

Samuel George Soal

SG Soal (1889–1975) was a university mathematics teacher and parapsychologist who during the 1940s and 1950s reported a high success rate in telepathy experiments. Following his death, a computer analysis determined that he had systematically faked the results. The case is today regarded as the single most serious case of fraud to have occurred in the field of parapsychology.

Short Biography

Samuel George Soal was born in Yorkshire; his family moved to Essex when he was six. In 1905, he matriculated at London University, then worked part-time at Rochford School as a student teacher. From 1907 he studied for his degree at East London College (now Queen Mary College) where he had been awarded a scholarship. After a year at the Institute of Education he was given a junior post in the Mathematics Department at Queen Mary College in 1911 and took his MA in Mathematics in 1914.

In 1915, Soal joined the Army and was wounded at the Somme. After the war he was recalled to Queen Mary College where he later became senior lecturer in Mathematics. He remained on its staff until his retirement in 1958. In 1942, Soal married Miss Beatrice Anne Elliott (Rita), who had helped him with much of his experimental work.

Soal joined the SPR in October 1922 and served on its Council from 1928 until his retirement in 1961. He was elected president of the Society in 1950 for two years. In 1945, he was awarded a DSc by London University for his research work in parapsychology. The fourth William McDougall Award for Distinguished Work in Parapsychology was given to Dr Soal in 1960 by the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University in the US.

Psychical Research

Research with Mediums

Soal became interested in psychical research after reading Oliver Lodge's book *Raymond*, which described Lodge's visits to mediums and his belief that he had received communications through them from his dead soldier son Raymond. Soal decided to try himself to get messages through mediums from his brother Frank, who had also been killed in the war, aged nineteen. He joined the London Spiritualist Alliance (now the British College of Psychic Studies) and attended sittings with the medium Mrs Brittain, which impressed him favourably.

Later, Soal sent the SPR enthusiastic reports of twenty-four sittings with a 'direct voice' medium, Blanche Cooper.^[1] These included brief messages from 'Frank' whispered through a 'trumpet' floating in the dark, that included information not known by anyone present and later found to be accurate. However, communications by a self-identified John Ferguson, a former acquaintance, appeared to be feeding

back thoughts that had been present in Soal's mind, raising the suspicion that the communicating personality was merely a telepathic confabulation between medium and sitter. Most notable in this series were detailed communications from a former school friend named Gordon Davis (whom Soal believed was dead), confirming his decease and giving persuasive evidence of his identity, but who Soal later discovered was in fact alive.

This rare anomaly has made the 'Gordon Davis' case notable in the literature of psychical research, and one that is often cited in opposition to mediumship as evidence of survival of death. There are other examples of the phenomenon; however, in the light of subsequent revelations of Soal's systematic fraud in telepathy experiments questions have been raised about the reliability of this particular example. Long after his death, exercise books containing Soal's handwritten notes of the Cooper sittings were found in a second-hand shop. The content fairly tallies with his published quotes. On the other hand there is a surprising lack of contrast between the notes supposedly written with his left hand during the dark séances and the notes written normally afterwards. Irregularities in sequencing mean that the document cannot serve as proof that everything was written on the dates marked, so the case still relies on Soal's testimony. Over time Soal expressed contradictory sentiments about the Cooper material, sometimes dismissing it as unreliable, but on at least one occasion asserting that his experiences with Cooper formed the bedrock of his belief in the paranormal.^[2]

Becoming a Medium

Following the Davis affair, Soal visited the medium Hester Dowden, who helped clients develop 'automatic' writing. Holding her hand over his, both poised over a Ouija board, messages were recorded ostensibly from Oscar Wilde. The two went on to produce scripts from 'Oscar Wilde' independently. Dowden regarded hers as truly from the deceased Wilde. Soal by contrast was obliged to concede that although his scripts, which he published under the name 'Mr V', reproduced features of the author's style, wit and handwriting, some passages were clearly derived from Wilde's published works. A further cause for doubt was that the scripts seemed deliberately to avoid giving any personal details that Soal could not be expected to know but which might be checked.

Soal's younger brother Charles wrote two commentaries on the scripts, the first in praise,^[3] the second more critical, citing a flagrant plagiarism that had been identified by a friend of Soal's, a quote from a letter he had sent her some years earlier.^[4]

Soal, again as 'Mr V', went on to produce scripts attributed to a lesser poet, Margaret Veley. No personal details about Veley emerged beyond what was available in print, while the compositions might plausibly have been produced by Soal himself.^[5] Soal emphasized that revived memories of things he could have read (cryptomnesia), and the manifestation of an unrehearsed persona were both extraordinary phenomena, but avoided asserting paranormality.

From Sceptic to Believer

Soal next turned his attention to the telepathic powers of ordinary people. After a critical assessment of distant telepathy tests by radio, organized by the SPR, he embarked on years of effort to find a successful telepathic subject, using playing cards and other targets. In 1932, he produced a mammoth report of uniformly chance results.^[6]

In 1934, JB Rhine began reporting successful card guessing with packs of 25 shuffled cards with five geometric symbols. Soal copied this method, but without success, and began attacking Rhine for what he believed were lax methods that led to spurious and fraudulent scoring. In 1940, renouncing this abusive criticism, Soal announced in *Nature* that he had found two persons, Basil Shackleton and Gloria Stewart, who could produce significant 'displacement' effects, that is, scoring on the targets one ahead or one behind rather than on the immediate target.^[7]

The Shackleton Experiments

Soal's 1941-43 Shackleton tests^[8] produced uniquely consistent – and apparently fraudproof – 'one-ahead' scoring. The targets were five animal picture cards. The random target sequence, produced by Soal, was written in two columns of 25 numbers on the score sheets. These were held by Experimenter A, who sat at a table opposite the agent, but separated by a screen with an aperture at eye level. Shackleton was in an adjacent room with the communicating door open.

Experimenter A called out when Shackleton was to make a guess, simultaneously holding a number 1 to 5 at the aperture to tell the agent which card was the target. The agent had a set of five animal cards in a row before her. If number 2 appeared she knew the second card from the left was the target. Before guessing began, she shuffled the row so that she alone knew which card corresponded to which number. This prevented A's voice, during the otherwise silent procedure, from transmitting any clue. After 50 guesses Experimenter B would bring the Shackleton guess-sheet to A to convert the letter guesses into numbers and enter in the Guess columns adjacent to the Actual target columns on A's score sheet. Shackleton's hits could then be counted. A dummy example of a completed score sheet is shown below.

KM Goldney assisted throughout, acting as Experimenter A or B. The scoring responded consistently to changes in testing. Under the clairvoyance condition, when the agent touched the backs of her five cards without knowing which they were, chance scores were invariable. One-ahead scoring changed to two-ahead when the experiment was speeded up. Different agents produced high scores or clear failure. (The main agent, Rita Elliot, became Soal's wife, which however Soal did not publicly reveal.)

Witnesses attended the sessions and a hand-written copy of the completed score sheets was posted to Professor [CD Broad](#), a Cambridge philosopher with an interest in psychical research.

Goldney tried to persuade Soal to allow other experimenters to test Shackleton, generally without success: a single, brief test carried out by Denys Parsons, using concealed counters, had no clear outcome.

mathematics students who was twenty years his junior, saying he preferred to have 'an atmosphere free from suspicion'.^[9] The tests spread over five years and his report is included in a book published in 1956, authored by Soal and Bateman.^[10] It received great acclaim and established Soal as the then leading British authority on ESP.

The Stewart sessions were relatively informal, Soal generally acting as Exprimenter A and Bateman as B. Under the customary set-up, Stewart accumulated over 33,000 guesses with 25% correct (chance expectation 20%), a level virtually equal to Shackleton's results, although in the last sessions she seemed to have lost her ability.

Discovery of Fraud

In 1956, an American psychologist asked to see a Shackleton score sheet. Soal said he had long ago 'lost the records on a train'. The possibility of fraud began to be publicly discussed. In 1960, it became known that Gretl Albert, an agent at one session, had said she saw him changing 1s into 4s or 5s on the score sheets.^[11] She was re-interviewed in 1974, while psychologists C. Scott and CEM Hansel reported finding odd patterns in the data consistent with Albert's accusation.^[12] SPR researchers came to Soal's defence,^[13] but in 1978 Markwick, working from the Broad copies, found repetitions of sequences of up to 25 digits in the Shackleton targets. Occasional interpolations of extra single digits within a repeated sequence almost always produced a correct guess. In his target sequence Soal had probably left gaps or digits that would be easy to change once he knew what guesses had been made. One may suppose that similar manipulation occurred throughout. Soal might well have used other deceptions as well; in any event, it is impossible now to determine whether any of the scores are genuine.

In 2000, SPR researcher Donald West asked Markwick to help him scrutinize the Stewart records that had been placed in the SPR archives. These included guess sheets, completed in Stewart's handwriting, and score sheets with the guesses converted into numbers and entered in the Actual target columns. There is also a microfiche of the whole collection and a typed copy of a chronicle of the sessions compiled by Bateman. About 16% of score sheets and 19% of guess sheets are missing, but most of these appear on the microfiche.

Markwick noted many signs that most of the score sheets and nearly all the guess sheets were modified copies, not the true originals. For example, the signatures of witnesses are sometimes ludicrously crude imitations. The sheets are printed in batches, commissioned as the work progressed, distinguished by varied typefaces, watermarks and paper. The copies are on one large, distinctive batch. Many faint indents of digits on score sheet copies are impressions from the preceding score sheet, as became clearer when they were subjected to electrostatic detection at the Giles Document Laboratory in Amersham. In making his copies, Soal must have used a block of blank score sheets on which to write, leaving indentations on the blank sheet below, which was afterwards used for making a copy of the next score sheet.

The research was done in the 1940s, but when making the copies in the 1950s, Soal sometimes dates the sheets with a '50', crossed out to '40' or occasionally left erroneous. The microfiche includes two versions of one score sheet, the first an original, with clearly visible alterations to some target digits, the second a neatly rewritten copy that conceals these changes. When shown this copy, Bateman said his signature was a forgery. Using a multiplicity of such clues, Markwick was confident of being able to identify the minority of sheets that are originals. On these sheets there are many changes to figures in the target columns, made by scratching out and overwriting. It had been discovered that the Stewart targets were not fully random, being deficient in doubles, that is, repetitions of the same target digit. These rather crude target changes, left visible on the original score sheets, had been carefully engineered to add the requisite number of doubles without changing the total score. The deficit of doubles was not a fatal flaw, but Soal had felt the need to conceal it.

To achieve high scores fraudulently Soal must have altered either the guesses or the targets during the sessions, and before the guesses were decoded, the hits counted, and Bateman took home the score sheets for checking. Further examination revealed that the guess sheets in the archive are also mostly copies. Only guess sheets from the distance tests, and from one test that gave null results, are originals. Evidence for this is threefold. Some guess sheets show indents similar to those found on the score sheets. The guess sheet copies are all on the same batch of forms as was used for the copied score sheet. Gloria Stewart's signatures at the top of the guess sheets differ from her usual signature or that on the original guess sheets. This point received some confirmation from a sample examined by a handwriting expert. Soal must have had good reason for making all these copies.

Markwick noticed on the original score sheets, among target digits producing hits, some displaying atypical peculiarities of ink colour or depth or alignment. Although these features are more subtle than the crude changes producing extra doubles, Markwick could pick them out. Given a sample of score sheets on which she had found such anomalies, West was able to identify them independently. She suggests the likely explanation is that during the sessions Soal substituted false guess sheets with guesses he had fixed to match positions on his prepared target sheets where he had left digits faint or easy to change. The manipulation would need to be done when he could access the number codes for the guesses. Her explanation is supported by a non-random feature of the atypical digits and similarity with manipulation in the Shackleton data.

Four sessions of distance tests with Stewart in Antwerp and agents in London gave highly significant scoring and were published in advance.^[14] Neither the guess sheets in Stewart's handwriting, nor the signed score sheets show any sign of being other than genuine originals. However, as proof against fraud this experiment was hopelessly inadequate. Stewart's guess sheets were posted to Soal who then brought them to Bateman for checking apparently unopened. He could have steamed them open and increased the scores by rearranged the codes that had been written in pencil on his score sheets.

Trust in any of Soal's Stewart experiments is impossible. The only time she was tested by another experimenter was by Gaither Pratt in USA. The results were

persistently at chance level, although this was long after she had reportedly lost her powers. Whether or not she ever possessed telepathic ability, like Shackleton, she was a victim of Soal's manipulation.

Welsh Telepathy Experiments

In 1955, still on the lookout for telepathic subjects, Soal tried card guessing with two thirteen year old boy cousins, Glyn as the guesser, Ieuan as the agent. This was the start of his last major project, published in 1959 in book form.^[15] The boys came from a family in North Wales with whom Soal had lodged many times during his vacations. While he was alone with them, significantly high scores were obtained immediately.

Soal invited the assistance of a recently joined member of the SPR, HT Bowden, headmaster of a private school, and Goldney. Promising results continued, and the boys were brought to London for seven sessions in the library of the SPR. Witnesses were impressed and an account for the SPR Journal was prepared. However, this was withdrawn when, back home, the boys were found to be using crude signals, with Ieuan coughing, sniffing and creaking his chair.

When tests resumed, trials began out of doors. During a further visit to London a score averaging 2.5 times chance expectation was achieved with the boys 99 feet apart on playing fields, with auditory signalling seemingly ruled out. Further tests in Wales continued with spectacular results.

Soal was under pressure to introduce variations in the experiments, in order to remove all doubts, at a time when phenomenally significant scores were continuing to accrue, for example, by arranging for the boys to be placed in separate houses.

He resisted strongly, arguing that changes were apt to inhibit the effect. Meanwhile, Soal's wife told Goldney that she thought the boys were tricksters and that her husband was scared they might be exposed and his reputation ruined.

Progress stalled and experimentation came to a temporary end as the boys became increasingly restive and undisciplined. The parents too were becoming less cooperative, feeling exploited and demanding greater recompense for loss of earnings and the cost of accommodation for their visits to London.

Furthermore, suspicions were now raised that the boys might have been signalling to each other with a concealed supersonic whistle inaudible to adults. Soal argued that the idea was absurd.^[16] However in 1959, C. Scott gave convincing demonstrations before Goldney, West and others, showing that it could be done by means of a Galton whistle under his shirt, attached to a compressible bulb that he squeezed with his arm against his chest.^[17] Soal agreed to the boys performing for the BBC Panorama programme^[18] that included recording to detect supersonic signals. No extra-chance scores and no signalling occurred, but the boys were aware of what was happening and, in any case, their ability was supposedly already lost.

A final blow to the reputation of the research was headmaster Bowden's conviction in 1959 for sexual offences against boys. However, when West interviewed Glyn and Ieuan separately in 2002 neither had known of this and both were adamant that no

impropriety had occurred with between them and Bowden. They also both insisted that their telepathy with Soal was genuine. Many SPR members who had witnessed the boys being tested remained convinced they were genuine. The case remains 'not proven', but Soal's mismanagement may have lost the chance of obtaining exceptional evidence for ESP.

A Strange Personality

One can only speculate on the motives of so conflicted and complex a character as Soal. His family background was unpromising. His brother Charles became an unemployed, financially dependent neurotic. His only sister, a one-time school teacher, became a chronic paranoid schizophrenic, dying in a psychiatric hospital aged 73.

Soal himself was more successful, overcoming a modest background – his father was a poultry farmer and bee keeper – to gain university entrance and establish a career as a maths teacher – no mean feat at the time. By contrast, his private and social life were dismal. Deeply introverted and secretive, he could spend hours in company hardly speaking at all. His colleague Bateman worked with him for some years before learning that he was married. Soal was prone to irascible and hostile outbursts, especially in print, and his reactions to criticism of his work were positively paranoid. His late marriage was fraught: Rita complained that he shut himself away with his books, leaving her alone, and a visitor got the impression she was his housekeeper.

Initially, Soal was committed to spiritualism. A medium friend was witness at his secretive Registry Office marriage. He was disappointed at the realization that the Cooper messages were not from his dead brother, but persisted in publishing his dramatic account of the sittings. Suspicions remain that he manipulated the Gordon Davis evidence. A strong element of vanity is evident in his commentary on the 'Mr V' scripts.

Years of work in the systematic generation of, and cynical public promotion of, false results undoubtedly fulfilled Soal's yearning for public recognition. However, he could hardly have spent so many years in fruitless testing of potential telepathy subjects without at least some hope of a result. He was ready to compose conscientious replies to inquirers wanting guidance on ESP testing. He may also have been motivated to provide support for some version of the paranormal that he really believed in. His openly expressed disappointment when the Jones boys were not performing well, and his continued efforts to test them during his retirement, suggest he retained a real hope they were genuine.

Note: This article comprises points from the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* vol. 60, 224 (2018) by Markwick and West. The text and supporting documents have been deposited in the SPR archives.

Donald West

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1.^ Soal (1925).
- 2.^ Soal (1939).
- 3.^ Soal, C.W. (1923).
- 4.^ Soal (1924).
- 5.^ Salter & Mr V, (1929).
- 6.^ Soal (1932).
- 7.^ Carington & Soal (1940).
- 8.^ Soal & Goldney (1943).
- 9.^ Soal & Bateman (1954), 203.
- 10.^ Soal & Bateman (1954).
- 11.^ Soal & Goldney (1960).
- 12.^ Scott & Haskell (1974).
- 13.^ Goldney et al (1974).
- 14.^ Bateman & Soal (1950).
- 15.^ Soal & Bowden (1959).
- 16.^ Scott & Goldney (1960), 280.
- 17.^ Scott & Goldney (1960).
- 18.^ BBC *Panorama*, 27 April, 1959.