

Dreams, art and mental telepathy

Knowledge of the sleep-dream cycle has encouraged ESP advocates to try mental telepathy on sleeping subjects

by Patricia McBroom

People enjoy believing in ESP as they enjoy believing that UFOs come from outer space. There's mystery, romance, a touch of the possible and wide new vistas for human experience.

Besides, who hasn't suspected himself of extrasensory powers because of a phone call from a friend just as the friend came to mind, a simultaneous thought with someone close or, more rarely, a dream that turns out to reflect actual fact.

Probably few people call their experiences extrasensory perception, they speak of "premonitions," of "being on the same wavelength," of "getting the message," via some channel other than the usual ones—sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.

This predisposition to believe in some kind of extra-normal communication regularly leads a small minority of professional scientists to try elaborate experiments aimed at establishing ESP as a fact.

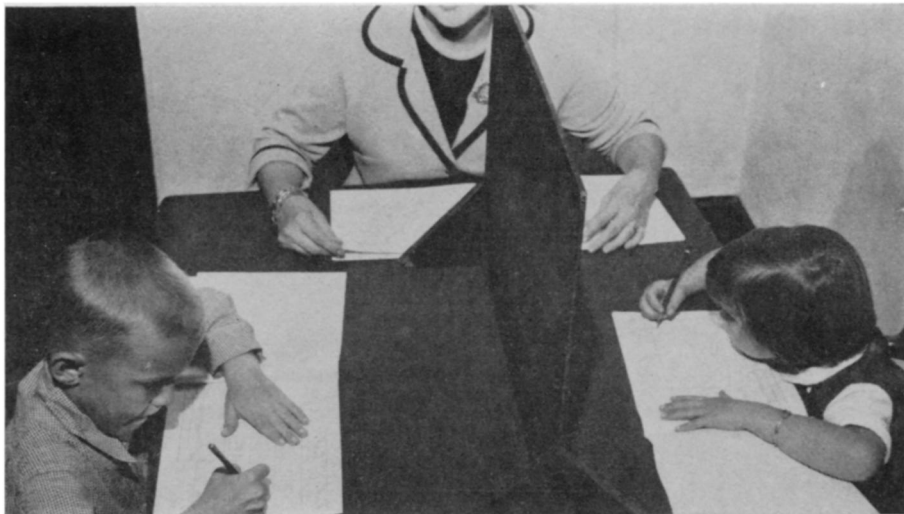
And just as regularly, most of them give up because the payoffs on ESP research are so low.

"I went through the cycle," says Dr. Arthur J. Bachrach, a psychologist at Arizona State University. Like many others Dr. Bachrach got interested in ESP as an industrious graduate student and then dropped the investigations partly because his results were absolutely negative—the subjects couldn't communicate on any extrasensory level—and partly because of the type of researcher who customarily enters the field.

"The more I worked with these people, the more I felt there was a certain uncritical handling of the data," says Dr. Bachrach.

So after a couple of years in ESP research, the psychologist turned to the study of perception itself, a young, growing and relatively unexplored field in behavioral science.

Meanwhile, ESP investigations have taken a new turn and changed the rules of the game. Where once researchers tried for complete objectivity—or at least the semblance of objectivity—with machines, buttons, switches, room dividers, screens and cards printed with symbols, they now work in dreams and emotions. New knowledge of dreams has opened the way for ESP researchers to approximate the emotional context of so-called para-



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Two children test their ESP powers at Dr. J. B. Rhine's facility in Durham.

normal experience, and, in the process, sidestep the old ESP critics.

In past years, ESP advocates tried to prove their point by closing off any possibility of communication between agent, or sender, and receiver. But because so little is known about the range and sensitivity of normal human perception, that job turned out to be exceedingly difficult and critics could always claim the experiment wasn't tight enough.

In 1938, for example, the scientific world discovered that the famous ESP cards used by Dr. J. B. Rhine in classic experiments at Duke University could be read from their backs under certain lighting conditions. Though the cards were later changed, reports of ESP work from that laboratory were thereafter received with some suspicion.

Another sample of tricky perception came to light last year when it was reported that no blindfold effectively blocks sight. The shape of the face always admits a sliver of light along the nose, no matter how many bandages and tapes cover the eyes.

English psychologist C.E.M. Hansel recently summed up and debunked all the leading ESP experiments of the past. In "ESP, a Scientific Evaluation," Dr. Hansel, professor at the University of Wales, presents an exhaustive study of experimental controls used in American, English and Russian ESP tests, and concludes that in each case, trickery could have been responsible for the results.

In some cases, deliberate trickery did occur, says Dr. Hansel. In all other cases, sensory leakage, deliberate or unintentional deception was possible. Dr. Hansel points out that every time the experimental controls tightened up, the ESP scores went down; every time they loosened, scores went up. Furthermore, supposedly sensitive subjects were regularly unable to perform before ESP critics.

"To the skeptic," says Dr. Hansel, "psychic research seems to have been as much a history of the manner in which the artful can mislead the innocent as it is a reflection of any more esoteric activity."

Russian psychologists show no more inclination to believe ESP claims than do Americans, says Dr. Gregory Razran, a Queens College professor who keeps well-informed on Soviet developments in the behavioral sciences. Despite periodic sensational reports of large-scale telepathy experiments in that country, the overriding professional attitude in Russia, as in the United States, is one of skepticism and disinterest, says Dr. Razran.

The trouble is that no matter how well-conceived the experiment, ESP research is based on a fundamental logical flaw which probably makes the phenomenon forever unprovable.

ESP has only a negative definition, points out Dr. Edwin G. Boring, professor emeritus at Harvard University. It is "communication without the intervention of ordinary sensory channels."

Therefore, to establish ESP, one has to prove no other information channels are operating, says Dr. Boring in an introduction to Hansel's book. "A universal negative of this sort cannot be proven. . . . Ignorance is too plentiful."

The new experiments combining dreams and mental telepathy have found no more workable definition of ESP than the others, but it does make the "tricky perception" argument against ESP research somewhat irrelevant.

Sleeping and dreaming presumably alter or even suspend the normal powers of perception, so subtle sensory leakage is no longer a main problem. The new difficulty lies in making scientific sense out of something as subjective as a dream.

Dream experiments have only been possible since the recent discovery that rapid eye movements (REMs) in a sleeping man indicate he is dreaming. About five minutes after the eyeballs start to roll, the experimenter can wake his subject and get full dream recall. The man then returns to sleep, only to be awakened again when his REMs reappear.

Such precise knowledge of dream periods enables an ESP researcher to try out communication on a sleeping man. The task is to find "the message" somewhere in the sleeper's dream.

Dr. Montague Ullman, who is testing mental telepathy at Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn, explains his interest in dreams.

If mental telepathy is a property, says Dr. Ullman, it seems to be tied in with strong emotions and needs. So are dreams. The telepathic event, for instance, often occurs during a dream, as when a man dreams that someone close to him is in danger.

During 20 years of psychoanalytic practice, says Dr. Ullman, he had many patients bring in dreams that seemed to reflect events in the doctor's own life. Other analysts have reported similar experiences.

Such patients apparently have a need to reach the psychiatrist on a level where normal communication and defenses don't operate, Dr. Ullman concludes. Of all his patients, however, only three seemed to be consistent telepathic dreamers, to the point where the phenomenon became a distinct focus in the therapy.

But the link—if there is one—between ESP and emotional states is a tough one to duplicate in the laboratory.

Dr. Ullman's approach is to combine dreams, telepathy and art.

A volunteer reports to the lab at night, gets briefed on the experiment and goes to bed, after being wired with electrodes.

Meanwhile, an agent reports to another room, some distance away, carrying a sealed envelope. Inside is a reproduction of some well-known painting: George Bellow's "Dempsey and Firpo;" Salvador Dali's "The Sacrament of the Last Supper;" or Rufino Tamayo's "Animals."

Throughout the night, the agent works at his own pace—he stares at the painting, goes to sleep, wakes up, draws the painting, thinks about it, goes to sleep. His job: to transmit something of the painting to the dreamer.

Periodically, Dr. Ullman wakes the sleeping man and records his dreams. A single night may yield up to eight dreams.

One subject dreamt the following on the night that "Animals"—which depicts slaving beasts (cover)—was the target painting: "I was at this banquet . . . and I was eating something like rib steak. And this friend of mine was there . . . and people were talking about how she wasn't very good to invite for dinner because she was very conscious of other people getting more to eat than she got like, especially, meat."

To Dr. Ullman this is a promising experiment.

The dream recordings, along with 10 reproductions, are then sent along to each of three independent judges who try to match the dreams to the right painting.

So far, the judges have had significant success on only one subject, with seven nights worth of dreams. For 12 others, with one night apiece, the matchings failed to reach much beyond chance.

Dr. Ullman cautiously refrains from attributing any success to mental telepathy "We're encouraged," he says, "but don't feel we have proved anything."

Dreams distort and transform material to such an extent that for anything to get through in recognizable form is a source of encouragement, he says.

The opposite argument can also be made: considering the complexity of both dreams and paintings, perhaps it isn't unusual that an outsider would occasionally find striking correspondences between the two, far above chance level.

That is the trouble with ESP research—no base for comparison. What should have been in the dreams without telepathy? What are the chances of coincidental matchings? No one knows.

Dr. Ullman may never establish ESP, but if more people turn up acting as though they went to bed in an art museum, he may well give the Scientific Establishment something to chew over.

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