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Was There Something in the Cellar?

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In recent years, infrasound (normally defined as acoustic energy with a frequency below that of normal human hearing i.e., 20Hz) has increasingly been suggested, although primarily anecdotally, as a causal factor in some reports of personal paranormal experiences. The seminal studies conducted by the late Vic Tandy at Coventry University (Tandy & Lawrence 1998; Tandy 2000), suggested that a frequency of around 19Hz may be a key frequency in the production of a range of physiological effects. These include eyeball oscillation which could lead to a smearing of vision which has been suggested as the cause of people experiencing apparitions.

In May 2006, the authors were invited to conduct large scale field experiments within Mary King's Close, Edinburgh (Mary King's Close forms part of Edinburgh's Underground City and this well known tourist attraction has a documented record of alleged paranormal and supernatural incidents going back to the 16th Century). After consultation with Mary King's Close, an experiment was devised that was to expose members of the public to a significant level (>55 dB(SPL)) of infrasound at a frequency of 19Hz. The experiment was designed as double blind with neither the experimenters nor the participants (and tour guides) knowing whether the infrasound was applied or not. Members of the public signed up for tours giving informed consent of their participation in an experiment. Participants were taken on a standard guided tour of the Close (groups of approx. 20), unaware of the presence or absence of applied infrasound. At the end of the tour, the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire about their experiences during the tour.

The infrasound was applied using the ARIA system (Acoustic Research Infrasound Array), designed specifically to generate large amplitudes of infrasound at required frequencies between 12 and 25Hz at Sound Pressure levels (SPL) of up to 100dB(SPL). ARIA was positioned out of sight of participants in an area of the Close not accessed during the public tours. Measurements of infrasound levels at significant locations within Mary King's Close were measured prior to the participant's admittance using ARID (Acoustic Research Infrasound Detector) and found to be within the range 50-80dB (SPL). Ambient infrasound i.e., the infrasound normally present within the Close, was also measured, and found to be less than 40dB(SPL) throughout the Close at peak frequencies of less than 12Hz. This was caused by a mixture of local environmental noise i.e., road traffic, and an air conditioning unit located at the bottom end of the Close which supplied warmed air to the City Chambers building directly above the Close.

A total of 439 questionnaires were analysed, with 249 people experiencing both ambient and generated infrasound, and 190 people experiencing only ambient infrasound. From the preliminary results of the experiment, it would appear that a significant number of people reported experiences, regardless of the infrasound state (approximately one third of participants in the “on” condition, and in the “off” condition). However, in the “off” condition, people were more likely to report a single experience during their tour, whereas when infrasound at 19Hz was applied, significantly more people (36% compared to 16%) reported multiple (up to 4) experiences.

Of those reporting experiences, these included feelings of being watched, discomfort, anxiety and nausea. Perhaps the most interesting result was that when the infrasound was applied, 20% of people on the tour reported a perceived rise in temperature as opposed to just 5% of people reporting a perceived temperature rise when only ambient infrasound was present. No participant reported a drop in temperature, a phenomenon commonly associated with apparent paranormal experiences. However, out of 249 participants who received the generated 19Hz infrasound, only one reported any form of visual experience. This would suggest to the authors that the supposition put forward by Tandy in his two papers that 19Hz is a significant factor in the production of visual disturbances leading to apparitional experiences, is questionable. However, it is apparent from the results that whilst infrasound at around 19Hz is unlikely to create the visual field disturbances and thus apparitional encounters suggested by Tandy, it remains one of several possible causal factors in the production of a range of psychophysical experiences that may lead to a number of people reporting haunting experiences. This large scale experiment forms part of a larger series of field measurements of infrasound, partially funded by a generous grant from the SPR.

References

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Have the Lunatics Taken Over the (Haunted) Asylum?

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Investigation of spontaneous paranormal phenomena including ghosts, apparitions and poltergeists (paranormal investigating), has been undertaken since the late 19th century by private individuals and organisations. At various times throughout the past 120 years, the general public’s interest in the paranormal has waxed and waned. During the 1920’s and 30’s, Harry Price became a nationally recognised figure within the media as a “ghost hunter”. Later, in the 1960’s and 70’s, Peter Underwood and others continued to maintain and cultivate this public demand for ghost investigations.

In the 1990’s there was a large resurgence of interest in many aspects of paranormal and supernatural experiences, fuelled by media programs such as *Strange But True*. A defining factor in these programmes was the seriousness with which the subject was treated, and most programming at this time was fronted by respectable presenters (e.g., Michael Aspel). This coincided with the formation of a small but significant number of amateur paranormal investigation groups throughout the UK whose members wanted to experience for themselves a ghostly encounter.

In 2002 Living TV aired the first series of *Most Haunted*, which stated it was the first serious televised investigation of spontaneous cases. It has grown through 10 series to become a cult TV show with a large mass following and various spin-off or copycat paranormal shows. A quick scan of the internet reveals more than 500 websites and interactive forums dedicated to discussing the show and its claimed results. The influence of these types of shows on spontaneous case research is frightening.

In recent years, there has been an explosion in the number of ordinary members of the public participating in vigils and other ghost hunting activities. For example, in 1995 there were less than 100 amateur paranormal investigation groups - in 2006 a count using the internet revealed this number to now be in excess of 1200 such groups in the UK alone. Additionally, a number of organisations have been established selling ghost hunting experiences to members of the public. The internet itself must share some of the blame in this explosion - where once one had to study and undertake many years of field investigation to become an “expert” in the field, nowadays with the advent of forums, chatrooms and Wikipedia, everyone has become an instant “expert”. At the same time, modern technology has permitted amateur ghost hunters to avail themselves of high tech video recording equipment capable of use in the dark and also more esoteric equipment such as EMF meters and digital thermometers are now readily and cheaply available. For these reasons, ghost hunting has now become, for the first time in over 100 years, a “mass participation hobby”. Within Para.Science (formed in 1995), the first two authors have noticed that within the last 4-5 years there has been an unprecedented reduction in the number of spontaneous cases that are reported to us, and furthermore there has been a significant loss of suitable locations in which to conduct spontaneous case investigations. From 1995-2001 we received around 2-3 requests per week for assistance from home owners and factory owners reporting paranormal activity. From 2002 onwards this number has fallen month on month until the present at which time we receive around 1-2 such requests per year. Locations reputed to be haunted which previously could be visited for perhaps a few pounds, are now routinely charging several hundred pounds for a single night visit and annually many more locations are trading on the flimsiest of claimed paranormal associations in order to cash in on this mass frenzy for ghost hunting.

In the current climate, what therefore is the future for serious spontaneous case investigation to continue? We have observed that the expectations of both client and investigator have changed dramatically

in recent years. Clients now expect and are indeed disappointed, if an investigation does not immediately include the use of a medium or sensitive. Investigators, armed with the latest gadgets, now fully expect to capture “scientific evidence” of paranormal encounters. The use of equipment has become perhaps one of the most contentious issues within contemporary paranormal investigation, one example being the use of a basic EMF meter as a “ghost detector” and also, the advent of new paranormal phenomena such as the “orb”, which has only come about following the widespread introduction of digital still photography. Whilst both of the previous assumptions have been demonstrated on a number of occasions to be misguided (Persinger 2000, Para.Science 2004), the widespread dissemination of these ideas throughout both the amateur investigation groups and more generally, the public, continue unabated.

It would now appear that spontaneous case investigation undertaken in a scientific manner and with serious aims of trying to understand more about the mechanisms and processes by which such encounters may be generated, are at serious risk of being permanently and irrevocably undermined by this new wave of pseudoscientific, amateur thrill seekers whose primary intention might be more accurately described as wanting to spend a scary night in a spooky building. This trend, which shows no sign of abating, must be a serious concern to established organisations such as the SPR and serious researchers, who increasingly are finding that they are unable to find suitable cases for their research and study. Moreover, the ethical considerations and implications of this large number of amateur groups must be of great concern to those of us who are committed to undertaking genuine research. We have encountered several cases in recent years where the home owners claiming originally quite minor paranormal disturbances have, following a visit from the local ghostbusters, become greatly disturbed by the applied quasi-scientific and sometimes near occult practices employed by some. In one case in which all authors were directly involved, this ultimately led to both experiencees requiring external professional counselling and a move of house following the many lurid and disturbing phantoms that they were told were infesting their property. Perhaps the time has come for those of us both in academic fields such as parapsychology and groups aimed at conducting serious spontaneous case investigation to unite and call for some form of regulation and the implementation of ethical and scientific considerations to this area of study. Despite all of the problems that currently exist, the field remains a worthy and worthwhile area of research that perhaps, if appropriate steps can be taken, could answer the many interesting questions relating to the productions of ghosts, apparitions, poltergeists and even survival of bodily death.

The authors will expand on these topics and discuss possible solutions to the problems facing spontaneous case research today.

References

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