

THEY THINK THEY KNOW

by Paul H. Smith

Have I not told you that when you think you know something, that is a most perfect barrier against learning?

--Frank Herbert (in *God Emperor of Dune*)

A few days ago when I first read the newspaper reports revealing that Britain's Ministry of Defense (MoD) had researched psychic skills, I started scribbling on a table-thumping rant about how wrong-headed the research had been – not because it had been done at all (which I think is wonderful) but because of how poorly-conceived it had been, at least according to the newspapers. Before I published my rant far and wide, someone fortunately pointed me to the actual 168-page declassified report, where I could read a more detailed account of what the MoD had actually done. I discovered that the news stories were embarrassingly oversimplified and incomplete, and that the research was not as ill-advised as reporters had claimed. It was still flawed, which I discuss below – but the whole affair amounts to the latest example of society's self-perpetuating ignorance of the nature of “psychic phenomena” in general and remote viewing in particular.

According to the news reports, back in 2002 researchers under contract to the MoD tried to recruit psychics who advertised on the Internet to be subjects in the study. When all of these people turned the offer down, the researchers selected a group of “novices” instead and after blindfolding them, tested their abilities by asking them to try to “see” what the photo was in various opaque, brown envelopes. The results? Twenty-eight percent of the subjects guessed “close” to what the photo in the envelope showed, and the rest were totally off the mark. The MoD researchers allegedly decided that ESP held no value for intelligence operations.

That's what the news reports *said*, anyway. What really happened was this: The researchers tried to contact 12 people who claimed on the internet to be *remote viewers*. However, only six responded – and of those, “none showed any interest in participating,” according to the official report (5 – numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in the MoD report). But six others never responded. The report doesn't specify how these remote viewers were contacted. Hence, we have no way of knowing whether the non-responsive six ever even received the inquiries, or why they didn't respond.

This points up the first problem. These 12 people were approached because they had websites that “say publicly that [remote viewing] is an area of interest” for them (6). Unfortunately, that is far too lean a criterion, except perhaps for a first-cut screening. Recruiting remote viewers off the Internet just because their websites say they're remote viewers is a sure-fire recipe for questionable success. That might be one useful means for identifying a pool of possible subjects, but you are bound to produce poor results unless you include some further screening mechanism for weeding out the wishful thinkers and fraudulent entrepreneurs from the smaller subset who actually have some ability or real experience. Fortunately, the Internet RVer's themselves helped the MoD dodge that bullet by declining to participate.

So as a default option, the MoD researchers turned to the naive subjects – once again with no apparent provision for screening. Since evidence shows that nearly everyone has at least some “psychic” ability, using naive subjects is not necessarily a mistake. But one must expect that the results ultimately produced will be less robust because you have an uncontrolled, unscreened group of subjects who will provide responses of varying levels of quality. And that indeed appears to have been the outcome here.

To be fair to the researchers, they seemed to have at least some awareness of this problem and suggested that, though they weren’t able to use “experienced remote viewers as sources,” at least the “untrained RV subjects [established] a baseline which would demonstrate any capability of novices in the field.” The future performance of experienced remote viewing subjects could then be compared against this baseline (8).

This is not a bad strategy – in fact it is just the approach my son used a few years ago in his successful 5th-grade science fair project. The idea was to test whether remote viewing training worked. I gave him access to a set of my basic-course remote viewing students before they had undergone any significant training, and he tested them against picture-targets in double-blind remote viewing sessions. A couple of weeks later I was holding an intermediate remote viewing course, and he was able to test those students in the same way, with obvious results. The catch is, of course, that you actually have to repeat your experiment with the experienced viewers or your results are inconclusive. There is no indication that MoD followed up with (certifiably) experienced viewers.

The biggest mistakes made by the MoD researchers, though, was in the experimental protocol itself. The subjects were blindfolded, then asked to report what the photos in the opaque brown envelopes were of. This was less than optimal for a number of reasons:

1) I’m flattered that MoD took as its guide the Coordinate Remote Viewing manual I wrote back in 1985-86 while assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency (though on page 107 the researchers mistakenly attribute authorship to Palyne Gaenir). Unfortunately, this manual was never intended to be used to guide experiments. Much good research by Ingo Swann, Hal Puthoff, Russell Targ, and others in SRI-International’s consciousness research program established the context from which I and my colleagues were able to produce the manual. But the manual itself was intended and written in a way meant to help train viewers in applying practical remote viewing skills, rather than for research, for which it would make a fairly confusing guide.

2) The MoD study did not simulate the task the subjects would eventually be expected to perform if the results turned out satisfactory. (Presumably, the next step would have been operational intelligence collection – but identifying photos in envelopes has little relevance to real intelligence tasks.)

3) Included with each photo in its opaque envelope were questions such as “what is this place, where is this place, who is this person?” (8). This suggests that the subjects were expected to identify specifically what the photographs represented. Unfortunately, this task has rarely been done successfully by remote viewers or other psychics, skilled or not. Among the photos in the

set were, for example, pictures of a knife, of Mother Theresa, of an “Asian inhabitant,” of a petrol filling station, etc. These seem to be representative of the rest of the selected target pool. The task given to the subjects amounted to “guessing” what was in a given envelope (the report indicates that the subjects each performed an average of three of these remote viewing tasks during the course of the project).

Expecting subjects to identify what a photo in an opaque envelope is *of* – such as “It’s a picture of a knife,” or “It’s Mother Theresa,” is in most cases bound to fail. Hundreds of past experiments and thousands of hours of research have shown that ESP is a phenomenon facilitated by the right, non-verbal hemisphere of the brain. Competent remote viewing researchers know to expect responses that are descriptive in nature and, for most subjects, heavily dependent on sketching of patterns, shapes, and lines. “Naming” – that is, assigning identity labels to what the subject consciously “thinks” the target is, produces a very high error rate. An approach much more likely to bring success is to have the subject *describe* as accurately as possible the form and appearance of the target photo, and not try to “name” it.

Again, to give some credit to the researchers, in the evaluation phase they did resort to assessing whether sketching and verbalizations recorded on session transcripts bore any resemblance to the respective target photos. Of the total 18 trials, they judged that six times (28% of the sessions) novice viewers “may have accessed some feature of the target” (105-106) (how six of 18 works out to 28% is unclear). There are more bones to be picked about this part of the experimental design, but in the interest of space I’ll move on.

4) Though not all the novice viewers seem to have used a blindfold, most of them apparently did. Why blindfolds were involved is unclear, as they seem to have served no particular purpose. If the photos were in an opaque envelope, the blindfold was superfluous. More effective, anyway, would have been to put the target envelope in a separate room from the subject. From reading the session logs in the report, it seems to me that the blindfolds were probably more distracting than anything. But there is a further issue: Closing the eyes raises the alpha brain-wave level and encourages mental imagery. But you don’t want to encourage mental imagery in remote viewing, because the imagery is heavily laced with left-brain analytical constructs, which contribute significantly to mental noise, polluting the impressions the viewer is trying to receive.

5) Much of the effort, and probably the majority of the expense, went into obtaining equipment to measure the brain electrical activity of each of the viewers during the sessions he or she worked, then collecting and analyzing the data. This was done because “some experiments have suggested that there is a link between ELF EM [extremely low-frequency electromagnetic] radiation and the mechanism (undefined) that enables RV to take place” (6). It is puzzling where this idea came from. Extensive research at SRI and published in open sources had already shown that electromagnetic radiation could not account for remote viewing. Predictably, this part of the experiment produced no useful results.

6) Scientists doing scientific research are obliged to perform a literature search before engaging in their project, to make sure that lessons learned in the past are taken into account when conducting the proposed research. In this case some preliminary work was done, but it seems to have been almost exclusively confined to the Internet. As the researchers have no doubt by now

discovered, that is a very uncertain source for a scientifically-solid literature review – especially back in 2002, when suitable references on the Internet were even more sparse than they are today. There is no evidence that any of the hard-copy literature was examined, such as books and scientific papers by Puthoff, Targ, Jahn and Dunne, May, Tart, Schwartz, and others. We can expect that the experimental protocol and procedures would have been much more robust had this material been taken into account.

There is one excuse we can make for the MoD researchers: Some good sources on remote viewing research and experimental design were at the time essentially unavailable to them, and in fact didn't become readily accessible until 2004, when the CIA's Star Gate Archive was finally fully declassified and released to the public (it was available, though in a limited form, in 2003). (On the other hand, since their study was classified, and since the UK and the US often share classified information, it's reasonable to think that they may have obtained the files earlier, had they inquired.) And my own book, *Reading the Enemy's Mind*, which might have at least helped point them in some profitable directions and alerted them to some of the more obscure sources, wasn't out until 2005 – though I had done much of the research for it by 2002, when the MoD study took place.

Further, the US military did years of research and practical trials in using remote viewing as an operational intelligence tool. People with extensive experience in this area could have been consulted in forming the experimental design for the MoD study – yet no effort appears to have been made to do that. If attempts were made to connect with, say, Joe McMoneagle, Ed May, or F. Holmes (“Skip”) Atwater – or even Puthoff or Targ, there is no evidence of it. I have no recollection of having been contacted, and as far as I know no one else associated with IRVA (the International Remote Viewing Association) was approached. (Of course, given that the MoD made it a secret project, it's possible that a cover story was used that disguised the true nature and sponsor of the research, in which case none of us would know for sure whether or not we had been contacted.)

In the end, despite what attempts at review were done, whoever was responsible for this project seems to have had some preconceived notion as to what constituted remote viewing, which influenced the final protocol they forged ahead with. The MoD gets an A for good intentions, but a C-minus for execution (at least that's not the “F” the media seem anxious to bestow). The MoD spokesman's conclusion that remote viewing held “little value” for MoD's mission is at best premature and at worst invalid.

Regrettably, media-instigated accusations of wasted government money are not the worst fall-out we can expect from this noble, if faulty effort. ESP, remote viewing, and various other so-called “psychic” modalities are real, and there is a modest but well-attested research base as evidence. However, society's overall perception is just the opposite, and conclusions based on research such as this reinforces that false perception. This MoD “study” will now join the ill-advised conclusions of other supposedly-reliable, yet defective examinations of psychic behavior. Among these is the notorious review done in 1995 by the American Institutes for Research at the behest of the CIA which, after purposely ignoring 95% of the results produced over two decades by the US military and intelligence communities, concluded that remote viewing was useless.

The flawed MoD research project is, unfortunately, symptomatic of a much larger and more widely-spread problem, and that is the rampant misconceptions of the vast majority of the public and the media as to what ESP, remote viewing, etc. are all about. Nearly any program on television that portrays ESP gets at least some of the portrayal wrong.

Among common misconceptions is that ESP can foretell the future. The truth is that, while there are occasional documented instances of this, it is very rare that future events are successfully predicted by remote viewers or any other kind of psychic. This misperception has been associated with ESP and psychic behavior for so long it is virtually ineradicable. It persists thanks partly to the media's and the public's perpetual linking of the two, and partly to the fact that the occasional instances where the future may have been successfully predicted are reported but the many times that has failed are ignored or never mentioned.

There is also the misbelief that ESP is useful for discerning numbers or words. However, because of the heavy involvement of the non-verbal right brain-hemisphere in the process, numbers, words, names, and letters are in fact among the hardest things for a remote viewer or a psychic to perceive. There are occasional successes but, again, they are rare. Yet one of the most common demands a remote viewer hears is, "OK, if you're psychic – why don't you give me the winning lottery numbers?" or "Why don't you remote view the name of Jon-Benet Ramsey's killer?" When a viewer can't produce this sort of information, the person demanding the results takes that as evidence that remote viewing is fake. (Indeed, one of the Amazing Randi's earlier skeptical "tests" of ESP was to challenge psychics to read off a series of numbers kept locked in his safe. No one ever did it, so he concluded that was evidence that ESP didn't exist.)

This amounts to a logical fallacy, of course. No knowledgeable and competent remote viewer will claim to be able to report numbers or names, nor reliably foretell the future (I specify "knowledgeable and competent" here, because there are those claiming to be remote viewers who are neither knowledgeable nor competent – they should not be counted as evidence against remote viewing). So for a challenger to require a viewer to do either one demonstrates the challenger's ignorance of the process, not any shortcoming in the viewer or the remote viewing phenomenon. It would in fact be the logical equivalent of requiring a horse to fly, then deciding it wasn't a horse because it failed the test.

It isn't just critics that make such mistakes, however. The media and the general public have muddled notions about what it means to remote view, or to be psychic. I've done a fair number of on-air remote viewing demonstrations for media. For the demonstration to succeed, the production crew has to set up the correct experimental conditions, and I do my best to educate them in what they needed to do. In spite of that, in only one instance did the crew actually get it completely right. The rest of the time they mixed in some of their own assumptions about how it ought to be done, and the demonstration suffered to the degree they departed from protocol.

But it doesn't stop there. What is feeding these wrong ideas are the stereotypes promoted by Hollywood and television, where psychics are depicted as discerning license plate numbers of getaway cars, or having clear visions of murderer's faces – or "seeing" the full sequence of

events in a crime. The audience doesn't stop to consider that these enactments owe more to the producer's need for visual drama and to wrap up the program in 45 minutes – plus time for commercials.

Unfortunately, many self-described intuitives and psychics themselves contribute to these false stereotypes. For better or worse the intuitive community – the popular world of psychics, intuitives, remote viewers, etc. – is unpoliced and unregulated. Anyone can claim to have intuitive “gifts,” and many make such claims. Some of them really do have abilities and skills – some more, some less. But many others simply act the way they think psychics are supposed to, and this often just reinforces the same old stereotypes. Even the talented ones sometimes don the mantle of the popular image of a psychic, because that is what the public expects.

Scientists studying parapsychology, and legitimate intuitives and remote viewers have tried hard to distance themselves from the popular image of psychics. Unfortunately, the public, the media, the skeptics, and even many in the intuitive community itself have been unable to let go. Attempts to educate the public have been few and ineffective – for several reasons. One is that parapsychologists have had neither the insight, nor the resources, nor the access, nor – unfortunately, in most cases – even the will to mount the sort of public relations campaign that is necessary.

Another reason education has so-far failed is that there is immense resistance to change. The media has grown accustomed to treating ESP and its analogues as a source of entertainment. Usually any story involving psychics, remote viewing or other kinds of ESP, or even scientific parapsychology research, inevitably is treated as humorous or dubious. Few reporters or broadcasters will risk the ridicule that would come their way for treating the subject seriously. (As a current example, recent news reports on the closing of one of the few remaining parapsychology laboratories, the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research laboratory, nearly always contained some tongue-in-cheek remark about the reader “already knowing about” the news. What the reader already knew about was that threadbare joke would be trotted out yet one more time.)

The skeptical community encourages such attitudes. It is heavily invested in preserving the status quo, and fights any attempts to present parapsychology research in a favorable light, relying on ridicule and innuendo when logic and the facts aren't on their side. Skeptics follow the same strategy that corporate tort lawyers take: Make it so excruciating for your opponents that they will give up on their attempts to oppose you, even if you are wrong and they are right. When skeptics can't undermine well-attested parapsychology claims or experiments, they attack via the “giggle-factor,” using ridicule as a substitute for rational argument – and then turn around and accuse their opponents of being irrational.

In consequence, the general public has only been allowed to form a caricature of what ESP, remote viewing, and other psychic phenomena are really like. This gives equally-befuddled media hacks the go-ahead to build straw men at their leisure, which they can tear down and then boast that they have once again proved that there is nothing to ESP. It would be nice if they would take some time, step back, and make a serious attempt to understand and, perhaps, change their minds. But – of course – they think they already know.

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