

Podmore's 'Apparitions and Thought-Transference'

Frank Podmore was an early leading member of the Society for Psychical Research. His 1894 book *Apparitions and Thought-Transference: An Examination of the Evidence for Telepathy* is one of the best available overviews of the nineteenth century ESP literature.

The book is part of publisher Walter Scott's *Contemporary Science* series, which covered topics such as bacteria, criminals, genius, insanity, marriage, and meteorology, among others. It can be accessed [here](#).

Introduction

Podmore summarizes his aim as follows:

The thesis which these pages are designed to illustrate and support is briefly: *that communication is possible between mind and mind otherwise than through the known channels of the senses*. Proof of the existence of such communication, provisionally called *Thought Transference* or *Telepathy* (from *tele* = at a distance, and *pathos* = feeling), will be found in a considerable mass of experiments conducted during the last twelve years by various observers in different European countries and in America.'^[1]

Examples of some of these observers are Alfred Backman, Max Dessoir, Edmund Gurney, Pierre Janet, A.A. Liébeault, Oliver Lodge, Charles Richet, Blair Thaw, Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, and H.M. Wesserman.

Podmore is remembered today mainly for his negative critiques of the evidence for such phenomena as physical mediumship and poltergeists.^[2] While he clearly believes that telepathy takes place, he states: 'The evidence, of which samples are presented in the following pages, is as yet hardly adequate for the establishment of telepathy as a fact in nature, and leaves much to be desired for the elucidation of the laws under which it operates'.^[3] Furthermore, in the first chapter the author cautions us about excessive credulity and the need to control for problems such as fraud and sensory cues.

Experiments

Numerous examples of telepathy experiments are given, under the headings of: transference of simple sensations in the normal state; simple sensations with hypnotized participants; induction of movements and other effects such as anesthesia; and other effects at a distance, such as images and induction of trance.

In experiments conducted by Malcolm Guthrie and other SPR members, participants were asked to describe substances being tasted (unseen by them) by the experimenter. Vinegar was described as a 'sharp and nasty taste'. Other results were:

mustard – 'mustard'

port wine – 'between eau de cologne and beer'

nutmeg – 'peppermint – no – what you put in puddings – nutmeg'^[4]

Podmore also summarized Blair Thaw's experiments in which Thaw was the percipient:

Dr. Thaw had his eyes blindfolded and his ears muffled, and the agent, Mrs. Thaw, and Mr. M. H. Wyatt, who was present but took no part in the agency, kept silent, except when it was necessary to state whether an object, card, number, or colour was to be guessed. The objects were in all cases actually looked at by the agent, the 'colour' being a coloured disc, and the numbers being printed on separate cards...

1st Object. Silk Pincushion, in form of Orange-Red Apple, quite round. Percipient: A Disc. When asked what colour, said, Red or Orange. When asked what object, named Pincushion.

2nd Object. A Short Lead Pencil, nearly covered by the nickel cover. Never seen by percipient. Percipient: Something white or light. A card. I thought of Mr. Wyatt's silver pencil.

3rd Object. A DARK Violet in Mr. Wyatt's button-hole, but not known to be in the house by percipient. Percipient: *Something dark. Not very big. Longish. Narrow. Soft. It can't be a cigarette because it is dark brown. A dirty colour.* Asked about smell, said: *Not strong, but what you might call pungent; a clean smell.*

Percipient had not noticed smell before, though sitting by Mr. Wyatt some time, but when afterwards told of the violet knew that this was the odour noticed in experiment.

Asked to spell name, percipient said: *Phrygian, Phrigid, or first letter V if not Ph.*^[5]

More impressive are the results of tests in which agent and percipient were distant from each other. This is the case of induction of trance at a distance, as seen in the famous tests reported by Pierre Janet with 'Mme B' (Léonie Leboulanger) in collaboration with physician Joseph Gibert. Here is an example from one of Janet's reports quoted (and translated) by Podmore:

In the evening (22nd) we all dined at M. Gibert's, and in the evening M. Gibert made another attempt to put her to sleep at a distance from his house in the Rue Séry,—she being at the Pavilion, Rue de la Ferme,—and to bring her to his house by an effort of will. At 8.55 he retired to his study; and MM. Ochorowicz, Marillier, Janet, and A. T. Myers went to the Pavilion, and waited outside in the street, out of sight of the house. At 9.22 Dr. Myers observed Madame B. coming half-way out of the garden-gate, and again retreating. Those who saw her more closely observed that she was plainly in the somnambular state, and was wandering about and muttering. At 9.25 she came out (with eyes persistently closed, so far as could be seen), walked quickly past MM. Janet and Marillier without noticing them, and made for M. Gibert's house, though not by the usual or shortest route. (It appeared afterwards that the maid had seen her go into the salon at 8.45, and issue thence asleep at 9.15 : had not looked in between those times.) She avoided lamp-posts, vehicles, etc., but crossed and recrossed the street repeatedly. No one went in front of her or spoke to her. After eight or ten minutes she grew much more uncertain in gait, and paused as though she would fall. Dr. Myers noted the moment in the Rue Faure; it was 9.35. At about 9.40 she grew bolder, and at 9.45 reached the street in front of M. Gibert's house. There she met him, but did not notice him, and walked into his house, where she rushed hurriedly from room to room on the ground-floor. M. Gibert had to take her hand before she recognised him. She then grew calm.

M. Gibert said that from 8.55 to 9.20 he thought intently about her; from 9.20 to 9.35 he thought more feebly; at 9.35 he gave the experiment up, and began to play billiards; but in a few minutes began to will her again. It appeared that his visit to the billiard-room had coincided with her hesitation and stumbling in the street. But this coincidence may of course have been accidental...^[6]

Spontaneous Cases

In addition to experiments, Podmore discussed many spontaneous cases of the type presented in Gurney, Myers and Podmore's *Phantasms of the Living*, published in two volumes in 1886. Many of these cases are related to someone's death, either at the time of the experience, or somewhat later. Here is an example:

In the spring and summer of 1886 I often visited a poor woman called Evans, who lived in our parish... She was very ill with a painful disease, and it was, as she said, a great pleasure when I went to see her; and I frequently sat with her and read to her. Towards the middle of October she was evidently growing weaker, but there seemed no immediate danger. I had not called on her for several days, and one evening I was standing in the dining-room after dinner with the rest of the family, when I saw the figure of a woman dressed like Mrs. Evans, in large apron and muslin cap, pass across the room from one door to the other, where she disappeared. I said, 'Who is that?' My mother said, 'What do you mean?' and I said, 'That woman who has just come in and walked over to the other door.' They all laughed at me, and said I was dreaming, but I felt sure it was Mrs. Evans, and next morning we heard she was dead.^[7]

Another case is of an impression and a vision of physician G Dupré about his daughter's accident, which happened to be correct:

One day in May 1890, I had just been visiting a patient, and was coming downstairs, when suddenly I had the impression that my little girl of four years old had fallen down the stone stairs of my house, and hurt herself.

Then gradually after the first impression, as though a curtain which hid the sight from me were slowly drawn back, I saw my child lying at the foot of the stairs, with her chin bleeding, but I had no impression of hearing her cries.

The vision was blotted out suddenly, but the memory of it remained with me. I took note of the hour—10.30 a.m.—and continued my professional rounds.

When I got home I much astonished my family by giving a description of the accident, and naming the hour when it

occurred.^[8]

Podmore devotes some chapters to particularly interesting cases: coincidental dreams, collective hallucinations and induced telepathic hallucinations. The latter included Joseph Kirk's attempts to appear to a friend, Miss G Kirk wrote:

I was seized with the impulse to make a trial on Miss G. I did not, of course, know where she was at the moment, but, with a flash, as it were, I transferred myself to her bedroom... As it happened, it was what I must call a 'lucky shot,' for I caught her at the moment she was lightly sleeping in her chair...

The figure seen by Miss G. was clothed in a suit I was at the moment wearing, and was bareheaded, the latter as would be the case, of course, in an office. This suit is of a dark reddish-brown check stuff, and it was an unusual circumstance for me to have had on the coat at the time, as I wear, as a rule, an office coat of light material. But this office coat I had, a day or so before, sent to a tailor to be repaired, and I had, therefore, to keep on that belonging to the dark suit.

I tested the reality of the vision by this dark suit. I asked, 'How was I dressed?' (not at all a leading question). The reply of Miss G. was, touching the sleeve of the coat I was then wearing (of a light suit), 'Not this coat, but that dark suit you wear sometimes. I even saw clearly the small check pattern of it; and I saw your features as plainly as though you had been bodily present. I could not have seen you more distinctly.'^[9]

The following was Miss G's account:

A peculiar occurrence happened to me on the Wednesday of the week before last. In the afternoon (being tired by a morning walk), while sitting in an easy-chair near the window of my own room, I fell asleep. At any time I happen to sleep during the day ... I invariably awake with tired, uncomfortable sensations, which take some little time to pass off; but that afternoon, on the contrary, I was suddenly quite wide awake, seeing Mr. Kirk standing near my chair, dressed in a dark brown coat, which I had frequently seen him wear. His back was towards the window, his right hand towards me; he passed across the room towards the door, which is opposite the window, the space between being 15 feet, the furniture so arranged as to leave just that centre clear; but when he got about 4 feet from the door, which was closed, he disappeared.^[10]

Theories and Conclusions

In the final chapter Podmore asserts that experiments demonstrate the reality of telepathy. He also writes that some cases are seemingly accounted for by other explanations:

And such instances we do certainly find, in simultaneous dreams and in vague presentiments, and in innumerable coincidences of thought and expression in ordinary life.

And the suggestion that the same power may serve as an auxiliary to more completely systematised modes of expression, though incapable of proof, may yet be thought worthy of consideration. It is conceivable, for instance, that it may aid the intercourse of a mother with her infant child, that the influence of the orator may be due not only to the spoken word, and that even in our daily conversation thoughts may pass by this means which find no outward expression.^[11]

The phenomena of telepathy, Podmore states, have no explanation. He says earlier that this lack of knowledge about the telepathic process, 'is not a defect which in the present state of experimental psychology can be held seriously to weaken the evidence...'^[12] Podmore concludes that we only know about the mental aspects, not about physical forces behind the process:

To begin with, there is no sense-organ for our presumed new mode of sensation; nor at the present stage of physiological knowledge is there likelihood that we can annex any as yet unappropriated organ to register telepathic stimuli... In lacking an elaborate machinery specially adapted for receiving its messages and concentrating them on the peripheral end of the nerves, telepathy would thus seem to be on a par with radiant energy affecting the general surface of the body. But the sensations of heat and cold are without quality or difference, other than difference of degree; whereas telepathic messages, as we have seen, purport often to be as detailed and precise as those conveyed by the same radiant energy falling on the organs of vision.^[13]

There are ideas, Podmore states, about physical forces such as the fluid of the mesmerists, also various ideas of brain waves or nerve radiation, but the existence of these has not been established. Podmore also points out 'the difficulty of

supposing vibrations so minute to be capable of producing effects at so great a distance, and to have a selective capacity so finely adjusted that out of all the thousands of persons within the radius^[14] it only reaches the person for who the message is relevant. Nothing is convincing at the moment, the author says, suggesting that further experimentation may solve the problem. He also refers to the ideas of researchers such as [Frederic WH Myers](#) that locate telepathy in the realm of the non-material.

Clairvoyance

Podmore also devotes two chapters to clairvoyance. He writes that mesmerists used to use the term 'clairvoyance' to mean 'a supposed faculty by which the subject was enabled to ascertain facts not within human knowledge ... and in the second place to a power of discerning facts within the knowledge of some living mind'.^[15] He believes there is only evidence for the second definition, one in which the knowledge obtained does not depend on a crisis nor on the action of an agent. Podmore discusses here the mediumship of [Leonora Piper](#), in which veridical communications could have involved telepathy as well. The medium, he writes, on many occasions 'stated facts which were not within the conscious knowledge of any person present, and which could not conceivably have been discovered by any process of private inquiry'.^[16]

Reception

Spiritualistic reviewers felt that Podmore had been too cautiously conservative in his interpretation of telepathic phenomena. A reviewer in the spiritualist journal *Light* praised the book as an overview of the subject, but complained of an exaggerated application of the idea of telepathy at the expense of spirit action.^[17] An unnamed reviewer in *Borderland* (probably [William T Stead](#)),^[18] criticized Podmore for over-reliance on telepathy and 'telepathic hallucinations' to explain apparitions of the living, as opposed to, for instance, the concept of the double.

Although not a spiritualist, William Romaine Newbold argued in an otherwise positive review that he should have taken the idea of telepathy from the dead more seriously, even if the reality of this phenomenon remained to be fully established.^[19]

Reviewers less concerned with survival approved of Podmore's conservatism. Writing in *Annales des Sciences Psychiques*, Marcel Mangin called it the best book available on the topic, and praised the author for being cautious in his conclusions, 'which cannot be too much praised when the problems are so complex and so difficult to interpret'.^[20]

The book was also discussed in publications not devoted to psychic phenomena. William James^[21] offered a good opinion in the *Psychological Review*: 'When one sees brought together ... the evidence for thought-transference ... one perceives that it is far from contemptible in either quality or amount...' James also was favorable to Podmore's use of telepathy to explain apparitions around the time of death. Similarly, a reviewer in *Mind* said that psychical research had made good efforts to show the reality of the phenomena, although he continued:

Perhaps ... he does not make sufficient allowance for the loose nature of these psychical, as compared with physical, experiments; it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to take the same liberties with persons as with inert matter. It is difficult to gain an assurance that conditions essentially affecting the result have not escaped even the most careful observation.^[22]

Skeptics also had their say. Writing in the *American Journal of Psychology*, psychologist G Stanley Hall^[23] went so far as to assert that the book offered no evidence for telepathy. The British science fiction writer HG Wells was similarly unimpressed, complaining that the evidence it offered fell far below the standards of mainstream science, a view he held about psychical research works in general.^[24]

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References

Footnotes

- 1.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 6.
- 2.^ Willin, 2017).
- 3.^ Podmore, 1894, p. xiv.
- 4.^ Podmore, 1894, pp. 21-22.
- 5.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 31.
- 6.^ Podmore, 1894, pp. 110-111.
- 7.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 258.
- 8.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 172.
- 9.^ Podmore, 1894, pp. 244-5.
- 10.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 245.
- 11.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 372.
- 12.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 9.
- 13.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 383.
- 14.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 387.
- 15.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 326.
- 16.^ Podmore, 1894, p. 328.
- 17.^ Anonymous, 1894b.
- 18.^ Anonymous, 1894a .
- 19.^ Newbold, 1895, p. 149.
- 20.^ Marcel Mangin, 1894, p. 374.
- 21.^ William James, 1895 pp. 67-68.
- 22.^ Anonymous, 1895.
- 23.^ G Stanley Hall, 1895, p. 137.
- 24.^ H.G. Wells, 1894, p. 122.