ABOUT POLTERGEISTS

G. G. Lull
Psychical Research Foundation

Every so often you read in the paper about people who are being very much disturbed by curious happenings in their home. Plates are falling off shelves, knockknocks are flying about, pieces of furniture move when nobody could have pushed them. Such events seem impossible — yet they happen. They are called "poltergeist" phenomena. The word poltergeist literally means "noisy (or rattling) spirit." Though the phenomena are not necessarily connected with a disagreeable person coming back from the next world, one reason they are interesting to parapsychologists is that they do touch on the question of personal survival. People often believe that the events are caused by "spirits." It's true that it is easy to think so; the knock and thumps sometimes sound as if somebody is knocking on the door to come in. But we must not assume this is so, for it's an important question not to be taken lightly.

The term RSPK, meaning Recurrent Spontaneous Psychokinesis, has been introduced as a name for such phenomena; this helps avoid the assumption that ghosts or spirits are necessarily responsible. Poltergeists, as we have said, are usually of fairly short duration; they appear and disappear suddenly. In hauntings there may also be voices, movements of objects, etc.; but these are usually less frequent than with poltergeists. Hauntings usually last over a longer period of time. Also, as a general rule, there is apt to be one real person, usually a child, who haunts the house and returns. But it's been found that poltergeists usually appear in the vicinity of certain persons: when this "correct" person is absent, the rappings cease or disappear. This person is usually in some sort of tense mental state; disturbed, maybe very much dissatisfied with life. Most such people have been young people, but not all. There is apt to be some upset family or other interpersonal situation; maybe an adolescent mother or an offbeat boy doesn't get along with his boss. In accounts from the 18th and 19th centuries (poltergeists have been recorded in many countries) for hundreds of years) several girls in remote country houses in Great Britain were sometimes apparently such poltergeist centers.

Why are poltergeist studies valuable to the researcher? Of course, the parapsychologist who is in pursuit of a poltergeist has to go to the place where it is in action and take his field studies on location. He usually can't impose all the precautions and controls that are possible in laboratory work. Poltergeist studies are not for the person who wants a neat and well-controlled research design; you never know when it's going to happen. But RSPK effects can provide a rich source of material. They are strong, massive, dramatic, abundant. In this respect they are in great contrast to lab tests, where PK effects are usually very small and where only small objects such as dice are involved — not as (sometimes happens in RS PK) large pieces of furniture. RSPK often shows violent motion and the flying objects may move in extraordinary patterns.

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An interdisciplinary study

It's not only parapsychologists who are interested in these strange phenomena. In fact we could say that the significant part of the story is not so much the accounts of flying objects, etc., as it is the interpretations of the occurrences by people in other professions who were willing to look at the data. We have found that when, having "cornered" the poltergeist, we begin to ask how and why these goings-on are taking place, we must talk to people in psychotherapy, electronics, engineering, etc. We want to explore the relationship of RSPK to other parts of nature's matrix — to see, for instance, how this form of PK fits in with our knowledge of physics. Discoveries of such relationships can lead to a better understanding of man's interaction with the world around him.

Tests

Poltergeist investigations use many kinds of tests. Some are psychological — for instance:

Personality tests, scanning the psychological make-up of all the persons involved. As we have said, there are often pathological conditions in the agent's personality or in the interpersonal family situation.

Intelligence tests: One reason for giving these is that a person who turns out to have a very low I.Q. is less likely to have been able to carry out complex tricks; to install, use and conceal devices in such a way that the people observing could not detect them.

Other tests are mechanical, electronic or electrical, using modern technology and instrumentation to rule out not only fraud but natural causes which might explain the noises and movements: for instance any shifting of the house's foundations, or movements of the earth.

In a German poltergeist case studied by Dr. Hans Bender (see NEWSLETTER #4) electric lamps exploded in
a lawyer’s office, and there were unexplained effects on telephones, electric relays and safety switches. A team from Freiburg installed a voltage meter, which seemed to indicate abnormal upswings in the wall current during the phenomena. They reported that the unusual recordings were due to a psychokinetic effect on the voltage meter itself. They also set up a “light curtain”: a crescent of infrared rays acting as a surveillance device to detect the motion of any objects crossing it and to trigger an automatic camera. In the “Miami Disturbances” case, objects in a parking house kept falling off or “flying” off the shelves.

The investigations made detailed charts showing the position of these objects when they fell, and how far they were at moments from Julio, a shipping clerk who was presumably the “agent.” It was found on analyzing these charts that the farther away from him the objects were, the longer they were off the shelves, (Cf. p. 9, The Miami Poltergeist.)

On hearing poltergeists
If you should hear of a poltergeist in your neighborhood, you may be helpful in investigating it. You should prepare yourself by reading the literature, however, it would be a good idea to contact professional parapsychologists, preferably before your investigation. The Psychical Research Foundation, Duke Station, Durham, N. C. 27706, is interested in poltergeists, and will alert a local field reporter if they cannot send an investigator to the area, or might become such a field reporter. Try to press, publicity, at least till a study has been made. Time and publicity are both dangers to field investigations. For detailed suggestions, see 2, pages 180-190.

References
3. American Library. 1973

FIELD RESEARCH IN INDIA
Karlis Osis, Ph.D.
Director of Research

James Kidd left a substantial legacy for research on evidence of a soul which might “leave the body at death.” The ASPR reorganized the problem in scientific terms and has followed through with vigorous research projects. The last portion of the Kidd fund has been used for field research in India by two psychologists, Dr. Erlendur Haraldsson and myself. We had visited previously that the out-of-body projection of our participant swans were said to be collectively seen by several observers. (See NEWSLETTERS #19, 24) Such apparitions might remain for a considerable time, talk, handle objects, and even leave things behind after suddenly vanishing. They obviously are important for understanding human existence and what happens at death.

On our ten-week Indian trip early this year, we concentrated on Satyra Sai Baba, who is said to be an avatar (god-man) and to have 6 million followers, and also on Dalai (Elden Brothers), who is well known in Northern India. We interviewed the swans, observed them in interaction with their devatars, and tried to verify as much information as possible in the time we had.

Gathering evidence was not unlike a court-case procedure: we interviewed and questioned every witness we could get hold of. We had to scout for them all over the huge territory of the Indian subcontinent. All kinds of people, we found, had witnessed the phenomena in question: housewives, engineers, bankers, judges, physicians, scientists, research scientists. Western-trained professors, leading industrialists, as well as small shopkeepers and schoolboys. Most of them speak good English, but we also had interpreters for a bewildering variety of languages: Hindi, Bengali, Kannada, Telug, Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati. In one OBE case we found eight witnesses of an apparition of Sai Baba; but "because" there were present, their vision was perhaps miles away. Four witnesses testified to seeing an apparition of Dalai while he was visiting 500 miles away. Forty witnesses testified to seeing an apparition of Dalai while he was visiting 500 miles away. We also interviewed Sita best.

At times the OBE apparition is reported as engaging in rescue missions, preventing accidents, frightening and burgher of healing the bereftless. Such reports are, of course, not our first-hand observations: at times we were held to believe our ears. For instance, seventy witnesses are even told us about the swan’s disappearing all-gate and reappearing somewhere else! We personally see opportunities, however, to observe directly the inexplicable appearance and disappearance of objects in the presence of Sai Baba. At the time we did not see anything but the suggested trickery. But this is still unfinished business requiring further evidence from instrumented research.

We have packed all this information into 51 cassette recordings, which will now be transcribed and analyzed. And analyze we must. Some witnesses are dear consistent, others have foggy memories: some stick to their version in spite of our efforts to shake their story; some suggest some water and may in fact be exaggerating. On the whole, however, we feel we have a good-quality crop of data. One of the basic criteria in case studies, developed by Myers and his successors, is that all cases can be true of and fall into certain natural groups. Atypical cases are discarded: for instance any report of apparitions which gather on it and on. Another such atypical case we interviewed about involved the apparition of a dead man. He borrowed somebody’s jacket, went off with it, and left it on his deceased own grave.

Judged by proper British standards, our Indian cases are provocatively atypical. However, they seem to fit into an internal consistency of their own. They may not fit into a cluster in natural groups typical of Indian god-men, though unheard-of in London or New York. The common atypical cases may be that they work by unacknowledged means, as a rule, in the all-encompassing Indian tradition with roots to the past.

The West can learn—by carefully applying the right scientific method.