



# Exploring People's Experiences of Telephone Telepathy: A Qualitative Study

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# Introduction

*Parapsychology can be defined as the scientific study of **experiences** which, if they are as they seem to be, are in principle outside the realm of human capabilities as presently conceived by conventional scientists.*

Irwin & Watt (2007)

- Such experiences are very common.
- Efforts to study them typically entail
  - Testing explanations in terms of conventional or already-understood processes
  - Taking seriously counter-explanations by directly testing the claim while controlling for normal explanations
- However, the validity of these approaches depends crucially on researchers' ability to effectively characterize the phenomenon they are interested to explain





# Telephone Telepathy



- Possibly the most commonly reported parapsychological experience

| Study  | Question  | N   | %  |
|--|---|-----|----|
| Sheldrake (2000):<br>London sample             | <i>Have you ever felt that someone was going to telephone you just before they did?</i>   | 387 | 51 |
| Sheldrake (2000):<br>Bury sample               | <i>Have you ever heard the telephone ring or picked up the telephone and known who was on the other end without any possible cue, before they had spoken?</i> | 200 | 49 |
| Brown & Sheldrake (2001):<br>Santa Cruz sample | <i>Have you ever heard the telephone ring and known who was on the other end without any possible cue, before they had spoken?</i>                            | 200 | 47 |

- More commonly reported by females than males (London, 56% vs 41%; Bury, 71% vs 53%; Santa Cruz, 48% vs 44%)





# Introduction

Conventional explanations typically involve

- Coincidence & selective recall
- Subtle cuing
- Pattern recognition





# Introduction

Experimental tests control for these





## Rationale for present study

- Surveys have given us only the most shallow of characterisations of the phenomenon
- Skeptical accounts offer only a superficial fit
- Experimental tests seem oblivious to any necessary conditions for occurrence
- We planned to start to address this here by asking people about their experiences via focus groups
- Research question: “How do people describe their experiences of telephone telepathy?”





## Procedure

- Participants recruited through media appeals
- There were no male enquiries
- Age range 19-60
- Participants met with the researcher in focus groups of 2-3.
- Briefing / informed consent
- Content of interview schedule





## Analysis

- Narratives were recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed so as to develop an account of lay experiences of telephone telepathy
- Thematic analysis involves a process of immersing oneself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
- Transcripts were coded and organised into a thematic framework (Aronson, 1994; Flick, 1998).



# Results

- Circumstances of TT: mental state

**TR:** It's not a constant knowing ... It's more a mind frame for me being in the right frame of mind um whether that's an altered state or an out of state or whatever it is um for me it is all about whether you're open up here [points to head] and if you've got your logic brain going on too much of the time I don't get anything with that but um if I'm doing something inane like washing up or um standing around in the sitting room and the kids have gone to bed and suddenly my mind's nice and empty and that's yeah that's when I get it..

**RP:** For me when I'm stressed any mind's going ten to the dozen of all the things I would be doing then...yeah my mind's on track somewhere else and not there at all...I wasn't picking up on something because I'm totally in a mental state and gone somewhere else”

**CB:** I would say that when I'm busy I get it more and when I am running around doing lots and lots of work or lots going on in my life and like I think I said before I might have to rely on an extra sense or something and that's when these messages come through to me and stuff happens or could it just be um stress I don't know





# Results

- Circumstances of TT: physical sensation

**CB:** I would almost say it it's like an out-of-body experience but yeah I would say it's just like a heightening sense of knowing it's going to happen and I don't know whether that makes any sense and it's just um taking yourself out of your normal zone in a way

**RP:** I think Oh [shudders] and it's like a weird sensation because you know it's like here she is and it's kind of like another sense and ... it doesn't surprise me but every time it excites you a little bit

**TR:** Yeah it feels like an anxiety um ... I would say kind of here [points to chest and torso area] ... it's like an emotional connection [LAS: yeah] and it's the only maybe way I could describe it





# Results

## ● Circumstances of TT: emotional connection

**CB:** Yeah I tend to say though if I'm getting phone calls it'll be from someone close so like I said my mum and this particular friend Anthony and a few ... girlfriends who I'm in tune with should I say and I will randomly think about them and get a call from them

**RP:** I've got two sisters and that's who I experience it with the most and there must be a link to being emotionally close to someone and that ability

**TR:** I know a wide group of people um but it tends to be the ones that I really like that I'm really connected to at the time like my friend with her son um and I really like her and I feel like we do bond so um it is always a closeness of a friendship that I have that the strongest kind of knowing





# Results

## ● Gender differences

**RP:** ... men find it so much hard to trust their emotions...and they seem to be more comfortable with rational and I don't need rational...

**JR:** ... they don't respond to the little feelings, men don't register those emotions as ... women do so um I don't think [LAS: yeah] and I don't think they pick up on those vibes

**CB:** I think females are more intuitive anyway ... we use our senses very well and other senses too but that is a sweeping generalisation but like you said about men as well they might just not want to admit to it because it's not very masculine is it to say oh this happened to me maybe?

**HMB:** They feel emasculated because of it really and they don't want to, they don't want to (laughs) get involved and they feel like they'll be laughed at and things

**CH:** It's like going back to the male as the hunter gatherer and you're at home sorry or wherever you are and making sure all the children are safe or you know other members of the family as evolution progresses but yeah that instinct would have had to be there



# Results

## ● Making phone calls

**TR:** I hadn't spoken to my brother for six years due to his wife and myself not getting on and I just had this overwhelming feeling one day and got up and phoned and we lived in South Africa and his servant said something was horribly wrong and we needed to sort things out and he'd been in an horrific accident but why did that give me that overwhelming feeling [LAS: yeah] and need to phone then

**RP:** I only get that with my sisters and I will know and it's not a desire to be with them but I need to check I have a desire to check in with them and without a doubt every time something's happened

**JR:** I'll get an anxious feeling and not general day-to-day every now and again [LAS: yeah] and it'll be and it's generally like when there was something wrong with my brother and I'm drawn to go and phone [LAS: yeah] that source um and it's like a prickly feeling

**RP:** It makes me feel a little sick sometimes .... Like a travel sickness is the only way to describe it ... and you know it's not related to anything else and it'll be my brother and oh it will be Becca...





# Results

## ● Reflections on possible causes

**RP:** [it could be] a best friend that you haven't seen for a couple of years and you can still keep in tune and there might be distance and time away from you. And they are the ones where you go more 'Wow! I knew it was going to be you on the phone

**JR:** I have ruled it out as coincidence for [LAS: yeah] for a very long time um and I say to my daughter have you heard from Adam yet? And within 30 seconds [clicks fingers] to a minute Adam will phone ... but I think it happens too often to be coincidental

**CB:** ...maybe it's because it's a predicted time that I know she is going to call me... I do find that a bit strange because it could be predicted behaviour ... I know my mum's going to call at certain times of the day and I just sense it as such

**JR:** I think if you've got your phone near the computer and you're working before it goes off or a while before it goes off you get that di di di di through the PC so there must be that





# Results

- Telephone telepathy as a minor subclass of phenomena

**RP:** Yeah I talk to my family about anything intuitive but not about the phone calls because they happen all the time but definitely my premonitions and dreams because I knew that was going to be the case I will definitely speak to my family about that

**JR:** it's not just telephone telepathy and for me it goes a lot further back and trying to figure that out and my first real I suppose wake up call was in that something wasn't um I don't know something was different I had a horrific car accident with my brother but I saw it in my dreams the night before and everything was exactly as it was and I thought well how did I do that and how bizarre was that... the car accident it was absolutely a vivid dream [HMB: yeah] and I seldom do dream [LAS: mmm] that I ever remember

**CB:** I've had experiences where they're negative but I don't really see them as negative and I see them as warning signals I need to be aware of so I'll get a warning of some sort um usually in a dream so I have a dream about someone and something and I think I have got to take notice of that and um I had 3 leading up to a car crash I had um and I think in a way they were preparing me for a car crash and ... something was kind of looking out for me shall we say...





## Conclusions

- Work is still ongoing on this project
- Illustrates that experiencers are aware of counter explanations and that TT events are distinguished in some way from common or garden variety coincidences
- Responses are primarily emotional or physiological, commonly refer to those who are emotionally close and have a reciprocal openness, and reflect a need to ensure that they are safe and well
- Despite their relative success, experimental tests do not seem to reflect this
- It is difficult to see how sceptical accounts, as they are currently formulated, could do justice to these experiences





*Thank you for your attention*

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