

Poltergeists (Overview)

'Poltergeist' is traditionally used to describe the rare but extensively documented phenomenon of anomalous disturbances arising in connection with a particular place or person. The disturbances are characterized by 'rapping' or 'knocking' noises of unknown provenance, along with the anomalous and often violent movement of furniture and other objects, outbreaks of fires, inundations, and the like. The commotion often appears to have a mischievous intent, hence the traditional tendency to associate it with ghosts or other supernatural beings. However, in many cases it may equally be attributed to a force emanating from a living person, typically a child who exhibits symptoms of repressed emotion. An alternative view, not endorsed by most serious investigators, is that the phenomenon should be accounted for entirely in terms of trickery and natural events such as seismic activity.

Early Beliefs and Reports

The term 'poltergeist' derives from the German words *poltern* (to crash or bang about) and *geist* (mind, ghost or spirit). Reports of poltergeist activity date back as far as the Ravenna case of 530 CE^[1] and traditionally implicate a spirit entity, although without much supporting evidence; in medieval times almost any unexplained effect was put down to the involvement of a spirit force. Several cases were documented between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the sixteenth century, although most are short and lacking in detail.

A better-known example is a French case that took place in a monastery in Lyons in 1526, centred on an eighteen-year-old nun, Anthoinette de Grollée. A variety of phenomena were described, including soft, communicative rapping sounds, the apparition of a human figure and the presence of a feeble voice. On one occasion when the nuns were eating, 33 powerful blows were heard, apparently witnessed by all present. The effects were considered to have been caused by a nun who had died two years earlier in tragic circumstances.^[2]

Other early cases offering some degree of detail and objectivity are those at Tuttelstadt^[3] and North Aston,^[4] both of which have been summarized in more recent literature.^[5]

Reported Phenomena

A study of 500 poltergeist cases by [Alan Gauld](#) and [Tony Cornell](#)^[6] shows that the effects most commonly reported are the movement of small objects (64%), rapping sounds (48%), movements of large objects such as chairs and tables (36%), the appearance of a human phantasm (29%), and the presence of a voice or groaning sound (26%). Phenomena reported less often are [apports](#) (the mysterious appearance of small objects, sometimes in mid-air), small animals seen or heard, various luminous effects, incendiary effects and inundations of water. Of the high proportion of rapping sounds, a large number (16% of the total cases) involved some form of communication with the unknown force.

The study also examined the quality of the testimony for each case, for instance considering whether the account was first-hand or second-hand, whether there was more than one witness, and how long after the events the testimony was formally recorded. On this basis, a numerical rating was given to each case ranging from one (for a case that involved a distant recollection of a second-hand story) to ten (for a case that involved several witnesses and continuous instrumental recording of the events). A 1-5 rating quantified the amount of detail provided in the report. A cluster analysis grouped the cases by shared characteristics. Among other things, the authors concluded that certain cases traditionally regarded as poltergeist episodes should more appropriately be regarded as [hauntings](#).

Public Attitudes and The Media

Public attitudes to the subject are largely determined by accounts in newspapers, magazines, films, popular books, and television programmes. Much of this information is far from objective, and inaccuracies have tended to contaminate reference works found elsewhere, particularly on the Internet. Perceptions of poltergeist activity are often based on sensationalist depictions of the subject, commonly involving entirely fictional scripts intended to entertain rather than inform. A sensationalist approach is even taken in documentary programmes and tabloid newspaper accounts, to satisfy the public appetite for entertainment. Arguably, the only objective evaluation in recent times was the 2007 screening of the Enfield Poltergeist and even that was portrayed in a rather melodramatic fashion.^[7]

Influential films include *Carrie*, *The Exorcist* and the *Poltergeist* trilogy. The film *Amityville Horror*, based on Jay Anson's 1977 non-fiction book of the same name,^[8] appeared in 1979 and was remade in 2005. Details of the case came almost exclusively from the young couple that lived in the house, George and Kathy Lutz, who claimed to have experienced strange noises, an unearthly presence, locked doors and windows opening and closing by themselves, along with unexplained movement of objects and the presence of an apparition. The evidence suggests that the events were largely fabricated or, at best, exaggerated, but the depiction of them has nevertheless been influential in shaping public perceptions.

Notable Poltergeist Cases

Cases that have attracted considerable media attention, such as Amityville, [Borley Rectory](#),^[9] and [Columbus](#),^[10] offer less convincing evidence of paranormal activity than less well-known but better documented examples such as Willington,^[11] Epworth Rectory,^[12] Calvados,^[13] East Midlands,^[14] [Sauchie](#), Andover, and Hopfgarten.^[15]

The 1960 Sauchie case involved unusual occurrences in the vicinity of a young girl, Virginia Campbell. Two local doctors and a local clergyman were present when unusual rapping sounds were heard, apparently associated with Virginia but clearly not caused by her, since she was under their observation. Credible witnesses reported seeing anomalous movements of objects around her such the top of a linen basket rising on its own, and her school desk lid slowly rising up and down

despite her placing her hands on top of it palms downward in an apparent attempt to prevent it from moving. Other unusual movements of objects occurred during class time, all witnessed by teacher Margaret Stewart, who provided a detailed record of events.^[16]

In the 1995 Druten, Netherlands case, significant quantities of stones, sand and dirt flew into the home of a Turkish family. Suspicion at once fell on the young son, fifteen-year old Cetin; however, a police investigation could not establish any link. On one occasion, a police officer had sand thrown in his face while Cetin was standing directly in front of him with his hands in his pockets. Dutch parapsychologists concluded that the phenomena were linked to tensions within the family, and recommended psychological counselling as a means to halt the disturbances.^[17]

See the bibliography below for a selection of well-documented cases.

Responsive Poltergeist Cases

The means by which the raps or rappings (also referred to as 'knocks', 'bangs' and 'thumps') are created remains mysterious, but the evidence is abundant that they have no normal origin. There are however some indications, yet to be confirmed, that raps are the result not of a percussive force, but rather appear to derive from an unexplained internal stress within the object from which they appear to emanate, such as a wall, floor, bedstead or other item of furniture.^[18]

In certain cases it appears raps feature as a means of communication. An early example is the [1848 Hydesville, USA, case](#), where the Fox family claimed their thirteen-year-old daughter received coherent answers to spoken questions in the form of one knock for 'no, two for 'yes', and so on. A recent notable instance occurred in a 1970s case in Andover, UK, in which raps from a wooden bed-head were heard by the principal investigator and found to be linked to vibrations of the bed-head, which he could distinctly feel. He and local residents also heard loud rapping sounds, with similar accompanying vibrations, apparently emanating from an external wall of the house (as many as thirty people gathered to hear and feel the vibrating wall). Ample controls were in place to guard against fraud, and long, meaningful messages were rapped out in reply to questions posed by those present.^[19]

The literature contains many other cases where coded messages were received in this manner, including Derrygonnelly, [Cideville](#), Karin and Hannath Hall.

The case at Derrygonnelly, near Enniskillen, was investigated in 1877 by [Sir William Barrett](#), an eminent scientist and co-founder of the [Society for Psychical Research](#). Barrett placed his hands in his overcoat pocket and asked that a number of knocks be given that corresponded to the number of fingers he had open. This was correctly done five times in succession.^[20]

The 1850s Cideville case exhibited similar levels of communication in reply to questions posed by M de Mirville, a witness of the phenomena. He also asked the

entity to rap out particular tunes, including part of Rossini's 'Stabat', which it did. Other witnesses achieved similar effects.^[21]

A case from Sweden centred around a 27-year old, delicately-formed woman known as Karin. Again, questions were asked and were answered by means of coded raps. The strength of the raps 'oscillated in strength from heavy blows, as from a hammer, to sounds so weak that they could hardly be caught with certainty'. Karin's husband, and several others, frequently witnessed these unusual events, with every possible precaution taken to ensure that normal explanations could be ruled out.^[22]

The Hannath Hall case also involved coded raps coming from an unknown source. On some occasions the sounds were very loud, on others hardly discernible. During a series of loud raps, one of the investigators flashed his torch in the direction of the source and the knocks ceased immediately, although nothing could be discerned at that spot that might account for them. The source of the coded messages identified itself as a woman who had been murdered in the house in 1906, though no corroborative evidence could be found to support this. The investigators considered possible normal explanations, such as the presence of a practical joker, potential seismic activity, subsidence and underground water. However all witnesses agreed that the knocks were 'responses to questions' and that no practical joker, child or adult, could have been responsible for the phenomena.^[23]

Challenges Faced by Investigators

The investigation of poltergeist activity is difficult for several reasons.

- Poltergeist activity is very rare, and often lasts only a few days or weeks. By the time a case comes to the attention of parapsychologists it may have ceased, or have become too weak to provide unambiguous evidence.
- Whilst funding is available for certain types of paranormal investigation – notably psychokinesis and ESP experiments – such support is not readily available for field investigations.
- Poltergeist activity typically arises in domestic family situations, which may sometimes be tense, and at unsocial hours – all of which complicates investigators' attempts to gain access.
- Experienced investigators may find themselves impeded by the involvement of local amateurs, who have heard about a case from the local media and initiated their own research, or by the involvement of media employees.
- Being essentially anecdotal, claims of poltergeist activity are vulnerable to exaggeration and bias. As well as seeking opportunities to observe phenomena at first hand, investigators must make judgements as to the reliability of what they are told by witnesses.

The late Danish-born parapsychologist [William Roll](#), a dedicated investigator of poltergeist activity, stated: 'The extent to which it is possible to observe poltergeist events under good conditions will determine whether or not science can take them seriously'.^[24] He argued that there is much room for improvement in terms of the quality of reports. This may soon come to pass, with the advent of increasingly sophisticated recording equipment and with growing knowledge regarding psychological issues and experimental procedures.

Recurrent Spontaneous Psychokinesis (RSPK)

Until the twentieth century poltergeist activity was widely considered to have a supernatural origin. This changed with modern [experimental parapsychology](#) and the new view of psi as a general feature of consciousness. Since, in so many reported cases, the person whose presence seemed to correlate with the phenomena exhibited symptoms of repressed anger or distress, it made sense to view the effects as caused by a kind of discharge of mental energy. This concept was dubbed '[recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis](#)', or RSPK, by Roll, a veteran of several key investigations in the United States. The view of the 'living agent' as the cause of poltergeist effects, involuntarily employing RSPK to exteriorize repressed internal feelings of anguish, is favoured by many, if not most, professional parapsychologists today.

Cases that might without difficulty be explained in this way include the American cases of Columbus, [Seaford, Long Island](#) and [Miami](#) – all investigated by Roll – and the case of Rosenheim reported by [Hans Bender](#).

Survival of Death

However there are well-documented cases where no specific living agent was present during the manifestations, or where veridical information unknown to anyone present was given. Furthermore, communication with an apparent discarnate entity features in some cases, suggesting that the origin of the force emanates from such an entity. The Lagny,^[25] Kuala Kangsar,^[26] and [Enfield](#) cases involved communication with a vocal being, while rapping communications featured in the cases from Lyons, Bristol,^[27] Hydesville,^[28] and Andover.

Some cases, including the famous 1920 Poona episode,^[29] involved the appearance of a phantasm. An example involved Raymond Bayless, a life-long investigator of paranormal behaviour, who told his wife that, following his death, he would make himself known to her. Shortly after he died in 2004, his wife saw the back door of their home opening and closing on a regular basis. The effects seemed regular and purposeful, and not at all as if they were being caused by gusts of wind. On one occasion, she saw Raymond's form from the waist up, in her hallway: it was somewhat fuzzy but distinctly recognizable as her husband.^[30]

Cases of this type lead some scholars to argue that poltergeist phenomena derive from discarnate agencies. Parapsychologist [Ian Stevenson](#), in a study to determine whether poltergeist activity stems from living agents or discarnate agencies, concluded: 'Neither always. Some poltergeists are living and others are dead.'^[31] Gault and Cornell considered the discarnate entity theory in some detail and concluded, 'We can see no grounds for dismissing the evidence in such cases *en bloc*, and are therefore constrained to admit that in such cases it is appropriate to explore the discarnate entity hypothesis further and more fully'.^[32]

Normal Explanations

Fraud

Some observers argue that all so-called poltergeist activity can be attributed to fraud. They point to the fact that children and young people are often described as the 'focus' of alleged poltergeist activity, and are furthermore often said to be emotionally unstable – conditions that might be regarded as potentially productive of fraud. Trickery has been discovered in some cases, such as Columbus, Shropshire,^[33] Ipswich,^[34] Waterford^[35] and Netherfield.^[36] However it is also true that in many cases documented by credible investigators, fraud and trickery were ruled out.

Misinterpretation

Numerous experiments have confirmed that eyewitness testimony can be unreliable, and that observers often see what they expect to see. However sound anecdotal evidence may seem, it must be verified before being used to support generalised conclusions. Apart from the known issues of poor memory, consensus reporting and confirmation bias, evidence must be analysed and extensively evaluated. In their 1956 survey of the Borley Rectory case, [Dingwall](#), [Goldney](#) and [Hall](#) argued that the influence of suggestion had played a large part, showing how, 'once in the mind of the affected, belief can be strengthened and simple events misinterpreted in order to fit them into the desired pattern'.^[37] This is a pertinent description of what would now be described as 'confirmation bias'.

On the other hand, there are numerous cases where critical investigators, knowledgeable of the psychological challenges and limitations that may apply, nevertheless concluded that the observed phenomena could not be explained in this way.

Natural Physical Phenomena

It has been suggested that underground seismic forces or vibrations caused by sudden subterranean water movements could in principle account for typical poltergeist effects. Examples cited are paintings being removed and thrown from the walls, small objects being displaced, and rapping sounds being heard throughout a building. This approach was first described in the Dibbesdorf case of 1767^[38] and was discussed in much greater detail by [GW Lambert](#) in a series of articles in the 1950s and 60s.^[39] Gauld and Cornell tested this theory in 1961 by artificially creating vibrations within structural walls of a house in Cambridgeshire. Despite very significant induced vibrations, minor object movements took place only when the whole house began to shake quite significantly, thus essentially disproving the theory of natural subterranean vibrations.^[40]

Non-Normal Explanations (Extended Physics)

An alternative approach looks to explain poltergeist phenomena in terms of suitably extended or modified laws of physics (paraphysics). In his 1964 book, George Owen advanced ideas in this regard, dividing them into four discrete categories.^[41]

Action at a Distance

This theory suggests that the person at the centre of poltergeist activity – the ‘medium’ or ‘agent’ - reacts directly on the object to be moved without the existence of any intermediary field or mechanism in the intervening space. As Owen pointed out, this is logically equivalent to ‘non-localisation’ of effect, a notion already put forward in psychical research to explain mental phenomena such as telepathy and clairvoyance.

Higher Space

This theory invokes the existence of an additional physical space lying outside the ordinary physical continuum but accessible to some form of energy or matter. Action at a distance might only *seem* to be so. Perhaps some kind of higher space exists, in which the physical universe of ordinary experience is embedded, as it were on the surface of a sheet of paper. Influences pass outside ordinary physical space, with the result that, as viewed by us, no connection between cause and effect is detectable. Once regarded with suspicion, theories of higher dimensions have been embraced by conventional physics and are more readily considered.

Field Theories

The existence of a physical field has been proposed, of a kind new to science and mediating between the medium and the moved object. So poltergeist phenomena might be described in terms analogous to known physical fields, but differing from these in some important details.

The essential characteristics of a field require that every point in space is in a certain ‘state’ and that a material object is acted on only by forces derived from its immediate vicinity. In addition, energy flows through the field at a certain definite speed. In this context, we would consider that the space around the agent of a poltergeist effect is activated or in some way excited. When an object moves, it is in response to the ‘state’ of space in its immediate vicinity. The mechanical work done in moving the object results from a flow of energy from the medium across the intervening space to the object in question.

The poltergeist force differs from electromagnetic forces in that it seems independent of the material composing the object on which it acts. In this respect it resembles the gravitational force. On the other hand, unlike the gravitational field, it is selective, and it is this selectivity that weighs against a simple field explanation.

An updated form of field theory suggests that psi energy is transmitted by waves, similar to electromagnetic and acoustic energy fields. William Roll speculated that an object is associated with a ‘psi-field’ that interacts with the physical component of the object, and also with the psi fields of other objects (animate or inanimate), thereby resulting in ESP and PK.^[42] The psi field would explain the exponential decrease with distance from the agent – to Roll, a key characteristic of poltergeist activity. Area focusing would be expected, as with other types of energy waveforms. Of course, due to their being a completely unfamiliar form of energy, there is currently no way psi waves could be measured.

A modification of the psi-wave theory has been proposed by physicist [Harold Puthoff](#)^[45] and modified by William Joines, professor of electrical engineering at Duke University.^[44] It includes the concept of zero-point energy (ZPE), an idea originally put forward by Albert Einstein. This widely recognized form of energy might influence gravitational and inertial forces, giving rise to a mechanism for the movement of physical objects. It has been proposed that these psi waves are related to physical energies but also have a psychological component.

Anthropomorphic Theories

This form of contact theory postulates the existence of a substance detached from the subject, either wholly or in part, that is relatively free to wander and that moves objects by direct contact. This substance might be similar to the 'ectoplasmic' substance of the séance room, or might resemble the 'pseudopods' described by some researchers.^[45] Actual evidence supporting the genuineness of ectoplasmic material is scant, but mention was made of it in the Karin case, where CE Birdsall stated, 'Any person gifted ... with psychic sight, could have seen the form issue from, usually, the left side of the subject, and watch it make the raps...'.^[46] A similar effect was described in the somewhat different context of psychokinetic experiments with the Austrian medium [Rudi Schneider](#) in 1930,^[47] where a force that moved objects also interrupted an infrared beam, and was seen as a 'mist' by at least one witness.^[48]

Following a careful study of object movements in the Olive Hill case, Roll proposed a rotating beam theory.^[49] This postulates a beam of energy radiating out from the poltergeist agent, that rotates to produce the movement of objects. (However, while this theory may hold for some specific cases, it is not a general solution.) Similarly, Brovotto and Maxia have proposed that object movements and raps could be the result of a reduction in molecular bond strengths brought about by certain alterations in the brain of the agent.^[50]

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Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Krusch (1896).
2. ^ De Montalembert (1528).
3. ^ Korner (1581).
4. ^ Anon (1592).
5. ^ Gauld & Cornell (1979).
6. ^ Gauld & Cornell (1979).
7. ^ Playfair (1980).
8. ^ Anson (1977).
9. ^ Dingwall, Goldney & Hall (1956).
10. ^ Roll & Storey (2004).
11. ^ Crowe (1848).
12. ^ Wright (1917).
13. ^ Morice (1892–1893).
14. ^ Lamb, Gauld & Cornell (1973).
15. ^ Von Schrenck-Notzing (1929).
16. ^ Owen (1964), Chapter 5.
17. ^ Gerding, Wezelman & Bierman (1997).
18. ^ Colvin (2010).
19. ^ Colvin (2008).

20. ^ Barrett (1911).
21. ^ De Mirville (1854).
22. ^ Wijk & Karin (1905).
23. ^ Cornell & Gauld (1960).
24. ^ Roll (1976), 25.
25. ^ Calmet (1751).
26. ^ *Daily Telegraph Magazine* (Dec 1967).
27. ^ Durbin (1971).
28. ^ Brown (1970).
29. ^ Kohn (1930).
30. ^ McAdams (2014).
31. ^ Stevenson (1972), 251.
32. ^ Gauld & Cornell (1979).
33. ^ Hughes (1884).
34. ^ Anon. (1888).
35. ^ Anon. (1891).
36. ^ Sharp & Cameron (1947).
37. ^ Dingwall, Goldney & Hall (1956).
38. ^ Perty (1872).
39. ^ Lambert (1955, 1956, 1959, 1960).
40. ^ Gauld & Cornell (1979), 334-7.
41. ^ Owen (1964). All information in this section is drawn from this source unless otherwise noted.
42. ^ Roll (1964).
43. ^ Puthoff (1997).
44. ^ Joines (1975).
45. ^ Crawford (1919).
46. ^ Birdsall (1905), 313-4.
47. ^ Price (1933).
48. ^ Goldney (1975).
49. ^ Roll, Burdick & Joines (1974).
50. ^ Brovetto & Maxia (2008).