

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor,

Michael Coleman's letter (July 1997 issue) raises a number of interesting points in response to Monty Keen's paper (April 1997 issue), and I imagine that Monty will wish to offer his own reply. Accordingly I will touch briefly on only two points in Michael's letter.

Firstly, Michael finds it "difficult to consider" Harry Edwards's account of Jack Webber's mediumship "as entirely disinterested" because Edwards was "a friend, next-door neighbour and séance-arranger" for Webber. This is a curious argument. One could as readily reverse it and say that Edwards was a friend and séance-arranger for Webber because of his prior conviction of the genuineness of the latter's abilities. And one could go on to point out that, rather than sully his judgement, living next door to Webber put Edwards in a privileged position to note anything suspicious in his behaviour.

Secondly, Michael has it that there is "no evidence for a hypnotic state as defined by physiological, behavioural or subjective-reporting criteria". Rather than swapping a long list of references with Michael, let me draw his attention to the work of the two professional bodies operating in this area in the UK, namely the British Society of Medical and Dental Hypnosis (whose membership consists of medically qualified doctors and dentists) and the British Society of Experimental and Clinical Hypnosis (made up primarily of psychologists). Both these bodies have extensively documented both the objective reality of the hypnotic state, and its application in medical, dental, and psychological areas.

It is true that the ability to attain a deep hypnotic state may be apparent in only some 10 per cent of the adult population, and the findings of researchers may thus be significantly affected by their sampling techniques, but there can be no doubting the behavioural and subjective reality of the state itself. To the extensive body of published work attesting to this I can add my personal experience as a psychologist qualified in the area who has both induced and (of equal relevance) experienced deep levels of this state. My long acquaintance with hypnosis leaves me convinced of its importance not only as a clinical but as an experimental tool.

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To the Editor,

I wish to comment on two points in James Munves's criticism (October 1997) of Richard Hodgson's report of Mrs Piper's communicator 'George Pelham'.

First, Mr Munves is wrong in asserting that the attribution of death to 'brain hemorrhage', in the absence of mention of contusions or skull fracture does not make sense as it stands. In fact, such cases may occur. It happens

that recently a student at the University of Virginia became severely intoxicated and, when alone, fell down some stairs, at the bottom of which she was found dead. The newspaper report of this tragedy stated that the student "injured her head when she fell down the stairs—there were no open wounds—and a blood vessel hemorrhaged, causing bleeding inside her skull" (*The Daily Progress*, Charlottesville, December 2, 1997). Such cases cancel Mr Munves's claim that the postmortem report on the body of George Pellew (of whom 'George Pelham' was the purported discarnate continuation) was implausible and therefore must have been falsified. This is a point separate from the possibility that Mrs Piper might have read the newspaper reports of George Pellew's death.

Second, although Mrs Piper in the trance condition may have exhibited an extraordinary memory, this would not account for her (that is, the 'George Pelham' communicator) recognizing persons she had not known before when they were presented to her for the first time. Kenny (1986) had earlier put forward the suggestion that Mrs Piper might have overheard and retained much information about the friends of George Pellew. Polanyi (1966) pointed out that we "know more than we can tell" and cited as an example our inability adequately to describe in words how we recognize a face. Verbal descriptions of a person we have never met will not enable us to recognize that person unless we add several distinguishing details, such as special features of clothing worn.

It is well to acknowledge the imperfections in Hodgson's report, but Mr Munves has not convinced me that we can explain all Hodgson claimed for Mrs Piper's 'George Pelham' by invoking normal processes of communication.

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REFERENCES

- Kenny, M. G. (1986) *The Passion of Ansel Bourne*. Washington: The Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Polanyi, M (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.