

THE ANTICIPATION OF TELEPHONE CALLS: A SURVEY IN CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

200 randomly-selected people were surveyed in Santa Cruz County, California to investigate the frequency and nature of anticipations of telephone calls. 78% of the people surveyed said that they have had the experience of telephoning someone who said that they were just thinking about telephoning them. 47% of the respondents said that they had had the experience of knowing who was calling them when the phone rang without any possible cue. 68% of those surveyed said that they had thought about a person that they haven't seen for a while, who had then telephoned them that same day. A higher proportion of women than men gave positive answers to these questions. These results are in general agreement with two previous surveys in England, although there were several significant differences, which we discuss. These surveys reveal that seemingly telepathic experiences in connection with telephone calls are remarkably common. We suggest ways that this phenomenon can be investigated empirically.

It is not uncommon for people to telephone friends or relations who say that they were just thinking of calling them. Likewise, many people have had the experience of thinking of a particular person, with whom they have not spoken to for a while, who then calls them on the telephone later the same day. Some domestic animals, notably dogs and cats, also seem to anticipate telephone calls from particular people, their owners, while ignoring calls from other people (Sheldrake, 1999).

Some of these experiences might be explicable in terms of chance coincidence; but others might depend on telepathy, which is what many people who have had these experiences believe. Surprisingly, this well-known phenomenon has been almost completely neglected by psychical researchers and parapsychologists.

To find out how common this type of experience is we conducted a telephone survey of randomly selected households in Santa Cruz County, California. Two previous telephone surveys in England, one in London and the other in Greater Manchester, indicated that this type of experience occurs quite frequently (Sheldrake, 2000). In both surveys, more than half the respondents said they had felt that someone was about to telephone them just before they did so. We wanted to find out if this phenomenon was similarly common in an American population. We also asked respondents if they had had other kinds of seemingly telepathic experiences.

In a previous survey in Santa Cruz about perceptive pets, we found that significantly more pet owners said they had had a psychical experience than people without pets (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998). Also in the English surveys, there was a tendency for more pet owners to say they had anticipated telephone calls than people without pets (Sheldrake, 2000). To find out whether these observations were repeatable, in this survey we also asked people whether or not they had a pet

We conclude by discussing ways in which seemingly telepathic telephone calls can be investigated empirically.

Method

Data were collected by means of telephone interviews conducted by David Brown and Sherry Hall (D.B. and S.H.), following a standard questionnaire format. D.B. conducted 173 of these interviews and S.H. 27. The pattern of responses obtained by the two interviewers was very similar, and there were no statistically significant differences between them.

The households surveyed were in and around Santa Cruz (population 52,700) in north-west California. Santa Cruz was chosen because it is where D.B. lives, and calling within the local area helped to minimize the cost of the study. Also, we have already surveyed this area for another study (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998) regarding the unexplained powers of animals, and we are building up a database from this region about people's experiences of unexplained phenomena.

A random sample of households was selected from the Pacific Bell Santa Cruz County 1999 telephone directory (area code 831), using an electronic random number generator to determine the page and column number, as well as its position on the page (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998).

D.B. and S.H. introduced themselves as follows: "Hello, my name is David Brown/Sherry Hall. I'm conducting a very brief telephone survey. I was wondering if you had around two minutes to answer a few quick questions? I am not selling anything. The survey is about telephone calls." Approximately 20% of the people reached by phone agreed to participate in the survey. This relatively low participation rate was similar to that in a previous telephone survey in the same area (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998) and may reflect a reluctance of people there to be bothered with such surveys. There was no mention of anything telepathic or psychic at this stage, so the respondents' agreement to take part could not have been influenced by any bias for or against psychic phenomena.

When a cooperative subject was found, D.B. or S.H. then asked a series of questions and recorded the answers on a standard form as follows:

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. Has this ever happened when you were using a mobile phone?

Yes/No/Not Sure

4. 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

5. Approximately how many telephone calls do you receive a day?

Less than 5/ 5 to 10/ More than 10

6. 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

7. Do you have a pet?

Yes/No

The name, address and telephone number of each respondent were recorded, and their sex noted.

For the statistical comparisons, 2x2 contingency tables were used (Campbell, 1989).

Results

Two hundred people participated in this survey in Santa Cruz, 78 men and 122 women.

More than three quarters (78%) of the people surveyed said that they have had the experience of telephoning someone who said they were just thinking about telephoning them (Table 1). This was the highest positive response in the survey. About a quarter of these people said they had this experience often, but most said it happened "sometimes".

TABLE I

SURVEY RESULTS OF TELEPATHIC TELEPHONE CALLS IN SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA

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

Numbers (and percentages) of respondents

	Yes	No	Not sure
All respondents	155 (78%)	31 (16%)	14 (7%)
Men	57 (73%)	15 (19%)	6 (8%)
Women	98 (80%)	16 (13%)	8 (7%)

If yes, how often has this happened?

	Often	Sometimes	Once
All respondents	35 (23%)	113 (73%)	7 (5%)
Men	8 (14%)	45 (79%)	4 (7%)
Women	27 (28%)	68 (70%)	3 (3%)

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

	Numbers (and percentages) of respondents		
	Yes	No	Not Sure
All respondents	93 (47%)	80 (40%)	27 (14%)
Men	34 (44%)	35 (45%)	9 (12%)
Women	59 (48%)	45 (37%)	18 (15%)

If yes, how often has this happened?

	Often	Sometimes	Once
All respondents	35 (37%)	56 (60%)	2 (2%)
Men	14 (40%)	18 (53%)	2 (2%)
Women	21 (36%)	38 (64%)	0 (0%)

Note There were 200 respondents in all, 78 men and 122 women

3. Has this ever happened when you were using a mobile phone?

	Numbers (and percentages) of respondents		
	Yes	No	Not sure
All respondents	15 (8%)	176 (88%)	9 (5%)
Men	7 (9%)	67 (86%)	4 (5%)
Women	8 (7%)	109 (89%)	5 (4%)

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

	Numbers (and percentages) of respondents		
	Yes	No	Not sure
All respondents	125 (63%)	43 (22%)	32 (16%)
Men	46 (59%)	21 (27%)	11 (14%)
Women	79 (65%)	22 (18%)	21 (17%)

If yes, how often has this happened?

	Often	Sometimes	Once
All respondents	19 (15%)	97 (78%)	9 (7%)
Men	4 (9%)	40 (89%)	2 (4%)
Women	15 (19%)	57 (72%)	7 (9%)

5. Approximately how many telephone calls do you receive a day?

	Numbers (and percentages) of respondents		
	<5	5-10	>10
All respondents	98 (49%)	64 (32%)	38 (19%)
Men	37 (47%)	20 (26%)	21 (27%)
Women	61 (50%)	44 (36%)	17 (14%)

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

	Numbers (and percentages) of respondents		
All respondents	90 (45%)	71 (36%)	39 (20%)
Men	31 (40%)	31 (40%)	16 (20%)
Women	59 (48%)	40 (33%)	23 (19%)

If yes, how often has this happened?

	Often	Sometimes	Once
All respondents	20 (22%)	67 (74%)	3 (3%)

Men	5 (16%)	25 (81%)	1 (3%)
Women	15 (25%)	42 (71%)	2 (3%)

When asked about their own responses, 47% of the respondents said they had known who was calling them when the telephone rang without any possible clue, and 37% of these people said this happened often. This question focused attention on the respondents' intuitions about who was calling them while the telephone was actually ringing, or while they were picking it up to answer it. But when asked if they had thought about a person they had not seen for a while who then telephoned the same day, 63% gave a positive answer. Most of these people said it happened only sometimes, but 15% said it happened often (Table 1).

A minority of the respondents (8%) said they had known who was calling them when the phone rang when they were using a mobile phone. However, many of the people surveyed did not have mobile phones.

On average, 49% of the respondents said they received fewer than 5 telephone calls a day, 32% received between 5 and 10 telephone calls a day, and 19% received more than 10 (Table 1). People who received more than 10 calls a day gave a slightly higher proportion of positive answers to questions 2 and 4 than those who received fewer calls, but these differences were not significant statistically.

In addition to their intuitions about telephone calls, 45% of the respondents said that they had had other experiences that seemed to involve telepathy, and just under a quarter of these people (22%) said that their seemingly telepathic experiences happened often.

Most people (68%) who said they had had other seemingly telepathic experiences gave a positive answer to question 2, in striking contrast to those who said they had not had other seemingly telepathic experiences (27%) or were not sure (33%). This difference in the positive response to question 2 between those who said they had had other telepathic experiences and those who said they had not or were not sure was very significant statistically ($p = 5 \times 10^{-6}$). This is not surprising, and simply means that most people who seemingly experienced telepathy in connection with telephone calls also did so in other contexts, and most of those who were not seemingly telepathic in relation to calls were not telepathic in other contexts. What is more surprising is that about a third of those who experienced telepathy in other contexts did not seem to do so in relation to the telephone calls. Conversely more than a quarter of the people who said they had had no other kinds of telepathic experience were seemingly telepathic in relation to telephone calls.

Similarly there were more positive answers to question 4 ("Have you ever had a thought about a person you haven't seen for a while who has then telephoned you the same day?") from those who said they had had other kinds of telepathic experiences (77%) than from those who said they had not (41%) or were not sure (69%). The difference between those who said they had had other telepathic experiences and those who said they had not or were not sure was significant statistically ($p = .0002$).

Differences between women and men

A higher proportion of women than men said that they had known who was calling them when the telephone rang (48% as opposed to 44%), that they had thought about a person they had not seen for a while who then telephoned the same day (65% as opposed to 59%), that they had called someone who said they were just thinking about calling them (80% as opposed to 73%), and that they had had other experiences that seemed to involve telepathy (48% as opposed to 40%). A higher proportion of women than men also said they had had such experiences often, except in the case of Question 2 (Table 1). However, none of these differences between women and men were statistically significant at the $p = .05$ level.

About half the men and women surveyed received less than 5 calls per day, but a higher proportion of men than women received more than 10 calls per day (Table 1, Question 5).

Pet ownership

Sixty nine per cent of the respondents owned pets. There was little or no difference between the responses of pet owners and people without pets to the various questions. To question 1, 77% of the pet owners and 79% of the non-pet-owners, said that they had had the experience of telephoning someone who said he or she was just thinking about telephoning them. 47% of the pet owners and 45% of the non-pet-owners said that they knew who was calling them when the phone rang without any possible cue. The largest difference between people with and without pets was in the response to Question 4. More pet owners (65%) than non-pet owners (57%) said that they had thought about a person that they haven't seen for a while, who had then telephoned them that same day. However, this difference was not statistically significant at the $p = .05$ level.

The proportion of people who said that they had had other seemingly telepathic experiences was 45% both for pet owners and for people without pets.

Discussion

Comparison with other surveys

These results are directly comparable with those of a recent survey in Bury, Greater Manchester, England (Sheldrake, 2000). People in Bury were asked the same questions as people in Santa Cruz (except for the question about mobile phones, not asked in Bury). The surveys in both places followed the same procedures and the same number of people was surveyed. The main difference between the surveys themselves was that a higher proportion of people contacted at random agreed to take part in the survey in Bury, 70% as opposed to 20% in Santa Cruz.

For some questions, the responses were very similar in both places: for Question 2, 47% in Bury and 49% in Santa Cruz answered yes, and to Question 5, 47% in Bury and 45% in Santa Cruz answered yes. But there were also some significant differences. Santa Cruz had a higher percentage of people who said that they had telephoned someone who said they were just thinking about telephoning them: 78% in

Santa Cruz, compared with 65% in Bury ($p < 0.02$). The biggest difference was in response to Question 3, concerning thinking about someone who later called: 63% said yes in Santa Cruz as opposed to 45% in Bury ($p < 0.00005$). We do not know the reasons for these significantly higher percentages of positive responses in Santa Cruz. They may reflect both the cultural differences between Santa Cruz, with its liberal Californian culture, and the more conservative culture of Bury, and also demographic differences: Santa Cruz as a beach and college town has an unusually youthful population.

In the survey in London, people were asked only one question about telephone calls: "Have you ever felt that someone was going to telephone you just before they did?" to which 51% said yes.

In London, significantly more women than men gave a positive response to this question. In Bury more women than men gave positive responses to the other questions about telephone calls and about other kinds of telepathic experience, but as in Santa Cruz these differences were not large enough to reach statistical significance at the $p = 0.05$ level.

In both London and Bury, pet owners gave a higher percentage of positive answers than people without pets to all the questions about the anticipation of telephone calls and other telepathic experiences, but these differences were not statistically significant. In Santa Cruz, there was little difference between people with and without pets. This finding contrasts with a previous survey we carried out in Santa Cruz in which significantly more pet owners than people without pets said they had had psychic experiences themselves (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998). We do not know why these surveys have given such different results in this respect, and this question could only be resolved by more extensive surveys involving larger samples.

In spite of these various differences, the English surveys and the present one agreed in showing that the anticipation of telephone calls from particular people is common, and in all three surveys there was a tendency for women to give more positive answers than men.

In this survey 45% of the respondents said they had had experiences that seemed to involve telepathy apart from any seemingly telepathic experiences with telephone calls. For comparison, in a review of national surveys, Haraldsson (1983) quoted a figure of 58% for the USA, and an average of 32% in Western Europe claiming personal experience of telepathy. In a nationwide Gallup survey of American adults conducted in 1990, a smaller proportion, 25% said they had had telepathic experiences, but in the same survey 75% said they had had at least one kind of paranormal experience (Gallup & Newport, 1991). Palmer (1979) reported that 38% of the citizens he surveyed in Virginia and 39% of the students said they had had an experience of "waking ESP". And in our previous survey in Santa Cruz (Brown & Sheldrake, 1998), 56% of the respondents said they had had a psychic experience at some point in their lives. Thus the figures in the present survey are in same general range as those in previous reports.

Does the anticipation of telephone calls involve telepathy?

If telepathy really exists, then telephone calls would provide a good way of revealing it. Before calling someone on the telephone, it is necessary to think about them and then dial their number. The caller's intention is focused on the individual being called, and this concentration of intention might create favorable conditions for telepathy. Telepathy could also work the other way round. If A thinks about B, by telepathy B might start thinking about A and then call A, who might then say, "I was just thinking about you."

However, although most people say they have known before answering the phone who was calling them, or have received calls from people they had just been thinking about, this does not necessarily imply a form of telepathic communication, for at least four reasons.

First, some people may merely pretend to have been thinking about someone before they call, for example because they feel guilty about not having called them when they should have done. Second, some people may have given misleadingly positive responses to our questions, perhaps out of a desire to please the interviewers. Third, consciously or unconsciously people may have had reason to expect calls from particular people for reasons that have nothing to do with telepathy, for example because they usually call on a particular day, or at a particular time. Fourth, people may frequently think about people who do not subsequently call, and simply forget all the occasions they were wrong; the seemingly telepathic anticipation of telephone calls may be an illusion that arises through a combination of chance coincidence and selective memory.

These are all reasonable possibilities, but at present there is no evidence either for or against them. They are, however, not quite as plausible as they might at first seem.

Although some people may have given misleadingly positive responses in our survey, some may also have given misleadingly negative responses out of shyness or an unwillingness to admit to a stranger on the telephone that they had had experiences of a potentially controversial nature. In informal settings, the percentage of people who claim to have had seemingly telepathic anticipations of telephone calls is often as high as 80 to 90% (Sheldrake, 2000). So these formal surveys may well have given an underestimate rather than an overestimate of the frequency of the phenomenon.

Moreover, many people may be capable of distinguishing between calls that are expected for normal reasons and ones that seem to imply telepathy. And many may be quite capable of recognizing and remembering that they are sometimes wrong. People may not be as prone to illusion and self-deception as skeptics commonly suppose (Blackmore, 1997).

It cannot be assumed that people are wrong when they say they have had telepathic experiences, just as it cannot be assumed that they are right. The question can only be decided by empirical investigation.

The empirical investigation of seemingly telepathic telephone calls

There are at least two ways in which this phenomenon can be investigated empirically.

First, people who say they often anticipate calls can be encouraged to keep log books near to the telephone in which they record any intuitions they may have about the identity of the caller before they pick up the receiver. (Of course, any caller ID system should be switched off for the purpose of this research.) After the call, they note down the date and time, record who the caller was, indicate whether their guess was right or wrong, and say whether the call was expected or not. From such log books it can be worked out how often people are right or wrong, if the calls from particular people show any routine pattern, and if the success rate is higher with some people than others. Expected

calls would be excluded from this analysis. These log books would provide valuable data on the natural history of the phenomenon and also enable the selective memory hypothesis to be tested.

Second, experiments can be carried out in which callers are selected from a pool of potential callers at random, so that there is no normal means by which the subject could guess who is calling. For this purpose the subject needs to nominate a number of potential callers (say four), and times have to be chosen for experiments when the subject is by the telephone, not expecting other calls, and the potential callers are available to take part. Then, in a given experiment, one caller is selected at random from the pool of four, and the times at which they call are also selected at random. When the phone rings during the experimental period, the subject writes down before answering who she thinks the caller is. The calls are also tape-recorded to provide an objective record. By chance, 25% of the subjects' guesses will be correct. If scores are significantly above chance, this would imply a telepathic influence from the caller.

Telepathy in connection with telephone calls is either a widespread illusion, or one of the commonest forms of telepathic experience in the modern world. Simple empirical investigations could enable this question to be resolved, and open up a fertile new field for parapsychological research.

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