

Research strikes a blow against ESP

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Ouija board salesmen, tarot card readers and aspiring oracles, your time may be up.

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Aleister Crowley devotees, students of Professor Charles Xavier and fans of John Edwards – you are all on borrowed time, too.

But then, practising clairvoyants and devout telepathists probably already knew that.

In the long battle between the mystics and sceptics – the horoscopes and the microscopes – a blow has been struck for science after research by Piers Howe of the Melbourne school of psychological sciences at the University of Melbourne.

Dr Howe, who published a study on Tuesday debunking extrasensory perception – or ESP – was prompted to investigate the so-called phenomenon by one of his students.

“I had a young woman come to me one day and claim to have what she characterised as a quasi-magical ability, a sixth sense,” Dr Howe said. “She claimed to be able to sense things that she couldn't see.”

The girl said she had been able to sense that a friend had been involved in an accident the previous day, with no physical cue that might indicate this was so. Thus an experiment was born to test the hypothesis.

Fellow researcher and article co-author Margaret Webb took a series of pairs of photographs of her friends, with one detail altered in the second image – a new set of glasses perhaps, or a haircut, or maybe a missing beard.

In an advanced game of spot the difference, the photos were flashed before the eyes of subjects (with a one-second gap), who were then asked to identify whether there was a change and, if so, to identify the change from a list of possibles.

“They could spot that there was a change but couldn't identify the change. This is why they believed they had a sixth sense, which was nonsense,” said Dr Howe, whose findings were published in the scientific journal *PLOS One*. “It wasn't a sixth sense. What happened was they took in more information than they could verbalise.”

It all came down to “visual statistics”, he said, and the amount of information the brain was perceiving and processing. The data was so immense that these “implicit realisations” were often mistaken for an extrasensory “feeling”.

Not that the student could be convinced. “I can't convince my mother. I can't convince the person I was on ABC breakfast radio with this morning,” Dr Howe said. “But I can show the data. I can show what's going on.”

ESP is a catch-all term, one that touches everything from precognition to astral projection. In that sense, this research is a relatively minor blow to the budding psychic community.

Dr Howe does not feel like a big spoilsport. “You have this ability. It's real. But it's not magical,” he said. “And isn't that actually better, that it's showing how amazing the human mind is?”

"We've got all this stuff going on in the background at this subconscious level. To me that's actually far cooler than having a sixth sense."

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