. See Georg G. Iggers, Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to Postmodern Challenge (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 43-47, 109; see for example Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1974); and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, The Peasants of Languedoc (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974),
sciences, parapsychology treated lived experiences as a less reliable, originary form of data that stimulated standardized experimental designs to authenticate the existence and mechanisms of alleged psi. To the Rhines, quantitative, statistical studies in laboratories were the most reliable form of investigation.\(^{39}\)

Perhaps because they were trained as biologists, J.B. Rhine and his wife Louisa’s work in psychical research in the 1920s sought to move away from the philosophical and psychoanalytical studies of mind and toward a physicalist science of mind.\(^{40}\) When they met, Louisa was questioning her family’s Mennonite background while J.B. had ambitions to become a Protestant minister. J.B. entered an intellectual and spiritual crisis while taking courses in religion. After they married in 1920, they explored psychical research as a potential bridge between science and spiritual questions.\(^{41}\) But for the Rhines, psychical research raised further doubts. They witnessed trickery and a lack of control in a séance circle, which they critiqued in an article in *the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* in 1927.\(^{42}\) They could see that both established science and religion had failed to explain experiences that were commonly reported as psychical. The Duke University psychologist William McDougall was impressed by the Rhines’ critical approach to psychical research. He invited them to work in his department, where J.B.’s experimental work in the following years led to the founding of the Parapsychology Laboratory in 1935. Duke provided an


\(^{40}\) The Rhines both studied plant physiology at the University of Chicago and ended up working together at the University of West Virginia.


academic infrastructure within which to conduct parapsychological studies. To legitimate those studies, the Rhines adopted an experimental, materialist, and statistical approach similar to that of the natural sciences.43

As the director of Duke University’s Parapsychology Laboratory, J.B. Rhine wanted this emerging field of study to be accepted by the majority of scientists. The lab’s experiments aimed to demonstrate that psi phenomena which had so far eluded researchers actually existed. In *New Frontiers of the Mind* (1937), Rhine argued that natural laws were inadequate to explain human consciousness, the potential of which was suggested through extra-sensory perception and psychokinesis.44 Psi could be shown in operation through meta-analyses of mechanized, replicable experiments – such as mechanized dice throwing, predicting runs of cards with symbols, or drawing images that were being concentrated upon by a person in another room – involving people who had either experienced or not experienced psi. When taken on their own, results would be anecdotal. Analyzed together, Rhine argued, they comprised statistical evidence of ESP and PK.

Rooms in the East Duke Building were dedicated to controlled experiments. In them, parapsychologists observed and documented multiple runs of tests involving volunteer subjects which, together, could be statistically evaluated. The tests could be replicated by any experimenter. The historians of science Seymour Mauskopf and Michael McVaugh (1980) write that Rhine did not merely have a scientific goal of “producing and replicating psychical phenomenon,” but a metaphysical goal to study the human mind to see “whether

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43 “The History of the Rhine Research Center,” accessed online 1 July 2016 on the Rhine Research Center’s website at [http://www.rhine.org/who-we-are/history.html](http://www.rhine.org/who-we-are/history.html). For more on McDougall and the ASPR, see Mauskopf and McVaugh, 17-23. On the founding of parapsychology at Duke, see Mauskopf and McVaugh, 131-145.
it transcended its material setting.” Parapsychological studies were designed to identify evidence of psi in action through the number of “hits.” Hits were successful correlations between the subject’s thoughts and a physical condition, such as choosing the correct symbol on a card that they could not see (ESP) or intending dice to fall on a specific face (PK).

Psychokinesis was among the most promising psi phenomena that Rhine and his colleagues tested. Between 1934 and 1943, they conducted 18 different tests involving dice-throwing in which results showed that dice landed on the intended face, on average, just above 50/50 chance, suggesting that mental intention weakly affected the physical fall of the dice. Rhine and his colleagues attended to criticism from doubtful scientists by improving equipment and experimental protocols. For example, when critics scrutinized Rhine’s statistical analyses in his second book *New Frontiers of the Mind* (1937), the president of the Institute of Mathematic Statistics, Burton Camp, affirmed they were valid and correct. Rather than have subjects cast dice by hand, experimenters found ways to mechanically dispense the dice by releasing them from a trap door and later with the push of a button, letting them fall into a wooden box, thereby avoiding human interference. With results overall favoring psychokinetic influence, experimenters varied the number of dice falling at once (up to 96 at a time) and the sizes and weights of dice, and results

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46 In J.B. Rhine’s first monograph *Extra-Sensory Perception* (Boston: G.W. Poole Printing, 1934), 8, he formally introduced the term “ESP” to include telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and retrocognition, and he acknowledged that psychokinesis was among parapsychological phenomena.
49 Rhine, *The Reach of the Mind*, 95.
remained above chance. Experimental variables were applied to further evaluate the mechanisms apparent in the test results. For example, narcotics that made test subjects sleepy were found to decrease hits. A stimulant like caffeine, however, would increase them. This suggested that psi had a physiological correlation. Rhine concluded, “It is not the brain as a physical process, but the mind as a nonphysical force, that influences the rolling dice. We have no idea how such direct psychophysical action takes place, but we are equally in the dark as to how thought interacts with the matter of the brain.” He was certain further research would reveal the mechanisms of mind-matter interaction.

Beyond the Duke experiments, however, the hypothesis that the fall of dice may be influenced by mental intention achieved no wider scientific consensus. A meta-analysis of 52 years of dice-throwing experiments by parapsychologists Dean Radin and Diane C. Ferrari (1991) showed “aggregate evidence” of “a weak, genuine mental effect,” thereby confirming Rhine’s claims. Rhine’s attempt to gain credibility through mechanized PK tests provided a basis to study more sensational forms of apparent PK in action in the natural world, encouraging parapsychological studies of the poltergeist phenomenon. To study the poltergeist, one needed to go to the site where the events were happening. William Roll’s on-site poltergeist investigations invariably involved unpredictable, spontaneous affect and physical anomalies. There were moments when it seemed that focus persons could predict or control physical effects. But Roll could not predict when such moments would occur; they arose as spontaneously as the poltergeist events themselves. Spontaneity ran against the grain of parapsychological studies where phenomena had to be recreated and measured.

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50 Rhine, The Reach of the Mind, 110-113.
51 Rhine, The Reach of the Mind, 121-123.
52 Rhine, The Reach of the Mind, 118.
in a controlled laboratory space as opposed to in households. Roll’s field and lab studies, nonetheless, expanded data about the poltergeist that favoured the psychokinesis hypothesis.

The Birth of RSPK Studies

Through the 1940s and ‘50s, the Rhines increasingly received reports of poltergeist activities. As results of psychokinesis experiments appeared promising, J.B. decided that he wanted to study the poltergeist as evidence of spontaneous, observable “macro-PK.” In *The Reach of the Mind* (1947), he noted that most cases seemed to be “associated with an individual, often a child,” and that “the suspicion of trickery cannot be fully allayed or completely justified. One lingers in a tantalizing state of suspended judgment, and hopes for a chance to experiment with such a case.” Over the next decade, parapsychologists collected and attempted to respond to active poltergeist cases, but they could not locate an opportunity for reliable observation.

Since 1948, Louisa Rhine (1891-1983) had been collecting and responding to letters pertaining to recurrent poltergeist events as well as to far more common incidents of anomalous physical phenomena occurring on just one occasion. The small effects derived from studies of dice throwing were far from the spectacular physical effects reported in spontaneous cases. In 1963, Louisa counted 178 cases in which people reported a non-recurrent, isolated, and spontaneous physical effect. In contrast to the dispassionate

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56 Rhine, *The Reach of the Mind*, 90.
mechanical dice-throwing experiments in the lab, Louisa found that experiencers associated profound personal meaning with the spontaneous physical events they reported. In three-quarters of the isolated anomalous physical events, experiencers reported relating it to someone who was dying at another location, or who had died. “Sometimes a clock or light was affected; sometimes a dish broke, or a picture fell, usually one associated with the dying person,” she wrote.\(^{57}\) The other quarter of the cases suggested a psychokinetic effect between the experiencer’s thoughts or affect and their physical environment. In one letter, a Philadelphia woman wrote of how, when she became emotional reading of the misfortunes of a physically disabled orphan, she heard a loud sound in the livingroom. She found that a book about surgery for children had fallen off the shelf. In another case, an electric clock “jumped off of the wall” when a man mimicked shooting it with a toy gun.\(^{58}\) Yet these were all isolated anecdotes. “One after another, cases like these 178 of the collection could be dismissed as the result of poor observation, overinterpretation, or coincidence,” Louisa wrote.\(^{59}\) The Rhines sought a way to eliminate doubt caused by the subjectivity involved in interpreting spontaneous PK.

The Duke parapsychologists wanted to be able to observe and test macro-PK events. The recurrent, physical nature of the poltergeist presented such opportunities. Poltergeist manifestations tended to circulate around individual people in a single location in a way that suggested a psychical relationship between the person and the events. While rare, the

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phenomenon had historically occurred frequently enough to enable several on-site investigations per year by British and American psychical researchers.\textsuperscript{60}

The breakthrough came in 1958 when Duke parapsychologists investigated a highly publicized poltergeist case on Long Island, New York.\textsuperscript{61} It was through that case that Rhine’s researchers rechristened the poltergeist “recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis” or RSPK. The town of Seaford was a new tract housing development built closely on the heels of its neighbour, America’s first suburb, Levittown. The family affected by the events were comprised of James Herrmann, an ex-Marine father, 43, who commuted in to Manhattan to work as a representative of Air France and his wife Lucille, 38, a former registered nurse-cum-housewife who took care of their two children (both of whom were named for their parents), Lucille (Lucy), 13, and James (Jimmy), 12. Their three-bedroom house became the site of 67 reported anomalous object movements between February 3rd and March 10th that would attract a closely documented police investigation, an international media frenzy, hundreds of letters each with its own idea of what was happening, a parapsychological investigation, and a CBS docudrama that aired that Halloween. In late February 1958, Rhine sent his assistant director, J. Gaither Pratt, the most experienced PK experimenter in the lab, to the active Seaford case; in a second trip to the home in early March, Pratt brought along a new employee of the lab who had recently arrived from Oxford University, the Danish-

\textsuperscript{60} From my survey of archived and published poltergeist cases documented by the Society for Psychical Research, the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory, and the Psychical Research Foundation between 1961 and 1980, on average there were six active cases investigated per year. Of the 134 cases documented in those two decades by these organizations, 18 cases directly contributed to a body of evidence supporting the psychokinesis hypothesis (or what Roll called RSPK). In 1958, Pratt and Roll wrote that a conservative estimate was that three American poltergeist cases were publicly known each year. See J. Gaither Pratt and William G. Roll, “The Seaford Disturbances,” \textit{Journal of Parapsychology} 22, no. 2 (June 1958), 80.

\textsuperscript{61} Roll wrote that the RSPK hypothesis aimed to “avoid the assumption that ghosts or spirits are responsible. We are still making an assumption, namely that poltergeist effects are produced by the mind or psyche of somebody, whether or not this somebody is in the flesh. This, too, is a hypothesis that has to be proved or disproved. When I used the word poltergeist, I mean an ‘apparent case of RSPK.’” Roll, \textit{The Poltergeist}, 9-10.
American parapsychologist William Roll. Their work on the case opened a new era in poltergeist studies in which the psychokinesis hypothesis dominated parapsychological thinking on the phenomenon.

Three major factors made Seaford a breakthrough case study: the deliberate use of empathy, the emphasis on multidisciplinary alliances, and collaborative observation. The case was largely guided by the police detective Joseph Tozzi, who had been involved since the second week of events. In a rare interview with the writer Stacy Horn, the Herrmanns’ daughter Lucille spoke about Tozzi fondly: “He protected us.... He was very sympathetic to us. He’d stop by sometimes and have a cup of coffee with my mother, to see that she was okay. He was very kind.” She remembered Tozzi comforting her and her brother when they were scared. There is little direct evidence, but from Lucille’s testimonial and the overall positive rapport evident in the case record, it appears that Tozzi applied an empathetic approach in his investigation that, by and large, was duplicated by Pratt and Roll. The Herrmanns, more than anything, were curious to find out what was causing the physical manifestations in their home, and Tozzi did much to help them in hopes of discovering those causes. Tozzi was instrumental in calling a variety of multidisciplinary experts to assist: structural, civil, and electrical engineers; electricians, plumbers, and municipal building inspectors; science instructors from the local college; radio frequency experts; and the fire department to check a well in front of the house. Tozzi effectively created multidisciplinary

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62 In Unbelievable: Investigations into Ghosts, Poltergeists, Telepathy, and Other Unseen Phenomena, from the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory (New York: Ecco, 2009), 133-136, Stacy Horn writes that before the Seaford case, the Parapsychology Laboratory attempted to investigate four poltergeist cases in 1957, in Hartville, Missouri; Berryhill, Oklahoma; Clayton, California; and Rest Haven, Illinois. Events ceased in these cases before they could investigate them first-hand, and eyewitness accounts cast doubt on the authenticity of the events. The cases were reported in “Some Recent Parapsychology Cases,” Parapsychology Bulletin 32 (November 1957), page numbers not recorded by Horn.

63 Horn, 154. By comparison, Lucille said she rarely thought about Pratt and Roll. From Stacy Horn interview with Lucille Herrmann Patricia.
alliances in order to rule out natural causes for the inexplicable incidents. Finally, there was collaborative observation that involved the family, guests, police, and the parapsychologists all correlating observations made in relation to where people were at the time of each incident. These were recorded in the police report, and Pratt and Roll used the data to map out object movements according to the observations to determine if there were common patterns. 

Because of the thoroughness of the investigation as directed by Tozzi, in 1972 Roll identified Seaford, and 1958, as “the dividing line between old and new poltergeists.” Both an entirely new standard of investigation and an empathetic model of approaching collaboration between family members and experts arose from the case – largely through the investigative structure implemented by the police detective.

A problem emerged, however, because J.B. Rhine disapproved of the type of publicity and the lack of control around the Seaford case. He demanded that staff get back to their tasks in the lab. This created tensions among staff members, many of whom were excited about the new prospects that emerged from the Seaford case. Louisa Rhine wrote to her daughter Sally that there was “unexpected fireworks” among staff when J.B. tried to close the Seaford case since it was “not an experimental issue” that could be tested in their laboratories. She added, “one member of the staff exploded and I sensed the rest were with her.” J.B. wrote to Sally that the “spectacle” could not justify “scientific interest.”

66 There were tensions forming around investigation procedures between James Herrmann and the parapsychologists. In interviews with the press, Herrmann was defensive and critical of the parapsychological investigation, something J.B. surely wanted to avoid as he worked to establish parapsychology’s scientific and public credibility. See Horn, 148-9. Years later, Louisa wrote, “For practical reasons... such studies are seldom possible; and even when they are, too often the situation is complicated by local publicity. This alone can make unprofitable the study of a subtle and unpredictable effect like the one presumably involved....” Louisa Rhine, Mind Over Matter, 329.
67 Horn, 154. Supplied to Stacy Horn by Sally Rhine Feather.
68 Horn, 154-55. Supplied to Stacy Horn by Sally Rhine Feather.
Only in the lab could things be controlled, bringing about results that would be considered reliable in the sciences. This created an ontological schism between Rhine who sought to scientifically verify psi and one of the lab’s key funders, the retired schoolteacher Charles Ozanne who, after his mother died, hoped the lab could determine the existence of life after death. Ozanne had used his stock investments to fund the laboratory since 1936. J.B. and Ozanne agreed that a new space could be opened outside of the Parapsychology Laboratory to investigate questions about life after death. In 1961, this became the Psychical Research Foundation (PRF), and Roll was chosen as its director. The PRF enabled the continuation of field studies of the poltergeist, and therefore the development and testing of the psychokinesis hypothesis. Roll wrote, “We know from PK experiments that many persons have the ability to influence physical objects in their vicinity: Perhaps poltergeist occurrences are concentrated bursts of PK from a living person.” Roll developed a strategy to conduct controlled observation of the poltergeist in the field. His goal was to develop the psychokinesis hypothesis through the extension of the laboratory-based framework of parapsychology to the field.

**Empathy: Opening Doors, Capturing Emotions**

With the PRF established to study RSPK in the field, Roll actively cultivated empathy as a way to achieve collaboration with poltergeist experiencers. Empathy, or attention to

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69 Horn, *Unbelievable*, 60.
70 Roll, *The Poltergeist*, 9-10. Given the mandate of the PRF, Roll did not discount that a discarnate entity or spirit could be involved in these cases, and arguments were made in favour of that hypothesis by the psychiatrist Ian Stevenson, who investigated people who claimed to remember their past lives, and the religious studies scholar L. Stafford Betty, who investigated a poltergeist case in which he argued it was evident that messages were being conveyed by a known deceased woman. See Ian Stevenson, “Are Poltergeists Living or Are They Dead?,” *The Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research (JASPR)* 66, no. 3 (July 1972), 233-252; and L. Stafford Betty, “The Kern City Poltergeist: A Case Severely Straining the Living Agent Hypothesis,” *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research (JSPR)* 52, no. 798 (October 1984), 345-364.
experiencers’ affective responses, was not central to the work of earlier psychical researchers and parapsychologists whose goal was to determine if claims were genuinely “paranormal” – that is, to establish that the events described could not be explained by natural causes or human behaviour. While the concept of a “focus person” in poltergeist cases had been circulating since William Barrett’s 1911 essay, most researchers emphasized observing events as the primary way of generating admissible evidence. Since direct observation was often not possible, researchers largely relied on testimonials about events from experiencers.

As I have shown in my analysis of the pre-1958 case studies, researchers often took note of unusual emotional or behavioural displays; this was, however, more to establish the credibility of witnesses than to enter into an empathetic relationship with them. The Seaford case gained credibility in parapsychological literature because the Herrmann family were relatively calm and curious about the events; they sought scientific ways to explain them. Instructional manuals on “ghost hunting” tended to emphasize the unreliability of witnesses. In the guide published by the British ghost hunter Andrew Green in 1973, for example, his evaluation of credibility included determining experiencers’ religious beliefs, mental and physical health problems, supposedly overactive imaginations, recent life disruptions such as a death or divorce, poverty, sensation-seeking, and the reasons why

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72 The major exception in the literature on Seaford was the articles in the Newsletter of the Parapsychology Foundation 5, no. 2 (March-April, 1958), 1-12, where Eileen Garrett and Karlis Osis argued it was most likely that trickery was involved. In Unbelievable, Stacy Horn wrote that Roll thought that Eileen Garrett and her Parapsychology Foundation staff might have been perturbed that Duke University’s Parapsychology Laboratory led the investigation of a case that took place on Long Island, very close to where the Foundation was geographically located (149).
witnesses reported their experiences in the first place. In 1988, the British parapsychologist Susan Blackmore critiqued this approach. She wrote:

The sad thing about psychical research is that it is only interested in such experiences if they hold out the prospect of finding psi. If not they are rejected as “normal.” Even if there does appear to be psi the experiences themselves, as experiences, are often torn apart in the attempt to prise out the anomaly within. There is plenty of room for a subject which wants to tackle these experiences critically, scientifically and yet sympathetically.

Here, Blackmore emphasized a critical and scientific approach to psi claims, but she also included an emphasis on caring for the experiencers, on creating a rapport rather than simply interrogating them to extract the source of the anomaly. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Roll tended to respond to cases where, based on consultation with observers, credibility already appeared to be intact, which enabled him to focus on empathizing and observing.

Roll’s strategy emerged at a time when psychologists and social scientists actively questioned their relationships with human research subjects. Through the first half of the twentieth century, psychologists and parapsychologists alike desired passive, naive subjects in the laboratory who would conform to testing protocols to produce supposedly reliable data on human nature. As Morawski writes, experimenter-subject relationships were never so simple. When working with individual subjects one-on-one, individual personality and interpersonal rapport were simultaneously “a prerequisite of successful experimental

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74 Susan Blackmore, “Do We Need a New Psychical Research?,” *JSPR* 55, no. 811 (April 1988), 57.
relations and an ever-present danger to them." Morawski writes that human subjects "appeared suspect as well as suspecting" to psychologists. If human subjects became aware of the nature of the experiment and the motives of experimenters, they may have acted mischievously, though usually not on purpose. Psychologists had consistently reported "unruliness" among experimental subjects, reminiscent of the deception found in mediumistic studies by psychical researchers. Experimenters questioned how they could distinguish between evidence of "real" human nature and that which was inauthentic.

Within laboratory spaces, scientists felt they could maintain controlled, predictable conditions. However, when they presented tools of measurement into human environments, such as workspaces, they "opened the door to problems and mischief." The historian of science Robert Michael Brain (2001) shows how at the turn of the twentieth century, the German sociologist Max Weber faced such problems in his attempt to conduct "mass-measurement of the effects and conditions of modern work" through a questionnaire distributed to factory workers. It was highly difficult to reliably transfer the methods of a controlled laboratory into human environments such as workplaces and homes. In an

76 Morawski, 574.
77 Morawski, 575, 581-586, 593; and McClenon, 190-192.
78 Morawski, 574, 590-591.
79 Morawski, 568.
80 Morawski, 568-569, 587.
81 Morawski, 570, 577. See Chapters 1 and 2.
82 Morawski, 571.
84 Brain, 650.
attempt to measure workers’ conditions, Weber created a questionnaire that he hoped would discover “workers’ attitudes and states of mind... on the workers’ own terms,” in their own environment, capturing their “social ontology.” The goal was to address social questions and comprehend human nature. Weber was unable to entice enough workers to participate in his questionnaire. Scientists were reliant on conformity in subjects’ cooperative participation, otherwise studies yielded insufficient results. This was a problem experienced across the human sciences throughout the twentieth century. Roll had to negotiate the inherent unpredictability in poltergeist cases. He used empathy in his interactions with experiencers to gain access, to create rapport, and to establish a sense of how personalities and emotions might be connected to the material manifestations of the poltergeist. But he rarely found opportunities to transform the sites where the poltergeist manifested into controlled laboratory-type environments.

Many correspondence records of British psychical researchers and American parapsychologists emphasize empathy as a strategy to gain information and to console experiencers. Roll’s colleagues at the Parapsychology Laboratory – particularly Louisa Rhine and the lab’s secretary Farilla David who responded to most of the letters sent by the public – sought to allay experiencers’ emotional concerns, much in the same way that many of the SPR’s research officers did as well. Lab staff recognized emotional distress in the correspondence. If such distress appeared to be pressing or potentially involved mental illness, they recommended the experiencer seek the advice of their general practitioner,

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85 Brain, 651.
86 Brain, 678-679.
who could refer people to psychological or psychiatric counselling if necessary.\textsuperscript{88} When that was not necessary, most responses sought to console experiencers. The major way to alleviate experiencers’ emotional concerns was to have them read material about similar experiences, many of which were documented in J.B. Rhine’s books. The psychotherapist Benjamin Karpman called this approach “bibliotherapy” – helping people understand what they experienced through articles and books.\textsuperscript{89} Consoling words were also common in correspondence. In one letter, J.B. wrote to the experiencer: “you need not worry – in all my fifty years of investigation of this field I have not seen a case like this turn out as anything seriously disruptive.”\textsuperscript{90} In another letter in which a woman heard “breathing sounds,” J.B. assured her it was “not going to hurt” her; it was likely to pass and cease altogether. He offered his phone number should anything “very pressing” occur.\textsuperscript{91} Most of the time, no further correspondence was received from experiencers. Already then, among parapsychologists and psychical researchers, there was a measure of care. Roll took this practice of empathy further by applying it to develop and test the psychokinesis hypothesis.

Roll saw experiencers’ emotions as central to the dynamics of poltergeist cases. From his own investigative experience, Roll knew that researchers, as authoritative figures, tended to inhibit the occurrence of poltergeist phenomena; empathy was a tool that could

\textsuperscript{88} Among the SPR research officers’ correspondence I reviewed was that of Donald J. West, who often suggested that letter-writers seek the advice of their medical doctors. See Christopher Laursen, “Delusions and Distress: Therapeutic Approaches in Post-War Psychical Research,” presented to the 36th International SPR Conference in Northampton, England, 7-9 September 2012 (available upon request).
\textsuperscript{90} J.B. Rhine to Mrs. Reiner D. Bohlen (Chicago, IL), 16 September 1971, Correspondence 1971: Ber-Brn, Parapsychology Laboratory Records.
\textsuperscript{91} J.B. Rhine to Mrs. Halina Michnicki (Schenectady, NY), 24 November 1972, Correspondence 1972: Mer-Mog, Parapsychology Laboratory Records.
potentially maintain the conditions through which manifestations arose.\textsuperscript{92} Central to his methodology was the effort to “try to blend in with the psychological and social situation in the home or area where the disturbances take place” in “a low-key fashion.”\textsuperscript{93} In the Columbus case, for example, Roll emphasized fitting in “unobtrusively” and making everything “as normal and ordinary as could be, given the circumstances.”\textsuperscript{94} If equipment was brought in, it should be “without upsetting the psychological situation on which the phenomena may depend.”\textsuperscript{95} Roll knew that experiencers, first and foremost, usually wanted the poltergeist activities “to end as quickly and painlessly as possible.”\textsuperscript{96} The poltergeist was, after all, surprising, disruptive, and potentially destructive. Among people I interviewed or conversed with informally, Roll was reputed to have a warm personality, so it appears that he had worked to cultivate empathy.\textsuperscript{97} By the time Roll arrived, poltergeist households were usually overrun by interveners from whom experiencers sought resolution—friends, neighbours, religious authorities, doctors, police, and news media. Reports by news media attracted curiosity seekers, sometimes large crowds of them, to the allegedly haunted households. Rather than being empathetic or sympathetic themselves, these people could be quite disruptive, throwing stones at the house, for example.\textsuperscript{98} Roll wrote that the primary task was to work with experiencers to get interveners under control, collaborate with people who could offer the best expertise and consolation, and to limit

\textsuperscript{93}Roll, \textit{The Poltergeist}, 201.
\textsuperscript{94}Roll and Storey, \textit{Unleashed}, 21.
\textsuperscript{96}Roll, \textit{The Poltergeist}, 202.
\textsuperscript{97}Including in my interviews with Roll’s student Bryan J. Williams (5 June 2015), Roll’s son Tertius Roll (3 August 2014), Roll’s daughter Lise Petterson-Roll (23 August 2014), and Roll’s daughter-in-law Jenny Hinsman (3 August 2014).
\textsuperscript{98}See for example the Speke case (1986-87), P452, Poltergeists, SPR Archives, in which boys threw stones at the house. In the Bow case (1931), a newspaper clipping claimed that about 1,000 spectators had gathered outside of a house where poltergeist activities were reported (P128, Poltergeists, SPR Archives).
access to the household. This enabled him to perform more controlled observations of the interpersonal dynamics in relation to the physical manifestations in the household.

Once access to the household was under control, Roll could focus on the task of site investigation, applying a combination of empathy and observation to collect data that would advance the psychokinesis hypothesis. Roll read the emotions of experiencers through their reactions to events as well as through testimonials about their lives. He evaluated emotional evidence as part of the potential psychokinetic causes of poltergeist activity. In his 1977 evaluation of 92 historically documented poltergeist cases in which a focus person was apparent, Roll noted that the majority of them involved an emotional upheaval, particularly around moving to a new home, family tensions, marital separation, or other psychological stresses. Such data could be collected through Roll and his colleagues’ empathetic approaches to the experiencers. Roll tried to collaborate with other empathetic individuals. For example, in the Columbus case, two psychologists volunteered to assist: an “intelligent,” “humorous,” and compassionate 24-year-old male clinical psychologist named Kelly Powers, and later the “highly intuitive” and “sympathetic” psychologist Rebecca Zinn. As trained psychologists, Powers and Zinn had the credentials to counsel the focus person, Tina Resch. It was tricky to balance detachment with empathy once a rapport was established with a focus person. Tina, for example, developed a crush on Powers which

101 Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 12-13, 117.
sometimes affected the quality of interviews, counselling, and observation. Situations like these, as well as the psychological tensions in poltergeist households, made the data collected difficult to evaluate. Yet this approach enabled Roll to expand the data on the poltergeist in ways that had not been seen in any other studies of the phenomenon. By doing so, Roll aimed to discover the mechanisms of the poltergeist.

The Expansion of Data on the Poltergeist

Roll’s poltergeist studies represent the largest continuous body of scientific investigation on the poltergeist phenomenon by a single researcher in the historical record. Given the rarity of the poltergeist, the number of case studies investigated in person by Roll was inevitably quite small. He published on six cases that came to his attention between 1958 and 1968, and then on the Columbus case of 1984. Most other cases on record between 1958 and 1990 were more descriptive and their investigators provided no specific theories on their causes. Given the thoroughness of investigation, the seven cases Roll documented dramatically expanded the data on the poltergeist in relation to the

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102 Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 21, 109, 157.
103 There were other active poltergeist investigators in the United States who may have investigated more poltergeist-type cases than Roll, such as Hans Holzer or Ed and Lorraine Warren, however they were working independently, and often with a religious or occult focus, not within a scientific discipline.
104 There were probably more poltergeist-type cases in Roll’s records. His papers at the University of West Georgia were being processed and organized during my archival research in 2012. Roll’s colleagues at Duke University investigated additional poltergeist-type cases in the 1960s and ’70s. J. Gaither Pratt noted an additional three cases. J.B. Rhine wrote letters about 16 cases that did not involve Roll or Pratt during these decades. His PRF colleague Jerry Solfvin published or corresponded on another seven cases.
105 Since Roll’s American investigations were the most crucial to developing and testing the psychokinesis hypothesis, I focus on his studies in this chapter. In the 226 reported poltergeist-type cases sampled from English-language archival and published records from between 1958 and 1990 – 69 in the US and 133 in Britain – only a small percentage were directly investigated. Thirty-five of those cases were clearly considered in relation to the psychokinesis hypothesis, meaning researchers argued in favour of the physical manifestations arising around a focus person. The co-creative, or human-centred/living person hypothesis, was most directly evaluated in British cases by Guy Lyon Playfair in This House Is Haunted: The True Story of a Poltergeist (New York: Stein and Day, 1980); and Manfred Cassirer, “A South London Case of RSPK,” Research Briefs, Research in Parapsychology 1976, edited by R.L. Morris and William G. Roll (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press), 11-13, and The Persecution of Tony Elms (The Bromley Poltergeist), self-published, 1993.
psychokinesis hypothesis. In these cases, Roll found three significant relationships – what he called “correlates” – between focus persons and the physical manifestations: psychological, neuropsychological, and physical.

In order to assess the psychological correlation, Roll observed and documented experiencers’ emotions and behaviours in relation to the poltergeist events, along with mapping and measuring the physical effects. The psychological correlate involved discovering meaning in the manifestations in relation to the context of the lives of the people at the centre of them. Roll found such correlations, for example, in the Indianapolis case (1962). The alleged focus person, Renate Beck, was experiencing psychological tensions with her mother, Lina Gemmecke, who had emigrated from Germany to live with her. During the investigation of the case, from a rack of 35 vinyl record albums, two of the four belonging to Gemmecke flew out with no apparent cause. The albums were entitled “Mit Mir zu Hause” (At Home with Me) and “Meine Mamma,” which to Roll showed a curious connection to the tensions between the mother and daughter. More intriguing were small puncture-like marks that Roll reported spontaneously showing up on Gemmecke’s body, which caused her great distress. After seeing Gemmecke press a cross to her breast when the marks spontaneously appeared there, Roll speculated that the marks were like religious stigmata. The wounds were very similar to a needle, and he noted that Gemmecke, who was diabetic, was dependent on Renate to give her insulin shots. Such meanings were apparent to Roll, but he needed to do something more to substantiate them as valid evidence of a relationship between the unconscious and the physical manifestations. To do this, he asked experiencers if they would participate in standardized

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psychological tests that were widely accepted among the greater community of psychologists. Psychological tests, Roll hoped, would systematically affirm the connections he was making between the personalities of focus persons and the qualities of the physical manifestations.

What is not clear is how participants viewed the psychological testing process or results, or even if results were shared with them. There is some evidence the tests perturbed James Herrmann in the Seaford case (1958). He became particularly critical of Pratt and Roll when they asked if his family would take a polygraph test, which used a machine to measure breath and pulse rates. Physiological changes associated with questions asked suggested that the answer was untrue. Herrmann felt that his family had already done their part. 108

Twelve-year-old Jimmy Herrmann had participated in three psychological tests with the psychologists Gertrude Schmeidler and Irving Paul: the intelligence quotient test (that found Jimmy had a high verbal IQ), projective tests such as the thematic apperception test (TAT) in which subjects’ responses regarding ambiguous pictures were thought to reveal their motives and concerns, and the Rorschach in which the subject interpreted symmetrical inkblots to more clearly allow researchers to comprehend subjects’ thought processes. 109

The psychologists’ interpretations aimed to correlate the boy’s subconscious thought processes (that “evoked images” of destruction, “hurt and violence”) to the poltergeist disturbances, thereby supporting a hypothesis that his repressed emotions were somehow expressed through the anomalous object movements. Paul’s projective tests demonstrated

109 Such psychological tests were called into question by Alfonso Martinez-Taboas and Carlos Alvarado in “Poltergeist Agents: A review of recent research trends and conceptualizations,” European Journal of Parapsychology 4 (1981), 99-110, and Martinez-Taboas, “An appraisal of aggression and the central nervous system in RSPK agents,” JASPR 78 (1984), 55-69. The parapsychologists argued that such tests were “of dubious validity,” and that there was a bias in that psychologists knew they were testing RSPK agents. Roll wrote that it would have been preferable if psychologists were unaware of that. Roll, “Psychological and Neuropsychological Aspects of RSPK,” 128.
that Jimmy had “an almost magical faith in [his own] omnipotence and omniscience.” Roll found that claim suggestive: he connected it to having heard Jimmy humming “He Has the Whole World in His Hand” which Roll connected to a globe that was among the objects that flew across his bedroom multiple times.\textsuperscript{110} For Roll, these tests helped validate the theory that “meaning” was created between focus persons and physical manifestations, further supporting the psychokinesis hypothesis.

Roll’s other two correlates – neuropsychological and physical – were based on physiological findings, instrumental readings of brain activity, and measurements of energies such as photon emission from focus person’s bodies, electromagnetic fields, and increased geomagnetic perturbation. Human neurophysiology and environmental factors were material aspects that could potentially be further evaluated in controlled laboratory situations. He collaborated with fellow parapsychologists, physicists, electrical engineers, and other scientific experts in order to find evidence that when certain neuropsychological and physical factors were combined, RSPK would occur.

In terms of neuropsychological evidence – evidence that seemed to involve the autonomic nervous system responsible for bodily functions that were not consciously directed – Roll found that in the Indianapolis case (1962), the RSPK manifestations appeared to relate to “somatic trouble,” physical symptoms in the focus person. In that case, Renate Beck reported that her anxieties around her German mother moving in with her brought about physical effects: stomach cramps and vomiting. Roll noted that these physiological symptoms were absent during the RSPK events, and that when the symptoms were exhibited, there would be no poltergeist manifestations. He called this an “inverse

\textsuperscript{110} Roll, “Psychological and Neuropsychological Aspects of RSPK,” 118.
In the Columbus case (1984), Tina Resch noted stomach aches and headaches that preceded the physical manifestations, a factor that was found in other cases by Roll and other poltergeist researchers (for example, Enfield, 1977-79). Medical histories could be obtained to further assess neuropsychological evidence. Along with observational evidence, equipment was used to test focus persons (when they consented), such as electroencephalography (EEG) to record electrical activity in the brain. Medical exams by the neurobiologist Stephen Baumann determined that Tina had “abnormally fast transmissions of electrical signals from the pons” in the brainstem which “may have amplified Tina’s capacity to focus on emotionally significant objects because there is evidence that the pons is involved in focused arousal where attention is temporarily locked onto specific aspects of the environment.” In some of the PRF’s investigations (for example, Kalamazoo, 1974, and Columbus, 1976) and in historical cases, epilepsy was diagnosed in focus persons. Epilepsy involves recurrent, spontaneous electrical disturbances in the brain, which result in seizures. Out of 49 case studies where the focus person had physiological complaints, Roll noted epilepsy-like symptoms were evident in 55% of them. In the Columbus case (1984), the Canadian cognitive neuroscientist Michael Persinger proposed that a medical examination of Tina “demonstrated occasional muscle jerks, blinking, twisting, and incessant finger movements” that indicated a mild case.
of Tourette’s syndrome.\textsuperscript{115} As with the Indianapolis case, there appeared to be an inverse relationship between Tina’s physiological sensations, such as aches and pains, and RSPK events.\textsuperscript{116} The data on diverse somatic and neuropsychological effects that researchers like Roll collected in poltergeist cases were inconclusive. The findings could do no more than suggest possible connections between the psychology and physiology of focus persons and the physical manifestations. There was not enough data found to advance firm evidence supporting the psychokinesis hypothesis.

Roll correlated physical relationships between the RSPK events and the body of the focus person. The most compelling evidence was the “attenuation effect” in which the number of objects that moved declined at further distances from the focus person. This effect was discovered in the Miami case (1967) in which Roll and Pratt transformed a warehouse in which poltergeist-type events were occurring into a makeshift laboratory space. The parapsychologists mapped out the aisles of shelves that contained various Florida souvenir items, made specific objects “targets” that could reliably be assessed when they moved, and they recorded the locations of the individuals who were present when objects moved. Distances and directions were measured between people and objects.\textsuperscript{117}

Using these methods, Roll determined statistically that most events took place within fifteen feet of the focus person, with far fewer taking place further away than that. Other potential physical correlates were tested, but did not have the significance of the attenuation effect observations. Working with the Duke University electrical engineer William Joines, Roll


\textsuperscript{116} Roll, “Psychological and Neuropsychological Aspects of RSPK,” 126.

\textsuperscript{117} The distance could be determined in 36 incidents, in 20 of which Pratt, Roll, or other investigators were present. William T. Joines and William G. Roll, “Energetic Aspects of RSPK,” \textit{Proceedings of Presented Papers of the Parapsychological Association Convention 2007}, 50.
assessed the physical composition of objects in relation to electrical conductivity.\(^{118}\)

Persinger sought potential relationships between geomagnetic activities and the central nervous system.\(^{119}\) Joines and Roll theorized that electromagnetic fluctuations affected gravity around moving objects. They argued that an affective response from the focus person, what they called a “charged emotional field,” possibly induced these fluctuations.\(^{120}\)

The physical correlations remained curious possibilities – speculations about the mechanics of the poltergeist events. The most significant correlations that Roll and his colleagues made, then, appeared to be psychological and neuropsychological rather than physical. The materialist model of parapsychology was limited in its ability to assess such data.

There were moments in Roll’s studies where experiencers’ predictions of object movements seemed to indicate that PK could be controlled. As I showed in the Introduction, both the focus person, Julio Vasquez, and Roll simultaneously realized that it seemed possible that Julio could suggest objects to move (Miami, 1967).\(^{121}\) There were other isolated incidents that also indicated such possibilities. For example, in Indianapolis (1962), while under hypnosis, Renate Beck was asked if there would be more poltergeist occurrences, to which there were a “series of knocks as if in reply.”\(^{122}\)

In the Olive Hill case (1968), Roll concluded, “There is little doubt that Roger knew about some of the events

\(^{118}\) Joines and Roll, “Energetic Aspects of RSPK,” 50, 54, found that whether objects that were electric conductors or non-conducting dielectric substances such as glass or porcelain did not affect the results.


\(^{120}\) Joines and Roll, “Energetic Aspects of RSPK,” 52-53. Yet in a 1975 case, over a one-minute period, Joines measured an anomalous “spherical region that emitted radiation at a frequency of 146 MHz” between two objects that had just moved. Measurements did not always appear to be connected to the presence of a focus person.

\(^{121}\) Roll, The Poltergeist, 184-85; Roll, “Psychological and Neuropsychological Aspects of RSPK,” 122.

\(^{122}\) Roll, “Psychological and Neuropsychological Aspects of RSPK,” 122.
before they occurred.” Resch felt empowered to learn how to control PK, taking, for example, the initiative to do metal-bending experiments on her own. Focus persons in Roll’s cases, however, were unable to demonstrate consistent control of apparent mind-matter interaction. When they did, they often appeared to feel empowered. Yet circumstances deterred further exploration of controlled PK. Julio was fired, Renate demonstrated no control outside of hypnosis, Roger’s Jehovah’s Witness parents prevented further investigation, and Tina’s RSPK events remained uncontrolled. If focus persons had the occasion to realize that they appeared to have control over the poltergeist events, the question then became, what was needed to develop and sustain their apparent PK talents? In Roll’s cases, the elusive spontaneity, limited resources, interruptive circumstances, and parapsychological protocols prevented a resolution to that question.

The work of the Psychical Research Foundation expanded the data available on the poltergeist by creating new research approaches in the field. An empathetic approach in these field studies prompted greater access to and collaboration with experiencers and interveners. Observational methodology was significantly improved and the documented narratives of events became more detailed, providing opportunities for further evaluation and comparison between cases. The result was three major correlations: psychological, neuropsychological, and physical. Roll’s work is widely recognized as a significant contribution to parapsychology, but there was a major step to be accomplished for RSPK and the psychokinesis hypothesis to become accepted in the emerging discipline: laboratory measurement and replication. The expansion of data in the field which advanced the

123 Roll, “Psychological and Neuropsychological Aspects of RSPK,” 122.
124 Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 187.
psychokinesis hypothesis had to be translated in ways that suited the laboratory-based approach accepted in parapsychological analyses and testing.

The Constraints of Parapsychology

Where empathy had opened doors in RSPK research, the laboratory had the effect of limiting what data could be accepted in parapsychology. The greatest challenge Roll faced was transferring the poltergeist effects from their natural habitat – the home – to a controlled space – the laboratory. His most successful transformation of a poltergeist site into a laboratory-type space was the warehouse in Miami, which operated not as a living space, but a workplace in which the employees eagerly collaborated in the parapsychological investigation. The warehouse had certain defined hours of operation; it was a place that employees could leave at the end of each day. In contrast, people’s homes were usually where the poltergeist was, and there, it was very difficult to control household activities, people’s actions, and flows of visitors to reliably evaluate the phenomenon. Therefore, in several of the cases he investigated, Roll attempted to take focus persons away from hard-to-control households into laboratory spaces in order to formally test their psychokinetic and psi potential. Lab activities ranged from established ESP and PK tests designed by Rhine and his colleagues to newer experiments, such as attempting to affect organic matter and atomic particles through intentional thoughts. Parapsychologists used laboratories so that scientifically acceptable observation and documentation could be made – for example, having the focus person sit in one location doing tasks in which potential psi could be measured.
By the 1970s, new laboratory technologies attempted to overcome the persistent problems inherent in humans studying humans. As Morawski argues, simply observing human behaviour simultaneously put scientists in the position of being observed by their human subjects, which put into question the objectivity of the knowledge produced. The subject was increasingly viewed as unstable. To help overcome these issues, the physicist Helmut Schmidt designed parapsychological experiments using quantum equipment, which would mechanically record results, reducing the possibility of human error and influence in recording data. By the 1980s, computers became commonplace for testing and automated data recording. The more tests could be conducted by computers, the more neutrality that could be asserted by parapsychologists seeking credibility in the greater scientific community.

Laboratory tests did not successfully measure, in a repeatable and predictable way, the alleged psychokinetic abilities of poltergeist focus persons. Just as with home-based manifestations, physical events, on the rare occasions that they occurred in the lab, continued to be spontaneous and elusive. For example, during testing at Rhine’s lab in Durham in 1967, Julio Vasquez stood in the door of an office during a break when Roll and his colleagues “heard a crash.” A decorative vase, sixteen feet from where Julio was standing, had fallen five feet away from where it had been sitting atop a table. Roll and his colleagues had Vasquez in view. “The moment we heard the crash, our attention naturally

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125 Morawski, 572-574.
went to Julio,” Roll wrote, explaining at length that there was no sign of any trickery. At the time Roll wrote, “As far as I know, there have been no other apparently genuine poltergeist incidents in a parapsychology laboratory.” Yet Julio’s standardized ESP and PK tests themselves revealed “no evidence” of psi capabilities. The spontaneity and elusiveness of poltergeist-type manifestations meant that they did not necessarily “behave” for the laboratory, nor did alleged RSPK events correspond with standardized “psi” testing.

Attempting to transfer RSPK from its “natural habitat” into a controlled laboratory environment exposed the limitations of parapsychological methodology. The expansion of data through empathy and observation of the poltergeist phenomenon in homes appeared to be incompatible with the controlled lab space. The lab lacked an interpersonal, environmentally specific dynamic that apparently was necessary for the production of the poltergeist. Yet the Rhinean materialist and statistical aims of parapsychology – to evaluate psi under controlled conditions – required measurability and replicability for data to be admitted as evidence. Ultimately, it was not just the rarity of poltergeist cases and limited resources, but the constraints of parapsychology’s methods that limited the acceptance of the psychokinesis hypothesis that Roll advanced in his field studies.

The sociologists of scientific knowledge Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch describe science as like the golem of Jewish legend, a “humanoid made by man from clay and water, with incantations and spells” that “grows a little more powerful every day.” As with the golem, people make and shape science, but “it is clumsy and dangerous. Without control, a golem may destroy its masters with its flailing vigour.” Humanity “must not expect too much”

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128 Roll, *The Poltergeist*, 181. These experiments took place at the Rhines’ Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man (FRNM), the organization that replaced Duke’s Parapsychology Laboratory in 1965 with the goal of broadening studies of mind and consciousness.
from science for, “powerful though it is, it is the creature of our art and craft.” If “science is a golem,” J.B. Rhine created a golem to achieve a specific end: to demonstrate the existence, and potentially the mechanisms, of alleged psi through increasingly sophisticated tests – from mechanical dice-throwing to Helmut Schmidt’s random event generator – in ways that could be replicated and statistically evaluated. This golem, however, was not made to study the phenomena and data that spontaneously occurred in people’s households and workplaces. It was not that things didn’t “fly” in the lab. Roll and his colleagues observed things flying, for example in Julio’s time at Rhine’s lab, and later, as we shall see, in the Tina Resch lab experiments. It was that the “flights” were not measured and documented in controlled ways that could be acceptably demonstrated to other scientists. The manifestations occurred spontaneously and elusively, not according to experimental protocols. All of the “poltergeist” data collected and documented by Roll was therefore very difficult to measure and replicate.

In his 1984 study, the sociologist James McClenon emphasizes how psi came to be judged according to the parapsychological golem designed to meet the standards of the natural sciences, but was nonetheless it perceived as “deviant” by other scientists. While psi-type experiences occurred commonly in the general population, statistical evidence of its existence had to be produced in long runs of laboratory tests. Most psi events, in their “natural habitats,” were likely unreported, occurred unpredictably, and were rarely recurrent. Although originating out of the study of the mind (psychology), Rhinean parapsychology made the physical sciences, which largely relied on mechanistic explanations, the basis of its pursuit for acceptance in the greater community of scientists.

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132 McClenon, Deviant Science, 235.
In the mid-twentieth century, the discipline of psychology itself was moving away from the subjective hermeneutics found for example in Freudian and Jungian psychoanalyses, and toward “objective,” mechanistic, and statistical evaluations practiced in the growing fields of experimental, behavioural, and clinical psychology. Materialist evaluations were an attempt to move parapsychology into the vanguard of natural sciences. The problem was that “psi” phenomena were experienced in spontaneous and subjective ways. They often were personally meaningful to experiencers. For example, people reported having uncanny mental impressions or premonitions involving loved ones who were dying or endangered. The data accumulated through replicable and statistical studies could be scientifically accepted, but they excluded consideration of the “socially real” – or ontological – aspects that appeared to be central to “psi” experiences for those experiencing them. These ontological factors were inadmissible by the standards of the natural sciences.

In 1992, at the end of the historical period being evaluated here, the philosopher and parapsychologist Stephen E. Braude gave the presidential address to the Parapsychological Association. In a recent update to that speech, Braude reflected, “I’ve often complained that laboratory research in parapsychology is almost ludicrously premature because researchers have no idea what kind of organic function they’re trying to investigate.”

Was psi or psychokinesis an ability, like playing music or doing mathematical calculations, or

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133 For a brief overview of this post-Second World War development in psychology, see Nathan Hale, Jr., *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans*, 1917-1985 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 380-393. McClenon, *Deviant Science*, 111-13, writes that when the Parapsychological Association (PA) was granted membership in the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), it originally enrolled in Psychology and then, because the section “did not accept P.A. contributions to its annual meeting programs,” in 1973, the PA moved to General, where it continued to be “treated as less than totally legitimate.” See below for more on the PA’s relationship with the AAAS.

a “brute endowment,” an inherent sixth sense, aspect, or disposition of human consciousness? Furthermore, Braude pointed out, each person experienced psi in different, fundamentally subjective ways. He questioned to what extent parapsychological “experimental procedures were appropriate for this phenomena.” To quote the historian of science Richard Noakes, the historical problem has been that “what counts as the ‘right result’ and ‘good experiment’ has been and still is in question.” The elusive nature of the phenomena, its unknown organic function, and the reliance on the materialist experimental approach prevented parapsychology from gaining authoritative standing among established scientists. It was not that parapsychologists were “bad scientists,” Braude argued, for “experienced psi researchers are arguably more careful and sophisticated methodologically than most mainstream scientists.” It was that Rhine had chosen a paradigm – or created a golem – that explicitly excluded the non-replicable, experiential, ontological realities of experiences and phenomena that parapsychologists defined as psi.

Parapsychology could apply other scientific approaches. Braude argued that the materialist approach was not “essential to the scientific enterprise.” This approach was useful in natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, and microbiology. But it was less applicable to “astronomy, geology, and meteorology, and less so still in the behavioral sciences,” he wrote. “It is comically arrogant to think that nature should conform to our favorite modes of investigation or that we should dictate to nature the forms in which we’re willing to accept its secrets.” Braude proposed that it was observation that mattered the most in the study of psi. Parapsychologists’ best work was done in the mode of “the psychic

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naturalist” observing, documenting, and analysing the nature of metaphysical phenomena without necessarily being able to replicate or control them, any more than a meteorologist can control the weather or an astronomer can control the cosmos. Such observational work, Braude argued, required “perceptivity and sensitivity.”

Roll practiced such perceptivity and sensitivity in households, the “natural habitat” of the poltergeist, through empathy, which expanded the observational data – data which then could be compared, analysed, and even considered as evidence of the organic function of psi. However, as other researchers from Weber to mid-century psychologists in the human sciences had found out, it was difficult to transfer the “psychic naturalist” approach into the experimental framework of controlled laboratory replication and measurement. According to Braude’s critique of parapsychology, this experimentalist framework filtered out much of the observational data collected in the field. Laboratory-centred approaches limited what could be admitted as parapsychological evidence supporting the psychokinesis hypothesis.

In order to gain scientific legitimacy, Rhine created a golem of parapsychology that he thought could diminish tensions with established scientists. As McClenon has argued, established scientists politicized science by rejecting certain innovative sciences, such as parapsychology, as deviant. Such politicization occurred, for example, in the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), which agreed upon what constituted acceptable science, promoting that through the education system and media. The politics were evident, for example, in the efforts by the Parapsychological Association (PA) to gain admission into the AAAS. With the growing success of and public attention to Duke University’s Parapsychology Laboratory and the formation of state-funded labs in Germany

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140 McClenon, *Deviant Science*, 224.
and the Netherlands, the PA was founded in 1957 as the global voice of professional parapsychology. The PA sought a position of scientific legitimacy through the sharing and disseminating of knowledge gained through experimental work, with a goal of integrating their findings into other branches of science. In the early 1960s, the PA began to lobby the AAAS for membership, which would give parapsychologists the ability to present to other scientists and submit papers to the AAAS peer-reviewed journal, *Science*.\(^1\) In 1961, the PA’s membership bid was rejected “on grounds that at present, parapsychology is not firmly or generally accepted as a science”; affiliation was declined again in 1963.\(^2\) The PA member Douglas Dean continued to lobby for AAAS membership, eventually gaining executive support to have its members vote on the PA’s admission. Both critical and supportive comments were made during the discussion at the AAAS’s meeting on 30 December 1969. One unnamed member stated: “Those so-called phenomena of parapsychology do not exist and it is impossible to do scientific work in this area, so that we have a null science.”\(^3\) Another said that “We are not familiar with what parapsychology is and so we are not qualified to make a vote on this association.”\(^4\) However, the AAAS president H. Bentley Glass defended parapsychology’s legitimacy as he was “satisfied that it uses scientific methods of inquiry; thus, that investigation can be regarded as scientific.”\(^5\) The anthropologist Margaret Mead also supported the cause: “This whole history of

\(^{1}\) McClenon, *Deviant Science*, 108. Other science magazines, including *Nature*, *The New Scientist*, and *Scientific American*, had published numerous articles on parapsychology. Before the PA became an AAAS member in 1969, *Science* regularly published both supportive and critical articles and letters on parapsychology and its research including by J.B. Rhine, the psychologists Gardner Murphy and Paul E. Meehl, the University of Minnesota medical researcher George R. Price, the philosopher of science Michael Scriven, the physicists P.W. Bridgman (Harvard) and Luis W. Alvarez (University of California, Berkeley), the University of Pittsburgh biologist R.A. McConnell, the UC Berkeley molecular biologist Gunther S. Stent, and the Birkbeck College parapsychologist S.G. Soal.


\(^{3}\) McClenon, *Deviant Science*, 112.

\(^{4}\) McClenon, *Deviant Science*, 112.

\(^{5}\) McClenon, *Deviant Science*, 113.
scientific advance is full of scientists investigating phenomena that the establishment did not believe were there.” In the end, about eighty percent of the AAAS membership voted in favour of admitting the PA. Yet, even after it was admitted to the AAAS, members of the PA found it particularly difficult to publish in established science journals. The former AAAS president Theodore Rockwell commented that “the scientific community is not familiar with the better research in parapsychology because the editors of establishment journals are still, for the most part, reluctant to publish positive findings in this area.” McClenon found that by the 1980s, parapsychology was met “with no apparent reaction from mainstream science.” To work toward scientific credibility, parapsychologists took particular care in their experimental work that might not be found in other scientific disciplines. By gaining membership into the larger community of scientists through the AAAS, parapsychologists aimed to diminish the essential tension between established sciences and parapsychology as an emerging science. Although they worked to adhere to established scientific standards of measurement and replicability in their experiments, parapsychologists found their work continued to be ignored or unaccepted by the larger scientific community because the subject matter was too controversial.

Parapsychology survived not through the support of fellow scientists, but through its commitment to the ideology of science which stabilized its standing, and most of all because

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147 PA members did not have research results published in *Science*. Compared to the years before 1969, little was published in *Science* at all on parapsychology, aside from a few debates on its scientific legitimacy. See the statistician Persi Diaconis, “Statistical Problems in ESP Research,” *Science*, New Series 201, no. 4351 (14 July 1978), 131-136, which generated a debate in the Letters section between Charles T. Tart, Harold E. Puthoff, Russell Targ, and Diaconis. The University of Texas, Austin, physicist John Archibald Wheeler urged the AAAS to disaffiliate the PA in 1979, leading to a published debate in the Letters section with J.B. Rhine, *Science*, New Series 205, no. 4402 (13 July 1979), 144. In 1983-84, there were two parapsychology reports included in *Science*, but the publication otherwise has not published parapsychological studies.
149 McClenon, *Deviant Science*, 228.
the general public continued to experience phenomena which they characterized as psi. It was lay individuals more than scientists who had a stake in psi being studied and explained. Lay people sought greater understanding of their extraordinary experiences, which tended to be sensationalized, shunned, and not taken seriously in public discourse because such experiences were elusive, anecdotal, and had no widely accepted scientific or religious basis. Parapsychology provided the possibility of an academically respectable means by which the stigma surrounding such experiences could be diminished. McClenon, for example, argued that the onus on accepting parapsychology as a science was not on parapsychologists; it was on the community of scientists.¹⁵¹ That community, itself, had built a large-scale framework of what it was to do science where anomalous phenomena – as Fort had critiqued in the first half of the twentieth century – remained largely excluded because it did not fit in with what the natural sciences set out to accomplish: to explain the world physically, mechanistically, and statistically. As McClenon argued, “Elite scientists’ evaluation of parapsychology’s legitimacy is closely related to their evaluation of psi’s ontological status” which was outside of typically accepted natural phenomena and human experiences. To many, such experiences were misinterpretations of natural phenomena, such as hallucinations, and the meanings made were superstitious or religious. Paranormal experiences, as they were sensationalized in popular culture, appeared to be what the media savvy debunking conjuror James Randi called “woo woo,” something outrageous, laughable, and unfounded.¹⁵² More generally, any attempt to study such claims was called “pseudoscience” which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, was “a spurious or pretended science” based on belief and “mistakenly regarded as based on scientific method

¹⁵¹ McClenon, Deviant Science, 222.
¹⁵² For a typical work by James Randi, see Flim Flam!: The Truth about Unicorns, Parapsychology, and Other Delusions (New York: Lippincott & Crowell, 1980).
or having the status of scientific truth.”\textsuperscript{153} Just as Freud had done to defend psychoanalysis, scientists in general threw protectionist barriers around their disciplines in order to stabilize and maintain their authority.\textsuperscript{154} There were many approaches to study anomalous experiences that were not widely accepted in science, but the experiences themselves remained. Parapsychology sought to isolate “extra-sensory perception” and “psychokinesis” as two common experiences that could be methodically studied, but it was highly difficult to extract these from the larger, interconnected collection of anomalous experiences which fell somewhere between scientifically observed phenomena and folklore: ghosts, UFOs, monsters, and legends. At the same time, it was because parapsychology was part of that larger body of anomalies that it attracted such public curiosity. Despite continued controversy over what it has actually achieved scientifically, parapsychology carries on along the frontiers of science largely employing the same laboratory-based methodology that Rhine introduced in the 1930s.

Conclusions: The Wrench in the Research

The Spring Creek Institute was a research lab located in a business park between Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. On 19 October 1984, the neurobiologist Steve Baumann conducted tests on Tina Resch, accompanied by William Roll and the psychotherapist Jeannie Lagle, who had been counselling and testing her. The director of the lab, the parapsychologist Edward F. Kelly, was also present, as was a technical

\textsuperscript{153} For a historical treatment on issues around pseudoscience, see Michael D. Gordin, \textit{The Pseudoscience Wars: Immanuel Velikovsky and the Birth of the Modern Fringe} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{154} McClenon, \textit{Deviant Science}, 226-27; see Chapter 2 on how Freud was cautious about interdisciplinary collaborations, including with psychical researchers.
assistant. As Baumann set up experiments that afternoon, Tina moved freely through the institute. Over a ninety-minute period, Roll recorded, a variety of objects spontaneously fell, flew, or were displaced: a six-inch screwdriver, coins that moved a distance of eighteen feet from the desktop on which they were sitting, a hairbrush, a pen, a deodorizer container in the washroom – all while Tina was in Lagle’s presence. There were no signs that Tina had interfered with the objects.

Roll documented how the afternoon ended with two more incidents. There was a loud noise in the empty experiment room. Baumann and Roll “rushed in” and found “a half-inch gash” on the wall, “apparently caused by a square, one-volt battery weighing about a pound that had been on the table with the PK detectors.” Baumann had seen the battery sitting there only minutes before, and estimated that it “must have sailed twelve to thirteen feet across the room, hit the wall, and landed under a table.” A minute later, another noise. A nine-inch crescent wrench that had been sitting on the technical assistant’s work cart in another room reportedly flew at least eight feet to land on the floor behind him. Observed and heard by the people present, Roll recorded seven objects moving that afternoon. He wrote, “Tina was ‘hot.’” And yet, Baumann’s controlled PK experiments were inconclusive. That was the “wrench in the research,” figuratively and literally, that afternoon. Spontaneity, part of the very nature of RSPK, made it seemingly impossible to contain, measure, and replicate – all major tenets of laboratory experimentation.

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155 Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 191.
156 Roll & Storey, Unleashed, 192-95.
157 Roll & Storey, Unleashed, 195.
158 Roll & Storey, Unleashed, 195. “Hot” meaning that many RSPK events happened in a short period of time.
159 Roll and Storey, Unleashed, 191-92, 195. Tina actively engaged in PK tests in the laboratory in which she intentionally tried to affect the firing of pacemaker cells in neurons extracted from sea snails, exerting pressure on a piezoelectric crystal, but “a statistical problem prevented an adequate evaluation” (Roll & Storey, 285).
occurrences seemed to upset Tina,” Roll recalled, and Lagle consoled her. The affect—the wonder, anxiety, fear, and excitement—always accompanied the spontaneous physical events for Tina and those around her. Tina sometimes said she felt pains in her stomach that accompanied the incidents. Through the pains, she thought she could predict when the incidents would occur, as reportedly happened that afternoon. Yet Tina did not seem to have an ability to control the alleged PK.

The emotional, physiological, mental, and social life-world of Tina Resch was as crucial to understanding the poltergeist events as were the physical events themselves. Controlled laboratory experiments, however, were largely unable to register such spontaneity, affect, or the apparently subjective conditions through which anomalous physical events occurred. The expansion of data in Roll’s detailed observations in poltergeist households did not meet the measurement and evaluative standards put forth by J.B. Rhine. Even when correlated with standardized tests, the psychological data depended too much on qualitative contexts, such as affect and life circumstances, that from a natural science perspective were not convincing enough to gain wider scientific acceptance. Most scientists sought quantitative, measurable, and replicable physical evidence. Furthermore, neuropsychological data and physical theories were too minor and too diverse to draw any acceptable conclusions. By parapsychological standards, the expansion of data in Roll’s poltergeist research was insufficient to advance the psychokinesis hypothesis to a scientific theory. How this rare physical phenomenon existed and operated remained unresolved. Still, Roll’s work revealed more about the phenomenon than any studies before it or since.

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160 Roll & Storey, Unleashed, 193.
161 Roll & Storey, Unleashed, 188-89.
Given the intense affect experienced by focus persons and their families, empathy was the crucial approach to gain access to people who were experiencing the poltergeist phenomenon. Through listening, engaged curiosity, and the offering of consolation, Roll and his colleagues gained experiencers’ trust, enabling levels of access, collaboration, and observation unlike anything ever seen before in studies of the poltergeist. This, in turn, elevated him to become the primary expert on these cases. For the hypothesis to be tested by the standards of parapsychology, which was unconcerned with the empathetic and interpretive elements of Roll’s approach, focus persons had to be removed from their homes to try to replicate psychokinesis under controlled laboratory conditions. The practice of trying to replicate a spontaneous phenomenon outside of its “natural” environment proved highly difficult, and the RSPK studies were unable to advance in ways that could prove the poltergeist in acceptable scientific terms.

There were, however, a small number of post-Second World War poltergeist cases that advanced the psychokinesis hypothesis further than any of Roll’s studies. Those cases largely worked outside of established golems of science and parapsychology. Where Jimmy, Julio, and Tina participated in parapsychological studies on Roll’s terms, in the next chapter, I show how Shirley, Matthew, and the “Philip group” explored the possibility of a co-creative process between focus persons and the poltergeist phenomenon even further – largely on their own terms. While those terms were especially controversial and largely ignored by parapsychologists and scientists, these cases demonstrated how empowering processes of self-actualization along with supportive, empathetic mentorship could reshape the outcomes of poltergeist- and psi-type experiences. These cases helped to open up a new conceptual space for “human potential” where looking inward to decipher one’s
unconscious – along with anomalies that physically manifested in one’s life-world – was critical.
Chapter 4

SELF:
Beyond Science and Religion

*I prefer not to be labelled, although others like to label me. Many of the things I do are because I’ve taught myself... to alter in some way “reality.”*

– Matthew Manning (1978)¹

The most extensive data favouring the psychokinesis hypothesis in twentieth-century poltergeist studies came from three atypical post-Second World War cases: Shirley Hitchings (UK, 1956-68), the Philip group (Canada, 1972-77), and Matthew Manning (UK, 1967 onwards). In those cases, the experiencers took on a radical role where they actively directed practices to study poltergeist-type events in ways that ultimately transformed their individual lives. The experiences could not be labelled easily. What they reported ran against the grain of common social, religious, and scientific expectations; the cases involved very different forms of boundary-work than were practiced in the psychical research, psychoanalytical, and parapsychological frameworks examined in previous chapters. Rather than being passive subjects for researchers to experiment with, these experiencers dynamically explored the events on their own terms, negotiating equal collaboration with researchers, and discovering meaning that shaped their life paths in ways that were akin to post-war psychotherapeutic models of individuation or self-actualization. Where other poltergeist experiencers felt marginalized, Shirley, the Philip group, and Matthew overall

had the support of empathetic family members and/or researchers. Their accounts were consonant with the concept that poltergeist-type phenomena were a co-creation between focus persons and mechanisms of unknown origin. In various ways, the outcomes of these cases enriched and challenged claims that had been made by researchers to support the psychokinesis hypothesis.

Inward, Into the Third Space

The practices in this chapter’s case studies took place in a “third space” outside of institutional science and religion. In this space, experiencers explored materiality, consciousness, and spirituality interwoven with both the observational and replicable practices of established scientific methodology and self-directed, often creative practices.² Fitting into a countercultural shift in 1960s and ‘70s America and Britain, “third space” explorers found their own way through “the flow of natural impulses, desires and the sensuality and experience” of their daily lives (as the historian Sam Binkley wrote).³ They sought not only to expand the boundaries of scientific knowledge, but to transform their sense of self through practices in which, they believed, consciousness and spirituality could be better defined.

While practices and interpretations varied in the three poltergeist-type studies examined in his chapter, the cases all had one factor in common: participants actively experimented through communication with the physical, poltergeist-type phenomena that they were all experiencing. For example, in the 1970s, a group of five women and three

² “Third space” was a term used by Jeffrey J. Kripal in a filmed interview that I conducted with him for the Esalen Institute in November 2015 as part of the symposium “The Further Reaches of the Imagination.”
men from Toronto – the chair of the high IQ society Mensa Canada, two housewives, a social worker, an accountant, a heating engineer, an industrial designer, and a sociology student – repeatedly demonstrated interaction and communication with something that was very much like a poltergeist. Raps and movements reportedly issued from a table around which the group sat – all in response to questions issued by the group members. Their poltergeist had a personality. His name was Philip, an aristocrat who lived during the English Civil War in the seventeenth-century. But Philip never existed. He was completely the product of the group’s imagination. The group made Philip up as a novelist would make up her characters. The apparently physical presence of the fictitious “Philip” strongly favoured the hypothesis that the physical manifestations of the poltergeist were co-created between living persons and some type of phenomenon that the group characterized as psychokinesis. The Philip group’s intentions were to put the psychokinesis hypothesis into practice, and through demonstrations of the effect, and teaching other groups of people how to do it, they argued that they had succeeded. They essentially claimed that anybody could make their own poltergeist through the deliberate cultivation of “mind over matter.”

Claims about the possibility of “mind over matter” fit within a larger social shift in America and Britain in the decades following the Second World War, largely influenced by diverse counterculture groups that, as Binkley defines it, “shared a common embrace of real experience and sensuality, and a dismissal of protocol, abstraction, and formal knowledge as a basis for self-discipline and the deferral of gratification.”

4 This “third space” was situated within a larger cultural shift that challenged established forms of power and authority – the state, material sciences, and mainstream religions – but even more it sought to expand the boundaries of established scientific and spiritual knowledge. I locate these “third-space”

4 Binkley, 63.
practices, broadly speaking, under the umbrella term “consciousness studies”: studies of the mind, mind-matter relationships, human potential, transpersonal psychology, transformative experiences, self-spirituality, self-actualization which all involved active exploration of the self through experience.

The rise of self-guided consciousness studies was a significant part of what the philosopher Charles Taylor (1992) calls “the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths.” Practitioners argued that discovering one’s internal “self” was about finding out more than what one was told about the external “objective” or “spiritual” world by mainstream social, scientific, and religious authorities. Inwardness involved finding out who one truly was: one’s greater human and spiritual potential, and one’s own distinctive place in a complex, interconnected world. In other words, finding one’s way to a truth not effectively explained but nonetheless experienced – such as through apparently psychical experiences – required exploring one’s own “inner depths.” How might something within a person – something not obvious in one’s typical experience of consciousness, something that could be found situated between scientific methods and ontologically driven self-direction – potentially reveal answers to controversial metaphysical questions?

The outcomes in Shirley, the Philip group, and Matthew’s cases stand in contrast to those of the passive poltergeist experiencers in previous chapters. Most poltergeist experiencers sought expert advice to simply try to stop poltergeist manifestations. Active participants, on the other hand, wanted to explore and engage with the poltergeist events. They found ways to prolong the poltergeist manifestations, which gave more opportunities to study the phenomenon. These active and participatory practices produced new ways to

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comprehend the poltergeist. The historian of religions Jeffrey J. Kripal (2016) calls this dual role of participating and researching “experience as experiment.”⁶ “Experience as experiment” is different than the ways that researchers such as William Roll and Nandor Fodor guided the parapsychological or psychoanalytical research agenda with the experiencers’ consent. In that work, focus persons were more like passive subjects. “Experience as experiment” involved focus persons and their families actively designing experimental parameters, in these three cases with the supportive guidance of empathetic researchers. As poltergeist experts, the researchers in this chapter, Hal Chibbett and George Owen, facilitated studies that were less bound by the traditions of psychical research, parapsychology, or psychoanalysis. They actively engaged with the “poltergeist” as if it had consciousness.

In order to access the apparent “consciousness” involved in the poltergeist events, the participants I examine in this chapter went through a common process identified by Kripal (2010, 2011) in which participants first “realized” that there appeared to be meaning in the physical manifestations. From there, they “authorized” further interactions between themselves and the phenomenon, prompting the manifestations to continue and even to evolve into new forms not experienced in other poltergeist case studies.⁷ Interactive participation involved communication with the phenomenon, such as occurred via Philip’s raps. The participants each had different interpretations of the source of the phenomenon – that it was a spirit of the dead, their own subconscious, or even a combination of the two.

To evaluate how these processes significantly changed experiencers’ lives, I am inspired by an “ontological turn” in scholarship that positions how people make sense of their own lives as central to the analysis. While the interpretations of the poltergeist-type events differed, the outcome in all of these cases was an ontological transformation – that is, the participants’ lives were transformed in positive ways from what they were before the poltergeist events began. To gauge the extent of this transformation, I compare how poltergeist experiencers’ ways of being changed before realization compared to what they were like after they authorized active participation. These transformations expanded participants’ views of what was possible in the world, beyond what was commonly accepted as fact. Participants became active knowledge-seekers.

There was no single way in which historical actors expressed or achieved better lives. In the first case, which took place in the south London district of Battersea (1956-68), the focus person Shirley Hitchings, her parents, and the Fortean researcher Hal Chibbett interactively participated in communicating with the phenomena, a practice which helped guide Shirley from childhood through to motherhood. Where many poltergeist-type cases had negative effects on experiencers’ lives (as shown in previous chapters), Shirley’s active participation led her to what she considered to be a “normal” life-path where she carried on with a healthy family life devoid of “supernatural” events. In the Canadian Philip experiment (1972-77), the group realized a life-path of greater human potential through their interactions with the physical manifestations. In that practice, the group sensed that they – and in fact anyone – could actively make a poltergeist, which had significant, but as of yet

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8 See the section “Contested Realities” in the Introduction for an outline of the ontological turn and how it inspires my approach.
9 I refer to focus persons by their first names to distinguish them from their family members, and also because sometimes all that was published in the documents was a first name.
10 Shirley Hitchings to Christopher Laursen, March 19, 2015 and May 19, 2016, e-mail correspondence.
unrealized, implications in terms of human abilities and consciousness studies. In the third case, the British poltergeist focus person Matthew Manning forged an extraordinary life-path in which he negotiated numerous factors – anomalous physical manifestations, scientific experiments, religious ideas, and public curiosity – to establish a career as a reputable energy healer on his own ontological terms. In all of these poltergeist-type cases, the participants treated their experience as an opportunity to experiment on their own terms. I argue that this was crucial to the positive outcomes. These outcomes were closely connected to models of self-actualization that were being popularized and practiced at the time, which I summarize in the next section. The turn to the self – “self” as an object of self-exploration and actualization, or “experience as experiment” – was crucial to facilitating new types of ontological and epistemic outcomes in certain post-war poltergeist-type cases.

**Post-War Paths to Self-Actualization**

In the three post-Second World War case studies that I analyse in this chapter, self-directed practices revealed new ways to experience and study the poltergeist. Such practices related to self-actualization, when people sought a new and improved purpose to their life. Achieving self-actualization required faith in one’s self and one’s potential. Rather than conforming to mainstream religious institutional obligations or doctrines, self-actualizers made their own pathways to better comprehend both nature and spirituality. In her 1990 study of British religion, the sociologist Grace Davie writes that “Believing, it seems, persists while belonging [to churches] continues to decline – or, to be more
accurate, believing is declining (has declined) at a slower rate than belonging.” 11 This generational shift in how people approached faith in post-war America and Britain is crucial to understanding how people sought actualization not through religious institutions, but through self-directed intellectual and creative processes. Self-actualization was closely connected to what the British sociologist and anthropologist Paul Heelas terms “self-spirituality,” often called the “New Age Movement.” Self-spiritual people identified less with established religions, and more with a personalized spiritual path, which could entail other forms of belonging, such as meditation groups, yoga, holistic retreats, and classes on Asian mysticism. 12 Self-actualization was part of the “third space” of consciousness studies. There is no single point from which the new approaches of consciousness studies were realized, but self-actualization was central to all of them. Mid-twentieth-century knowledge-seeking expanded through extensively distributed publications and media, the diversification of post-secondary education, and widespread gatherings and retreats. 13 Like their occult predecessors, mid-twentieth-century knowledge-seekers emphasized direct experience as a way to know self and the physical-metaphysical world. There was also continuity in how knowledge-seekers sought personal transcendence, studied anomalous phenomena, and employed a syncretic approach – a blending and reconciliation of diverse

11 Grace Davie, “Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?,” Social Compass 37, no. 4 (1990), 455.
philosophical and religious ideas – to seek new ways of being.\textsuperscript{14} The historian of American religion Catherine Albanese (2007) writes:

\begin{quote}
All the pieces of American metaphysical history came together in the New Age – Transcendentalism and spiritualism, mesmerism and Swedenborgianism, Christian Science and New Thought, Theosophy and its ubiquitous spin-offs, and especially metaphysical Asia. Quantum physics provided a horizon of discourse that could enable... mystical-scientific speculation.... Parapsychology pushed the scientific argot toward the paranormal.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

All of these things together, in various ways, fuelled the significant expansion of consciousness studies in the decades following the Second World War. In the increasing number of metaphysical bookstores, for example, one could find and discuss books and periodicals on all of these topics, including those published on the case studies analysed in this chapter.\textsuperscript{16} Consciousness studies developed an audience through such shared spaces.

Self-actualization itself was theorized and put into therapeutic practice most popularly by Carl Jung (1875-1963) and Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). Their texts contributed crucially to consciousness studies and the self-actualization movement, especially starting in the 1950s. In that decade, Jung published his most metaphysical analyses, including work on synchronicities and flying saucers, and soon after his death his posthumously published

\textsuperscript{16} For a brief history on one such metaphysical bookstore, see “History of Watkins,” Watkins Books website, 2010, accessed 1 July 2016 at \url{http://www.watkinsbooks.com/shop-history}. Many metaphysical bookstores also hold events and have a space for public or private gatherings.
autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963) appeared. Jung incorporated anomalous and mystical experiences into his definition of individuation, the process by which people achieved the goal of “wholeness,” that is, realizing their greatest personal potential. Individuation was accomplished, for example, through active imagination in which people used creative practices like drawing and writing to access their psyche in a state between being awake and being asleep. Influenced by Jung, Maslow gained wide credibility both among psychologists and lay people seeking their life’s purpose through the publication of *Motivation and Personality* (1954) and his subsequent books. Maslow formulated both utilitarian and more creative forms of what he called self-actualization, which were adapted and circulated through a new industry of “self-help” books and workshops. Most of these self-improvement tools addressed a post-war desire for material prosperity – what the sociologist Steven Tipton called a “utilitarian individualism” that guided people to find fulfilling careers, enlarge their property and wealth, and pursue leisure. Then there were those for whom utilitarian individualism was not enough. They sought a form of self-actualization that connected them to a sense of self that would help

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them, as the historian of Asian religions Frederic Spiegelberg (1897-1994) argued, to better comprehend their very existence, the miracle of their being, and a sense of unity with humanity and cosmos “beyond the narrow limitations of... reasoning.” Their goal was “to experience the bewildering, monstrous miracle of this our being here and now, in this moment on earth.”

Through a self-directed approach, individuals self-actualized in diverse, dynamic, and personalized ways – not necessarily consciously practicing self-actualization, but documenting and reflecting on it when writing on their experiences and outcomes. Self-actualization was frequently recognized retrospectively, after it had occurred. It meant different things to different people. The common factor was that these individuals felt that, through self-reflexive exploration, they had achieved something greater in their lives.

The goal for psychologists in studying and modelling self-actualization was, as Maslow wrote, to “enlarge our concept of the human personality by reaching into the ‘higher’ levels of human nature” through subjective experiences of imagination, dreams, mysticism, and personal transcendence. Self-actualization was an individual project for their clients to achieve. Rather than pathologizing and distancing themselves from their clients, Jungian and Maslovian psychologists actively empathized with them, becoming participants in their patients’ processes of self-actualization. The historian of American thought and culture Linda Sargant Wood writes that Maslow “encouraged psychologists to fully empathize, love,

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21 See Binkley, 5-10.


23 In the previous chapter, I showed how empathy was an essential tool in gaining greater access to poltergeist households, enabling William Roll to collect more detailed data on the relationship between the phenomenon and focus persons, thereby advancing the psychokinesis hypothesis that there was a co-creative interaction between the two.
care for, and experience the other ‘through becoming the other’” – what Maslow described as a “mystical fusion in which the two people become one in a phenomenological way that has been best described by mystics, Zen Buddhists, peak experiencers, lovers, estheticians, etc.” As I show in the case studies below, similarly empathetic guidance outside of therapeutic settings could help individuals comprehend unusual life events, such as poltergeist manifestations. Empathetic mentors, by and large, would support but not meddle in individuals’ self-actualization processes. Jung and Maslow emphasized that the therapist’s role was to be receptive and passive, listening to what their patient was telling them, through what Maslow called “careful observation of a noninterfering sort.” Non-interference was crucial to enable people to guide themselves through the process of self-actualization, and empathetic mentors such as Hal Chibbett and George Owen applied such an approach to their own involvement in poltergeist-type cases and experiments.

In the three cases analysed, I will be determining how the lives of poltergeist focus persons transformed positively a result of their self-actualizing “experiences as experiments.” Supported by empathetic people, participants realized meaning in the poltergeist events and authorized self-directed exploration of the phenomenon in relation to who they were and who they wanted to be. Each case contributed data to the broader field of consciousness studies, often beyond what was admissible under the typical terms of psychical research and parapsychology. In these cases, faith in oneself appears to be the crucial historical element that advanced knowledge about the poltergeist like never before.

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24 Wood, 144, 157; Maslow quote from Abraham H. Maslow, The Psychology of Science, 103-104.
Shirley and Donald

Shirley Hitchings (1940-) was 15 years old in February 1956 when strange physical manifestations began to occur around her that would dramatically affect her life. Where most poltergeist-type cases lasted weeks or a couple of months, this one went on for twelve years – from a time that many considered to be an atypically late childhood for Shirley to a what she calls a comparatively “normal” life-path as a wife and mother in the 1960s.26 The poltergeist-type events ended not long after the birth of her first child. These events developed in a way that, according to Shirley’s own account, appeared to guide her through the challenges of entering adult responsibilities. What made these events special among all poltergeist cases is that they involved intelligible communications – especially notes that would appear around the house. Shirley, her parents, and Chibbett soon realized that these messages were meaningful. The messages addressed things that were going on in the family and the investigation. They depended on Shirley’s presence. In my historical analysis of her account in this section, I argue that Shirley, with the support of her parents and Chibbett, authorized the interactive, communicative process until both she and the phenomenon, whatever it actually was, came to terms with her adult life as an office worker, wife, and mother.27 From Shirley’s perspective, she and her father were simply relieved when the events, which were often unnerving, ended. Shirley said she was unaware of having a “conscious part in any of the happenings,” but she actively participated in communication processes and anomalous events which, she writes, changed her life,

26 Shirley Hitchings to Christopher Laursen, March 19, 2015, e-mail correspondence.
though in ways that she did not see as positive at the time because they were so disruptive.28

The poltergeist-type events commenced at a particularly challenging juncture in Shirley’s life. At the time, Shirley lived with her “staunchly religious” Anglican parents: Wally, 47, who drove the underground Northern Line trains and Kitty, 51, a housewife.29 The Hitchingses rented a terrace house in the south London district of Battersea, also occupied by Wally’s mother and a relative who paid rent. The mid-1950s continued to be austere times as Britain recovered from the Second World War. Basic needs, such as food and clothing, had been in limited supply. During this time, it was typical for a 15-year-old daughter like Shirley to leave school and earn income that would help contribute to the family.30 She got a job as a dress-cutter at a department store. The transition to work was particularly challenging for Shirley. She preferred being at home, playing with her dolls – generally an activity for younger children, not for a 15-year-old. At the same time, her parents – and by extension those who belonged to her social class – expected her to be part of the adult workforce. Despite that expectation, the Hitchingses were experiencing upward mobility. By 1956, they were among the one-third of British households who had purchased a new luxury for their home, the television set.31 Within a few years, the family no longer

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28 Shirley Hitchings to Christopher Laursen, May 19, 2016, e-mail correspondence. There are possibilities in my historical interpretation of Shirley’s case that may not be apparent to her. It is important to emphasize here that my interpretations are presented in relation to the two cases below which involved active participation and interactive communication.


31 In Chapter 1 of *The Poltergeist Prince of London*, Hitchings and Clark write: “Dominating one corner was a large television set. This was a real luxury item for Battersea in 1956 and it was a focal point for much of the family’s day-to-day life.” For statistics on television ownership in Britain, see Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board (London), “Television ownership in private domestic households 1956-2016 (millions),” accessed 1 July 2016 at [http://www.barb.co.uk/resources/tv-facts/tv-ownership](http://www.barb.co.uk/resources/tv-facts/tv-ownership); and Tise Vahimagi, “TV in the 1950s,” *BFI*
needed a boarder in the house to supplement their income. And in 1964, Wally and Kitty could purchase a home of their own. Overall, it appeared that the family was caught up in the optimism that came with upward mobility. Many other families who experienced the poltergeist phenomenon commonly endured economic or interpersonal hardships. Fodor and Roll argued that in such conditions, individuals could feel repressed – that they could not effectively express how they felt or how they wanted to be – thus, in rare instances, resulting in a physical release of such inner tensions as a poltergeist. Tensions did not seem as obvious in the Hitchings family as they did in other cases, but there did appear to be a trigger: Shirley had to work during a time in her life in which she was still enjoying childhood.

Ten weeks after Shirley began working at the department store, poltergeist events commenced: tapping sounds, moving objects, and some spontaneous fires. The family sensed other spooky things, including “ghostly whispering” and floating lightforms. They occurred mostly around Shirley, manifesting not only at her home, but at her workplace. It was rare among poltergeist cases for the physical manifestations to accompany focus persons to other locations. Shirley wrote that she even heard tapping noises when going home on the bus once. During this time, her workmates “could see that Shirley was exhausted and distressed from a lack of sleep.” Tapping noises at work upset her co-workers. Furthermore, the taps were heard during an examination of Shirley by the store’s


doctor. He ordered her to take two weeks off. The manifestations affected Shirley, her family, and co-workers physically and emotionally.\(^{33}\)

During Shirley’s sick leave at home, she and her family came to realize that the tapping noises were not just random – they were communicative. The family documented an interactive process of asking questions and hearing taps respond with two taps for “yes” or one tap for “no.”\(^{34}\) Soon after, they reported that the taps could, albeit rather tediously, count out letters of the alphabet, producing more elaborate messages.\(^{35}\) The family realized that the communication depended on their active participation. Through this communication process, a personality was identified by the Hitchingses and Chibbett in the tapped-out answers: his name was “Donald.” At first, as recorded in transcripts of the messages, Donald identified as a childhood playmate of Shirley’s who had moved away; at one point he claimed to have died – a claim refuted when the family found out her former playmate was still alive and well.\(^{36}\) Donald then communicated that he was the last dauphin in line for the French throne, Louis XVII (1785-1795), the eldest son of King Louis XVI (1754-1793) who was beheaded during the French Revolution. The taps communicated that Donald was the same age as Shirley. This sensational claim grabbed more than the family’s attention; it also attracted the attention of the press. Through Donald – purportedly the spirit of a historical figure, a young prince no less – Shirley herself had become the centre of

\(^{33}\) Hitchings and Clark, *The Poltergeist Prince of London*, Kindle Edition. Green balls of light are described in Chapter 7. Ghostly whispers are described in Chapters 7, 8, and 18. The incidents at the workplace and bus are covered in Chapters 2 and 3.

\(^{34}\) The yes/no response code was devised by Shirley with a newspaper reporter, Ross Werge of *The South Western Star*. Hitchings and Clark, Chapter 2, *The Poltergeist Prince of London*, Kindle Edition.

\(^{35}\) The Hitchingses decided on this approach because they did not wish to allow a Ouija board in the house to communicate with the “spirit.” Hitchings and Clark, Chapter 2, *The Poltergeist Prince of London*, Kindle Edition.

\(^{36}\) The tapped communications first claimed to be from a boy named Ronald, who had played with Shirley when they were children. When Ronald’s family responded to a letter Chibbett had written to them in regards to Ronald, they sent the reply to a relative of their in London, who in turn passed the information to the Hitchingses. Ronald’s parents emphasized that they wanted nothing to do with the situation. Hitchings and Clark, Chapters 2 and 12, *The Poltergeist Prince of London*, Kindle Edition.
attention. The press reports alerted a Fortean psychical researcher, Hal Chibbett (1900-1978), to the case. Chibbett and Shirley’s father Wally became the primary documenters of the communications with Donald during this time which made it possible to examine and interpret the messages.

Chibbett empathized with the family’s situation and became a supportive friend to them. He helped to direct the process of communication. He explored various possibilities that Shirley’s parents had not considered, such as psychology and psi. In his critical analysis, Chibbett documented, assessed, and sought to verify the evidence of the case in his notes. Shirley wrote: “At the time a lot was kept from me by Mr Chibbett and my parents, to protect me from harm or worry.” They kept Shirley “mostly unaware” of what they discussed about “‘her’ poltergeist. In fact, Chibbett was always wary that he might be dealing with the product of Shirley’s subconscious mind and so he tried to avoid influencing her with his own speculations.” As a reader of Charles Fort’s works, Chibbett understood that Shirley could become socially marginalized through public attention. He guided the family through inquiries and interventions from the press, spiritualists, and other curiosity seekers.

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37 Shirley even appeared on the BBC Television program *Highlight* (although no poltergeist-type phenomenon occurred during the broadcast); see Hitchings and Clark, Chapters 2 and 5, *The Poltergeist Prince of London*, Kindle Edition. There are many examples of press attention throughout the book, and a full list of newspaper and magazine articles included in its bibliography. In spiritualist séances, theosophical teachings, and post-war channelling, famous historical figures and ascended masters reportedly appeared, although my colleagues the religious scholar and Spiritualist medium David Gordon Wilson and the anthropologist Jack Hunter note that in their ethnographic studies of mediumship, celebrity personalities rarely make appearances (shared with formal Research Ethics Board consent from a Facebook conversation, 3 July 2016). In Michael F. Brown’s study of channelling, he found that the higher up the social and spiritual hierarchy the messages originated, the more credibility and value they had. Channellers described the importance of connecting to “the highest sources.” In an interview with Brown, one theosophical channeller, Jill Parsons, described how channelling just any spirit would be “like hanging out at Bud’s Bar and Grill” (Brown, 23). The channelled dialogues simply would not have the same level of metaphysical guidance and insight. See Brown, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). In spiritualist séances, the fame and hierarchical position of certain spirits may have enhanced the charisma of mediums. For an example of séance sittings that were guided by famous historical figures, see Grant and Jane Solomon, *The Scole Experiment: Scientific Evidence for Life After Death* (London: Piatkus, 1999).


seekers. Chibbett and Shirley’s parents actively participated with Shirley in a process of realizing meaning and authorizing engaged communication with the phenomenon.

Authorization involved two things: first, the Hitchingses allowed Donald to be present—that is to exist as part of their daily lives; and second, they actively communicated and negotiated with the personality. To ease co-existence between the Hitchingses and the phenomenon, the family gave in to demands communicated by Donald. A prime example is how Donald’s messages prevented Shirley from returning to work – thus enabling her to stay at home to “play” with Donald and her dolls. Whenever the topic arose of Shirley getting a job, Donald’s communications made it clear that was unacceptable. For example, in May 1956, her father Wally accompanied Shirley to a job interview at a bank. “Donald tapped there,” he recorded in his journal, but fortunately “nobody noticed anything.” Shirley got the job, but the night before her first day at the bank, Donald tapped out a warning message: “IF THINK OF GOING TO WORK MONDAY I BREAK EVERY BIT OF BANK UP... I KNOW WHAT IN YOUR MIND.” Wally logged how the house was thrown into a dishevelled state, a bed sheet was torn, and there was a spontaneous localized fire. House keys were missing the next morning, and Wally wrote, “Shirley did not go to work for fear of what he would do.” When Shirley was offered an opportunity to commence work the following week, the household ruckus reportedly continued, and she never did start work at the bank. Calm returned, as did Shirley’s home life with Donald.

The Hitchingses continued to communicate with Donald, gave in to his demands to avoid havoc, and recognized his existence like that of a family member. Through these practices, the Hitchingses authorized and strengthened Donald’s presence. At that, the mode of communication changed. The messages conveyed through audible tapping stopped as

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notes began to appear spontaneously around the house, allegedly written by Donald himself (most of these notes were filed with the documents of the case study).\footnote{Arrangements are currently being made to have the documents formally archived.} Crucial to this process of authorization, the family said that they did not believe that Shirley wrote the messages, consciously or unconsciously. This faith, belief, or lack of critical doubt appeared to further empower Donald as a “spirit” being.\footnote{For further analysis, see Discussion chapter in Hitchings and Clark, The Poltergeist Prince of London, Kindle Edition.} As I show below in the Philip experiment, when there was a lack of faith in the veracity of the physical manifestations, the poltergeist events tended to diminish. Such evidence favoured the psychokinesis hypothesis that the poltergeist was co-created through the interactions between living persons and the unknown source of the physical phenomenon.\footnote{For a study of how faith and doubt play into reported physical manifestations, see the clinical psychologists Walter von Lucadou and Frauke Zahradnik, “Predictions of the Model of Pragmatic Information about RSPK,” Proceedings of Presented Papers from the Parapsychological Association Convention 2004, 99-112.}

Through interactive participation, Shirley experienced an ontological transformation in ways that were not evident for focus persons in the majority of other poltergeist case studies. Her participation guided her between two major life phases: childhood and motherhood. Before the events began, Shirley was an adolescent schoolgirl who still enjoyed the activities of childhood, especially playing with dolls.\footnote{For details on Shirley and Donald’s play with dolls, see Hitchings and Clark, Chapters 13, 14, 16, 18, 22, 26, 28, 34, 35, 37, and the Discussion chapter, The Poltergeist Prince of London, Kindle Edition.} The messages conveyed through the Donald personality prevented her from having to work as her parents expected. Once the family authorized Donald’s presence, he became a crucial part of Shirley’s adolescence. The notes expressed ideas typical among teenaged girls that Shirley herself denied feeling – such as having crushes on young actors.\footnote{Interest in the actor Jeremy Spenser is first noted in August 1956 in Hitchings and Clark, Chapter 16, The Poltergeist Prince of London, Kindle Edition.} Fan letters to male celebrities were written and put into envelopes; other notes asked Shirley’s parents to put them in the
post—which they did. In return, autographed pictures were received and pinned up on Shirley’s bedroom wall. The family claimed that one such picture of the teen actor Jeremy Spenser wept salty tears (Wally tasted them)—a phenomenon historically associated with miraculous religious icons and statues. Uncanny predictions were made through Donald’s notes: Wally and Chibbett documented how the notes predicted celebrities having accidents, for example, which were verified the next day in newspaper articles. While Chibbett thought the celebrity infatuations were typical of an adolescent girl, Shirley was adamant that they were Donald’s interest and not her own. One can only speculate here. Was Donald expressing desires that Shirley herself could not? To this day, Shirley writes that she did not experience romantic feelings for the celebrities. But somehow, the appearances of the notes seemed to serve as a sort of permission to help guide Shirley into adulthood. The notes began to decline in September 1958 when, at the age of 17, Shirley took on her first full-time job at a stationery firm, thereby taking on adult responsibilities. The Hitchingses reported that the notes periodically continued to appear, particularly at crucial life moments such as beginning dating, entering into marriage, and becoming a mother. Donald, whatever or whoever he was, seemed to act like a guide or conduit through which Shirley could cope with these life changes.

48 According to his notes, Chibbett, while impressed by the predictions, was not always certain such predictions were prophetic as Donald tended to make clusters of such predictions, not all of which came to pass. Hitchings and Clark, Chapters 17, 20, 28, and analysis in the Discussion chapter, The Poltergeist Prince of London, Kindle Edition.
50 Hitchings and Clark, Chapters 30 and 37, The Poltergeist Prince of London, Kindle Edition. In August 1963, when 22-year-old Shirley met her future husband Derek, a Decca television factory worker, a note from Donald gave them his blessing. They married in 1965. In 1966, Donald informed Shirley by note that she was pregnant, and he was correct. By then, fewer notes were showing up. All signs of Donald ceased by 1968.
51 Physical sensations prior to poltergeist manifestations were also noted in cases investigated by William Roll, covered in Chapter 3.
How can one comprehend such complex and anomalous interactions in relationship to how people thought about adolescent development at the time? Adolescent psychology was only in formation around the time of Shirley’s case. In Britain, drawing from G. Stanley Hall’s concept of “storm and stress,” Sigmund Freud’s daughter Anna outlined how the “mental economy” of the adolescent was not unlike that of people enduring “unhappy love affairs” and “periods of mourning” – an “emotional struggle” of “extreme urgency and immediacy.” Given these extreme emotional states, adolescence was a particularly difficult period of life for psychologists to study or treat. Psychological treatments aimed to meet the demands of parents and educators to deal with more immediate behavioural problems among individual adolescents. In the cases of Shirley Hitchings and of Matthew Manning (below), however, there was no overt emotional struggle, but rather more subtle ones, such as Shirley having to work when she preferred to stay home and play with dolls. During the course of the case, psychological and medical experts assessed Shirley. In February 1957, Chibbett invited a psychologist, W.E. Manning, to interview her. The psychologist called it a case of dissociation. Chibbett felt that this diagnosis failed to address the underlying cause of the physical manifestations. A year earlier, in March 1956, doctors at London’s Maudsley Hospital found no physical or mental abnormalities when examining Shirley, but prescribed medication “to calm her down.” Shirley recalled how Donald claimed that he


dissolved the pills in water, possibly to prevent her taking them.\textsuperscript{55} Overall, there were few indications in the documents that Shirley required counselling or medical treatment. While Shirley and her parents felt Donald was a spirit, Chibbett considered that there was the potential of a connection between Donald’s notes and Shirley’s unconscious. Given either explanation, and even if one were to doubt the case as anything but Shirley’s own actions (conscious or otherwise), Donald seemed to serve a transformative purpose in Shirley’s life.\textsuperscript{56}

What other phenomenon could be compared to Donald to better understand his role in Shirley’s life? Contextually, there was research emerging in the early to mid-twentieth century around the imagination as a crucial tool in childhood and adolescent development – notably around imaginary or pretend companions. Pretend companions are estimated to be experienced by 18 to 30 percent of people, mostly in early childhood. In such situations, researchers found that children can readily distinguish when their companion is a figment of their imagination as opposed to what they consider to be a real entity, such as “God, magic, unseen entities, and potentially miraculous events.”\textsuperscript{57} In Shirley’s case, Donald was seen as the latter – a real entity, not an imaginary one. This is a crucial distinction to make. Yet might a personality like Donald and an imaginary friend serve some similar functions? The question is speculative, but can be historically contextualized to better illuminate how

\textsuperscript{55} Hitchings and Clark, Discussion, \textit{The Poltergeist Prince of London}, Kindle Edition.
ontological transformation — a change in the individual’s way of being — arises in both situations.

Since the 1980s, research on pretend companions and the imagination has expanded, particularly in recent decades.\textsuperscript{58} Such developmental and cognitive research has not been applied to poltergeist-type cases such as Shirley’s, but in light of her case and the two others I examine below, the research is worth introducing to raise new questions for current or future cases that are similar. The reader should not take this analysis as a conflation of two very different things — Shirley’s experience of “Donald” reportedly had associated physical phenomena while “imaginary friends” that are commonly experienced in early childhood have no anomalous physical manifestations. Rather, research on pretend companions opens up new ways to consider experiences like Shirley’s in that both imaginary friends and poltergeist personalities appear to guide a specific individual through processes of cognitive development and problem solving. Pretend companion research might help us understand why “Donald” appeared to be an important guiding figure in Shirley’s youth, enabling another way to examine the historical events and think about what the psychokinesis hypothesis proposed. Twentieth-century studies have largely argued that pretend companions are a healthy part of childhood development, countering social tendencies to view it as a negative trait or psychopathological.\textsuperscript{59} Researchers have found that the more free time children have, the more tendencies they have to engage in imaginative play.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{58} Klausen and Passman, 355-56; Dubas et al, 390.
\textsuperscript{60} Sara Smilansky, The Effects of Sociodramatic Play on Disadvantaged Preschool Children (New York: Wiley, 1968), noted in Jerome L. Singer and Dorothy G. Singer, “Historical Overview of Research on Imagination in
Some adolescents create imaginary companions as well. The German developmental psychologist Inge Seiffge-Krenke, among the few researchers who have studied imaginary companions among adolescents, noted how the companions “supported the adolescent during the process of developing his/her identity.” The phenomenon has been most often reported among “highly creative adolescents” who are “socially competent” with “good coping abilities” as “a temporary outlet of affects and impulses the child cannot otherwise express.” An imaginary companion acts as a guide “in the process of individuation and differentiation but also reflects egocentric tendencies.” A number of studies have argued such creative behaviour is positive in a young person’s individual and social development. Shirley’s creative play with dolls or, as we will see below, the Philip group and Matthew Manning’s creative approaches to their situations suggest that creativity is a component shared between focus persons in these poltergeist-type cases and young people who have pretend companions. Again, we should not conflate the poltergeist and imaginary friends, but the correlation with creativity is worth noting.

As with the poltergeist, the presence of the imaginary companion tends to be temporary, often lasting only weeks or a few months, but it can occasionally span many years. Seiffge-Krenke gives an example from a 1951 study by the French clinical psychologist Jean Piaget:

[Piaget] regarded the imaginary companion as a healthy manifestation of a child’s symbolic or fantasy play. Observing his own 3-year-old daughter Jacqueline and her "aseau" he commented, “This strange creature, which

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61 Seiffge-Krenke, 137. Also see Taylor (1999), 4-6, 135-36, and Chapter 4.
62 Seiffge-Krenke, 137-39. Also see Taylor (1999), 4-6, 135-36, and Chapter 4.
engaged her attention for about two months was of help in all that she learned or devised, gave her moral encouragement in obeying orders and consoled her when she was unhappy. Then it disappeared."\(^{63}\)

The relationship noted by Piaget between his daughter and her imaginary companion is not unlike the one between Shirley and Donald. While Donald’s notes were demanding, even bossy, they nonetheless seemed to guide and support Shirley. Researchers have noted that imaginative play among children, including play with imaginary companions, enables them to “transcend and transform reality and potentially provides a practice ground for cognitive skills that are important for creative development.”\(^{64}\) In most cases, this practice was not an escape from a hostile or repressive home or work environment as Fodor and Roll suggested in their studies of the poltergeist. Researchers have found that imaginary companions usually arose in situations in which young people had relatively stable and happy lives, with overall good parental relationships and healthy friendships and social skills. These are common factors found in the three case studies compared in this chapter where focus persons had overall supportive, positive environments in which to explore the poltergeist-type events.\(^{65}\) Studies of both imaginary friends and the poltergeist leave more questions than answers. Neither is well understood.\(^{66}\) What does seem clear is that personalities associated with a poltergeist, like Donald, could – like imaginary friends – serve as guides to personal development, enabling ontological transformations.

Shirley herself decided that once Donald disappeared, she would carry on as if the poltergeist-type events had never been in her life. “When he went, I made up my mind that

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\(^{64}\) Taylor (2013), 5.

\(^{65}\) Taylor (1999), 139.

\(^{66}\) Taylor (1999), 154.
I would lock everything away and forget it because I did not want it to return and affect my children.” She adds, “Thank goodness, since him leaving, my life has been good with no other supernatural problems.” Shirley feared that her own children would be affected by the poltergeist, as if it were somehow transferable between generations. Since co-writing the book with James Clark in 2013, Shirley has sought further answers, scouring historical data for evidence of the French royal family’s connections to Donald and her home in Battersea. “I would still like to know exactly what it was,” she writes. She has sought evidence to support that Donald was a spirit as he claimed, detaching herself from having any involvement in his manifestation.

In Shirley’s case, significant things were happening that were not typically reported in poltergeist cases. The Hitchingses and Chibbett documented how they realized they could actively participate in communication with the phenomenon through tapping noises, and later written notes. They wrote about how the communications deepened through authorization – active participation between them and the phenomenon. To maintain that authorization, they suspended critical doubt and treated Donald as a member of the family. They had faith that what was happening was real. Chibbett and Shirley’s parents protected Shirley from being exposed to various speculations or doubts that could upset the situation. Interactions with Donald guided Shirley between what many considered to be a “late” childhood through to motherhood, at which point Shirley decided she wanted a “normal” life-path. Therefore, the poltergeist experience helped bring about an ontological transformation for Shirley. The publication of *The Poltergeist Prince of London* in 2013 enabled her to contribute the whole of the case’s data to those who sought to compare

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67 Shirley’s son found Hal Chibbett’s papers kept in her attic when he was 19, and later her daughter learned of the events as well. Shirley Hitchings to Christopher Laursen, March 19, 2015, e-mail correspondence.

68 Shirley Hitchings to Christopher Laursen, May 19, 2016, e-mail correspondence.
phenomena not readily explained. Where Shirley was adamant that she would carry on with what she called “a more normal life” after Donald, two other case studies involving active participation had significantly different aims and outcomes. In one, the Philip experiment, participants sought a greater potential in life that included psi. In the case of Matthew Manning, he made the practice of the extraordinary central to his life as an energy healer.

**The Group and Philip**

At the beginning of this chapter, I introduced the five-year-long Philip experiment. It involved a Toronto-based group of eight women and men who acted both as participants and experimenters. The group set a common goal for the experiment: to materially exteriorize a character that they had imagined. They claimed success in creating “Philip” through poltergeist-type physical manifestations – raps and table movements – which enhanced the group’s confidence. At the time of the experiment, group members testified as to how, in various ways, their participation was bringing about ontological transformation – a feeling that their lives were changing. They entered the experiment as “ordinary” people, and through it, they felt as if they had become psychokinetic adepts. Together, they could demonstrate physical manifestations that were usually associated with the spontaneous poltergeist. These demonstrations advanced the psychokinesis hypothesis of

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69 Shirley Hitchings to Christopher Laursen, May 19, 2016, e-mail correspondence.
70 Iris Owen and Margaret (Sue) Sparrow outlined the group’s research question in *Conjuring Up Philip: An Adventure in Psychokinesis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), xv: “If six or eight ordinary people,” none of whom claimed mediumship abilities, “each have rudimentary PK ability, can they, by working together, add up their separate contributions of PK force so as to manifest a physical effect?” The key phrase used here is “ordinary people.” None of the group members claimed to have controllable psi abilities before the experiment.
the poltergeist like never before. The experiment opened a new life-path for the group members, in which they felt like they were developing “greater human potential.”

The Philip experiment was conducted through the New Horizons Research Foundation, which broadly fit into what I term consciousness studies. New Horizons was founded in 1970 by the psychical researcher and former Cambridge University lecturer on mathematics and natural sciences Dr. Alan Robert George (A.R.G.) Owen (1919-2003), who went by George, and his wife Iris (1916-2007), a former nurse and Cambridgeshire County councillor. George and Iris were invited by the Canadian venture capitalist Ben Webster (1930-1997) to relocate to Toronto to form the research foundation. New Horizons sought to extend “the frontiers of knowledge” around “little understood” human abilities, “rare happenings” that were “difficult to understand or to fit into existing scientific paradigms.”

George Owen was critical of “certain esteemed professions, including medical practitioners and clergy” who “appear not only to be ignorant of the reality of [anomalous] occurrences but indifferent and unwilling to learn.” Owen wrote: “Unless one has worked for a considerable time in this field one is quite unaware of the frequency of these cases and of their troubling nature to those experiencing them.” New Horizons was actively responsive to individuals who sought help and advice for their anomalous experiences. If the Owens could show that the poltergeist was a psychokinetic phenomenon, that people could intentionally manifest it and learn to control it, then the poltergeist could be revealed as a natural force through which one could realize greater human potential.

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New Horizons’ work in the 1970s happened amidst a surge of public interest in the further reaches of frontier science exploration. The growing Canadian metropolis of Toronto was well situated as a crossroads between British psychical research traditions and the American enthusiasm for scientific advancement and human potential. In that same decade, new technologies and ideas were transforming how people knew the planet. The earth’s surface was becoming accurately mapped in great detail through America’s Landsat satellite program. 74 During post-war decades of decolonialization, independent nation states established relatively settled borders, and despite the Cold War, processes of capitalist globalization were underway through advanced trade and communications. 75 There were new projects to comprehend how earth processes were interconnected through studies of the atmosphere, hydrosphere, the biosphere, living populations of humans and non-humans, and how humans impacted natural systems. 76 The next frontier became outer space: humans set foot on the moon, and the Voyager and Pioneer probes explored the solar system and beyond. 77 The next frontier was also inner space: using new technologies to comprehend the intricate workings of the body and the brain, and exploring the mind and consciousness. Atomic and quantum scales were being deciphered. 78 The Philip

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experiment melded research of inner space (medical and “psy” studies), human experience (humanities), and the physical world (sciences) in a way that could not be wholly accepted by any one of those studies, but could be investigated in a new space that bridged them all—consciousness studies.  

While New Horizons created a new space to experiment between subjectivity (creative imagination and consciousness) and objectivity (recordable data), the researchers did not have the framework or resources to advance their new science beyond demonstrating the Philip experiment to observers. A 1976 book written about the experiment, Conjuring Up Philip, was printed in hardcover and mass paperback editions. While many notable parapsychologists and scientists observed the experiment, it gained very little attention in their peer-reviewed journals. Reviewing Conjuring Up Philip for the Society for Psychical Research’s journal, Frank Spedding argued that “an atmosphere of levity or even frivolity” and a practice of singing “light-hearted songs as a help to a successful outcome” in the Philip experiment went “against the grain” for “most scientifically minded persons.” As William

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79 In “Philip’s Fourth Year,” New Horizons Journal 2, pt. 3, no. 8 (June 1977), 14, Iris Owen reported that the Philip experiment had been summarized in several books: Jeffrey Mishlove, The Roots of Consciousness: Psychic Liberation through History, Science, and Experience (New York: Random House, 1975); Lyall Watson, Gifts of Unknown Things (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976); Lawrence L. LeShan, Alternate Realities: The Search for the Full Human Being (New York: M. Evans, 1976); and William R. Corliss, Strange Minds: A Sourcebook of Unusual Mental Phenomena (Glen Arm, Maryland: Sourcebook Project, 1976). The Philip experiment was also widely covered by media, and was written about by journalists in books, such as Michael H. Brown’s PK (Blauvelt, NY: Steinerbooks, 1976) and Dan Greenburg’s Something’s There: My Adventures in the Occult (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976).


81 Frank Spedding, book review of Conjuring Up Philip: An Adventure in Psychokinesis (1976) in the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research (JSPR) 49, no. 771 (March 1977), 463-64. For more on Spedding, see the letter from Richard Garden, Correspondence, JSPR 50, no. 785 (September 1980), 485-86. Frank Spedding, who died in 1980, was a former British intelligence officer.
Roll had found in his field and laboratory studies of RSPK, the Philip group (and those who conducted related earlier experiments in Britain – Kenneth Batcheldor, Colin Brookes-Smith, and D.W. Hunt) proposed that scientific tenets of imposing objective controls and a sceptical approach tended to “inhibit phenomena.” If frivolity and singing were required, then it seemed as if such an experiment was unlikely to be studied by dispassionate scientists. For George Owen, New Horizon’s goal was to move beyond the “cold and aseptic” experimental method that was standard in psychical research and parapsychology. To practice their new experimental approach, the Philip group made their own space in a room in a Toronto house rather than using a research laboratory. They invited both scientific observers and media camera crews into the room where the physical phenomenon was demonstrated. Once their results were established, the phenomenon could be replicated in any space, including by other groups based in Waterloo, Ontario, and Montréal. The Philip group experimented in a Kent State University physics laboratory near Akron, Ohio, where the upward thrust of the table was measured with a strain gauge. They demonstrated the effect on television shows like the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s religious affairs program Man Alive (1967-2000) and on Larry Solway’s syndicated talk show (1974-76).

But by the fall of 1977, the Philip group became tired of demonstrating the effect as a

84 Other groups of people replicated the experiment by inventing different personalities: Lilith, a French resistance fighter during the Second World War; a talking dolphin named Silk; a female extraterrestrial from Venus; and even Santa Claus. See Iris M. Owen, “Continuation of the Philip Experiment,” New Horizons 2, no. 2 (June 1976), 4-5; Iris M. Owen, “Philip’s Fourth Year,” New Horizons 2, no. 3, part 8 (June 1977), 13-14; Owen and Sparrow, Conjuring Up Philip, 214.
85 Iris M. Owen, “Continuation of the Philip Experiment,” 3.
novelty for observers. They were uncertain of how to further study the “psychokinetic force involved” given their limited resources. The Philip experiment has largely faded into historical obscurity, yet while it was active, it spoke to the “greater human potential” sought by knowledge-seekers through consciousness studies. Its findings demonstrated how a commitment to both subjectivity and objectivity appeared to be essential to the psychokinesis hypothesis.87

Subjective rapport was central to the process of building confidence among the group members – and to co-creating poltergeist-type manifestations. In the first year of their experiment, the group failed to “conjure” up Philip, but they developed a harmonious relationship.88 Iris Owen read about the British psychical researchers Batcheldor, Brookes-Smith, and Hunt’s experiments in the 1960s and early ’70s in which they replicated Victorian table rapping with groups of people.89 The British psychical researchers argued that it was not spirits that communicated in their experiments, but rather something that “manifested exosomatically” from living persons, “a psychological skill which can be acquired through aptitude and experience by virtually all human beings.” They found that the physical manifestations appeared to be co-created through interactions between the human participants and the phenomenon.90 The Toronto group decided to replicate the approach of the British experiments as a way to communicate with Philip. In order to accomplish this,

87 “Termination of the Philip Experiment,” New Horizons 2, pt. 4, no. 9 (September 1978), 1. The Vision TV documentary series Enigma aired a documentary on the experiment, “Conjuring Philip,” in 2006. There was a horror film, The Quiet Ones (2014), directed by John Pogue, that claimed to be based on the Philip experiment, but bore no resemblance to the case study.

88 In that year, the Philip group practiced meditative concentration to attempt to manifest an apparitional figure, to no avail. See Owen and Sparrow, Conjuring Up Philip, 128-9.

89 Owen and Sparrow, Conjuring Up Philip, xvi, 15-16, 19-20. As the public often did with apparition sightings, spiritualists had characterized such communicative raps as being caused by spirits of the dead. See Shane McCroristine, Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750-1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Alex Owen, The Darkened Room; Oppenheim, The Other World; and Edmund Gurney, F.W.H. Myers, and Frank Podmore, Phantasms of the Living (London: Trübner, 1886).

they recreated certain conditions of a Victorian séance. Rather than concentrating seriously on manifesting Philip, they accessed their “inner children” – a child-like imaginative state of mind. They socialized, sang songs, and joked around – activities that strengthened positive group rapport. Unlike the darkened room typical in séances, the group’s sessions were conducted in full light so that they could clearly observe the results. Within four sessions, the group reported feeling a vibration in the table. This was soon followed by rapping sounds. Iris and her fellow group member Sue wrote about the experience: “The next thing that happened, to their surprise, was that the table started to slide about the floor. It moved quite rapidly, in random fashion, and without any apparent purpose.” Another group member, Dorothy, asked, “I wonder if by chance Philip is doing this?” A loud rap sounded from the table top – “so Philip had come,” Iris and Sue wrote. Without the lively rapport in the sessions, there were no “Philip” manifestations. As had been apparent in the Hitchings case, a supportive rapport appeared to be the central ingredient to conjuring up a poltergeist. By the psychokinesis hypothesis, if manifestations typically seemed to come from the interpersonal tensions in most poltergeist cases, in the Philip experiment, they originated from a joyous bond between the group members. The group argued that the poltergeist did not need tensions to manifest.

In the sessions that followed, the group realized that they could – so long as their morale remained high – continue to produce physical effects within the parameters of the experiment. They believed that somehow, through psychokinesis, they were co-creating the effects attributed to their imagined character Philip. They carefully maintained their

92 The Philip experiment was seen to substantiate Roll’s work on RSPK, particularly after the Miami case. Owen and Sparrow wrote: it “seems as if it might be the transformation of a thought (conscious or unconscious) into an actual physical force that can be heard and seen at work.” Owen and Sparrow, *Conjuring Up Philip*, 13.
positive rapport in order to continue the experiment.\textsuperscript{93} The “yes” or “no” answers that were given through percussive raps mostly agreed with the story the group had created about their imagined character’s life. The answers also seemed to reflect the emotional dynamics of the group. For example, Philip could never settle on a religious identity. He wavered between the different faiths of the group members: Catholic, Protestant, Anglo-Catholic, and Jewish.\textsuperscript{94} Questions where the answer was uncertain or perhaps even embarrassing to the group members, such as asking about Philip’s political allegiances or love life, resulted in tentative scratching noises rather than affirmative or negative knocks.\textsuperscript{95} As the participant-experimenters fleshed out details of the Philip story further through their questions and answers, they began “reacting to him entirely as if he were another member of the group,” much as the Hitchingses had adopted “Donald” as a member of their family.\textsuperscript{96} Iris and Sue wrote: “Philip, or if you prefer, the table, did seem to possess personality characteristics which were not those of any individual member of the group. His personality was a composite one. The personality manifested was, obviously, that which the group as a whole had decided to project.”\textsuperscript{97} These findings seemed consistent with the way that Donald had personality attributes associated with Shirley, but also ones that appeared to be his own. Where Donald was considered by the Hitchingses to be a spirit, Philip was viewed by the group as a “device” to remove “the feeling of ownership of the phenomena from the individual members of the group.” Because the manifestations ran against rationalist

\textsuperscript{93} On the occasion that rapport diminished or when people became self-conscious or inhibited – for example with a group member threatening to banish Philip when there were no immediate raps responding to group questions, or when group members felt doubtful after their friends expressed scepticism, or when the proceedings were feeling “stale” – the Philip effects also diminished. Owen and Sparrow, \textit{Conjuring Up Philip}, 49-51, 65.

\textsuperscript{94} Owen and Sparrow, \textit{Conjuring Up Philip}, 34-5.

\textsuperscript{95} Owen and Sparrow, \textit{Conjuring Up Philip}, 50.

\textsuperscript{96} Owen and Sparrow, \textit{Conjuring Up Philip}, 49. For more on the process of fleshing out the Philip story, see 30-35, 45, 49, 52.

\textsuperscript{97} Owen and Sparrow, \textit{Conjuring Up Philip}, 83.
explanations for how such mechanisms could be created and replicated, the demonstration of “Philip” depended on the group’s faith that the phenomenon was real.\textsuperscript{98}

The most striking commonality between the Philip and Donald cases was the role of the dynamic of child-like play in co-creating physical manifestations. As I showed in the Hitchings case, Donald manifested around a point in Shirley’s life where she was expected to exit her childhood and begin an adult working life at the age of fifteen – at a time when she herself still loved engaging in play with dolls. Much of Donald’s activity circulated around this play.\textsuperscript{99} In the Philip experiment, the University of Toronto psychiatrist Joel Whitton found that the group’s “realization” that child-like play was crucial “dawned gradually, as the sittings progressed.”\textsuperscript{100} Iris and Sue wrote:

\begin{quote}
Perhaps, if this realization had come earlier, they might have had much more difficulty in producing the phenomena. They had achieved, among themselves, a degree of mutual confidence and respect for each other that permitted them to be perfectly relaxed, even childlike in their faith in the real existence of Philip as a personality, at the very least as an object of their experimentation.\textsuperscript{101}
\end{quote}

Whitton called it “childlike creativity,” and Iris and Sue noted that to have faith in the experiment, the group needed to suspend disbelief, much as a child would. The members of the group were close like a family, with George Owen as a supportive father-figure. This creative behaviour was particularly evident in the playful nature of the experiment, with Philip/the table reportedly tapping along to songs and chasing people around the room.\textsuperscript{102}

According to Iris and Sue, “The Philip group believes firmly that Philip is truly a child of their

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{98} Owen and Sparrow, \textit{Conjuring Up Philip}, 94. \\
\textsuperscript{99} Hitchings and Clark, \textit{The Poltergeist Prince of London}, Kindle Edition. \\
\textsuperscript{100} Owen and Sparrow, \textit{Conjuring Up Philip}, 85. Whitton along with George Owen, consulted and observed the group’s activities. They acted as empathetic, guiding figures to the Philip experiment as Shirley’s parents and Hal Chibbett had done for her “experience as experiment.” \\
\textsuperscript{101} Owen and Sparrow, \textit{Conjuring Up Philip}, 85. \\
\textsuperscript{102} Owen and Sparrow, \textit{Conjuring Up Philip}, 85-87.
\end{flushleft}
own creation.” Group member Andy made a similar point: “the Philip phenomena tend to be humorous,” perhaps “because the group resembles a family at play rather than participants in a very detached set of experiments.” Without the child-like play, there was no Philip, and perhaps there would have been no Donald either. In poltergeist cases, the physical manifestations embodied a sense of mischievousness – something that disrupted the ordinary state of things. But such transgressions from the norm were not acceptable within dispassionate scientific frameworks.

While the research made virtually no historical impact on a greater scientific community or on parapsychology and psychical research at the time that the experiment was active, it was contributing something radical about the psychokinesis hypothesis that no one had yet demonstrated: that the effects could be made based on the imagination and rapport of a group of people. The Philip experiment’s findings were generated within the ontological framework put forth by New Horizons that such a project would demonstrate control over psychokinetic abilities. The findings were also generated through the sensory data collected, both observable and affective. The realization that the experiment was becoming a success occurred when the group communicated with the “Philip” persona they had imagined. The group authorized further development of the experiment. They demonstrated the Philip manifestations to many people, and had others replicate it. The scientist George Owen and the psychiatrist Joel Whitton acted as empathetic supporters, endorsing the rapport and child-like play that otherwise would not be acceptable in scientific experiments. The participant-experimenters reported personal ontological

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103 Owen and Sparrow, *Conjuring Up Philip*, 87.
104 Owen and Sparrow, *Conjuring Up Philip*, 164.
transformation. They gained “increased social growth and self-confidence.” Andy, a housewife, wrote that “Shyness on social occasions seems to have disappeared” and “members of the group are far more self-assertive than they were.” Other group members, like Dorothy, also a housewife, said she had started to experience precognitive dreams and clairvoyance since participating in the experiment. She speculated: “Perhaps this can be of some help to me in my own way of life.” Sue felt that a “telepathic bond” had developed between the group members. Sidney, the youngest member of the group, and a sociology student, wrote:

The importance of this work for mankind is so monumental that mere words are not enough. These experiments can lead only to a greater understanding of ourselves. As for myself, the experience has given me a stronger belief in myself as a person. Involvement with the group has been enlightening; the time and effort expended have been well worth while.

The testimonials are striking evidence of an ontological transformation in progress, however, how the group members carried with on their lives after the experiment is undocumented. During the experiment, the group saw themselves as moving toward a life-

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105 Anthropologists as participant-observers have long reported life-altering effects, including anomalous experiences. For a collection of essays on how such experiences in their work transformed anthropologists, see Extraordinary Anthropology: Transformations in the Field, edited by Jean-Guy Goulet and Bruce Granville Miller (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007). Also see Diego Escolar, “Boundaries of Anthropology: Empirics and Ontological Relativism in a Field Experience with Anomalous Luminous Entities in Argentina,” Anthropology and Humanism 37, no. 1 (2012), 27-44; Edith Turner, “The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?” in Anthropology of Consciousness 4, no. 1 (1993), 9-12; and Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes, In Sorcery’s Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989). For more on scholars’ extraordinary experiences and how they affect their work, see Jeffrey J. Kripal, Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism & Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), especially 199-206; Authors of the Impossible, 34, 293 f68, 273-275; and Strieber and Kripal, The Super Natural.

106 Owen and Sparrow, Conjuring Up Philip, 164-5. On p. 72, Owen and Sparrow wrote: “Although the group was beginning to understand how to get the phenomena working (that is, under what conditions they would operate), they were no nearer to understanding why a ‘joint thought’ was able to produce actual physical effects in a table. The scientific implications of this experiment seemed to be enormous.”

107 Owen and Sparrow, Conjuring Up Philip, 167.

108 Owen and Sparrow, Conjuring Up Philip, 170.

109 Owen and Sparrow, Conjuring Up Philip, 169.
path of greater human potential, one in which they were moving beyond the ordinarily human into transhumanism. The futurist Anders Sandberg defines transhumanism as “the view that the human condition is not unchanging and that it can and should be questioned,” and as a commitment to the idea that human life can evolve “beyond its current form and limitations, using science and technology.”\textsuperscript{110} The concept was promoted as a movement by the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley in the 1950s, who described it as “man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing the new possibilities of and for his human nature.”\textsuperscript{111} This concept of becoming “beyond human” flowed through experiments like the one that the Philip group conducted. The group explored ways to manifest and potentially to master psychokinesis as an advanced human ability. However, they were uncertain of how to translate their imagined poltergeist personality into something other than a demonstration of alleged PK, where the mechanisms of the phenomenon could be examined. They ceased the project after four years. The experiment received little to no attention from religious or scientific authorities. Even among psychical researchers and parapsychologists, little more was done to advance the experiment. After four years of successfully demonstrating Philip (and his other imagined siblings), including in science labs and on television programs, the experiment faded into relative obscurity, remembered and replicated mostly by other knowledge-seekers who sought verification of their human or spiritual potential.\textsuperscript{112} During the time of the Philip experiment, however, there was another


\textsuperscript{112} Subsequent attempts to replicate the Philip experiment were noted by the South East London Paranormal Research Group, “Notices: Local Groups,” \textit{The Psi Researcher} 11 (Autumn 1993), 27; Peter Hallson, “Notes on Philip Type Experiments for Local Groups,” \textit{The Paranormal Review} 1 (February 1997), 10-11; and Christopher
case that was going even further. It also involved a poltergeist focus person, Matthew Manning. Rather than setting rigid experimental parameters as the Philip group had done, Matthew continually renegotiated those parameters according to his experiences of interacting with the “energy,” and made a career for himself as an “energy healer.”

Matthew and the Energy

Matthew Manning (1955-) was able to shape what he described as a “crude energy” into something that, for him, was both transcendent and utilitarian. From the time that he first experienced the “energy” as poltergeist-type manifestations when he was eleven years old in 1967, he was unsure of what the energy could be – something that arose from his subconscious through psychokinesis or actual spirits of the dead communicating through him? Ultimately, the source did not matter to him. With the support of family members and mentors, Matthew realized that he could gain control over the “energy” in ways that helped people. As he further explored and developed that sense of control, he authorized a practice in which he mastered its use. He ultimately concentrated on directing the energy into people’s bodies when they had a health concern, and many reported it having positive effects for them. Matthew’s experience existed in a similar historical context to the Philip experiment, where psychokinetic potential in humans was explored as never before. He was influenced both by the traditions of British psychical research and, in his travels to the

Bratcher’s response to Hallson’s article, “Letters: ‘Philip’-Type Experiments,” The Paranormal Review 3 (August 1997), 9-10. The Psi Researcher later became The Paranormal Review, published by the Society for Psychical Research. For related experiments conducted through the hypothesis that experimental sitters were communicating with spirits of the dead, see Grant and Jane Solomon in association with The Scole Experimental Group, The Scole Experiment: Scientific Evidence for Life After Death (London: Piatkus, 1999) and a detailed account of those experimental sittings, Robin P. Foy, Witnessing the Impossible (Diss, Norfolk: Torcal Publications, 2008). There is also the research of the Survival Research Institute of Canada that actively conducts experiments around table-sitting as an effort to establish evidence of survival after death (see http://www.islandnet.com/~sric/research_overview.php).
United States and Canada, by those working in consciousness studies. He helped bring ideas of “greater human potential” to Britain through television appearances (most notably on the journalist David Frost’s show), numerous news and magazine articles, and his best-selling books on his experiences and participation in scientific research: *The Link* (1974), *In the Minds of Millions* (1977), and *The Strangers* (1978), and later on *One Foot in the Stars* (1999), *The Healing Journey* (2001), and *Your Mind Can Heal Your Body* (2007). These books had great appeal among those who were asking questions that were not resolved in the traditions and practices of mainstream science and religion. As with the cases of Shirley Hitchings and the Philip group, there were supportive people involved in Matthew’s case. With that support and his own self-direction, Matthew set himself on an extraordinary life-path as a reputable energy healer.

Matthew’s experience began like many others who historically experienced the poltergeist, but there was a significant difference. Unlike most of the people in the case studies discussed here, Matthew came from an affluent, stable family who had their basic needs largely met. Matthew’s father Derek was an architect who could afford to send his children to private school. Also, unlike other poltergeist cases on record, Matthew’s poltergeist experience came in two waves, years apart from each other. The first wave was from 18 February to 26 March 1967 in his family’s detached house in Cambridge when Matthew was eleven. During that period, Matthew and his father documented a wide

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114 For another case study about an American “sound healer” who took a similar direction through an “extraordinary life-path,” see the documentary film *Song of the New Earth: Tom Kenyon and the Power of Sound* (2014), directed by Ward Serrill.
variety of objects moving seemingly of their own accord: his father’s silver tankard, a flower-filled vase, pottery, chairs, cutlery, plates, a coffee table, and more. At the time, George Owen was a fellow at Trinity College at Cambridge University who taught mathematics and genetics. He was also a well-known poltergeist expert, having investigated numerous cases and written a book, *Can We Explain the Poltergeist?* (1964), considered to be among the most authoritative works on the phenomenon. Knowing the typical outcome of historical poltergeist cases, Owen predicted events would cease within six weeks, which, Matthew wrote, they did after he and his eight-year-old sister Rosalind both witnessed an eraser rise into the air. After the events, Owen wrote to the family: “The force, whatever it may be, resides principally in Matthew.” Owen thought that tensions Matthew was experiencing, perhaps around writing important exams or feelings at odds with his father, might have spontaneously unleashed the poltergeist. As with most poltergeist cases, everything reportedly returned to calm after five weeks.

Matthew wrote that all was quiet until the summer of 1970 when a second, far more intense and ontologically transformative wave of poltergeist events manifested in a seventeenth-century historical house in Linton, just southeast of Cambridge. By then, the Mannings had lived in the house for two years. Matthew was fifteen years old. One day, he recalled being alone in his room and experiencing a variety of poltergeist events. Since his family did not initially see the manifestations, they were sceptical of Matthew’s account. Over Easter 1971, Matthew wrote, “a chaotic holocaust of frighteningly powerful poltergeist

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117 In *One Foot in the Stars*, 5, Matthew wrote that his father was “a very logical man who rarely expressed emotion. His temper could be volcanic, and you could never be sure when it was going to explode or what might trigger it.”
phenomena” erupted, “which was to continue over three months.” He claimed that family rapport strengthened as the poltergeist events continued. As with the Philip group, a strong group rapport appeared connected to the intensity of the events. The family reported often observing objects in movement, vibrating and then launching from their original locations, and turning angles in the air. Such direct observations were highly unusual among poltergeist cases. Childish writing and scribbled drawings spontaneously appeared on walls in the house. Matthew wrote that “they were in fact seen to grow on the wall, from the centre outwards, without any pencil being used.” Among the messages that appeared was one that read “Matthew Beware.” The warning created a sense that the family should take care with whatever it was that was unfolding. When Matthew returned to boarding school after the Easter break, his father, as an empathetic and supportive individual, informed the headmaster what had been going on at home. That contact was followed by a letter from George Owen. This proved to be a useful step, as, unusually for poltergeist cases, the physical manifestations followed Matthew to the boarding school.

The headmaster and a sympathetic matron were crucial in helping negotiate the impact of the events between Matthew, faculty, his peers, and parents at the boarding school. The

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118 Manning, *The Link*, 34-35; *One Foot in the Stars*, 15-16. On Easter Sunday night, Matthew recalled in *The Link*, a huge antique wardrobe inched toward him in his room. His bed vibrated violently. The end of it rose about a foot off the floor, and it “pitched out towards the centre of the room and finally settled at a tangent to the wall.” Downstairs, the settee pulled out at an angle across the room. Going back upstairs, he found that a heavy armchair had moved to his bedroom door entrance.


120 Manning, *The Link*, 38-9; *One Foot in the Stars*, 17.

121 Manning, *The Link*, 37-8; *One Foot in the Stars*, 18.

122 Manning, *The Link*, 40-41; *One Foot in the Stars*, 19.
events reported there were very dramatic compared to most poltergeist cases, and they were verified by testimonials given by peers, including this one by Jon Wills:

> There were 24 of us in bunk beds. Things just started to happen. Water appeared from nowhere. I remember my bed moving when there was nobody near it. On one occasion, this pile of dinner plates came crashing down, out of thin air, and shattered on the floor. Where they came from, who knows? Matthew was frightened. I was bloody terrified. It was the sort of experience that, unless you’ve been through it, you can’t begin to comprehend.ºº

Sensory data in Wills’ testimony emphasized both physical and affective sensations. Many objects of unknown origin reportedly flew around Matthew’s dormitory at night: broken glass, pebbles, cutlery, pieces of wood, and bone-handled knives. Book cases overturned. Furniture moved.ºº Of his peers, Matthew wrote, “Most of them learned to live with the happenings and accept them; some were frightened, some were frightened of me, others were sceptical and suspicious.”ºº Matthew already felt like “an outsider.”ºº He wrote that he spent “more time in my own head than other children might have done, dreaming things up,” a contrast to the rigid structures he experienced in home and private school life.ºº When peers and parents wanted Matthew expelled given what was happening at the school, Matthew’s father and the matron came to his defense. Such empathetic support was crucial to Matthew’s feeling protected as he was experiencing these strange events.

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ºº Manning, *One Foot in the Stars*, 12. In the previous poltergeist outbreak when he was eleven, he had gained a sense of how he was different than his peers. “I told no one at school about what was going on at home. I did not want anyone to ostracize us or regard us as a peculiar family,” Matthew wrote in *One Foot in the Stars*, 9. For more on the impact of the events on Matthew and his family, see Georgina Howell, “The weird brothers,” *Sunday Times*, 10 April 1983, 9-10; and Chalmers’ interview in *GQ*.
ºº Manning, *One Foot in the Stars*, 3.
Ultimately, such supportive networks enabled Matthew to approach his experiences as an experiment where he could explore what was happening to him.\(^{128}\)

At the boarding school, Matthew came to realize that he felt that he could gain control over the physical manifestations. Since George Owen’s investigation of the 1967 incidents, Matthew had been convinced that he was at the centre of the poltergeist activities. He was not sure how the manifestations were produced. He had no sense of control over them – that was until he sat down with some friends at his school and put pen to paper. Outside of (what Matthew reported to be) his conscious control, his hand would begin to write. Messages appeared on the paper as if from an external personality. In Victorian mediumistic circles such practices were known as automatic writing. Matthew noticed that as soon as he did this, the physical manifestations ceased – as if he were channelling the “crude energy” of the poltergeist into something creative.\(^{129}\)

Matthew decided to do something about his discovery. He used automatic writing as a way to quell the poltergeist manifestations and to let whatever it was come through expressively. Matthew’s technique of channelling his “energy” into automatic writing was not unlike Carl Jung’s concept of active imagination as a technique to tap into the unconscious as a part of a process of individuation. Over the course of a year, Matthew produced 50 pages worth of writing attributed to someone who identified as “Robert Webbe,” in which the personality claimed responsibility for a variety of the poltergeist manifestations.\(^{130}\) During this time, graffiti comprised of names and dates began


\(^{129}\) Peter Bander, “Preface,” *The Link*, 8; Matthew Manning, *The Link*, 59–63. As shown in Chapter 3, William Roll referred to an “inverse relation” in which poltergeist manifestations were quelled by somatic symptoms, such as focus persons feeling ill. In Manning’s case, the “inverse relation” appeared to be the practice of automatic writing, a creative form of expression. See Roll, “Psychological and Neuropsychological Aspects of RSPK,” *Proceedings of Presented Papers of the Parapsychological Association Convention 2007*, 125.

\(^{130}\) Manning, *The Link*, 84, 92, 98.
spontaneously to appear in one of the rooms of the Mannings’ house. A total of 503 different names, mostly English but also from the European continent, appeared and were photographed. Research conducted by Matthew and, later, by the psychical researcher Vernon Harrison, verified numerous names and dates with parish registry records. In the autumn of 1971, at his mother’s urging, Matthew began a practice of automatic drawing, composing pictures in the style of famous artists, including Pablo Picasso, Albrecht Dürer, Aubrey Beardsley, and Leonardo Da Vinci. Matthew used a draughtsman’s pen with a continuous flow of India ink, drawing not in a trance but “perfectly aware of everything going on.” These drawings were produced quickly from the centre of the paper outward with “little or no forethought or planning.” These abilities attracted significant attention from media. In a 2014 interview, Matthew said that “I had always imagined that the automatic writing, whatever it was, was probably flotsam that was coming out of my unconscious. I didn’t care, though, because it seemed to stop the poltergeists.” His technique was simple: “if it looked as though disturbances were imminent, I would sit down and write.” At home, Matthew, his family and friends began to experiment with a wide range of psi, such as reading each other’s minds and predicting Zener cards. Matthew wrote, “I discovered that I could switch myself ‘on’ or ‘off’ like an electric light-switch. If I switched myself ‘on’ as though I was going to write, but without actually doing so, I could

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132 Manning, *The Link*, 121-24, 131, 134; *One Foot in the Stars*, 42.

133 Chalmers, “An interview with Matthew Manning: Poltergeist boy,” Online. Again, there seems to be a relationship here to Roll’s concept of “inverse relation.”


135 Designed for the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory by the psychologist Karl Zener in the 1930s, Zener cards were cards upon which there were five symbolic designs: circle, cross, waves, square, and star. A person would look at the card and try to convey the symbol to a receiver. Such tests were used to determine if telepathic thought transmission was occurring.
see auras surrounding people. I cannot describe in words how I achieve this switching on
and off." Matthew participated in experiments with scientists in Britain, Europe, Canada,
and the United States. By the age of 19, Matthew, with long hair and a beard – Christ-like in
appearance – became a well-known celebrity “psychic” in England. This began what
Matthew called the “performing monkey” period.

Matthew wrote about how he felt frustrated with being in the public eye and scrutinized
by scientists. He complained that neither the media nor scientists comprehended the
potential of his practice of transforming the “crude energy” of the poltergeist into
something he could control. As happened in the Philip experiment, he felt that he was
becoming a mere novelty act. Matthew was constantly being compared to another
“psychic” superstar at the time, the Israeli mentalist Uri Geller. “But Uri Geller is streetwise
in a way that I have never been. You have no idea how it feels to be 19 in the middle of a
room full of cameras and aggressively sceptical journalists, who sit you down and ask you to
make something inexplicable happen on demand,” Matthew said in the 2014 interview.

Where Geller sought out media attention, but not scientific validation, Matthew said he
wanted to avoid the media and work with scientists. Matthew’s work with scientists
began well at the Psychokinesis Conference hosted by New Horizons in Toronto with George
Owen, but he lamented that “nothing much” came out of any of the experiments in which
he participated. In his 1977 book *In The Minds of Millions*, Matthew critiqued scientists as
“lethargic,” conducting experiments that “seem to lead nowhere.” He felt that the scientists
had wasted possibilities, largely by ignoring his intuitive experiences, such as automatic

139 Manning, *In the Minds of Millions*, 18-19.
writing and drawing. Rather, as typically happened in parapsychology, the scientists wanted to put Matthew to the test on their experimental terms, using equipment they had devised to “objectively” test psi abilities. Matthew wrote about “slogging away at the same ESP tests with the same symbols and colours and configurations; submitting to prolonged series of laboratory tests calculated to produce significant results by sheer not-to-be-ignored volume of hit and miss....” This J.B. Rhine type of approach attempted to make parapsychology more respectable among scientists. “But it’s not for me,” Matthew wrote. Such experiments were simply boring and fruitless to him. They lacked the self-directed creativity that Matthew employed to discover ways in which he could control the energy.

Matthew wanted a change in direction and a purpose for the extraordinary abilities everyone was so interested in. In spring 1977, after “half-heartedly” working on *In the Minds of Millions*, Matthew felt compelled to seek out “life’s possibilities” which he had not found working with scientists. Like many young people in the 1970s, Matthew went to India for a month to “find a guru or mystic who would sit cross-legged on the ground and give you the answers to life.” He ventured by car into the Himalayas, and there, as the sun rose one morning, Matthew reported having what Maslow would have characterized as a “peak experience.” “I lost all sense of time, I felt completely at one with and connected to everything around me. I became a part of the mountains and the rocks. They were part of me. I was the air, the air was me. I was part of the tree and the tree was part of me,” he wrote. “In those timeless moments of transcendence I came as close to God as I am likely to get on this earth. I was aware of a presence urging me to do only what I felt was right and

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141 Manning, *In the Minds of Millions*, 91-92.
142 Manning, *One Foot in the Stars*, 88-89. For historical context on the growth of American interest around Indian religion, see the documentary film *Awake: The Life of Yogananda* (2014), directed by Paola di Florio and Lisa Leeman.
what I wanted to do and not what others wanted me to do for their own reasons. I must also follow only those paths that would lead to healing.” Matthew added, “No guru could have taught me more.”143 This peak experience inspired Matthew to pursue a greater purpose, but he was not certain how that was to happen.

When Matthew returned to Britain, he collaborated again with scientists, but this time on his own terms – to explore and transform his talents into a form of healing. He worked with scientists from the University of California, the Mind Science Foundation in Texas, and the Society for Psychical Research in London to determine how, by applying a particular type of energetic focus, he reportedly could affect growth rates of virus cultures, enzyme levels in blood samples, and the development of cancer cells.144 In the experiment with cancer cells, Matthew recalls, “I tried to envisage the cells as being surrounded by white light. I imagined I was talking to them.” In 27 of 30 trials, the Mind Science Foundation scientist John Kmetz noted a large increase of dead cancer cells in flasks that Manning held in his hand and focused on.145 After returning home to Britain, an Italian doctor showed up at Matthew’s door. He had heard about the cancer cell experiments and, desperate to help his mother who was dying in the hospital from cancer, he invited Matthew to see her in the hospital. Matthew was hesitant, but he went to see her. He was shocked by her sickly appearance: liver failure had led to jaundice, emaciation, and fever. “I let my intuition guide me and did what I felt was right, very gently placing my hands on her and entering the mode

143 Manning, One Foot in the Stars, 91-92.
144 Manning, One Foot in the Stars, 93-132.
145 Chalmers, “An interview with Matthew Manning: Poltergeist boy,” Online. Kmetz’s colleagues at the Mind Science Foundation questioned his research protocol, arguing that “mechanical trauma” to the flask could affect the cancer cells. See William Braud, Gary Davis, and Robert Wood, Addendum, “Experiments with Matthew Manning,” Journal of the Society for Psychical Research 50, no. 782 (December 1979), 222-223. Kmetz’s report “PK experiments with cancer cells” (Science Unlimited Research Foundation, San Antonio, Texas) was not published. Despite this, the cancer cell experiment clearly influenced Matthew’s direction in life toward energy healing.
I had adopted for the cancer-cell experiments,” he wrote. That evening, Matthew returned to find her “sitting in an armchair,” the fever gone, having eaten dinner for the first time in weeks. But that night the woman died. Matthew felt that he had failed. It took him some time to realize the healing he had offered was not just potentially curative, but it was also about helping people to die.146 “If I can help someone to die without fear, pain, and in dignity, then that healing had value and success,” he said.147 Matthew has continued on that path of energy healing ever since, gaining a wide reputation as someone who has helped people through illnesses. For example, in the 1990s, one former client with breast cancer was given six months to live by her doctors. Seeing Matthew, she recalled, “The heat from his hands was phenomenal. When he put them near me I felt a shooting pain. When I looked at my skin afterwards, where his hands had been, I had marks, as if a flat iron had been pressed against me.” She recovered from the cancer.148 Matthew said, “The only way I can describe the feeling is that I am channelling some kind of unconditional love.”149 After his peak experience in the Himalayas, Matthew’s renewed approach to participating in science on his own terms directed him toward “healing.” Rather than letting parapsychologists tell him what kinds of tests he should do, Matthew worked with scientists who sought to explore micro-PK, the possibility that the intentional production of some type of “energy” by a person like Matthew could affect biotic and cellular organisms. He said his work was not a replacement for medical treatments, but a viable complement to them.

146 Manning, One Foot in the Stars, 133-34.
Matthew owned his new life practice as an energy healer, validating for himself and those who believed in his healing potential that he could do things that were outside of medical and scientific conventions – with the support of at least a few scientists.

Where Shirley wanted to move on to “a more normal life” and the Philip group did not know how they could advance their psychokinetic experiment, Matthew made an extraordinary life-path on his own terms. He validated this path by actively participating in cutting edge micro-PK studies that marked the intersection between frontier science and human potential. His family was also supportive and financially well off, and he made significant earnings from his popular books. Affluence enabled Matthew to reach these researchers and share his experiences largely on his own terms. He had stability and resources in his life that were absent in the lives of most people who experienced the poltergeist. Where most people wanted to evict the poltergeist, Matthew and his family were curious to see what it meant. The experience became an experiment. As with Shirley and the Philip group, an increasingly elaborate communication process unfolded in which, similar to what the psychokinesis hypothesis proposed, the phenomena seemed to be co-created in an interaction between Matthew and whatever the “energy” was. Matthew was less concerned with demonstrating or proving what the energy was than he was with putting it to use, which led to his work as an energy healer.

Communication was central to a co-creative process because manifestations seemed to involve an interaction between people and something of unknown origin which had a physically sensed, observable outcome. Where the Philip group limited the scope of communications to yes/no taps, Matthew picked up the pen himself and let whatever it was take control of his hand – leading to an array of automatic writings and drawings. As was
also reported in Shirley’s experience with Donald, enabling these modes of communication quelled the other spontaneous physical manifestations at Matthew’s home and school, in the ways predicted by Roll’s concept of the “inverse relation.” It was as if the “energy” was being channelled into something creatively expressive – as Carl Jung proposed could be done through the concept of active imagination. As the Hitchingses and Philip group found, the more expressive the co-creative process became, the greater the variety of psi-type experiences that emerged including clairvoyance, premonitions, and, in Matthew’s case, an ability to control the “energy.” At different stages, Matthew had empathetic people support him: George Owen, his father Derek, the headmaster and matron, his publicist Peter Bander, and the scientists with whom he did micro-PK studies after his “peak experience” in India. In the sunrise in the Himalayas, Matthew found clarity as an active participant in further scientific collaborations. Validation that he felt from those experiments inspired his work as an “energy healer.” Drawing on his poltergeist experiences, he turned the “energy” into something empowering, both transcendent – in that it was beyond what anyone could clearly explain – and utilitarian, something that he incorporated into his life practice. Matthew transformed his way of being through the “energy.”

**Conclusions: The Powers of Self**

As participants in these three cases realized that the manifestations were meaningful – that they could interact and communicate with the source of the physical events – they authorized an exploratory process that was otherwise absent in most poltergeist cases. Usually, passive experiencers left the investigative process to other authoritative figures. In
the cases examined above, experiencers actively participated and collaborated with supportive, empathetic mentors to try to comprehend what was going on. A number of new approaches emerged from those collaborations. The physical manifestations were not only prolonged past the month or two that the poltergeist phenomenon typically lasted, but they also led to entirely new phenomena that participants variously interpreted as communication with spirits, precognition, telepathy, energy healing, or psychokinesis. From the perspective of the psychokinesis hypothesis, there appeared to be co-creation between focus persons and the mechanism of the poltergeist manifestations, but the mechanism remained unresolved. What matters in these case studies was that focus persons made new directions in their lives from their collaborative “experiences as experiments.” For Shirley, her experience as experiment delayed her having to work until she felt ready. For the Philip group, they felt a sense that their evolutionary potential – as individuals and humans – grew tremendously. And for Matthew, each step of his experience as experiment led him to a new exploration of his individual and human potential, to the point where he made a career as an energy healer. While the contributions that these case studies made to poltergeist research were controversial within parapsychology, they appealed to a broader audience of people who sought to explore questions that had not otherwise been effectively answered. Such knowledge-seeking was driven more in self-guided ways – not based on existing physicalist, scientific, and religious models. That self-directed, knowledge-seeking practice reflected how, in the 1960s and ‘70s, as Sam Binkley puts it, there was a “loosening of the self” for a growing number of people.\footnote{Binkley, 9.} Rather than letting established knowledge define what was happening, the people involved in these cases – experiencers and researchers – actively participated and collaborated in exploring and experimenting
with the unusual events. Those who accepted the plausibility of the case studies examined in this chapter did so because they had faith that they were possible – often because they had themselves had transformative but hard-to-explain experiences. To them, these cases pointed to a combination of greater human and spiritual potential. The cases were inexplicable but continual; they challenged and transformed notions of the world and one’s own ontology. Such new approaches continue to be developed in a “third space,” the broad field of consciousness studies, which itself has provided venues for individuals to focus on self-development. The historical examination of these three cases presents opportunities to rethink studies of anomalous phenomena. Unconventional events such as those documented in poltergeist cases had very real effects on people’s lives, but to what extent have such events been accommodated as part of the world as it is known? The poltergeist continues to be experienced globally, yet it remains as marginalized as it was through the twentieth century and before.
INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSIONS:
Knowledge-Making, Paradoxes, Questions

Learn to live with paradox, to sit with the question. Come to terms with the bluntly physical ways that these events sometimes materialize in the environment.


In order to explain the poltergeist, the psychokinesis hypothesis straddles ontological divides: natural and physical sciences, sciences of the mind, religious and spiritual beliefs, and the diverse lifeworlds of experiencers. Experimental sciences provide a materialist paradigm in which observation, documentation, statistical evaluations, and replication render human and natural phenomena more predictable and comprehensible. Psychoanalysis and analytical psychology pose questions and design exercises that seek to elicit information hidden away in the human unconscious. Nestled in long-standing

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2 The psychokinesis hypothesis proposes that the poltergeist – spontaneous, recurrent, and anomalous physical manifestations involving objects moving, strange sounds, and spontaneous fires, all with no apparent cause – is a co-creation between a living individual and an unknown mechanism. Psychokinesis is also known as telekinesis, mind over matter, or mind-matter interactions.
4 On psychoanalysis, analytical psychology, and psi, see Psychoanalysis and the Occult, Second Printing, edited by George Devereux (New York: International Universities Press, 1970); C.G. Jung, Psychology and the Occult
religious and folk interpretations, rare and elusive phenomena like the poltergeist reside at the boundary of the material and immaterial. They remain contested and reveal the inability of a standard scientific framework to answer all questions.

The poltergeist is, generally speaking, a paradox. Its manifestations seem absurd or counter-intuitive by common knowledge, but through investigation and analysis, an explanation may prove to be well-founded. In poltergeist cases, people reported objects and buildings acting as if of their own volition, where they should usually be inanimate. Whatever the source of those manifestations, sometimes people entered into intelligible dialogues with them, as if the source were conscious. They asked questions and received replies. From a source unseen, answers came in the physical forms of sound, written notes, and object movements. Most people who experienced such things simply wanted them to cease so they could return back to how life was before the disruptions of the poltergeist. However, when people actively investigated and experimented with the phenomenon, when they realized that certain answers were unlikely to be found but that new possibilities appeared imminent, they, as the historian of religions Jeffrey J. Kripal writes, “Learn to live with the paradox” and “sit with the question.” Such an approach to the poltergeist was often life-changing for experiencers and researchers. It ran against the grain of people’s


7 Kripal, The Super Natural, 341.
common tendencies to seek an “expert” to get rid of the poltergeist, to explain away the paradoxical phenomenon, or to pretend it never happened. Those who learned to live in the paradox and sit with the questions reported experiencing a shift in their way of being—an ontological transformation. The transformation didn’t necessarily make their lives easier, but it could create a “third space” to actively participate in experiencing and studying such paradoxes outside of the epistemic confines of scientific materialism and religious doctrines, a process evident in the growth of post-Second World War self-spirituality and consciousness studies.

This study has shown that when historical actors lived in the paradox and sat with the questions, they found clues that helped them come to what they believed was a better comprehension of the possibilities of human nature and the natural world, evolutionary potential, and self. In twentieth-century America and Britain, experiencers and researchers explored the paradoxes of the poltergeist. In this practice of boundary-work, experiments were conducted through various frameworks in attempts to make better sense of mysterious phenomena.\(^8\) I have focused on how scientific, speculative, psychoanalytical, parapsychological, and self-directed experiential frameworks contributed to the making of the psychokinesis hypothesis. Some of the historical actors, like Frank Podmore or Paul Kurtz or James Randi, were unwilling to live with the paradox. They deferred to a scientific materialism that could only conclude that the poltergeist was the result of deception or

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\(^8\) Boundary-work involves investigating phenomena that are outside of common explanations. In the sciences, this work is done to expand scientific knowledge, but it is a term that generally denotes any attempt to expand knowledge.
natural causes. Other historical actors sought to resolve questions raised by the poltergeist using religious doctrines. In this study, I have focused on the historical actors who, while their claims remain controversial, reimagined the poltergeist phenomenon through the psychokinesis hypothesis.

**Historical Conclusions: The Illuminations of Boundary-Work**

This study has positioned the experiencer, specifically the so-called “focus person” who appeared to be at the centre of the manifestations, as the central actor in twentieth-century poltergeist cases. The more that focus persons were able to self-direct their exploration of the phenomenon, and the more supportive and collaborative the network of people around them, the more data about the poltergeist phenomenon that emerged. Experiencers were crucial to knowledge-making about the rare, elusive poltergeist. In most poltergeist cases, researchers utilized specific epistemic frameworks to study the poltergeist and to represent its likely cause. From the turn of the century into the 1920s, psychical researchers employed a dispassionate style inspired by scientific protocols of observation,

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documentation, falsification, and judgement. While these practices were crucial in pointing to a focus person in poltergeist cases, focus persons themselves were little more than passive subjects in psychical researchers’ case studies and analyses. Focus persons had little or no say in the researchers’ published assessments of their poltergeist experiences. The poltergeist manifestations were most often unobserved by the researchers themselves.

Experiencers gained greater importance in the 1930s when Nandor Fodor experimented with a psychoanalytical approach to the psychokinesis hypothesis. Using the Freudian psychoanalytical model, Fodor interviewed focus persons like Mrs. Forbes. Her answers to his questions played a crucial role in Fodor’s psychoanalytical interpretation, which pathologized the poltergeist as a symptom of emotional and sexual dysfunction. While Forbes’ testimonials are more evident in Fodor’s transcribed cross-examinations in his book on her case study than focus persons’ testimonials were in many prior published poltergeist case studies, ultimately Fodor’s psychoanalytical judgement was reflected in the psychokinesis hypothesis, not Forbes’ perspectives.11 Crucially, however, Fodor’s work revealed the value of ongoing collaboration with focus persons to study the phenomenon. After the Second World War, with books by Charles Fort influencing fictional speculation on the wonders and dangers of controlled psychokinetic powers, and Harry Price’s media sensationalism around his research appearing regularly in newspapers, on radio, and in films, and in his own books, the public was becoming increasingly attuned to the concept of PK as a viable explanation for the poltergeist.

Public openness to the psychokinesis hypothesis was part of a larger post-war shift in America and Britain. The public was reeling from the horrors of the Holocaust and anxiously living through growing Cold War tensions in a world dominated by two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Scientists revealed new claims about humans, nature, and technological potential. Popular discontent arose as people questioned the authority of dominant institutions of state, religion, and science. People became more aware and critical of established modes of power and authority, which, they argued, marginalized specific segments of the populace, and of the ways that technology was exploited for wealth and warfare. While mass consumerism and capitalism gave people more lifestyle choices, materialism left a growing segment of the population feeling spiritually restless and seeking answers beyond material knowledge. Doubting institutional authority, through the 1960s and ’70s, a growing number of Americans and Britons sought greater human and spiritual potential.\(^\text{12}\)

More than ever before, a significant number of people – twelve percent of Americans according to a 1976 Gallup poll – pursued “spiritual experimentation,” seeking something more than dominant authorities could offer.\(^\text{13}\) Other polls revealed the extent of the popular belief in the existence of the paranormal. While belief in the paranormal has slowly declined among Americans in particular since the 1990s, belief in parapsychological phenomena continues into the twenty-first century. A 2005 Gallup poll revealed that 41%


of people questioned believed in parapsychological phenomena such as extra-sensory perception (declining from 50% in 2001) and 55% believed in energy healing (up from 46% in 1990).¹⁴ Such data demonstrates a sustained wide public interest in self-directed spirituality, scientific boundary-work on human consciousness, and the phenomena studied by parapsychologists and psychical researchers.

In 1972, William Roll referred to the “consciousness revolution” as crucial to his development and testing of the psychokinesis hypothesis.¹⁵ His approach was to empathize with poltergeist experiencers, not only to gain access to their homes to conduct field research, but also to assess their emotional states. Affect, Roll argued, was an essential factor in the co-creation between a focus person and whatever mechanisms made the poltergeist phenomenon manifest. Building on Fodor’s evidence, Roll found emotional tensions were commonplace in his comparison of historical and contemporary poltergeist cases. While J.B. Rhine claimed success in statistically proving the existence of psychokinesis in mechanical dice-throwing experiments from 1934 to 1943, measurements were incompatible with the spontaneous, elusive nature of the poltergeist phenomenon.¹⁶ Roll found it highly difficult to translate his field research findings into laboratory experiments, which were crucial to the practice of parapsychology. Despite those experimental drawbacks, the collaborative rapport between Roll and the focus persons he worked with was stronger than in previous poltergeist investigations. For Roll, examining focus persons’ lives and emotions was essential to assessing the whole of the material

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manifestations. In other ways, the unpredictability of focus person’s lives negatively impacted Roll’s studies, such as when Julio Vasquez was fired from his job (Miami, 1967). Experiencers could also deny Roll further access to their experiences and prevent him from conducting research, as happened in the Olive Hill case where a Jehovah’s Witness family disagreed with the direction taken by his study of phenomena that they interpreted as diabolic (1968).^{17}

Among post-war poltergeist cases, I found three that had atypical outcomes. The cases of Shirley Hitchings (1956-1968), the Philip group (1972-1977), and Matthew Manning (1967 onwards) all had common features. They lasted many years rather than the weeks or months poltergeist cases usually lasted. The focus persons took an active, participatory, and leading role in the design and direction of the research. The events were integrated into and even transformed focus persons’ life-paths. All of the cases involved interactions where questions were intelligibly answered with characteristic poltergeist manifestations such as audible knocks, taps, and scratches as well as object movements. These questions were also answered in ways rarely reported in poltergeist cases: written notes that spontaneously appeared on walls and paper, practices of automatic writing and drawing, and other forms of psi, such as precognition, ghost-seeing, and clairvoyance. Shirley Hitchings, the Philip group, and Matthew Manning each showed that there was not a single way to approach, assess, and interpret the poltergeist. Each of their contributions, when put side-by-side and compared, raise new questions – not only about collaborative forms of knowledge-making around elusive, anomalous phenomena, but also for how present-day experiencers and researchers might reimagine the poltergeist. The psychokinesis hypothesis emerged out of

^{17} Roll, *The Poltergeist*, 115-149.
Inconclusive Conclusions: Knowledge-Making, Paradoxes, Questions

a new relationship between scientific observation and imaginative speculation. Drawing on
both psychoanalysis and parapsychology it reached its fullest potential in collaborations
between empathetic researchers and focus persons who were actively engaged in the
research process.

**Living in the Paradox, Sitting with the Questions**

This study is itself a mischievous force that disrupts how we see the past. Charles Fort,
through his roguish combination of data collection and speculation, challenged how
authorities made and enforced knowledge. Those authorities, which he referred to as the
“Dominants” of science and religion, secured their epistemological claims within
frameworks that benefitted their own worldviews and marginalized others. Boundary-work
delved into the paradoxes that the “Dominants” disregarded. As with Fort’s books, this
study does not bring resolution to these issues, but rather works to destabilize notions of
certainty around knowledge-making. It argues that it is important to sit with the questions
raised from the evidence presented from boundary-work (of which this study is part). If
people attempt to communicate with the poltergeist phenomenon, it may respond, and its
responses may be meaningful. If people collaborate with the phenomenon as if it were
conscious, it seems that there may be a co-creative relationship between people and the
messages conveyed, however they may be conveyed. If people suspend all that they know,
and open up to building new frameworks guided by their experiences in combination with
established analytical practices, new questions and potentially new knowledge arises. This
kind of boundary-work relies as much on the experiences of focus persons as it does on the
tools of science (observation, documentation, measurement, and the potential that one could control the material manifestations through conscious intentions).

If researchers acted as participant-observers, what the philosopher and parapsychologist Stephen Braude called “psychic naturalists,” they self-reflexively minimized interference in the interactions between focus persons and the manifestations. In those case studies, it seems, historically, that something more comes through. What is coming through? At certain points, in the cases of Shirley, the Philip group, and Matthew, focus persons and researchers sat together with the question, observing and authorizing a participatory practice. It seems as if the poltergeist itself, whatever it was, became an active participant—in similar ways to the process through which, for example, imaginary companions guided children through cognitive and social development. If we are to take this historical data and apply it to cognitive and consciousness studies in which focus persons are, as unobtrusively as possible, observed in their home environments, might we move closer to knowing the mechanism, and perhaps even the purpose, of the poltergeist? At this time, we can only sit with such a question. Like Fort, we can only speculate.

The folklorist David Hufford’s 1982 study on sleep paralysis demonstrates that research in the humanities has something to contribute to scientific investigations that result in better understandings of elusive phenomena. I see this study as having similar potential—although I cannot predict where that potential may lead. Historians have a stake in being

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19 See Chapter 4. The reader should not conflate poltergeist personalities and imaginary companions, but their similarities are worth pondering.
involved in such interdisciplinary collaborations, much as Hufford has been. Such collaborations are presently growing, for example, from Jeffrey Kripal’s scholarship. Kripal asks scholars and scientists to sit with the questions together and see what new practices might emerge.21 The most fruitful progress is currently being made in that type of interdisciplinary environment, situated between academic research, scientific studies, and direct experience.

The poltergeist events, whatever they were, inspired experiencers like Shirley, the Philip group, and Matthew to discover new ways of being. The status of the poltergeist itself, however, remains an open question. In alerting readers to those moments when people tried to make sense of the poltergeist, my intention has been to demonstrate that boundary-work matters. Boundary-work is a painstaking, imperfect process. Because this work involves rare and elusive phenomena that remain highly contested and diverse people who are isolated in their experiences, researchers find it very difficult to make and manage knowledge about the poltergeist. Drawing from the post-colonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty, I would argue that the poltergeist itself, is “not dependent on human beliefs” for its “own existence.” What brings the poltergeist “to presence are our own practices.”22 It is clear that the poltergeist is present in the many practices through which people try to make sense of it. I have emphasized affect as a crucial component not only in the making of the psychokinesis hypothesis, but also in how people’s lives were transformed by their experiences and studies of the poltergeist phenomenon. Often, this transformation was for

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the worse as experiencers were stigmatized by science, religion, and society. But transformation could also be for the better. Experiencers like Shirley Hitchings, the Philip group, and Matthew Manning actively participated in designing and directing the experiments that inspired them to redirect their lives in positive ways. To comprehend the plurality of these poltergeist experiences, I am inspired by Greg Anderson’s description of the ontological turn which, he writes, helps us “retrieve all those pasts that we have lost in translation... [to] make sense of each... lifeworld on its own ontological terms, as a distinct real world in its own right.”

In examining the making of the psychokinesis hypothesis, I have followed Anderson’s assertion that realness is not “an objective, pre-given material condition but a process, an ongoing effect produced by the dynamic entanglement of thought and materiality.” As Joy Dixon argues, such an ontological turn can be usefully incorporated into historical studies of the twentieth century, paying attention to the ways that metaphysical phenomena “did very real work” for the people who experienced and studied them. The ontological turn moves us beyond our very human tendencies to judge phenomena as real or not real according to our own worldviews. It asks us to consider past lifeworlds on their own terms, to see each of them as “an active, constitutive ingredient of whatever was really there at the time.” My study on boundary-work reminds us how knowledge and ways of being shift over time, in part under the impact of spontaneous, physical and metaphysical phenomena that remake our conceptions of human nature and the natural world over time.

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24 Anderson, 789.
26 Anderson, 790.
This study, then, responds to Kripal’s recent call for us, as scholars and as humans, to be willing to live with the paradoxical character of rare and elusive phenomena like the poltergeist, and of the various claims made about them. This is not a call I could have issued in the Introduction. The study itself needed to be as grounded in conventional historiography as possible in order to comprehend the context, meaning, and significance of the making of the psychokinesis hypothesis. The goal is to contribute to the reimagining not only of something like the poltergeist, but also our own ways of being and knowing in the world. Living in the paradox will not be for everyone. But for those who can live there, the question arises: what new possibilities can we make possible via radically agnostic practices that are sensitive to the plurality of ontologies, to the materiality of anomalous experiences, and to the productive messiness of affect?
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