

TELEPATHIC TELEPHONE CALLS: TWO SURVEYS

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ABSTRACT

Many people claim to have thought about a particular person who then calls them on the telephone. Through informal surveys I have found that seemingly telepathic telephone calls are common. Two telephone surveys were carried out in London and Bury to investigate the frequency of these experiences in a random sample of the population. In both surveys, half the respondents said they had felt that someone was about to telephone them just before they did. In Bury, 45 per cent of the respondents said they had thought about a person they had not seen for a while who then telephoned the same day, and two thirds of the Bury respondents said they had telephoned people who said they were just thinking about telephoning them. In Bury, 37 per cent of respondents who said they had know in advance who was calling without any possible clue said this happened often. In both surveys significantly more women than men gave positive responses, and in both surveys more pet owners than people without pets gave positive responses. In London significantly more people claimed to have anticipated telephone calls that to have had psychic experiences. Telepathic telephone calls may be one of the commonest kinds of psychic experience in the modern world, and I suggest ways in which they can be investigated empirically.

INTRODUCTION

Many people have had the experience of thinking about a particular person who soon afterwards calls on the telephone. Of course, if a person is expected to call at a particular time, no one thinks this strange. But sometimes this happens when the person was not expected to call, suggesting a telepathic influence.

In several lectures and seminars in the last few years, I have described this phenomenon briefly, and then asked those who have experienced it to raise their hands. Usually between 80 and 95 per cent of the people present do so. I have found a similar pattern of response in Britain, Germany, Holland, Switzerland and the United States.

Surprisingly, this well-known phenomenon seems to have been neglected by psychical researchers and parapsychologists. As a first step towards its investigation, it is important to know more about its natural history, and to have a better idea about its frequency than informal surveys can reveal. To obtain a more objective picture, I have conducted two random surveys to find out how many people claim to have had such experiences. One survey was in North London and the other in Bury, Greater Manchester.

I conclude by discussing ways in which this phenomenon can be investigated empirically.

METHODS

The surveys were carried out by telephone and involved calling a sample of households picked at random from local telephone directories as described by Sheldrake and Smart (1997).

London

The survey in North London was carried out between November 1996 and September 1997 by my assistants Catherine Lawlor and Jane Turney, and was part of a larger survey about the perceptiveness of pets (Sheldrake, Lawlor and Turney, 1998). In this survey 387 people were interviewed, 180 pet owners and 207 people without pets. The interviewers introduced themselves as follows: "My name is Cathy/Jane. I'm doing research on the unexplained powers of animal and would like to ask you a few questions." Approximately 75% of the people contacted agreed to take part in the survey. The pet owners were asked a series of seven questions about their pets, and the people without pets were asked one question about past pets. Then all respondents were asked:

1. "How frequently have you yourself had what you would consider to be a psychic experience?" (never/sometimes/frequently).
2. "Have you ever felt that someone was going to telephone you just before they did?" (agree/disagree/don't know)

Bury

Bury is an industrial town (pop. 182,000) near Manchester. The survey in Bury was carried out in June and July 1997 by my

research assistant Pamela Smart, who lives in the nearby town of Ramsbottom. The households to be telephoned were selected at random from the local telephone directory (Northwest Manchester). Pamela Smart introduced herself as follows: "Hello, my name is Pam Smart from Ramsbottom and I'm doing some scientific research about telephone calls. I'm not selling anything. Could you give me your personal opinion about the following questions?" About 70% of the people contacted agreed to take part. Two hundred people were interviewed and asked the following questions:

1. "Have you ever telephoned someone who said they were just thinking about telephoning you?" (yes/no/not sure)
If yes: "How often has this happened?" (often/sometimes/once)
2. "Have you ever heard the telephone ring or picked up the telephone and known who was on the other end without any possible cue, before they have spoken?" (yes/no/not sure).
If yes: "How often has this happened?" (often/sometimes/once).
3. "Have you ever had a thought about a person you haven't seen for a while, who has then telephoned you the same day?" (yes/no/not sure).
If yes: "How often has this happened?" (often/sometimes/once)
4. "Approximately how many telephone calls do you receive a day?" (less than 5 / 5 to 10 / more than 10)
5. "Apart from experiences like this with telephone calls, have you had any other experiences that seem to involve telepathy?" (yes/no/not sure).
If yes: "How often has this happened?" (often/sometimes/once)
6. "Do you have a pet?" (yes/no)

In both surveys the name, address and telephone number of the respondent were recorded, and their sex noted. (However in the London survey, in 12 out of 387 cases, the respondents gave only their initials rather than forenames and their sex was not recorded. This is why in the London data in Table 1 the total number of men and women is only 375.)

For comparing the statistical significance of differences between the responses from men and women, 2x2 contingency tables and the chi-squared test were used (Campbell, 1989).

RESULTS

The London survey

In the London survey, 51% of the respondents said they had felt that someone was going to telephone just before they did so (Table 1). There was a striking difference between men and women, with 56% of women giving a positive response and 41% of men. This difference was significant ($p < 0.0002$).

When the same respondents were asked if they had had psychic experiences, only 38% gave positive responses. Thus significantly fewer ($p < 0.0004$) people said they had had psychical experiences than had felt when someone was about to telephone.

In relation to psychical experience there was again a significant ($p < 0.02$) difference between women and men, with 41% of women saying they had had a psychical experience compared with only 30% of men.

Of the people surveyed, 47% kept pets. Pet owners and people without pets showed a similar pattern of response, though there was a slight but non-significant tendency for pet owners to give a higher proportion of positive answers: 53% of pet owners as opposed to 49% of people without pets said they anticipated someone telephoning, and 39% and 38% respectively said they had had psychical experiences.

The Bury survey Nearly two thirds of the respondents in Bury said they had had the experience of telephoning someone who said they were just thinking about telephoning them (Table 2). Women gave a significantly ($p < 0.02$) higher percentage of positive responses (71%) than men (53%), and more women than men said they had such experiences frequently.

Nearly half the respondents (49%) said that when answering the telephone they knew who was on the other end without any possible cue, and 47% said they had thought about a person they hadn't seen for a while who then telephoned them. In response to both these questions women gave more positive responses than men (Table 2), but these differences were not significant at the $p = 0.05$ level.

Over a third (37%) of those who said they knew who was telephoning before they had spoken had this experience frequently; fewer (14%) had frequent experiences of thinking about someone they hadn't seen for a while who then telephoned. There was little or no difference between men and women in this respect.

Two thirds of the people questioned said they usually received less than five telephone calls a day. Only 7% of the respondents had more than 10 calls a day.

In response to the question about other experiences that seem to involve telepathy, 47% said they had had such experiences (Table 2). A higher proportion of women than men gave positive answers (52% and 38% respectively), and slightly more women than men said these experiences occurred often. These differences were not significant at the $p=0.05$ level.

Previous random surveys of psychic experience in Britain gave rather higher figures than these surveys in Bury and London: 64% (Haraldsson, 1985) and 54% (Gaynard, 1992). A recent survey in Ramsbottom, near Bury, also gave an overall figure of 54% (Sheldrake and Smart, 1997).

In Bury, 42% of people questioned kept pets, and pet owners gave more positive answers than people without pets to all the questions about the anticipation of telephone calls and other telepathic experiences: for Question 1, 71% and 62% respectively; Question 2, 56% and 46%; Question 3, 50% and 40%; Question 5, 55% and 42%. However none of these differences were statistically significant at the $p=0.05$ level.

DISCUSSION

The incidence of seemingly telepathic telephone calls

Half the people questioned in London and in Bury said they had felt in advance when someone was telephoning them, and 45% of the respondents in Bury said that they had thought about someone they had not seen for a while who then telephoned them.

The positive responses in these formal surveys are considerably lower than the 80% to 95% figures I have repeatedly found in informal surveys of people at lectures and seminars. Why should there be such a large difference? One possibility is that my informal surveys gave an overestimate because of the non-random nature of the sample and because a positive bias introduced by the way in which I asked the question. Another possibility is that the random survey produces an underestimate because some people may be reluctant to admit to such personal experiences to a stranger on the telephone. Both these possibilities could have biased the results; if so, improved surveying methods would probably give results intermediate between my formal and informal surveys.

Although in the Bury survey only half of the respondents said they themselves had anticipated particular people calling, two thirds said that they had called someone who said they were just thinking about telephoning them; 40% said this happened often. The difference between these patterns of response was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Why should this be so? There are several possible reasons, which are not mutually exclusive. First, people may feel less inhibited about ascribing such anticipations to others than in admitting to their own experience. Second, even if a given person never anticipates telephone calls, when he or she telephones a range of other people, some of them may well anticipate the telephone call and say so, and hence more people may know others who anticipate their calls than anticipate calls themselves. Third, people who feel guilty about not calling the individual who is ringing them may try to excuse themselves by saying that they were just about to call. Only further research can reveal the relative importance of these possible explanations.

Psychic experiences and the anticipation of telephone calls

In the survey in London, significantly fewer people (38%) claimed to have had psychical experiences than to have anticipated telephone calls (51%). This implies that the anticipation of telephone calls was not regarded as a psychic experience by some respondents, either because they thought this anticipation had a more straightforward explanation, or because they took it for granted and had not considered the possibility that it might be telepathic.

In a survey in California, significantly more pet owners than non-owners claimed to have had psychic experiences (Brown and Sheldrake, 1998). A similar pattern (although statistically non-significant) was found in the present surveys. I do not know whether keeping pets tends to make people more open to psychical experiences, or whether people open to such experiences are more likely to keep pets.

Is the anticipation of telephone calls really telepathic?

There is no need to invoke telepathy if a person anticipates a telephone call from someone who rings at an expected time, or someone who is practically the only person who ever makes calls to the household. Probably no one would consider these kinds of anticipation remarkable. More impressive are those cases when someone starts thinking about a particular person

for no apparent reason shortly before that person rings. Here a telepathic influence seems more likely.

Before calling someone on the telephone, it is necessary to think about that person, perhaps to look up their number and then to dial it. Throughout this process, the caller's intention is focussed on the individual being called, and this concentration of intention might create favourable conditions for telepathy.

Non-human animals may also respond telepathically to telephone calls. Some cat and dog owners claim that their animals react with excitement to calls from people they are attached to, even at non-routine times, from hundreds of miles away. Some of these animals respond when the telephone begins to ring: others do so shortly beforehand. They ignore calls from other people (Sheldrake, 1999).

But although the responses of some people and domestic animals to telephone calls may appear to be telepathic, could they be explained in more mundane way? There are at least two alternative hypotheses:

First, someone may expect a call from a particular person around a particular time without being conscious of this expectation.

Second, an illusion of telepathy could be created by a combination of chance coincidence and selective memory. Someone may often think about a particular person or have a hunch that they are about to call. On those occasions that the person does in fact call, this feeling would be attributed to telepathy, while hunches not followed by calls would be forgotten.

Proposals for empirical investigation

As far as I know, no one has attempted to test these hypotheses empirically. However they could be investigated relatively simply and inexpensively. I suggest a two-stage research programme:

1. People who say they often anticipate calls can be encouraged to keep log-books, in which they record any intuitions they may have about the identity of the caller before they answer the telephone. This log book should be kept by the telephone, and they should record this name before answering. (Of course, any electronic device which displays the number of the incoming call should be switched off or covered up.) After the call, they note down the date and time, and record who the caller was, whether the intuition was correct or not, and also whether the call was expected or not. In addition, in cases where they recorded no guess in advance, they should also note down the date, time and name of callers.
From this record it can be worked out how often they are right or wrong, if there is any routine pattern in the timing of the calls, and whether their success rate is higher with some people than others. Expected calls will be excluded from this analysis.
From the analysis of such log books, it should be possible to test the chance coincidence/selective memory hypothesis. These records would also shed light on the natural history of the phenomenon, and permit the identification of any people whose calls are correctly anticipated at statistically significant levels. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people are more likely respond to calls from those to whom they have strong emotional bonds.
2. Having identified a person, A, whose calls B often anticipates, a simple experiment is possible. A is requested to call B at randomly-selected times. These requests could be made by a third person, who would call A at randomly-selected times and ask A to call B five minutes later. Against a background of calls from other people to whom B does not respond, does B correctly predict A's calls to a statistically significant extent? In this way the chance coincidence/selective memory and unconscious expectation hypotheses could be tested. If they are refuted by the data, this result would support the telepathic hypothesis.

The telepathic anticipation of telephone calls would provide excellent opportunities for further research. For example, experiments could be designed to find out whether or not this effect declines with distance, and the effects of intention could be explored.

Telephone telepathy is either a widespread illusion, or one of the commonest form of psychical experience in the modern world. It would be good to know more about it.

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Table 1

Responses in the survey in North London about people's own psychic experience and their anticipation of telephone calls from particular people.

1 How frequently have you yourself had what you would consider to be a psychic experience?

	Numbers (and percentages) of people			
	Total	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
All respondents	387	23 (6%)	125 (32%)	239 (62%)
Men	136	2 (1%)	38 (29%)	95 (70%)
Women	239	20 (8%)	80 (33%)	130 (58%)

2 Have you ever felt that someone was going to telephone you just before they did?

	Numbers (and percentages) of people			
	Total	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
All respondents	387	197 (51%)	169 (44%)	21 (5%)
Men	136	56 (41%)	73 (54%)	7 (5%)
Women	239	135 (56%)	91 (38%)	13 (6%)

Table 2

Survey of telepathic telephone calls in Bury, Lancashire. There were 200 respondents in all, 68 men and 132 women.

1 Have you ever telephoned someone who said they were just thinking about telephoning you?

	Numbers (and percentages) of people		
	Yes	No	Not sure
All respondents	130 (65%)	68 (34%)	2 (1%)
Men	36 (53%)	31 (46%)	1 (1%)
Women	94 (71%)	37 (28%)	1 (1%)

1 If yes, how often has this happened?

	Often	Sometimes	Once
All saying yes	52 (40%)	67 (52%)	10 (8%)
Men	11 (31%)	22 (61%)	3 (8%)
Women	41 (44%)	45 (48%)	7 (8%)

(Note: one woman respondent did not give extra details)

2 Have you ever heard the telephone ring or picked up the telephone and known who was on the other end without any possible cue, before they have spoken?

Numbers (and percentages) of people

	Yes	No	Not sure
All respondents	97 (49%)	101 (51%)	2 (1%)
Men	29 (43%)	39 (57%)	0 (0%)
Women	68 (52%)	62 (47%)	2 (2%)

If yes, how often has this happened?

	Often	Sometimes	Once
All saying yes	36 (37%)	54 (56%)	7 (7%)
Men	12 (41%)	16 (55%)	1 (3%)
Women	24 (35%)	38 (56%)	6 (9%)

3 Have you ever had a thought about a person you haven't seen for a while, who has then telephoned you the same day?

Numbers (and percentages) of people

	Yes	No	Not sure
All respondents	89 (45%)	100 (50%)	11 (6%)
Men	24 (35%)	38 (56%)	6 (9%)
Women	65 (49%)	62 (47%)	5 (4%)

If yes, how often has this happened?

	Often	Sometimes	Once
All saying yes	12 (14%)	53 (60%)	24 (27%)
Men	3 (13%)	14 (58%)	7 (29%)
Women	9 (14%)	39 (60%)	17 (26%)

4 Approximately how many telephone calls do you receive a day?

	< 5	5 - 10	> 10
All respondents	133 (67%)	53 (27%)	13 (7%)

(*Note*) one respondent did not answer this question)/p>

5 Apart from experiences like this with telephone calls, have you had any other experiences that seem to involve telepathy?

	Numbers (and percentages) of people		
	Yes	No	Not sure
	Yes	No	Not sure
All respondents	94 (47%)	97 (49%)	9 (5%)
Men	26 (38%)	40 (59%)	2 (3%)
Women	68 (52%)	57 (43%)	7 (5%)

If yes, how often has this happened?

	Often	Sometimes	Once
All saying yes	27 (29%)	60 (64%)	7 (7%)
Men	7 (27%)	17 (65%)	2 (8%)
Women	20 (30%)	43 (63%)	5 (7%)