

Poltergeist Phenomena: A Primer on Parapsychological Research and Perspectives

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Summary: We present a basic primer for paranormal enthusiasts on the current state of parapsychological research and perspectives relating to phenomena traditionally labeled “poltergeist.” Topics such as case characteristics, experimental approaches, theoretical aspects, and the similarities and differences between poltergeist and haunt cases are discussed and supplemented with illustrative examples and anecdotes from the published case literature.

We wish to dedicate this primer to Dr. William G. Roll of the University of West Georgia, in acknowledgment of his substantial and significant contributions to the parapsychological study of poltergeist phenomena over the past 50 years. Thanks in large part to his continuing efforts, our advancement in the understanding of poltergeists has reached the point where it is today.

Table of Contents:

1. <u>Introduction</u>	2
2. <u>Poltergeists: Definition & Case Studies</u>	3
Case Study #1: The <u>Miami</u> Disturbances.....	4
Case Study #2: The <u>Rosenheim</u> “Electronic” Poltergeist.....	5
Case Study #3: The <u>Druten</u> Disturbances.....	6
3. <u>Poltergeist Case Characteristics: The Phenomena</u>	6
<u>Type and Frequency</u> of Phenomena.....	7
<u>Duration</u> of the Phenomena.....	8
Unusual <u>Motion</u> of Objects.....	8
Object and Area <u>Focusing</u>	9
<u>Fraudulent</u> Phenomena.....	9
4. <u>Poltergeist Case Characteristics: RSPK Agents</u>	10
<u>Cases</u> Involving an Agent.....	10
<u>Age & Gender</u> of the Agent.....	11
<u>Situation</u> of the Agent.....	11
5. <u>Poltergeists and Haunts: Similarities and Differences</u>	14
Case Study #4: A <u>New England</u> Haunt-RSPK Case.....	15
Case Study #5: An Allegedly Haunted <u>Japanese Restaurant</u>	16
6. <u>Experimenting with Poltergeists?</u>	18
Case Study #1 Revisited: <u>Testing Julio</u>	18
Case Study #6: Tests with <u>Tina Resch</u>	19
Case Study #3 Revisited: <u>RNG PK Tests with Cetin</u>	21
7. <u>Towards a Theory of the Poltergeist: Three Aspects to Consider</u>	22
The <u>Psychological</u> Aspect.....	22
The <u>Neurological</u> Aspect.....	23
The <u>Energetic</u> Aspect.....	24
8. <u>Conclusion</u>	26
<u>Notes</u>	27
<u>References</u>	28

1. Introduction

Poltergeist cases are characterized by a series of apparently anomalous physical phenomena such as the sudden movement of objects without any apparent force acting upon them, and rapping or knocking sounds that do not seem to have any clear source. Like cases of ghosts and apparitions, these occurrences have a long tradition steeped in myth, folklore, and superstition.

One of the earliest known poltergeist cases was investigated and documented by Joseph Glanvill, a chaplain to King Charles II and a fellow of the Royal Society of Great Britain. In his 1689 book *Saducismus Triumphatus*, Glanvill describes the “Drummer of Tidworth” Poltergeist of 1661, which involved object movements and loud noises occurring in the home of John Mompression, the local justice of the peace. Among the anomalous noises heard were those said to resemble the percussive beats of a drum. A small illustration of the Tidworth case appears on the frontispiece of Glanvill’s book, showing a winged devil flying over the Mompression home and beating on a drum, indicating what was suspected to be the cause of the poltergeist disturbances at the time.

One of the first scientists to research poltergeist reports was Robert Boyle, a chemist and another member of the Royal Society who is best known for his work on the nature of gases. During a visit to Geneva around 1642, Boyle met a Protestant minister named Francis Perrault, who gave him an account of moving objects and strange noises that took place in his home in Macôn, France, in 1612. Perrault’s account, which was later published in English at Boyle’s recommendation, suggests that the phenomena tended to be active in the presence of his maid:

Once he [the poltergeist] snatched a brass candlestick out of the maid’s grasp, leaving the candle lighted in her hand.

One afternoon a friend of mine, one M. Conain, a physician of Macôn, bestowed a visit upon me. As I was relating to him these strange passages [i.e., experiences] we went together to the chamber where the demon was most resident. There we found the feather-bed, blankets, sheets, and bolster laid all upon the floor. I called the maid to make the bed, which she did in our presence, but presently, we being walking in the same room, saw the bed undone and tumbled down on the floor, as it was before (Rogo, 1979/1990, p. 45).

Note that Perrault’s use of the word “demon” again suggests what was believed to be causing the disturbances in his home. Indeed, the case came to be known as “the devil of Macôn,” and for Boyle had the effect “... at length to overcome in me ... all my settled indisposedness to believe in strange things” (Thurston, 1954, p. 40).

These are only a few historical examples demonstrating the belief that poltergeist occurrences are due to the mischievous acts of ghosts, demons, or any other kind of discarnate spirit. In *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Gove, 1993), “poltergeist” is defined as: “... a noisy and usu. mischievous ghost: a spirit capable of making mysterious noises (as rappings)” (p. 1756). These cultural beliefs are reflected in the German roots of the term itself. The first half of the term, *polter-*, derives from the verb *poltern*, which means “rumble,” “to make a noise,” or “bluster” (Sasser et al., 1966/1986, p. 170). The second half of the term, *-geist*, means “spirit, apparition, or ghost” (Sasser et al., 1966/1986, p. 83). Thus, the two halves of the term combined represent the traditional image of a “noisy spirit.” Even today, these cultural beliefs still linger to some degree through the exaggerated and misguided depictions of poltergeists in television, film, and the print media.

Poltergeists can be confused with haunt phenomena due to their overt similarity in characteristics and the implied suggestion of spirits. However, parapsychologists have found that

there are subtle differences between haunt and poltergeist cases that allow distinctions to be made between them. Moreover, field studies of poltergeist cases by parapsychologists have discovered that poltergeist phenomena may have much more of a human, rather than a spirit, element to them. To avoid confusion and aid in the proper interpretation of findings obtained during field investigations, it is important to recognize the distinction between poltergeists and haunts, and to be aware of what has been learned so far about poltergeists through the research efforts of parapsychologists.

Thus, we have decided to provide at [Public Parapsychology](#) a fourth installment of our basic primer series – yet another “crash course,” if you will – summarizing the current state of parapsychological research and perspectives relating to poltergeist phenomena. We hope that this primer will help clarify any misconceptions about what may be fact and what may be fiction when it comes to such phenomena, and assist paranormal enthusiasts in their approach to any poltergeist cases that they may come across and investigate.

2. Poltergeists: Definition & Case Studies

While the earliest perspectives on poltergeist phenomena were concerned with demons and spirits, it was Sir William Barrett (1911), a physicist and one of the founding members of the Society for Psychical Research, who was the first to suggest a human side to poltergeists when he examined a series of early cases under close scrutiny. Much like Perrault’s case (Section 1), Barrett noticed that the phenomena in these cases tended to focus around a certain person, usually occurring whenever this person was present or was nearby. Parapsychologists have also noted this tendency in poltergeist cases since Barrett’s time. If the moving objects and strange noises seem to focus around a central person, then one explanation to consider is the possibility that these phenomena are a large-scale form of psychokinesis (PK, or “mind over matter”) on the part of the central person. Because the phenomena often manifest spontaneously and are not willfully controlled by the central person, this large-scale PK is thought to act on an unconscious level.

Although it runs counter to cultural beliefs about “noisy ghosts,” attributing these anomalous effects to human agents may seem more sensible in light of the large amount of experimental research on PK that parapsychologists have conducted over the past seven decades. In these experiments, ordinary volunteers attempted to mentally affect the fall of rolling dice (Radin & Ferrari, 1991; Rhine, 1970), or the sequence of numbers produced by electronic random number generators (RNGs) (Bösch et al., 2006; Jahn et al., 1997; Radin, 2006, Ch. 9; Radin & Nelson, 1989, 2003; Radin et al., 2006). Over a series of many trials, the resulting numbers reflected their mental intent more often than would be expected by chance alone. In addition, some studies have found preliminary evidence suggesting that certain forms of emotional expression (or shifts in it) may facilitate PK-related influences on RNGs (Blasband, 2000; Lumsden-Cook, 2005a, 2005b). In poltergeist cases, the object movements and noises may be seen as a similar kind of psychokinetic influence, but on a much larger scale than dice or random numbers. As we’ll see (Section 4), emotional expression seems to be a factor in many poltergeist cases.

On the basis of this perspective, parapsychologists J. Gaither Pratt and William Roll (1958) coined the term *recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis* (RSPK) to describe the phenomena occurring in poltergeist cases. This term reflects the tendency for the phenomena to occur unpredictably (the “spontaneous” part of the term) and repeatedly over time (the “recurrent” part).

RSPK is the technical term most parapsychologists use when referring to poltergeists, and the central person in these cases is referred to as the *RSPK agent*. To sum up these ideas in light of current parapsychological perspectives, we offer this convenient, general definition of poltergeist:

A poltergeist is a large-scale form of psychokinesis or “mind over matter,” in which anomalous physical phenomena (such as moving objects, electrical disturbances, and noises without any obvious source) repeatedly occur in the presence of a certain person over a brief period of time. This large-scale form of PK, which occurs largely on the unconscious level, is known as recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis, or RSPK, and the person around whom the phenomena occur is known as the RSPK agent.

By this definition, poltergeists are *person-oriented* phenomena rather than spirit-oriented. The remainder of this primer will be geared toward summarizing the evidence collected by parapsychologists that has led them to view poltergeists in this manner. We begin by taking a brief look at three case studies that will help illustrate poltergeist phenomena in terms of RSPK, as well as indicate some of the common characteristics of poltergeist cases, which we will look at in Sections 3 and 4.

Case Study #1: The Miami Disturbances

In January of 1967, William Roll and J. Gaither Pratt investigated a series of poltergeist disturbances occurring in a small Miami shipping warehouse that specialized in the distribution of Florida-themed souvenir merchandise (Roll, 1972/2004, Ch. 9 & 10; Roll & Pratt, 1971). According to the warehouse owners and employees, small souvenir objects (such as beer mugs, highball glasses, and ashtrays) that were being painted and packed for shipping would frequently fall off the storage shelves, sometimes breaking on the floor in the process. In some cases, these objects landed some distance away from where they were first placed, suggesting that they had taken flight in order to land where they were found. Larger objects, such as cardboard boxes, also occasionally fell and spilled their contents. Although one of the warehouse owners initially attributed these apparent “accidents” to the carelessness of his employees, it was soon noticed that they seemed to occur most often whenever Julio, a 19-year-old shipping clerk, was present in the warehouse.

The object movements were still happening when Roll and Pratt arrived, and this allowed them the rare opportunity to conduct a semi-controlled experiment. They noticed that there were certain shelves in the warehouse from which objects repeatedly fell or took off, so they placed target objects on them to see if the objects would later move. They were able to maintain a degree of control over the situation by inspecting the areas around the target objects for magical devices beforehand, and closely monitoring the movements of the employees, particularly Julio. At least ten of the target objects placed by Roll and Pratt moved at times when one or both of them had the area under surveillance. At least seven of the objects moved when Roll and/or Pratt had been directly watching Julio, and no one else was close enough to the objects.

In one such instance, Roll was watching Julio put a plastic alligator figure on one of the storage shelves in the hopes that the figure might become a target object. At that same moment, a highball glass sitting on another shelf four feet behind Julio fell to the floor and shattered. Roll was five feet away from Julio, and could see that both of Julio’s hands were occupied at the time: in his right hand was the alligator figure, and in his left hand was his clipboard. There were only two other employees in the warehouse at the time, and they were both more than 15 feet away

from the glass when it fell. It did not seem plausible that either of them could have picked up the glass and thrown it because no one had been near it since Roll and Pratt had initially placed it there. In the process of placing it, Roll and Pratt also checked the glass for strings or magical devices with which the event might have been faked, thus excluding the possibility of trickery.

Case Study #2: The Rosenheim “Electronic” Poltergeist

In November of 1967, not long after the Miami case, another series of poltergeist occurrences was reported, this time in the office of a Bavarian law firm (Bender, 1974, pp. 131 – 134; see also Roll, 1972/2004, pp. 100 – 103). In addition to moving objects, a large number of electrical disturbances were reported. Light bulbs in the office were said to explode, and neon tubes in the ceiling light fixtures would repeatedly go out. When electricians checked the tubes, they would find them unscrewed from the sockets at an angle of about 90 degrees. Sharp bangs were heard, and automatic fuses blew without any apparent cause. The office telephone system behaved erratically; it sometimes cut off calls, would have all four phones in the office ring at once, and resulted in inordinately high phone bills.

Disruptions in the power supply were initially the suspected cause for the disturbances, so the electricians installed monitoring equipment to check for power surges. This equipment registered large deflections in electrical current, as high as 50 amps, for which the electricians could find no clear cause. The deflections still occurred even when an emergency power unit was installed to provide a separate and undisturbed source of electricity.

In a similar fashion, the local telephone company installed an automatic call counter to record the number, time, and duration of every call made in the office. This counter indicated that calls were repeatedly being made to the local time announcement service, sometimes dialing the number up to six times a minute for weeks. According to the employees, none of the phones were being used at the times when these calls were registered.

This was the situation when Hans Bender, the director of the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene (IGPP) at the University of Freiburg, began his investigation of the case. He noticed that the disturbances occurred only during office hours, and that they seemed to center around Annemarie, a 19-year-old secretary with the firm. According to Bender (1974):

When this young girl walked through the gangways [i.e., halls], the lamps behind her began to swing with increasing amplitude ... If bulbs exploded, the fragments flew towards her. In addition, the number of phenomena decreased with increasing distance from [Annemarie]. It became obvious that we were dealing with RSPK connected with Annemarie (p. 133).

As a further possible indicator of RSPK, Bender noted that at least one of the large deflections was registered at Annemarie’s morning arrival at the office.

To rule out a more conventional explanation, Bender asked two physicists, F. Karger and G. Zicha, from the Max Planck Institut für Plasmaphysik in Munich to look further into the electrical aspect of the disturbances. The two physicists “... observed and examined the recorder deflections and systematically eliminated or checked every conceivable physical cause” (p. 134), which included faulty shifts in the main voltage to the office, static electric and magnetic fields, vibrations, and ultrasonic and infrasonic effects. In the opinion of the physicists, none of these provided a suitable way to account for all of the disturbances.

The revelation that the disturbances could be due to RSPK on the part of Annemarie seemed to lead to an increase in their intensity. Pictures on the wall began to swing and turn,

drawers opened by themselves, and a 175 kilogram (386 lb.) cabinet reportedly moved about 30 centimeters (i.e., about a foot) from the wall on at least two occasions. As her nervousness grew, Annemarie began displaying hysterical contractions in her arms and legs. Finally, when Annemarie left the law firm for another position, the disturbances in the office stopped. They reportedly continued in her new place of employment, but were short-lived and eventually ceased altogether.

Case Study #3: The Druten Disturbances

One of the most recent poltergeist cases was reported in May of 1995 by a Turkish family living in the Dutch village of Druten (Gerding, Wezelman, & Bierman, 1997). According to the family, a considerable amount of stones, sand, and dirt clods were flying into their home from the back garden, with the debris striking family members and breaking windows. In addition, several small objects were flying about and breaking. When the police were called in to help the frightened family, they suspected simple childish pranks that were likely perpetrated by Çetin, the 15-year-old son whom the events seemed to be focused around. However, certain phenomena occurred in the presence of the police officers that were difficult to explain away as mere pranks.

For instance, two officers closely observed Çetin and followed him upstairs to his room, where no one else was known to be at the time. While watching Çetin, one officer suddenly had sand thrown in her face. Then the other officer got sand thrown in his face, even though Çetin was standing before him with his hands in his pockets. Later on, the two officers were driving Çetin to the home of his step-sister when the female officer experienced sand falling on her head while in the car. She suspected that Çetin might have thrown it from the back seat, but when she got out of the car to let Çetin out, she again felt sand fall on her head, even though Çetin was still in the back seat with the car door still closed and all of the windows rolled up.

Some of the poltergeist events were noted to take place after a hoja (an Islamic priest), who the family had asked to perform an exorcistic-type ritual, had left the home. In one event, a glass water bottle flew into the hallway and broke against the bathroom door. At the time, Çetin was seated on the living room couch between a neighbor and a friend of his father's. Neither reported seeing Çetin throw the bottle, and no one had been near the table that the bottle had been standing on. Furthermore, it was noticed that, even if Çetin did somehow manage to grab the bottle and throw it unnoticed, it would have taken a skilled throw by him to make it land where it did; the trajectory of the bottle from Çetin's place on the couch to the bathroom door included a sharp curve around a doorpost that was between the living room and the hallway.

Soon after the events began, the family asked the Parapsychology Institute in Utrecht for help. Although the Utrecht investigators were unable to directly witness the events themselves (the events ended ten days after they began, and the investigators were only able to be present on four of those days), they were able to do some simple tests with Çetin and one of his step-sisters, which seemed to offer insight into the psychokinetic aspect of the poltergeist. We'll look at this in Section 6.

3. Poltergeist Case Characteristics: The Phenomena

In surveying the many poltergeist cases that have been documented over the years, parapsychologists have uncovered certain characteristics of RSPK. The case studies above offer us an indirect look at a few of these characteristics. For instance, one might notice that all three

cases involved an RSPK agent in their teens, and that the cases all contained some form of object movement that occurred in the agent's presence. In this section we'll look at the characteristics of the physical phenomena reported in poltergeist cases, and then we will examine the characteristics of the RSPK agents in the next section. The characteristics that we summarize in both sections are based on surveys of 116 cases collected by the Psychical Research Foundation (PRF) in North Carolina (Roll, 1977a), 59 cases collected by the Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und Psychohygiene (IGPP) in Freiburg, Germany (Huesmann & Schriever, 1989, in Roll & Persinger, 1998), and 247 cases out of 500 compiled by researchers Alan Gauld and A. D. Cornell (1979, Ch. 12) for which the quality of witness testimony was highest.¹

Type and Frequency of Phenomena

The types of phenomena reported in the three poltergeist case collections, and the relative frequency at which they have been reported in the cases, are shown in Table 1. It can be seen that poltergeist phenomena are characterized primarily by the movement of small (household) objects, and by percussive sounds such as knocks and raps.

Table 1. Type and Frequency of Reported Poltergeist Phenomena

Phenomena	PRF Cases	IGPP Cases	Gauld-Cornell Cases
Object Movements	91%	87%	67%**
Knocking & Rapping Sounds	52%	57%	56%
Apparitions	23%	12%	38%***
Apportation of Objects	17%	37%	26%
Floating/Flashing Lights	8%	26%*	13%

All values are rounded to the nearest one percent.

* May be inflated by inclusion of visual manifestations of human-like figures

** Refers to small objects only

*** Refers to human apparitions only; may be inflated by inclusion of haunt apparitions

Although apparitions are sometimes witnessed in poltergeist cases, the table indicates that this tends to be rather uncommon. Furthermore, the apparitions in poltergeist cases do not always seem to represent human figures, but can also take the form of animal figures, body limbs, demonic figures, and amorphous shapes that may be indistinct, shadowy, or mist-like (Roll, 1977a, p. 397). If we were to limit ourselves only to those involving human figures, we may find that the apparitions more often reflect the personalities of *living* people rather than those of *dead* people. We shall see examples of this in Section 5.

Even though apportations – in which objects appear in, or disappear out of, enclosed spaces – are traditionally thought by some to be a regular aspect of poltergeist cases, Table 1 indicates that they are rather uncommon as well. However, the occasional reports that have surfaced in the case literature do seem intriguing. IGPP director Hans Bender (1969, in Roll, 1977a, p. 389) described the following example, which is based on an account given by a German lawyer who investigated poltergeist occurrences reported in 1968 by a family in a nearby town:²

They [the family] told him [the lawyer] that objects which disappeared were later seen falling outside the house. He put bottles containing perfume and tablets on the kitchen table, asked the inhabitants of the house to go outside, closed all the windows and doors, and then left himself. After a short time, the perfume bottle appeared in the air outside the house, and a bit later on, the

bottle of tablets appeared in the air at the height of the roof and fell to the ground in a zigzag manner.

Parapsychologist William Roll (1977a) notes that apportionation "... provides a special challenge and opportunity for the RSPK investigator. It is fairly easy to provide for sealed rooms or containers. If an object appears in or disappears from such an area, the investigator is likely to be able conclusively to discount familiar causes, human as well as physical" (p. 390). This suggests a way in which an investigator might be able to informally test apportionation effects, should one come across them in a case.

In rare instances, floating or flashing lights may be reported in poltergeist cases. Roll (1972/2004, Ch. 6) came across one case in North Carolina where the phenomena consisted solely of bright flashes of light, akin to those produced by electric strobe lights, which occurred spontaneously around a 19-year-old girl. In another case, field investigators Barry Taff and Kerry Gaynor (1976) observed displays of small, rapidly-moving balls of light on several occasions, which occurred in the presence of a woman in her mid-to-late 30s. The lights were reported to change their motion, size, and intensity in response to the investigators' requests, and to the occasional emotional outbursts of the female agent. Attempts to photograph the lights were reportedly met with no success on most occasions, although in a few rare instances, the lights were captured on film as curved arcs of light, akin to the "trails" that can appear in photos of lighted objects (whether due to motion of the camera, or to motion by the object itself). No signs of faulty wiring, trickery, or external sources were found in either of these cases.

Duration of the Phenomena

The PRF and IGPP surveys both indicate that poltergeist phenomena tend to be rather short-lived. The phenomena in the PRF cases lasted anywhere from one day to six years, with an average length of five months and a median of two months. The IGPP cases had a median of five months. This suggests that poltergeist phenomena tend to go on for close to half a year, on average. Similarly, Gauld and Cornell (1979, p. 226) note that 59% of their cases lasted less than a year.

It was noted that in 41% of the PRF cases, the phenomena began after a move, an illness, or another kind of event that may be stressful or upsetting to people. In 20% of the IGPP cases, the phenomena started when a bout of "rage, disappointment or great frustration" was displayed by the suspected RSPK agent (Roll & Persinger, 1998, p. 187). In 8% of Gauld and Cornell's (1979) cases, the agents were characterized, prior to the start of the disturbances, as already suffering "... from a mental or emotional problem, or were in a state of physical distress likely to have emotional consequences" (pp. 228 – 229). This may have important implications for the human side to poltergeists, which we will look at further in Section 4.

Unusual Motion of Objects

As indicated in Table 1, a large portion of the phenomena in poltergeist cases involves the movement of objects. If these movements were being fraudulently produced by someone picking up the object and throwing it across the room, then the movement of the objects through the air should be in a fairly smooth arc as the object flies upward from the force of the throw, and then drops downward to the floor under the force of gravity. However, there are some poltergeist cases in which unusual patterns of motion are displayed by the objects as they move through the air. In

41% of the PRF cases, for instance, moving objects were described by the witnesses to be floating, fluttering, falling in a zigzag pattern (as in the apportionation example above), or curving around sharp corners. Similarly, objects that displayed unusual flight paths were described in 45% of the IGPP cases (Roll & Persinger, 1998, p. 188). Such displays would be inconsistent with simple hand throws.

Some objects were also described as changing their speed while in motion. An example of this comes from an Austrian physicist who investigated the poltergeist phenomena occurring in the home of his son-in-law in 1818. While the physicist and his daughter were in the kitchen with a neighbor, Mr. Koppbauer, "... a big iron spoon suddenly left the shelf on which it was lying and came straight at Koppbauer's head. Weighing about a pound and travelling [*sic*] with great velocity it might have been expected to inflict a serious bruise, but the stricken man declared he felt only a light touch and the spoon dropped perpendicularly at his feet" (Thurston, 1954, pp. 30 – 31). This kind of sudden change would also be inconsistent with a hand throw.

Object and Area Focusing

In his own poltergeist investigations, Roll (1975) noticed that there is a tendency for the phenomena to repeatedly involve either certain objects or certain types of objects. We saw an example of this in the Druten case (Case Study #3 in Section 2), where a number of the movements particularly involved the stones that flew in from the garden, and the sand that was mysteriously thrown in peoples' faces or fell on their heads. Roll has called this tendency *object focusing*, which has been seen in 85% of the PRF cases (it is not mentioned in the cases of the IGPP, or in the Gauld-Cornell cases).

In a similar fashion, Roll noticed that there also is a tendency for the phenomena to occur in certain areas of the affected home or workplace. We saw an example of this in the Miami case (Case Study #1 in Section 2), where there were certain shelves in the warehouse from which objects repeatedly fell or took off.³ *Area focusing*, as this tendency is called, has been seen in 26% of the PRF cases, and in 41% of the IGPP cases (again this is not mentioned in the Gauld-Cornell cases).

It was this type of focusing that allowed Roll and Pratt (1971; see also Roll, 1972/2004, Ch. 10) to conduct their semi-controlled experiment that was briefly mentioned in Section 2. This suggests a practical test for investigators to try in poltergeist cases, should they notice a similar tendency toward object or area focusing in any of their cases.

Fraudulent Phenomena

While fraud does not appear to be rampant in poltergeist cases (discovered in only 14% of the PRF cases, 26% of the IGPP cases, and 12% of the Gauld-Cornell cases), there is nevertheless the possibility that, in the course of an investigation, the investigators may uncover one or more phenomena that have been fraudulently produced. It is natural to think that if these phenomena were faked, then there is reason to suspect that any or all of the others in the case may have been as well, and that there is nothing more to be learned. In the minds of many investigators, this usually means the end of the investigation.

However, it is important to recognize that fraud can actually be instructive. It can demonstrate to the investigators just how certain phenomena were faked, so that they will know what to watch out for in future cases. Additionally, as Bender (1974) and Roll (1977a) both argue,

it can be psychodynamically instructive in that it might help shed some light on the nature of the case in terms of its underlying psychology. This in turn can help give the investigators an idea of why the phenomena may have begun in the first place, as well as hint at the possible motivations for the fraud.

Parapsychologist W. Edward Cox (1961) once pointed out that there are two types of fraud in poltergeist cases: imitative and total. As implied by its name, imitative fraud is where a person attempts to imitate previously genuine poltergeist phenomena through trickery. This is not always done with the intent to deceive; it may alternatively represent a kind of “coping mechanism” for the RSPK agent, or it may be done for the investigator, to the benefit of the agent. We’ll take a closer look at the reasoning underlying these motivations for imitative fraud in the next section.

Total fraud is where all of the poltergeist phenomena are staged or produced by trickery with the deliberate intent of being deceptive. This too may be instructive at times for the reasons given above.

When it comes to either type of fraud, Roll (1977a) makes the useful point that:

Fraud incidents emphasize that RSPK occurrences are person-oriented. They also emphasize that the most plausible normal explanation for ostensible RSPK events is deception by the person around whom they occur. The main effort of poltergeist researchers in determining whether a case includes genuine RSPK effects consists in setting up controlled conditions which will exclude normal interference by the focal person [i.e., the RSPK agent] or anyone else in the group among whom the disturbances occur (p. 393).

In Section 6, we’ll look at a case investigated by Roll that initially involved imitative fraud on the part of the agent, but then later included apparently genuine phenomena that occurred under controlled conditions.

4. Poltergeist Case Characteristics: RSPK Agents

If poltergeist disturbances are focused around a person, then examining the characteristics of RSPK agents can be useful to investigators. They may hint at the psychological aspects of the situation that are driving the disturbances, revealing a way to resolve the underlying situation and possibly bring the disturbances to an end.

Cases Involving an Agent

The likelihood that poltergeists are a person-oriented phenomenon rather than a spirit-oriented one is most strongly indicated by the high number of individuals that have been found at the center of poltergeist cases throughout the years. For instance, 79% of the PRF collection consisted of cases in which the poltergeist phenomena seemed to depend on one particular individual (the RSPK agent) being present. Similarly, 63% of the IGPP collection depended on the presence of one certain individual (Roll & Persinger, 1998, p. 186).⁴ In addition, Canadian researcher A. R. G. Owen (1978) once pointed out that “... no poltergeistery occurs when the poltergeist individual is in normal sleep” (p. 369). Indeed, none of the PRF cases displayed phenomena that manifested when the RSPK agent was asleep (although this did occur in 9% of the IGPP cases, suggesting that there may be a few exceptions). Further indicating the person-oriented nature of the poltergeist is another point made by Owen (1978) that there are no known

poltergeist cases in which the phenomena centered around an animal; as Owen put it, "... poltergeist cats and dogs are unknown" (p. 369).

Age & Gender of the Agent

It is commonly noted that poltergeist cases tend to involve agents who are in their adolescent or teenage years, as suggested in the three case studies we looked at in Section 2. For the most part, this tendency bears out in the poltergeist case collections. In the PRF cases, the median age of the agent was 14 years. In the IGPP cases, the age was 14 for male agents and 12½ for female agents. Around 37% of the cases collected by Gauld and Cornell (1979, p. 226) had an agent whose age was under 20. However, readers should be aware that having an adolescent or teen agent is not always the rule. In the PRF cases, for instance, the age of the agents in the individual cases ranged from as young as eight years to as old as 70 years. As noted in Section 3, the moving light displays witnessed in a case investigated by Taff and Gaynor (1976) were apparently centered around a woman in her 30s.

In an Indianapolis case investigated by William Roll (1970; see also Roll, 1972/2004, Ch. 5), the phenomena also seemed to center around a woman in her 30s. This woman had a 13-year-old daughter. While one might immediately suspect, simply on the basis of her age, that the daughter may have been the RSPK agent, the evidence gathered during the investigation *did not* point in this direction; rather, the evidence suggested that the RSPK agent was her mother. For example, the mother was found to be present more often during the occurrences than her daughter was. In addition, when an occurrence took place, the mother was often closer to it.⁵

In early RSPK cases, there seemed to be a gender difference among agents. A majority of the cases in the PRF collection occurring prior to 1900 were centered around more female agents (79%) than male agents (21%). Similarly, the cases collected by Gauld and Cornell (1979), most of which were compiled from accounts prior to 1900, also show more females (34%) than males (12%).⁶ The reason for this early difference is not clear, although Roll (1978) has speculated that "... perhaps girls then led more stressful lives than boys or perhaps cases with girls were for some reason more likely to be reported" (p. 171).

However, contemporary cases seem to be rather evenly matched among agent gender. While the early cases in the PRF collection indicated a gender imbalance, those occurring after 1900 showed a close balance (51% females, 49% males). Similarly, the IGPP collection shows a fairly close balance, with 44% of the cases having a female agent, and 56% having a male agent (Roll & Persinger, 1998, p. 186). This suggests that gender is generally not an important factor in contemporary poltergeist cases.

Situation of the Agent

In many poltergeist cases, it has been found that the RSPK agent may be in a situation that is bringing about psychological tension for him or her, usually in relation to interpersonal problems with other people who live or work with the agent. For instance, the relations between an agent and his/her family may be strained, and the agent may wish to escape from a difficult home life. Alternatively, it may be the case that the agent feels neglected or ignored by his or her parents, and longs for attention. Within a work setting, the agent may be feeling pressured by or at odds with the boss or co-workers. Of course, these are situations that many people face regularly

in everyday life, but unlike in the conventional everyday case, the manner in which the situation is coped with is unconventional in poltergeist cases.

This view is elaborated in the words of several parapsychologists in broadly analyzing the poltergeist cases that they have come across. William Roll (1972/2004) wrote in his book *The Poltergeist* that:

The red thread running through most of the cases I have investigated, or am familiar with, is tension in family situations or extensions of them In general, we find hostility in the agent which cannot be expressed in normal ways, the main target for the anger being people with whom he is associated on a daily basis (p. 175).

In discussing this view, the late D. Scott Rogo (1986) added the following words in his book *On the Track of the Poltergeist*:

The poltergeist is ... both an expression and a release mechanism (or safety valve) of and for this inner hostility.

This explanation also tells us a great deal about the specific dynamics of the poltergeist – that is, it actually explains quite neatly just *why* the poltergeist acts the way it does. I am sure that all readers ... have seen what happens when a young child becomes frustrated, or when one becomes angry after being scolded for being naughty. The child is apt to throw a tantrum by slamming doors, throwing toys about, banging on the walls, and displaying other aggressive acts. It doesn't take much insight to realize that these are the exact activities in which the poltergeist engages. Like a frustrated youngster, it too bangs on the walls, throws things, and slams doors (p. 11, his emphasis).

In his book *ESP, Hauntings and Poltergeists*, Loyd Auerbach (1986) offers a similar analogy within a convenient summary:

Poltergeist experiences, or cases of RSPK, are, by the currently held model, related to the subconscious mind of a person in the situation where the disturbances are going on. That person is generally in a stress-related tense, and frustrating situation or relationship. Where most people would respond to the stress in a variety of "normal" ways, from punching walls or throwing things to having nervous breakdowns or experiencing physical illness, our poltergeist agents have an alternate means of "blowing off steam." For some reason, the reaction to the stress is a subconsciously directed psychokinetic outburst. Call it a subconscious PK temper tantrum, if you will, though this is simplifying things a bit (p. 50).

An example of this can be found in the Miami case (Case Study #1 in Section 2). At one point during the investigation, Julio got into a minor argument with one of his co-workers over who was going to pay for the breakage occurring in the warehouse. A moment later, an alligator ashtray fell to the floor behind Julio and broke. Afterward, Roll noticed that Julio "... seemed much less tense and angry. I asked him how he felt. 'I feel happy; that thing [the breakage] makes me feel happy; I don't know why'" (Roll, 1972/2004, p. 169). In contrast, when there was a long period with no disturbances taking place, Roll had again asked Julio how he felt. "He said, 'Now I am nervous because nothing happens'" (p. 169). Reflecting on this, Roll commented: "It seems that for Julio the poltergeist breakages in a literal sense 'broke the tension'" (p. 169). And in line with this, it seemed to Roll and Pratt that the disturbances in the warehouse were particularly active when Julio was irritated or tense (p. 138).

Roll (2007) later observed that, when visitors and investigators arrive on the scene, the situation may sometimes change for RSPK agents. He suggested that, "... RSPK may not only

serve to free the agent from an intolerable social relationship by destructive behavior, but that RSPK may also be a method to obtain attention without destruction” (p. 124). This would perhaps be most applicable in cases where an RSPK agent feels neglected or ignored by his/her parents or co-workers, and may long for this deprived attention from others. When this attention is suddenly received from the visitors and investigators who are watching the agent, the psychological situation may shift to a more positive one for the agent, and in response, phenomena may begin to occur when the visitors and investigators are watching the agent. This shift would be beneficial to both parties: for the agent, it presents a more positive psychological situation, as noted. For the visitors and investigators, it allows them to be able to witness phenomena even in the presence of the agent and better exclude the possibility of fraud.

This kind of “attention-seeking” behavior seemed to be reflected in the Miami case, according to Roll (2003). In a summary of the case, he wrote:

There was a subtle change during our investigation. Pratt and I hoped to witness the occurrences, and after a few days objects moved in our presence, seven of these when we had Julio in direct view. It seemed as if he was rewarding our attention. The breakages would probably have continued whether we were there or not but they would not have involved the objects we set out. The meaning of the events had changed and thereby the course they took, but the intensity of the energy seemed the same (p. 76).

In some cases, the phenomena that occur as a result of this behavior may not be genuine; rather, they may be instances of imitative fraud that are produced by the agent in order to please the visitors and investigators (who presumably want something to happen). This scenario would perhaps be more likely in cases where the poltergeist phenomena are near the end of their short-lived existence. Since the phenomena are likely to be much more infrequent by this time, the agent may attempt to purposefully imitate the phenomena in order to keep the attention of the visitors or investigators.

An example of this kind of attention-seeking motivation for imitative fraud is suggested in a poltergeist case occurring in the Bronx region of New York City (Eisler, 1975). The suspected agent, an eight-year-old girl named Ann, was being raised by an older couple that had adopted her. According to a psychologist who was counseling the family, “... Ann was not getting the attention and affection she wanted from her parents, especially her mother” (p. 142). Several objects and pieces of furniture were spontaneously falling or moving about in proximity to Ann, which drew the attention of outside observers. This seemed to be a mixture of genuine events and imitative fraud by Ann, as indicated by the following description given by one of the investigators:

An insurance agent, Mr. Barclay, the 24-year-old son of another family in the building, visited in hope of observing and filming the incidents. While he was with the girl in the master bedroom, a lamp fell over twice in another part of the room. The last time he saw it as it fell. He told me there was no way the girl could have caused this event since she was behind him, several feet from the lamp, and since the cord of the lamp was on its other side. No one else was in the room. He then replaced a night table which had fallen earlier, preparing to film it if it should fall again. When [Ann] thought that Mr. Barclay was not looking, she quickly touched the table, turning it over. He commented, “she thought this was fun, so she helped” (Eisler, 1975; Roll, unpublished notes, 1974) (Roll, 1977a, p. 392).

Another example can be seen from a poltergeist case in a rural Southern U. S. community, where object movements and sounds were occurring around a ten-year-old African American boy

known as J. E. (Palmer, 1974). In the eyes of the investigator, J. E. was "... a friendly, generally well-mannered boy who interacted easily and naturally with strangers. He was quite eager to please me, and I had the impression when interviewing him that he was trying to give me the answers he thought I wanted to hear" (p. 27). J. E.'s teachers and principal generally concurred with the boy's eagerness to please, referring to him as an "attention-seeker" (p. 27). During the investigation, there were times when the investigator witnessed nothing at all, and J. E. seemed motivated to produce phenomena by imitative fraud (e.g., by kicking doors and by trying to grab objects and throw them when he thought witnesses were not looking). As the investigator stated, "I also believe that J. E. may have produced some of the phenomena occurring in my presence normally in order to please me" (p. 24). Like Ann, J. E. was being raised by an older couple. In his psychological evaluation, J. E. was described in the following manner: "... this boy still struggles with gratification of dependency needs and acceptance by significant adult figures. *In general, he pictures himself as unwanted and feelings of rejection are experienced* (pp. 28 – 29, italics in original). If this evaluation is accurate, then J. E. may have been somewhat deprived of attention, and perhaps sought it from others in any way that he could. In the case of the investigator, this may have been to produce poltergeist occurrences for him through imitative fraud.

Examples like these demonstrate how imitative fraud may reveal something about the psychological situation underlying a poltergeist case. If the revealed situation can then be remedied through counseling or similar means, this may help the witnesses involved and perhaps bring an end to the disturbances.

5. Poltergeists and Haunts: Similarities and Differences

It was mentioned in Section 1 that poltergeist and haunt phenomena can be confused because of their overt similarities and their implied suggestion of spirits. But despite their close similarity on the surface, parapsychologists have generally found under closer examination that poltergeists and haunts have subtle differences that allow distinctions to be made between them (Roll, 1972/2004, p. 200). These similarities and differences are as follows:

1.) Both poltergeists and haunts can involve object movements, electrical disturbances, and strange noises. In poltergeist cases, the phenomena tend to occur in rather close succession, whereas in haunt cases, they are more spread out in time and may only occur infrequently.

2.) The object movements and noises in poltergeist cases tend to be directly *physical*, involving disturbances of actual objects and generating sounds that can result from such disturbances. Moreover, the disturbances in poltergeist cases are more likely to be witnessed by others. In contrast, the movements and noises reported in haunt cases tend to be *hallucinatory*, in that they do not correspond to actual physical disturbances (e.g., a witness may hear a loud crash in another room, but then find nothing fallen or out of place upon entering the room) and may only be selectively perceived (e.g., while one witness may hear the crash, others may not).

3.) Apparitions can be reported in both poltergeists and haunts. Such reports tend to be more common in haunt cases, whereas poltergeist cases tend to lack such reports.

4.) Poltergeist cases are usually of short duration, lasting around two to five months (Section 3). In contrast, haunt cases can range over a much longer period of time, lasting for many months or even years.

5.) Whereas haunts tend to be associated with a certain *place*, poltergeists tend to be associated with a certain *person*.

Although poltergeists and haunts are separate phenomena according to these criteria, it appears that, in rare cases, they can occur in tandem, with RSPK and haunt phenomena both being reported within the same case. As examples of this, we examine two cases investigated by William Roll and his colleagues:

Case Study #4: A New England Haunt-RSPK Case

In May of 1979, Mr. and Mrs. Berini moved into their New England home along with Mrs. Berini's two children from a previous marriage. From that time up until August of 1981, the family reported witnessing RSPK and apparitions in the home at various times (Roll & Tringale, 1983).

Three apparitions were seen or heard. On six separate nights, Mr. and Mrs. Berini heard the voice of a little girl crying for her mother, with Mrs. Berini hearing it first. The second apparition was experienced one morning when Mrs. Berini woke up and saw the figure of a little boy dressed in white standing in the hallway. Mr. Berini also saw this boy apparition on another occasion, as he witnessed it trying to pick up a rug in the hall (when he later pulled up the floor boards, he found a medallion of the Virgin Mary hidden underneath). Afterward, the apparition appeared two or three times a week, making brief statements and sometimes responding to questions asked by the Berinis. They did not always both see it each time it appeared. In some instances, the appearance of the apparition was followed by object movements. Once when it appeared, Mrs. Berini purposely ignored it as instructed by the family priest. She said that the bedroom closet door then began opening and slamming shut about 20 times. The appearance of the boy apparition eventually gave way to a third, more ominous-looking apparition. Mr. and Mrs. Berini both saw it on separate occasions, and it was described as a black caped figure with a hump on its back, which spoke in a gruff male voice. The figure usually spoke to Mrs. Berini while she was praying, reportedly saying "really disgusting things" to her. When she asked who it was, it reportedly replied, "I am a minister of God." As with the apparition of the boy, this ominous-looking figure was not always seen by everyone present whenever it appeared.

The RSPK phenomena primarily consisted of object movements. The night following the initial appearance of the ominous-looking apparition, the phone beside the bed reportedly "kept flying across the room" and a lamp next to the bed fell on Mrs. Berini's head several times. Dishes, crosses, and religious figurines also moved and broke on other occasions. In addition, large objects such as a cupboard, a bookcase, and a desk moved more than once. The object which reportedly moved the most was the retractable staircase leading to the attic, which opened and slammed shut with such force that it began to form a crack in the hall ceiling.

Nearly all of the movements were noted to occur when Mrs. Berini was present or nearby, suggesting that she may have been the RSPK agent. Like other RSPK agents (Section 4), Mrs. Berini was facing a situation filled with tension and interpersonal problems. She had an unhappy childhood, and felt distant from her mother and the rest of her family. Her relations with Mr.

Berini's family were strained, and she apparently faced much confusion and conflict in her decision to convert from Judaism to Catholicism for the sake of her immediate family. These difficulties seemed to be symbolically reflected some of the reported phenomena. For instance, as was noted in the case report:

The little girl who seemed to call for her mother and the first words of the white [boy] apparition, ("Where do all the lonely people go?" and "Where do I belong?") seemed to match Mrs. Berini's inability to reach the attention of her own mother and the rejection she experienced from her new family [i.e., her in-laws] (Roll & Tringale, 1983, p. 135).

In addition, the confusion and conflict that Mrs. Berini faced from her religious conversion seemed to be reflected in the movement and breakage of crosses and religious figures, as well as in the appearance and behavior of the third, ominous-looking apparition.

The Berini family briefly moved out of their home in September of 1981, when they asked a Catholic priest to perform an exorcism. After this, no other phenomena reportedly occurred.

Case Study #5: An Allegedly Haunted Japanese Restaurant

In October of 1991, various haunt phenomena were being reported by the manager and staff of a Japanese restaurant in Georgia (Roll, Maher, & Brown, 1992). They heard noises at night, including footsteps, objects being moved around, the sound of dishes vibrating, and the sound of the restroom toilets flushing when no one was known to be in there. Lights would spontaneously turn on and off, and the bulbs would sometimes be found unscrewed from the sockets. There were also several anomalous malfunctions reported with the restaurant's equipment. One potentially hazardous example involved the deep fryer in the kitchen. The fryer was a gas-powered unit operated by a hand switch, and the staff always made sure to turn off the switch every night before leaving. However, there was more than one instance in which the staff came in the next morning and found the fryer turned on and heated to a very hot temperature. According to the manager: "Every night we would turn [it] off ... two people watching and one person turning [it] off, and in the morning it would be on" (p. 153).

In another example, an emergency alarm would sound and the back fire escape door would be found unlocked and hanging open. The manager stated that: "Almost nightly, when we were busy, we would have alarms going off and I would have to come [back and] stay until 2:30, 3 o'clock in the morning before we got out of here" (p. 153). And in some instances, despite having been checked by the staff before closing, the door would again be found unlocked and open when the restaurant was closed. The manager added, "Then we would have to come back at 4 and spend an hour going through the building with the police" (p. 153). No signs of burglary or an intruder were found in any of these instances.

Aside from the physical disturbances, the manager and his staff reported subjective perceptual experiences while in the restaurant. There were cold spots on one floor of the building that, according to the manager, made "... the hair just stand up" when one passed through them (p. 154). Apparitions were seen in the restaurant at various times by the head waitress and the sushi chefs. In particular, the manager said that he frequently encountered two apparitions that were occasionally seen by others. In one such sighting, the manager and another employee had been outside on the deck. Two other employees were inside doing accounting work when a female employee came running out onto the deck, stating that the intercom on the bar telephone had suddenly turned on, even though there was no one at the bar. The other employees working inside

turned to look toward the bar and saw an “old, short, fat guy standing behind the bar drunk, and they were afraid of him” (p. 154). Thinking that an intruder was present, the manager grabbed his gun and went to the bar. He found no one there, but he found that a locked back room door was now unlocked and that the padlocks on the liquor cabinets were open. He stated: “And there are only two of us with keys and we were both outside” (p. 154).

Out of the corner of his eye, the manager also frequently saw the figure of a slim man in a white shirt and dark pants standing behind the bar, in the lounge, or in the upper floor hallway. This figure would usually be seen after a busy night at the restaurant, and on one occasion, the manager mistook it for a real person. He had been taking a nap on one of the barroom couches when he awoke and heard footsteps, followed by the feeling that someone was watching him. Upon looking up, he saw the figure of a man that suddenly disappeared. Thinking there was someone else in the restaurant, the manager searched the building, but found no one (p. 154).

Eventually, the manager contacted Roll for help in dealing with the haunt occurrences at the restaurant. As part of the subsequent investigation, Roll arranged for an informal session to be held with a group of psychics. The two apparitions seen by the manager were described by the psychics in the course of the session: the tall, slim one was said to have a solemn, responsible, and protective demeanor. In contrast, the short, drunken apparition seen at the bar was said to have a very carefree and irresponsible manner.

When examined closely, these two apparitions seemed to reflect different facets of the manager’s own personality. In describing the tall, slim apparition, one of the psychics had told the manager, “It’s almost like that man is your mirror” (p. 165). And indeed, the manager was a very professional and attentive person who lived up well to the high level of responsibility bestowed upon him by his Japanese bosses. The apparition’s protective manner seemed to reflect his inner need for support and mentorship in his manager duties (the manager was in his early 20s when he received the position). At first, the short, drunken apparition seemed to be the complete opposite of the manager’s character. However, when asked by the investigators if he ever just wanted to “kick back and be a drunken bum” at times, the manager replied, “Sure I do” (p. 165). However, his need to always keep a professional, polite, and responsible appearance (which is valued by his Japanese bosses), even when outside of work, did not allow him to be very casual and relaxed. Instead, the short drunken apparition seemed to reflect his need for occasional diversion from his duties. Limited by his strict duties at the restaurant, the investigators suggested that the manager “... may be seen as projecting this [casual] part of his personality onto his surroundings, much as a screenwriter projects his personality onto the movie screen” (p. 165).

Projective psychological tests administered to manager later revealed possible indicators of repressed aggression that seem akin to the personality of an RSPK agent. This, along with the results of a neuropsychological test (Section 7), suggests that the manager may have been a minor RSPK agent.

In both of these case studies, there is a psychosocial aspect to the apparitions that seems to reflect back upon one of the witnesses. Each witness was facing a difficult psychological situation around the time he or she saw the apparitions, and aspects of the witness’ situation seemed to be symbolically reflected by the apparitions. If some apparitions are psychological projections into the environment that can later be witnessed by others, then this process might be partly mediated by psychokinesis (Roll, 1994). If that is so, then perhaps some of the apparitions seen in poltergeist and dual haunt-RSPK cases are PK products of the agent’s own mind.

6. Experimenting with Poltergeists?

If poltergeist occurrences involve large-scale psychokinesis on the part of a living agent, how might this be further explored and verified? One way is to try and test suspected RSPK agents for psychokinesis under controlled conditions; to try and “bring the poltergeist into the laboratory,” so to speak. Due to the rarity and short-lived nature of poltergeist cases, only a few opportunities have arisen to study poltergeist agents in this manner throughout the history of parapsychology (Roll, 1977b, pp. 58 – 66). As a result, they tend to be overlooked or missed by the media, skeptics, and the general public. Here, summaries are provided of two such opportunities that arose in relation to two poltergeist cases investigated by William Roll.

Case Study #1 Revisited: Testing Julio

One month after Roll and Pratt’s (1971) investigation at the Miami souvenir warehouse (Section 2), Julio was invited to the Institute for Parapsychology at the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man (FRNM) in North Carolina, for three days of psychological evaluation and PK testing (Roll, 1972/2004, Ch. 14). The results of the psychological tests indicated that Julio sometimes experienced feelings of unworthiness and guilt at not living up to his family’s expectations. There was also some suggestion that he harbored some feelings of resentment towards one of the warehouse owners, who he may have “seen as phony and cheating” (p. 171). These results seemed consistent with the idea that RSPK agents are often in a psychologically tense or distressful situation.

To explore a possible PK effect on Julio’s part, the FRNM staff led him through a series of PK tests over the course of three nights. One of these tests utilized an automated dice machine that consisted of a two-foot long plastic tube that is rotated by an electric motor. A pair of dice is loaded into the tube through a trapdoor at one end, which is held in place by spring clamps while the tube is rotating. The dice fall from one end of the tube to the other as the tube turns, bouncing off a number of baffles as they tumble down, with the machine pausing after each turn so that the numbers on the die faces can be recorded. The goal for a person participating in the PK test is to make certain target numbers come up on the dice more often than would be expected by chance alone. Each individual test is made up of six trials, one for each of the six number faces on a die to act as the PK target.⁷ By going around the die in this manner, any imperfections in the dice or the machine will cancel each other out and not contribute to the overall score.⁸

Julio participated in three PK tests with the dice machine during the first night of his visit, consisting of 18 falls of the two dice, or 36 test trials in all. With probability of successfully rolling the target die face being 1 in 6, he would be expected to score six successful rolls by chance. Julio scored nine successful rolls in all; although this score is above chance, it is not statistically significant.

Despite the lack of significant overall results, there were some curious incidents during Julio’s tests which may have been suggestive of a PK effect. During the second trial of Julio’s first test, the trapdoor at the end of the tube on the dice machine suddenly popped open, causing the dice to tumble out onto the tabletop. The FRNM staff had never had something like that occur with the machine, and they simply figured that the trapdoor had not been tightly fastened. After the dice had been reloaded and the trapdoor firmly shut, the test continued. But then, on the fifth trial, the trapdoor again popped open and the dice fell to the tabletop, both landing with a successful roll of five on their faces. The trapdoor stayed put for the sixth trial, which produced

one successful roll of six. When the second test was started, however, the trapdoor swung open a third time and the dice landed on the table with a successful roll of one on each face. The trapdoor remained in place throughout the rest of the second test, but popped open a final time at the beginning of the third test, with one of the dice again showing a successful roll of one.

It is interesting to note that Julio scored five of his nine successful rolls during the times that the trapdoor had popped open. The odds of this occurring by chance alone are more than 100 to 1. Nothing like this occurred on the other PK test devices that the FRNM staff had tested Julio with that night.

On Julio's second night of testing, the dice machine was briefly tried again to see if the same peculiar event would happen. The trapdoor flew open once despite the fact that it had been firmly closed, and that it had been carefully inspected beforehand by the FRNM staff to make sure that it would not open by natural means or through simple trickery. Perhaps even more peculiar was that the trapdoor *did not* open when the dice hit the bottom of the tube, when the force of the dice hitting the trapdoor might have caused it to pop open. Rather, the opening only occurred *after* the dice were lying still on the bottom of the tube as it was beginning to swing upward for another rotation.

Another curious incident suggestive of PK occurred during a break in the testing, when Roll and three FRNM staff members were in an office. Julio was standing in the office doorway, holding a coffee cup in his right hand, when a crash was suddenly heard in the hallway behind him. A large decorative vase that had been on a table on the other side of the hall was found broken on the floor. The bottom of the vase and its glass stopper were both still intact, but the neck had shattered into many pieces. The vase had apparently flown about five feet from the table before hitting the floor. The impact point was about 16 feet from Julio's position in the doorway, and the vase had apparently flown toward him when it fell. At least two FRNM staff members had been standing opposite of Julio when the crash was heard, and had him in their sight at least partially at that moment (they could see Julio's right arm, but his left arm was out of view by the doorway).

Although one might argue that Julio could have naturally caused the crash by pulling on a string in his left hand that was attached to the vase, there are several problems with this argument. Although Julio's left arm was obscured, no string was found in his left hand or on his person when Roll and the staff members focused on him immediately after the event. Nor was a string found near the vase or in the hallway. Furthermore, it did not seem plausible that Julio could have tied a string to the vase because there was no free moment in which he had been left alone; Roll had been with him at all times. Roll and the FRNM staff also accompanied Julio when they went from room to room, so there was also not a moment in which he had been unobserved for a prolonged period.

Case Study #6: Tests with Tina Resch

In March of 1984, poltergeist disturbances were being reported in the Columbus, Ohio, home of John and Joan Resch. Objects of various sizes and weights were spontaneously moving, from small items like hair barrettes to objects as large as a loveseat. A few electrical malfunctions were also occurring, with room lights and appliances turning on and off by themselves. At first, no source could be found for the disturbances, but it soon became apparent that they centered around the Reschs' 14-year-old adopted daughter, Tina.

Word of the disturbances eventually reached the media, and the Columbus Poltergeist soon became local and national news. Roll's attention was drawn to the case by one of the reporters covering it for the local newspaper, and he was soon invited by Joan Resch to come and investigate the disturbances.

At first, the case did not seem promising. Roll learned before his arrival at the home that a TV news crew had captured footage of Tina pulling over a lamp in an attempt to imitate the disturbances (an example of imitative fraud; see Section 3). In addition, he noted that several of the events occurring during the first three days of his visit could have been staged. But then, Roll began witnessing a series of occurrences in Tina's presence that he could not easily dismiss as fraudulent.

In one such occurrence, Roll was watching Tina mop up some water she had accidentally spilled when he heard a sound behind him. Turning to look, Roll found that an empty teacup he had placed on Tina's bedside table was now lying on a pile of clothes in Tina's closet 12 feet away. He noted that both of Tina's hands had been occupied at the time of the event, and that a bed stood between her and the table, so there was no possible way that she could have grabbed the teacup and thrown it. This and other occurrences observed by Roll are described more fully by him in the book [*Unleashed – Of Poltergeists and Murder: The Curious Story of Tina Resch*](#) (Roll & Storey, 2004).⁹

To test Tina for PK under controlled conditions, Roll brought her to Spring Creek Institute in North Carolina in October of 1984. By this time, the poltergeist activity around Tina was already waning, leaving the researchers concerned that it might disappear completely before they had an opportunity to test her. However, psychotherapist Jeannie Lagle Stewart thought that it might be possible to "re-activate" Tina's RSPK through hypnosis. Upon guiding her into a hypnotic state, Stewart asked Tina to recall the conditions under which the poltergeist disturbances had occurred in her Columbus home. The memories that Tina recalled were disturbing for her, and elicited the feelings of abdominal discomfort that she often associated with the disturbances. This seemed to do the trick, as four small objects that Tina selected from her purse had moved shortly after the hypnosis session ended.

Neurobiologist Stephen Baumann constructed two innovative test devices to study Tina's PK ability. One device measured the electrical signals being steadily emitted from the nerve cell of a sea slug, and Tina's goal was to speed up or slow down the rate of this steady signal by way of willful intention. The other device measured electric discharges emitted from a piezoelectric crystal, a mineral that can produce an electric current when subjected to pressure. Here, Tina's goal was to mentally apply pressure to the crystal through PK such that it produced a measurable current. Although Tina's results with both devices were promising, there were problems with the test designs that made the results difficult to evaluate statistically (Baumann, Stewart, & Roll, 1986).

However, during test breaks, small objects that had been set out on a table as PK targets began moving at various times. At one point, Baumann and Stewart had been standing in front of the table while they were packing away a video camera. They were facing Tina when they heard a loud noise out in the hallway behind her. Heading towards the source, they found a 12-inch socket wrench, which had been sitting on the table, now lying on the floor in a storeroom 18 feet away. A large dent had been left in the storeroom door, indicating the force of the wrench's impact. Given that Baumann and Stewart had been blocking her access to the table the entire time, it did not seem possible that Tina could have grabbed the wrench and thrown it without them noticing.

During another test break on the following day, Stewart was watching Tina search for something in her purse when she heard a sound from behind. Turning quickly to look, she managed to catch a glimpse of a small plastic level just as it struck a roll of printer paper and landed on the floor. The level had also come from the table of PK target objects, which Roll had been guarding at the time. In order to get where it landed, the level would have had to leave the room where the table was located and travel in a curved path around two corners, a distance of 40 feet. Roll was certain that Tina had not taken it from the table beforehand, as she was kept some distance away at all times.

The events had started to upset Tina, so Stewart took her to the room where Roll was guarding the table to help calm her down. As Tina was seating herself in a chair by the window, an AA battery suddenly struck the window behind her, followed a moment later by an L-bracket. Both objects had again come from the table, and again it was unlikely that Tina had thrown them because Roll and Stewart were sitting in front of her, blocking the table. Then, about five minutes later, Tina got up and was heading for the doorway. Roll and Stewart were following behind her when they heard something back in the room. A drill bit from the table had struck the window and landed about where the battery and bracket had. Roll and Stewart both noticed that Tina had her hands resting on the sides of the doorway at the time.

At least 16 other objects had moved in the Spring Creek laboratory while the researchers were closely watching Tina, with three of them coming from the table of objects (Stewart, Roll, & Baumann, 1987; Roll & Storey, 2004, Ch. 17 & 18).

In both of these case studies, poltergeist disturbances continued to occur around the RSPK agents even when they had been placed in unfamiliar and more tightly controlled environments. Researchers closely monitored them both throughout the duration of the studies, and no obvious signs of trickery were discovered. If the disturbances were indeed genuine, then it seems that the researchers were successful in bringing poltergeist phenomena into the laboratory for a time.

In some cases, it has also been possible to informally experiment with poltergeists in the course of a field investigation, as in the Miami case (Roll, 1972/2004, Ch. 10; Roll & Pratt, 1971) and in the Druten case.

Case Study #3 Revisited: RNG PK Tests with Çetin

To help the Turkish family in Druten find an explanation for the poltergeist events occurring in their home (Section 2), the investigators from the Parapsychology Institute in Utrecht conducted some simple PK tests with Çetin and his half-sister Aynur (Gerding et al., 1997). These tests used an electronic random number generator (RNG) like those often used in experimental PK research (Section 2). The RNG was used to determine the size of a circle shown on a computer screen, which would grow or shrink at random according to the RNG's random sequence. The goal was to try and influence the size of the circle in a consistent direction (large or small) through willful intention. Çetin and Aynur were each tested one at a time, with one attempting to influence the circle while the other watched. Although his combined test results were not statistically significant, Çetin did show significant scores on six of his 77 individual test runs (odds of about 35 to 1 against chance), suggesting that if he did show any PK, it came in intermittent "bursts." His half-sister Aynur produced a significant result in the direction opposite to that of her intended influence (i.e., she scored significantly below chance, a phenomenon known in parapsychology as "psi-missing"), which was more difficult to interpret meaningfully.

Apart from the PK tests, the investigators had used the RNG as a kind of free-running “background monitor” during the course of the Druten disturbances (Bierman, 1996; Gerding et al., 1997). The RNG was installed in the family home to collect random number data over the course of several days, in the event that a poltergeist disturbance should occur. Whenever a disturbance occurred, the family logged it on the computer running the RNG by pressing a key. The RNG data collected during these logged disturbances could then be statistically examined for any non-random patterns akin to those seen in PK tests. During the disturbances, the combined RNG data showed a pattern that was significantly below chance (psi-missing), suggesting that the RNG had, in a sense, become more random than usually expected during the poltergeist disturbances (i.e., it became “more random than random”). This too is somewhat difficult to meaningfully interpret, and needs to be reproduced in other poltergeist cases before a serious attempt is made to do so. At the very least, the finding seems consistent with the psychokinetic interpretation of poltergeist phenomena.

7. Towards a Theory of the Poltergeist: Three Aspects to Consider

Finally, we take a brief look at three main aspects of poltergeist cases that may have to be considered in attempts to formulate a general theory of RSPK: the psychological aspect, the neurological aspect, and the energetic aspect.

The Psychological Aspect: As indicated in Section 4, RSPK agents tend to find themselves in adverse psychological situations that they may be unable to cope with via conventional means. As noted by William Roll (1972/2004): “In general, we find hostility in the agent which cannot be expressed in normal ways, the main target for the anger being people with whom he [or she] is associated on a daily basis” (p. 175). It seems that, in some cases, the poltergeist disturbances may be an indirect reflection of this. For example, Roll finds that in some of his cases, the objects tend to move toward the rooms belonging to the person who is the focus of the agent’s anger (p. 175). Another example may be seen in the Druten case (Gerding et al., 1997; Case Study #3 in Section 2): Prior to the onset of the disturbances, Çetin received an increased amount of attention from his father while his step-mother and step-sister were on a three-week trip to Turkey. This may have been particularly important to Çetin because he had not previously received such attention from his father, having been initially abandoned by him soon after he was born. When his step-mother and step-sister returned, Çetin had to compete with them for his father’s attention. The disturbances began three days later, and Çetin’s step-mother and step-sister apparently became the most frequent targets for the flying stones. The symbolism becomes more apparent in light of the fact that, in Islamic culture, stoning is considered a traditional form of punishment.

The Druten researchers found that the case is consistent with the idea that poltergeists “... are a parapsychological manifestation most properly understood within the context of psychopathology and more specifically within the context of interpersonal relationships” (Gerding et al., 1997, p. 154). And it seems that when this form of “parapsychopathology,” to use a term coined by J. B. Rhine (in Roll, 1972/2004, p. xiii), is dealt with through counseling of the agent and the others involved, the poltergeist disturbances tend to vanish along with their problems.

However, we have to be cautious regarding the simplicity of this view of poltergeist cases, as it is not likely to be the whole answer. As parapsychologist Richard Broughton (1991) points out:

We must be careful ... not to “overpsychologize” our poltergeist agents. As many critics of psychoanalysis have complained, it is easy to find psychopathology and stress conditions anywhere one looks for them. Now that parapsychologists expect to find psychopathology, it is not surprising that they do find it in these cases. If poltergeist outbreaks are simply due to young people with repressed hostility who are under psychological stress, we should expect to see whole school buildings come crashing down by the dozens each year around exam time. At any given time there are probably hundreds of thousands of young people who have more severe psychological disturbances or who are enduring far greater stress than any of the poltergeist agents who have been studied. The real question is, What is the trigger that sets off so very few individuals, turning them into poltergeist agents? What is it in their psychological (or physical) makeup that can cause such gross violations of the laws of physics? (pp. 231 – 232)

A similar point is made by Roll (1972/2004), who adds that there “... must be something else which eludes the psychological tests” (p. 175). Part of that something else may be the other two aspects we examine here.

The Neurological Aspect: Upon examining the health of the 92 RSPK agents in the PRF case collection, Roll (1977, p. 400) found that 49 of them (53%) showed medical or psychological problems. Twenty-two were said to have exhibited (or have been prone to) seizing or dissociative states. Sixteen of the 22 agents showed symptoms that included sudden muscle contractions, convulsions, fainting spells, coma, trances, and seizures. Often these are considered some of the symptoms of epilepsy (Kolb & Whishaw, 1990, pp. 141 – 143), and at least four agents were diagnosed with epilepsy. In at least one instance where the brain waves of an RSPK agent were monitored by electroencephalograph (EEG), a brief 14 Hz “spike” pattern was observed when the agent felt drowsy. If more pronounced, the pattern could have indicated of complex partial epilepsy (Roll, 1972/2004, pp. 175 – 176). The manager of the allegedly haunted Japanese restaurant (Roll et al., 1992; Case Study #5 in Section 5) had given responses on a neuropsychological questionnaire that were suggestive of temporal lobe epilepsy. Tina Resch, the agent in the Columbus case (Case Study #6 in Section 6), was diagnosed with a mild form of Tourette’s syndrome. Like epilepsy, Tourette’s syndrome is a condition marked by involuntary body and vocal reactions that are apparently related to sudden, brief, and repeated electrical discharges within brain neurons (Roll & Storey, 2004, Ch. 19). These findings suggest that RSPK may be correlated with disturbances of the central nervous system (CNS), which may be similar to those produced by epilepsy.

This relationship between RSPK and CNS disturbances also suggested by several parallels found between RSPK and complex partial epilepsy in the research of Roll and physician Elson de Montagno (1983). Among the parallels, Roll and Montagno noticed that both phenomena: 1) peak in the adolescent and teenage years; 2) can equally affect males and females; 3) occur repeatedly over time; 4) and involve brief displays of energy. Both can be triggered spontaneously or in response to arousal, and both can represent expressions of an emotional state. On this basis, Montagno and Roll (1983) proposed that when RSPK happens, neuroelectric discharges within the CNS may somehow become “blocked” within the body and are instead reflected in the surrounding environment.

Such a process may be suggested by the apparent inverse relationship that has been found between the poltergeist disturbances and the medical symptoms of certain RSPK agents. For instance, in the New England case (Roll & Tringale, 1983; Case Study #4 in Section 5), Mrs. Berini had a history of suffering migraine headaches. However, no poltergeist disturbances took place in the house whenever she suffered one. Similarly, in another case (Roll, 1970; see also Roll, 1972/2004, Ch. 5), a female agent in her 30s occasionally suffered vomiting episodes

apparently brought on by stress. After she suffered an episode, no poltergeist phenomena occurred for a short time. And in at least one case involving a male agent diagnosed with epilepsy (Solfvin & Roll, 1976), the poltergeist disturbances began after the agent's seizures were treated with medication. The relationship seen in these cases suggests a kind of switching mechanism: When agents cannot deal with CNS disturbances through the conventional way of expressing psychosomatic symptoms (such as headaches, vomiting, and seizures), then perhaps RSPK takes their place as the outlet.

A series of neurological tests done with Tina Resch indicated signs of an abnormality within her brainstem (Roll & Storey, 2004, Ch. 19), which might encourage further research into whether RSPK may be associated with certain alterations in brain structure and function. Further examination for such alterations in the brains of other RSPK agents will help determine whether or not this is a general factor in RSPK. We should note that, given the rarity of RSPK, there have been few opportunities to study the neurological aspect in depth. There are still many details left unspecified and some criticism regarding this aspect has been raised in the past (Martínez-Taboas, 1984; Martínez-Taboas & Alvarado, 1981; for some counter-criticisms see Rogo, 1986, Ch. 9, and Roll, 2007). Thus, it is prudent to be cautious in our interpretation of neurological findings, with the hope that further opportunities for study will begin to provide a clearer picture.

The Energetic Aspect: During the investigation of the Miami case (Case Study #1 in Section 2), Roll (1972/2004, pp. 160 – 161) used a tape measure to estimate the distance between Julio and the initial place where objects had been located (before they moved), whenever this was known. The resulting measurements for 32 events revealed a notable pattern of decline: As the distance from Julio increased, the number of object movements decreased. In other words, the farther away Julio was, the fewer object movements there were.

This pattern, which was also seen in six other cases investigated by Roll (summarized in Joines & Roll, 2007) is notable because it seemed to resemble the pattern exhibited by two mathematical functions governing electricity and magnetism: the inverse square function and the exponential decay function. The inverse square function governs the dispersal of energy with distance from a point source in the environment (Dart, 1966, pp. 5 – 7). An example would be the light from a light bulb: the light rays get dimmer the farther they travel away from the bulb. The exponential decay function governs the gradual decay of energy as it travels through a medium, such as air or water. An example would be sunlight traveling through water: as the sun's rays penetrate the surface of the ocean, they gradually become dimmer the farther down they travel into the ocean's depths.

Because both functions could apply to RSPK on the basis of their similarity to the measured pattern, Duke University engineer William Joines derived a mathematical function that effectively combined the two functions, and then applied them to the measured pattern observed in the three cases investigated by Roll that seemed to provide the strongest evidence for RSPK, two of which were the Miami case and the Columbus case (Case Study #6 in Section 6). As a visual example, Figure 1 shows Joines' function fitted to the measured pattern of decline in the Miami case.

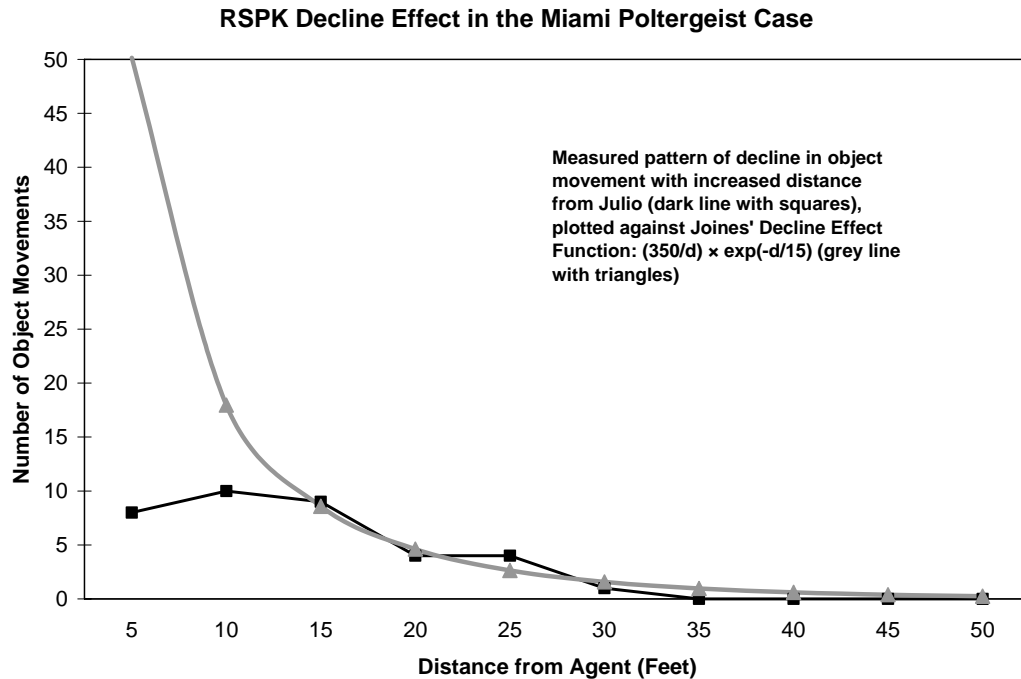


Figure 1. Plot of Joines' decline function against the pattern of object movements with distance from Julio observed in the Miami poltergeist case. Reproduced from data and equations given in Roll and Joines (2001).

The similarity between the patterns produced by the inverse square and exponential decay functions, and the measured pattern of object movements is one finding that suggests there is an energetic aspect to RSPK that may be akin to known physical principles.

Another finding is a possible relationship between RSPK and the activity of the Earth's magnetic field. Preliminary surveys in which the occurrence of RSPK was compared with recorded magnetic indices indicate that RSPK tends to coincide with increases in geomagnetic activity (Gearhart & Persinger, 1986; Roll & Gearhart, 1974; Wilkinson & Gauld, 1993, pp. 303 – 306). In addition, in at least one case – the Columbus case involving Tina Resch – the poltergeist disturbances began in the midst of a geomagnetic storm (Roll & Storey, 2004, p. 212).

Such increases in geomagnetic activity often result from disturbances produced by variations in the solar wind (due to solar flares associated with sunspots, mass coronal ejections, and similar stellar phenomena) that interact with the magnetosphere surrounding the Earth (Burch, 2001; Lyon, 2000). How exactly these increases might relate to RSPK is still unclear, although other findings may offer clues. We noted previously that RSPK seems to have a neurological aspect involving CNS disturbances similar to epilepsy. On this basis, if RSPK and epilepsy share some similar (if not some of the same) processes, then perhaps they can both be affected by similar external factors. For instance, some studies have found that artificial exposure to above-average magnetic fields akin to those produced during geomagnetic disturbances may induce seizures in rats (Michon & Persinger, 1997; Persinger, 1996), and that seizing in rats and humans tends to be more common during increases in geomagnetic activity (Keshavan et al. 1981; Rajaram & Mitra, 1981; Spottiswoode et al., 1993). This remains to be speculation at the moment, and perhaps further study will further whether it is plausible or not.

8. Conclusion

While this primer was not meant to be a complete and comprehensive overview, we have covered a lot of ground in the way of conveniently summarizing the current state of parapsychological research on poltergeist phenomena. This primer has presented a bulk of reasons why most parapsychologists have come to view poltergeists as person-oriented phenomena, rather than spirit-oriented phenomena.

So what could paranormal enthusiasts possibly take away from all this may be useful in their own field investigations? On the basis of our overview, we offer a few tips:

1.) With its myth and folklore dispelled, poltergeists should seem less mysterious than initially thought, although a lot of questions about its nature remain to be answered. Paranormal enthusiasts can be quite helpful in the effort to unravel these questions. We recommend that, in coming across a suspected poltergeist case, investigators pay close attention to the characteristics of the case and carefully document all details. Among these, investigators should note whether there are any notable patterns in the phenomena (e.g., Do they seem to occur when a specific person is present? Do they focus on particular objects or places?).

2.) If possible, investigators should take measurements relating to the movement of objects. Among these, investigators should try and estimate: the distance that an object moved from its original location, and the distance between the suspected agent and the object before it moved. In addition, plotting the path of the object movements on a floor plan may reveal other patterns with regards to area focusing. Measurements such as these can be helpful in further exploring the patterns that seem to be associated with the energetic aspect of RSPK (Section 7).

3.) We recommend that paranormal enthusiasts pay careful attention to the psychological situation of the witnesses involved in the case, being respectful of their needs and wishes. Because poltergeist experiences are spontaneous in nature and seem out of the ordinary, they can be disorienting, troubling, or even frightening to witnesses. In addition, as noted in Section 4, the suspected agent in the case may be facing an adverse psychological situation that is distressing. In these situations, it is suggested that investigators either have a mental health professional accompany them during the investigation of the case, or be able to refer the witnesses to an appropriate professional should it seem necessary to do so. Particularly in poltergeist cases, this may be an action that is necessary in order to help the witnesses and eventually bring a satisfactory resolution to the case.

As with other primers, we conclude with more questions to explore than answers, as there is still much to be learned about the nature of poltergeist experiences. We hope that the continued effort of parapsychologists and paranormal enthusiasts will shed more light on this matter, and reveal more about the relationship between mind and matter.

Notes

1.) We should note a limitation in these three surveys, in that they are not fully independent of one another. For instance, Roll and Persinger (1998) state that the IGPP case collection contains six cases that are also found in the PRF collection. Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, they note that the case collection compiled by Gauld and Cornell (1979) is comprised of 115 cases that came from the same source as the PRF collection. In addition, the

findings from the Gault-Cornell collection may be confounded by the fact that this collection also includes haunt cases mixed with poltergeist cases, and distinguishing between the two is not always a clear-cut issue.

2.) Incidentally, this was the same lawyer whose law firm was disturbed by the Rosenheim poltergeist (Case Study #2 in Section 2). The poltergeist disturbances in his office had spurred the lawyer's interest in these phenomena, which led him to look into the case from which this example is drawn.

3.) The Miami case also seems to show some degree of object focusing, in that beer mugs were a particular type of object in the warehouse that frequently fell and broke.

4.) In some instances, there have been poltergeist cases where the phenomena seemed to center around two people. However, this has been seen in only a few PRF cases, and in only 17% of the IGPP cases, so it is not very common. Still, the investigator should be aware of the possibility of encountering this kind of case.

5.) Incidentally, the Indianapolis case is one in which there appeared to be two people at the center of the poltergeist disturbances (Note 4). In this case, it was the woman and her 60-year-old mother, who also lived in the house. Thus, this case serves as a good example of a "double agent" poltergeist case.

6.) The reader might notice that, when combined, the male and female percentages for the Gault-Cornell collection do not add up to 100%. The likely reason for this is the inclusion of haunt cases in their collection (see Note 1), which has constrained the values associated with agents.

7.) In other words, the person participating in the test aims for the "one" face on each of the two dice in the first trial, then aims for the "two" face in the second trial, the "three" face in the third trial, and so on, all the way around the die.

8.) For example, if one or both of the dice had some type of imperfection that caused them to be biased toward rolling a six more often than any other number, then this would add to the number of successful rolls when the six face is the PK target, but it will also subtract from the number of successful rolls when one of the other number faces is the target.

9.) In the 1990s, the television show *Unsolved Mysteries* had aired a segment on the Tina Resch case that is quite close to the facts, despite some exaggeration in the reenactments. A two-part streaming video clip of this segment can be found on YouTube – Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBmmucKI3g0>, Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWxKZP3qfLY>. Although the quality of the clip is a bit blurry, the segment is complete and still reasonably sharp for viewing.

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