



## The presence of the dead: an empirical study

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**ABSTRACT** *It is very common for newly bereaved people to hold on to their spouse's possessions, and talk to photographs of them, or to feel that they are still communicating with them. A post-bereavement experience that encapsulates these themes, providing closeness, communication, and the continuation of an important relationship, is the sense of the dead person's presence. At its weakest this is a feeling that one is somehow being watched; at its strongest it is a full-blown sensory experience. This experience has over the past 50 years become well documented in medical, counselling and psychological literature. Our discussion is based on two empirical studies undertaken roughly 15 years apart, and it leads us to challenge some assumptions found in the literature. We argue, for example, that the sense of presence does not occur at a single stage of bereavement and that it lasts for much longer than the literature has previously suggested. We also look at some of the ways these sorts of experiences have been commonly interpreted and how experiencers interpret them themselves. The view that dominates scientific discourse is that these experiences are illusory—symptoms of broken hearts and minds in chaos, or part of the futile searching for the deceased that characterizes the early stages of grief. However, there is an alternative interpretational framework which allows the phenomenon to be seen as 'real' and 'natural', evidence of the possibility of continuing links with the dead beyond the grave. We argue that both these discourses are cultural artefacts, equally 'rational' and equally 'traditional'. In a search for understanding of their experiences, bereaved people have access to both these discourses. We show that they may utilize either or both, often within the context of a single conversation or narrative. The primary data for this paper come from KMB's recent research into the lives of widows in Leicester; it also draws on earlier research conducted in Manchester by GB.*

Interviewed in the *Daily Telegraph* on Friday 7 January 2000, Dame Thora Hird spoke of the loss of her husband after 58 years of marriage. "Part of my life is gone", she said, "but he isn't a long way away. Don't think I'm being silly, but I sit in his easy chair in the loft and so often I have a feeling he's there".

### Introduction

Following the death of a spouse, the bereaved partner has, in effect, two choices: to die or to continue living (Sanders, 1989: 82). If the bereaved person chooses

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to survive, he or she may remarry or may commit him- or herself to what has been called the 'career of widowhood' (Hansson *et al.*, 1993: 373–375; see also Lopata, 1996: xiii). In the years that follow, many people find comfort in things which connect them to the one they have lost. Steven Shuchter and Sidney Zisook (1993), for example, found that over 40% of widowed people kept some of their late spouse's belongings. Comparable findings have been noted by Colin Murray Parkes (1986) and by Geoffrey Gorer who observed that: "many [widows] keep one personal relic, his watch, his favourite blazer and the like" (Gorer, 1977: 110).

One post-bereavement experience that encapsulates these themes, providing closeness, communication, and the continuation of an important relationship, has been well documented in bereavement literature and is generally referred to as the 'illusion' or 'sense' of the dead person's presence. At its weakest it is a feeling that one is somehow being watched; at its strongest it is a full-blown sensory experience—olfactory, auditory, visual, and occasionally tactile. Such phenomena are alluded to in classic early studies—for example Lindemann's 1944 study of the symptomatology of acute grief; Gorer's *Death, grief and mourning* (1977: 54–58); and Marris's study of young London widows (1974: 28). In their work in Los Angeles, Richard Kalish and David Reynolds found that: "The individual realities of a substantial proportion of residents of one urban area include interpersonal perceptions of dead persons who had returned" (1973: 220). Ira Glick and his colleague 1974 study of 68 widows and widowers in Boston, MA, observed that four of their respondents reported having seen their husbands sitting in their favourite armchairs or going into another room. Many felt the presence in connection with experiences they had shared, such as getting breakfast or watching TV. The researchers concluded: "The greater part of our sample seemed to maintain some sense of their husband's presence ... during the first two months of their bereavement" (Glick *et al.*, 1974: 136–137).

Douglas Davies has recently reported that "approximately 35 per cent" of the people contacted for his 1995 survey of 1,603 people in four regions of the UK "had gained some such sense of the presence of the dead" (Davies, 1997: 154; see also Davies & Shaw, 1995: 96, Table 8.13). He notes that sensing the presence of a parent is the most common type of experience (15.4%); grandparents follow next (10.3%), then spouses (5.0%), siblings (2.2%), children (1.1%) and other kin (3.6%); 1.7% sense the presence of friends. Indeed, it has now become the consensus among bereavement researchers that these sorts of experiences are commonplace (see Schulz, 1978; Kastenbaum, 1981; Bowling & Cartwright, 1982; Parkes, 1986; Sanders, 1989; Simon-Buller *et al.*, 1988–89; Littlewood, 1992; Grimby 1998).

The present paper first reports the experiences of widowed women in Leicester who lost their husbands in their later years. It discusses some preliminary implications for bereavement research, especially the finding that the sense of presence would appear to persist for longer than has been assumed and is not confined to any particular stage of mourning. It then goes on to consider

what interpretive frameworks are available to those who experience this phenomenon.

To facilitate this discussion, we compare the recent accounts from Leicester collected by KMB with narratives told to GB in the 1980s. The former research was conducted by a psychologist interested in the lived experience of widowhood; the latter research was conducted by a folklorist interested in the formation and expression of personal belief. We will suggest that there is a clear continuum between the accounts offered during these studies. We end by drawing out the implications of this finding in terms of understanding how people interpret for themselves, and present to others, their experiences of the presence of the dead. But first we briefly outline the methodology for both these studies. Anyone who is interested in learning more about the way the projects were conducted should consult our discussion of stage theories of grief in *Omega* (Bennett & Bennett, 2000) which is based on the same material, or our joint chapter on bereavement in Bennett (1999).

### **Collecting the data**

The Leicester respondents were all members of a club for widowed women which meets on Sunday afternoons in Leicester (UK). The data consist of tape-recorded interviews with 19 widows aged between 60 and 76 years old who had been widowed for between two and 26 years. They were interviewed in their own homes over a six-month period during 1997–98. The interviews lasted from one to four hours, the average being about an hour and a half. The interviewer did not ask questions about the respondents' social class and occupation. However, it was her impression that most of these women were working class and had worked outside the home (though not as the main breadwinner) when they were younger. They had also been the principal homemaker and had looked after the children of the marriage. The question about the 'presence of the dead' was asked whenever the context seemed to allow it to be broached (on two occasions a suitable opening never presented itself). It was always couched in vague and neutral terms, such as 'Do you ever feel he's still around?' 'Do you ever feel his presence?' and so on.

The Manchester material comes from a doctoral dissertation which set out to evaluate the role of informal storytelling and personal experience in the formation and expression of belief. The interviews took place in a chiropodist's clinic during normal surgery hours. For five afternoons a week for five months, with patients' permission the researcher simply sat in on their treatment, told them what the subject of the research was and how it would be used, and recorded everything that was said. There were no refusals (though patients were given every chance to refuse, or to withdraw at any point they became uncomfortable): most regarded the survey as a welcome, though unusual, sort of in-house entertainment. By the end of the research period, 96 retired women had been interviewed, 20 women between 40 and 60 years old, three young girls, and 13 elderly men. Nine early interviews were set aside because of

technical, or other, mistakes, leaving a corpus of interviews with 87 women between 60 and 96 years old (widowed, married and single), containing a total of 208 narratives, all but 55 of which were about unusual or paranormal experiences including encounters with the dead, sensing the presence of the dead, and psychic experiences.

There is one aspect that is common to both studies and which should be emphasized. In both cases the interviews were only loosely structured; respondents were encouraged to control the agenda, to talk, reminisce, and tell stories if they wanted to, on themes of their own choice suggested by the questions. They were rarely cut short, or guided, or returned to the question schedule. This was particularly so in the Manchester study, where the interviewer simply followed the respondents' lead and functioned as audience for them. This makes a statistical account impossible, of course, but it does have at least one advantage. It means that the accounts below are more or less spontaneous, which in turn means that they can be taken as reasonably reliably indicating what aspects of the experience were significant to the speakers. In the transcriptions that follow, the interviewer's question is noted where it directs the responses; where it is not given, the account has been spontaneously volunteered in the context of talking about the experience of bereavement in general.

### **The nature of the experience: accounts from Leicester**

Over half the Leicester widows said they had made efforts to retain some sort of contact with their dead husbands. All but one of them displayed his photograph and showed it to the interviewer; many had also kept mementoes at least for a while—rings, watches and service medals maybe, but most often clothes. One of the widows still made regular visits to the cemetery; two had visited mediums, many had dreamt of the dead man (“dreams of the past and your husband's always with you” as Mrs I said), and most talked to him as if he were still alive: “The actual day to day, knowing that somebody's there and cares about you, got a sympathetic ear if you want to talk about—you know somebody's upset you or something or you're not very well—or, you know, just general affection. That's what I miss more than anything else” (Mrs D, Interview Transcript, p. 27); “I mean sometimes I quite often say, ‘Oh, I still love you’, because although he's died you don't lose feeling for the person” (Mrs P, Interview Transcript, p. 24).

Following these sorts of leads, 17 of the 19 Leicester widows were asked whether they had ever felt the presence of their husbands. All knew exactly what was meant by the phrase. There were only three ambiguous answers, two that seemed to be positive and one negative. Eleven unambiguously said they had had the experience or still had it. Three unambiguously said they had never had it or they could not remember ever having had it. Their accounts are quite varied in tone and content, but cover all the sorts of experiences reported in the literature. At its least marked, the sense of presence is an odd feeling of being watched somehow, “as if he was kind of at the back of me”, as Mrs J said (Mrs

J has been widowed two years). Another common experience is the feeling that, not only is one being observed doing ordinary tasks, but that one is being helped to accomplish them properly. The five brief narratives that follow are typical accounts of each of these sorts of experiences.

### *Being observed*

[Interviewer. Can I ask you whether you felt as if he was still—you felt as if he was still around, still talking to you?]

Still do, and I'm a very sceptical person. I'm sceptical about almost anything ... but yes, yes, to me he's still often around, and when I'm sometimes doing things, it's ever so strange ... I know when first I started doing jobs and I was thinking, 'Now how on earth—how would Stan do this?' and I'd think, 'How would he tackle it?' and I'd go out to look for the whatever-it-was, and it was just as if it was almost put in my hand to do it. And you find these things extremely strange if you never believe in any of this sort of thing, but yes it did. It is, yes. (Mrs A. Widowed nine years. Interview Transcript, p. 12).

### *Hearing a voice*

[Interviewer. Do you ever feel the presence of your husband?]

Oh yes! Very often! Very often. Because sometimes I'll sit in here and somebody'll say, 'Mary!' and I'll look round, and I thought, 'Well, I've not done it! I've not said that!' you know. Yeah, I have, about three times. Yes, I can honestly say that. About three times [...] and somebody said, 'Mary!' and I've thought, 'That's Tom!' you know. Because I know there's nobody else it could be. But that has happened three times. (Mrs Q. Widowed three years. Interview Transcript, p. 21).

### *Smelling a particular odour*

[Interviewer. OK. You said that you feel the presence of your husband, used to feel it. More strongly at first?]

Yeah, strongly at first. Very strong.

[Interviewer. I mean, what form did it take?]

Well, I was going to say this. I mean, it sounds a little bit far-fetched. He used to rub himself, when he'd got aches or pains, with a certain rub, and it had got like a smell with it. It was one of these in a tube. I can't think of it now [...] I know I once went into the bedroom afterwards, one night I think it was, and the smell was there, and yet there was none of it left in the house, you know, and I just couldn't explain it. But, as I say, it was there. (Mrs R. Widowed 20 years. Interview Transcript, pp. 11–12).

### *Seeing the dead*

I really saw my husband now, about six or seven weeks after. I'd gone to sleep. I'd had a sleeping tablet. I couldn't sleep, and I woke up to hear somebody

say, 'Lucy, Lucy, Lucy', and I woke up, and it was like I am now, and just inside the bedroom door was John, HONESTLY! and he gave me the loveliest smile, and he'd got his lovely silver-grey suit on, and that was it. Never dreamt about him since or anything. But it was real. It was really real. (Group Interview Transcript, p. 35).

### *Sensing the dead man in bed*

[Interviewer. Do you still talk to him now?]

... I can't lumber you with the fact that two or three times I know he's been there ...

[Interviewer. Is there any particular circumstance? How do you know he's there?]

Because I've not dreamt it. I've told my daughter so. Where I've known, the last time he was, I woke up. I know on and off I was awake. I wasn't dreaming, and I woke up and I could feel him at the side of me. I know you might not think it's—But you could see because we used to lie like that, back to back you know, and I know I was awake because it had happened before [unintelligible]. And I lie there and I think to myself, 'Yes, I can feel him there'. I'm saying this to myself, not out loud, and I say, 'I'm not going to move because he'll go away'. So I wasn't asleep, was I? No. I wasn't! I know I wasn't! And I just lie there. I could just—He wasn't moving, but I could feel him. You would know someone was there, yes, yes, yes. And after a bit, I don't know whether I moved or what happened, but he went away. But this has happened to me two or three times ... (Mrs S. Widowed 15 years. Interview Transcript, p. 13).

So, among the Leicester widows the experience of 'sensing the presence' of their husbands has been common. The phenomenon has ranged from the classic ineffable 'feeling' that he is there, to clear sensory experiences. Hearing or sensing the voice of the lost husband giving advice or making comments on changes around the house are perhaps the most common experiences reported; others may smell an odour particularly associated with their husband, or may see or hear him. The sense of touch is also involved surprisingly often, especially in bed at night. Three women have felt that he was in bed with them.

It should be noted that these responses show that the length of time the sense of presence persists may be underestimated. A glance at the Leicester accounts shows that the women who told these stories have been widowed up to 20 years. In the interviews as a whole, eight women used the present tense to speak of these experiences, including two of the women who had been widowed longest. These experiences were not restricted to the early months of bereavement as some researchers have suggested, nor to any particular period (see, for example, Glick *et al.*, 1974: 136–137; Sanders, 1989: 45–108). Because of the way the questions were phrased, it is not easy to say with precision at what point of the bereavement the Leicester widows felt the presence of their husbands, but it certainly looks as if it was not confined to the confused early weeks following the death. We suggest that the length of time the feeling persists

should be revised upward. On the basis of this, admittedly small, sample, it looks as if the feeling may remain vivid for at least 15 years, maybe for as many as 20 years. It is certainly a point that invites further examination.

The widows were asked to describe their feelings and experiences at three points in their bereavement—immediately after the death, one year after, and at the present time. References to feeling their husband's presence occurred in their discussions of all three periods. Two said that they felt it in the early weeks and months; two others said they felt it at all three times (presumably it has been a constant feature of their bereavement). Two more mentioned it during their descriptions of the early days and say they still feel it now; and five others only said that they feel it now. The others mentioned it in passing and did not tie it to any particular time. These findings give support to observations made by a Welsh GP and reported in an unfairly neglected paper of 1971. Dr Dewi Rees interviewed 227 widows and 66 widowers in mid-Wales (80% of all widowed people in the area; 94% of those fit to be interviewed) in order to determine the extent of the phenomenon. He found that almost half the respondents had had some experience of the deceased's presence; that it "often lasted many years but [was] most common during the first 10 years of widowhood"; that 106 of his sample still had the experiences at the time of reporting; and that 67 of those reporting such experiences had been widowed for 20 years (Rees, 1971).

Neither do these data give any confirmation to another common suggestion, that the sense of presence is particularly likely to occur if the spouse's death was a sudden one (see, for example, Kastenbaum, 1981: 224; Schulz 1978: 147; Glick *et al.*, 1974: 148). Of the 11 Leicester women who gave unambiguous accounts of the phenomenon, four had lost their husbands suddenly, but seven had had some weeks' or months' warning. Interestingly, Rees's survey likewise finds no such connection (he lists it as one of several factors that do not affect the incidence of the experience; see his Table VIII, p. 40).

Consequently, we tried to follow some of the leads suggested by the data and see if there were other patterns that might indicate fruitful lines of exploration in the future. We considered, for example, whether it might be death in distressing circumstances that precipitated the experience. Although the evidence was not conclusive (and could not be, given the smallness of the sample), there was a better degree of association here; just over half of those who had had the experience had lost their husbands under distressing circumstances. It might be possible, too, that the length of time widows had been married might be important. Once again there does seem to be some degree of association: all those who gave an unambiguous positive answer had been married a very long time (an average of 40 years); in contrast, the ones who gave negative answers had been married an average of only 24 years. An interesting finding in this respect is that one lady who said she was glad when her husband died nevertheless said she feels his presence. This is in contrast to Rees's findings: of 11 of his respondents who had been unhappily married, not one sensed the spouse's presence (Rees, 1971: 39). One way of interpreting this might be that, if there is a connection between pair bonds and sense of presence,

it might be the *duration* of the bond that is the deciding factor. The Leicester lady had been married for 30 years and it is possible that this factor outweighed the unhappiness factor (Rees does not say how long his 11 unhappily married respondents stayed in the marriage). If there is such a link, it might help to account for a number of scholarly observations; for example, Davies's findings that it is the presence of parents that is most commonly sensed (a finding also of GB's 1980s study). There might also be a ratio between the length of time the bond existed and the length of time the sense of presence is likely to persist, so that the longer the bond has endured, the longer the persistence of the phenomenon after the death of one of the pair. If this is so, it might reconcile some apparent conflicts between our findings and those of some other researchers. Our observation that the feeling persists up to 20 years need not, for example, conflict with Marris's estimate that it is a feature of 'acute normal grief', which he sees as persisting for only about two years (Marris, 1974: 25, 27). The Leicester widows were over 60 and had been married an average of 32 years; Marris's widows were aged between 25 and 56 years old, so on the whole would have been married for a shorter time.

These are hypotheses that future work might usefully explore. Meanwhile, we turn to a consideration of how the presence phenomenon may be interpreted by bereavement researchers and by experiencers themselves.

### **Interpreting the experience: rival discourses**

Broadly speaking two rival discourses dominate attempts at interpretation. Both are traditional, though only one is commonly assumed to be so; and both are rational, though only one is commonly assumed to be so.

The discourse that has generally prevailed among health professionals is that experiencing the presence of the dead is a psychological or medical phenomenon resulting from acute or chronic grief, at best something which might help to identify certain stages or processes of mourning, at worst a symptom of physical, emotional or mental dysfunction. This interpretation was especially commonplace in the early literature, based as so much of it was on a medical model. So one finds the experience called an "hallucination" (Rees, 1971), "near hallucination" (Glick *et al.*, 1974: 147), "illusion" (Schulz, 1978: 147), a "preoccupation" with "images of the deceased" (Lindemann, 1944:142), "dreams and visions" (Gorer, 1977: 54–58), and so on. Bowlby seems to be referring to the sense of presence when he discusses "the hopes and *phantasies* which the newly bereaved entertains and the *dreams* he dreams" in the first phase of mourning (Bowlby, 1961: 333, emphasis added). According to this discourse its etiology may be physical, perhaps because "the sensorium is generally somewhat altered" (Lindemann, 1944: 142); or it may be psychological, the result of a refusal "to surrender the dead, reviving them in imagination" (Marris, 1974: 28), or a part of the futile 'searching' for the deceased that characterizes the early stages of grief. [Schulz (1978: 147), for example, says: "a perceptual set is developed, designed to detect the presence of the spouse".)



Freud thought it might be a symptom of bereaved people's unwillingness to give up the object of their love "an opposition so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (quoted in Gorer, 1977: 120).

This sort of rhetoric is not so common nowadays, most writers preferring to avoid overt interpretations altogether by resorting to evasions such as the phrase 'the *sense* of presence' itself. Nevertheless, sometimes the medico-psychological model and its "images of abnormality" (Kellehear, 1996: 42) still lie close to the surface, and betray themselves in several ways. For example, attempts are made to distinguish the 'subjective' sense of presence from 'objective' occurrences such as dreams, or to redefine the former as the latter (see, for example, the rather elaborate categorizations in Littlewood, 1992: 40–53; Davies, 1997: 146–163). Elsewhere, little dissociative phrases creep into otherwise neutral descriptions. In his generally sympathetic account of the phenomenon, for example, Davies constantly uses phrases like "when people *reckon to have* seen the dead" (our emphasis); his discussion also features elaborate circumlocutions such as "[several people] had gained some sort of experience which they believed involved an encounter or communication with a dead person" (Davies, 1997: 156). In general, there are very few studies which remain entirely neutral about the 'reality' of the experience and that are not implicitly written from within the dominant discourse. Notable exceptions are Hoyt's (1980–81) paper in *Omega* and Kalish and Reynolds' earlier paper in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1973).

Whatever the rhetoric, there are some words that are never used—among them, 'soul', 'spirit', 'ghost'; and a set of explanations that are never countenanced—that the dead person is interacting with the living one, for example, or that this interaction is happening because human affections and personality can survive beyond the grave, or that there is an afterlife in which the dead continue to exist and from which these communications come. As Kalish and Reynolds note: "behavioral scientists and other investigators have rarely permitted mystical, other-worldly, extrasensory occurrences to become part of their personal interpretation of the world" (Kalish & Reynolds, 1973: 210). The possibility of 'patients' treating the experience as religious or spiritual in nature is often treated with distaste. "Even in healthy mourning", Bowlby observes, "some persistence of behaviour oriented towards the lost object who is often believed to continue his existence in another world is the rule" (Bowlby, 1961: 337). "Religious agencies have led in dealing with the bereaved", Lindemann regretfully notes. "They have provided comfort by giving the backing of dogma to the patient's wish for continued interaction with the deceased ... and have counteracted the morbid guilt feelings of the patient by ... promising an opportunity for 'making up' to the deceased at the time of a later reunion" (Lindemann, 1944: 147). "The reason why the Christian clergy are so continually involved in the disposal of the dead", Gorer pronounces, "is that orthodox Christianity is dogmatic that the soul continues to exist after death ... The hope and belief that one's loved ones are in bliss are meant to be consolations to the bereaved"

(Gorer, 1977: 24). Others see religion, or beliefs in a spiritual world, as palliatives in what is primarily a physical or psychological crisis. Glick *et al.*, for example, noted that some people thought “a supernatural explanation made it easier for a child to manage the loss” and quoted one example of a child being offered a “fanciful quasi-religious idea” (Glick *et al.*, 1974: 136). The distaste comes out in the rhetoric, especially the continued use of the word ‘dogma’, and in the implication that supernatural explanations are best fitted for children’s use or that organized religion has somehow seized an unfair advantage.

Terms such as ‘soul’, belief in spirit beings, and assumptions such as that souls exist in a spiritual world apart from but not separated from, the mundane sphere are, of course, central concepts of a discourse that sets itself up in opposition to the materialism of the discourse we have been examining. It is not necessary to elaborate the details of the rival discourse because it is very familiar through media such as legends and ghost stories, films like *Truly, Madly, Deeply* and *Ghost*, and popular folklore and religion. However, perhaps it is worth making two brief points in passing. The first is that there is nothing inherently ‘irrational’ or ‘illogical’ in the supernaturalist tradition (unless preferring a rival discourse to the privileged discourse of science is by definition unreasonable). It successfully fulfils the usual scientific requirements of being internally consistent, based on empirical observation, and capable of explaining what has been observed elegantly, efficiently and economically. The second point we should like to make is that both discourses are traditional. The materialist, as much as the supernaturalist, is of ancient provenance, draws on well rehearsed arguments and acquired mindsets, and takes a good deal on trust (for an illuminating discussion, see the work of medical folklorist David Hufford [1982a, 1982b, and esp. 1995]; see also Allan Kellehear’s [1996] incisive examination of the claims and rhetoric of medico-scientific writing in his examination of the near-death experience). The two things that principally separate these discourses are their assumptions about the nature of the cosmos, and what each deems to be proper and sufficient evidence for those assumptions (for a discussion of the latter point, see Bennett 1999: 31–38, 150–158).

Both these explanatory discourses are in the public domain. People who experience the presence of a dead partner, friend or family member and who need to find an explanation for what has happened can use either tradition, or both, in order to interpret events to their own or other people’s satisfaction. In deciding how to describe or explain an experience much depends on the context—on factors such as the presence or absence of an audience, the nature of that audience, the physical, social and emotional context, and so on. Here, for example, is ‘Vanessa’, an 80-year-old widow from Manchester, struggling to find an answer to a question about the power of the dead to return to this world:

Well, I have SEEN my mother sometimes—occasionally. But whether that’s occasions that she’s been on my mind or something ...

[G.B. How did you come to see your mother? Did she ... ?]

It was in the night. Whether I was dreaming about her I don’t know. I saw her

quite plainly. It only happened once to me. But whether she was on my mind or not I don't know, and I can't remember whether perhaps I was a bit low.

[G.B. How long ago was this, Vanessa?]

Oh, I can't say how long.

[G.B. When you were younger?]

No, the last few years. And it just came over me whether it was a warning that I was going to meet her or something. I never said anything to anybody about it.

Vanessa plainly cannot decide, or will not say, whether she believes that her experience was an objective or subjective one. Two traditions are available to her as explanatory mechanisms, and she hovers between the two. On the one hand, she uses the language of supernatural belief ("I have SEEN my mother", "I saw her quite plainly") and relies on a traditional assumption about the reasons why the dead may contact the living ("and it just came over me whether it was a warning that I was going to meet her or something"). On the other hand, she uses explanatory concepts drawn from the rationalist tradition; she wonders whether she was dreaming or whether it happened because "she's been on my mind or something" or because she was feeling "a bit low". Note, too, how she hedges her bets about the frequency of this sort of occurrence, switching from "sometimes", to "occasionally", to "once".

### **Talking about the presence of the dead in Manchester and Leicester**

To further illustrate this point we go on to discuss the material collected in Manchester from which Vanessa's account is taken. This was conducted in a rather different context from the Leicester study. During a survey of beliefs about ESP, hauntings and personal contact with the dead, respondents were asked the following deliberately vague question: 'You know how you hear people say that their mothers or their husbands who have died have come to them sometimes. What do you make of that? Do you think there might be something in it?'. It should be noted that all but one of the Manchester respondents professed adherence to some religious faith (the majority were Christians, mainly Methodists; a minority were Jewish); many were regular churchgoers. In contrast, the Leicester widows appeared to be of a more secular orientation, several expressing some hostility towards the Church's involvement in bereavement counselling (see Bennett & Bennett, forthcoming). Also the context of the Leicester interviews was a psychological investigation and the question about the sense of presence was framed using that term or something very similar. Implicitly, therefore, Leicester respondents were invited to frame their answers in terms of the materialist discourse, whereas Manchester informants were encouraged to respond in terms of the supernaturalist discourse.

Most of the Manchester informants responded with stories of personal experience, their own or that of a relative or close friend. Between them they told 70 stories, some about hauntings but most about visitations from dead

family members who came to warn them of coming trouble, or who appeared as wraiths at the moment of death, or who came to accompany dying persons to the next world, or who saw visions of an afterlife on their deathbed. What they mostly told of were occasions when they had had some sort of contact with dead mothers or husbands (or occasionally other relatives) in times of trouble. Some had seen their loved ones; others had heard their voices or smelt the smoke from their cigarettes; some had touched them; some had had answers to questions ‘put in their heads’, and so on. The story below, told by ‘Alma’, a 70-year-old widow, is fairly typical:

But I know—A cousin of mine she was very, very old when she died. She was very sensitive. We knew her mother wouldn’t last, she was downstairs.

My cousin had gone to bed. They’d been sitting up with the mother, and she had gone to bed, and she said her father came and woke her and he said, ‘Your mother wants you,’ and she got up, went downstairs, and her brother was there and he said, ‘What have you come for?’ and she said, ‘Well, my father came and said she needed me.’

He said, ‘Father? Father’s dead!’ and she said, it was only after—She said, ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘He came in. I heard him cough, and he came in,’ and he shook her and said, ‘Your mother wants you,’ and she got up, and she said it was only when her brother said, ‘Father? Father’s dead!’ AND HE’D BEEN DEAD YEARS.

[G.B. What happened next?]

Oh, she died. She died very soon after that.

At their most elaborate the stories were traditionalized by being given a scene-setting appropriate for a popular ghost story, so at one extreme they echo the sorts of accounts of purposeful apparitions which may be found in 17th and 18th century collections of polemic and folklore (see, for example, Baxter, [1691] 1840; Aubrey, 1696; Beaumont, 1705; Bourne, [1725] 1977; Brand, 1777; Glanvil, 1681; Grose, 1790).

At their most untraditionalized, however, the Manchester women’s stories were very similar to accounts of the sense of presence collected in a different context in Leicester. Despite the differences in context and in the language commonly used by respondents to describe the experience, the underlying assumptions of the two sets of stories are actually remarkably alike. This can be illustrated by using a technique from the study of folklore and legends. This is a simple form of textual analysis in which recurring words are identified and counted. Noel Williams, for example, used the method to show the contexts and implications of the word ‘fairy’ in texts from 1320 to 1829 (Williams, 1983), and William Lynwood Montell used it (perhaps less rigorously but no less usefully) to summarize the essential characteristics of American ghosts as they appear in his wonderful story compilation *Ghosts Along the Cumberland* (Montell, [1975], 90–94). An analysis of the 16 ‘presence’ stories from the Leicester interviews shows that the three most commonly used words or phrases were, in descending order of frequency: *say*, *think*, and *real*, and their equivalents *talk*, *thought*, and *true*. Then followed temporal adverbs with *sometimes* predominat-

ing; a group of words that indicated state of mind (*bothered/struggled/worried/in a mess*); and terms which assessed the nature of the experience (the husband was said to be *there, here* or *with me*). Next came (*a*)*wake/woke*, then phrases such as *had help/look(ing) after*, and ‘*You’ll be alright*’ as a message from the husband. These accounted for just over half of the 200 recurrences of the 25 most common words and phrases. Other commonly used words were, again in descending order: *night, dream, bed(room), strange/funny; happen(ed); as though/as if/almost; (felt the) presence; doing jobs; garden; smell; see; know; around; silly/daft; somebody; imagination/all in the mind; and kitchen*. These words could almost be used as a template for reconstructing a typical story from Manchester.

Both sets of stories are accounts of ineffable experiences with a spiritual dimension, set in ‘the daily round, the common task’, occurring in the context of crisis, with spiritual strength, practical help or emotional comfort being gained from the experience. We draw two inferences from this similarity. The first is that accounts of the sense of presence may be found in some unexpected places. Shorn of their rhetorical window dressing and philosophical assumptions, stories from folklore help confirm the ubiquity of the experience known as ‘the sense of presence’ and may help flesh out its nature, contexts and effects (the accounts in chapter 5 of John Aubrey’s *Miscellanies* of 1696 might be particularly useful). So, too, shorn of different language and assumptions, some accounts from parapsychology might be equally useful (see, for example, Gurney & Myers, 1884; Sidgwick *et al.*, 1894; Jaffé, 1979; Green & McCreery, 1975; MacKenzie, 1982). Our other inference—and this is our focus in this article—is that experiencers can, and commonly do, describe ‘the same’ event in different, and often conflicting, ways.

We can see this happening in the Manchester stories. Although most respondents opted into the supernaturalist discourse when describing their experiences, several responded to the question about dead persons ‘coming to’ the living with accounts framed primarily in terms of the sense of presence, as in the following account. “My mother’s been dead a long time”, said ‘Violet’, a married woman in her 60s:

but I always feel that if I’m in any trouble, I can feel the nearness of my mother ... I mean, it doesn’t go away, but I feel she’s there. I went through a very bad time quite a few years ago. My husband had a very bad illness. I couldn’t have gone through that on my own strength ... So, as I say, I didn’t bear that on my own. I did come through it, and I really do think—I always feel that in any time of trouble my mother ... is very close by me.

Respondents also often swapped between the language of ‘illusion’, dreams and imagination and the language of ‘reality’ during the course of a single account. In the story below, for example, ‘May’, a married lady in her 80s, starts by acknowledging the sceptical discourse—“I don’t know whether you would call it superstition”—and then proceeds for two or three sentences in the language of ‘feeling’ and ‘seeming’. She ends her account, however, in the language of

‘reality’: “the room was empty”, “she was with me all that long time”, “she was gone”.

I don’t know whether you would call it a superstition or—but I do believe it’s very close to you at times of trouble or anything.

[G.B. Some people say that their mothers particularly ... ]

Particularly my mother. I feel her presence, and I will say this. After she died, it was quite 12 months before I felt that her presence was no longer in the house. I felt she was there in some form or other and her bedroom seemed to be full of her for quite a long time, nearly 12 months afterwards, and then all of a sudden—We went away for the—well, the second holiday afterwards, and I came back, and the room was empty, and—now, I’ve never told anyone else before. But it was very strong. But she was with me all that long time and then she was gone. She was gone.

The process of switching discourses mid-stream is even more graphically illustrated in another, particularly poignant, story. It is a bereaved mother’s account of the early days after the death of her child. Although nearly all the story is told implicitly from within the supernaturalist tradition, in mid-narrative she seems for a short time to adopt the materialist interpretation. So “and I was fully awake. This is perfectly true. I was fully awake” is temporarily replaced with “I don’t know whether I was dreaming or not”, then reverts to “and he was there and I did it” and “It was a miracle”:

My little boy was drowned in the brook, did you not know? Well, I can tell you about that. I can tell you about what happened after with that.

I prayed ... I had ... I was very, very ill, and I lay in bed one night and I said, ‘Please God, just let me see him!’ and he walked round the door, and I was fully awake. This is perfectly true. I was fully awake, and he came round the door, and he smiled at me, and I said, ‘Were you pushed, Bob, or were you—did you fall in?’ and he didn’t say a word, and then I wasn’t satisfied with that, I said, ‘Please God’, praying to God, ‘please let me touch him! and I’d friends in the village—the butcher’s shop opposite the cinema, and I was in bed again and he came. I said, ‘Please let me touch him!’ and I don’t know whether I was dreaming or not, but he came in front of me at their house above the butcher’s shop, and he stood in front of me as he often did, and I used to stroke him under the chin. He was a gorgeous looking little boy. He’d blond curls.

[GB: How old was he?]

Eight-and-a-half, and I just touched his cheeks. Like I always did, put my hand under his cheeks, you know, and held him close to me and he was there and I did it, and I said too—. What else did I ask for? My wishes were granted. It was three wishes, and I can’t think what the other one was, can’t think what the other ... But it—I thought it was absolutely wonderful.

[GB: Sort of like a miracle]

It WAS a miracle. It was a miracle to ME.

If we return to the data from Leicester, we can see the reverse process taking place in several of the narratives. Given that the context of the interviews was

a scientific investigation by researchers known to be connected to a university, it is surprising to note that only one of the 17 Leicester women opted unwaveringly into the materialist discourse and said that her experience had been ‘all in the mind’. At the least, most of the widows interpreted their experience as ‘real’ in some way, even if inexplicable: “I couldn’t explain it, but it was there”, as Mrs R said. Mrs A, too, in the story quoted above (page 144), despite her declared scepticism saw her experiences as real (in fact, she used her scepticism to validate the experience—the ‘strangeness’, in this context, of it all). One of the three ladies who said they had ‘never felt the presence’ said that, “*if he was going to get in touch with me it would be through music*” [our emphasis]. Others insist that the experience was a waking one. In the stories of several other women, the language and assumptions of the supernaturalist tradition often creep into otherwise neutral accounts. For example, Mrs Q, whose auditory experience was given above (page 144), adds a gloss to her story that we omitted to quote at the time. Although her main narrative is neutral, the gloss provides an interpretation drawn from popular religion and folklore: “And I mean, I’d like to—I like to know he’s still here with us. Some people think it’s perhaps a bit silly, but, no, I don’t”. This sort of switch from the materialist into the supernaturalist discourse often takes place after the main events have been told and the narrator is seeking closure for the narrative. So the widows might add a coda such as: “Their spirit’s still with you, in’t it? It is, yeah. Oh yeah. I don’t think they ever leave you” (Mrs C); “Just looking after us, I think” (Mrs J). In contrast, another lady’s account begins with “I really saw my husband now”, but ends by saying that she has “never *dreamt*” about him since (our emphasis).

In the most extreme of the Leicester accounts (the only one in which the experience had been a frightening one) the narrator prevaricates throughout about whether the experience was a dreaming or a waking one, switching between discourses in her search for understanding of the experience:

Can I tell you an experience? This sounds unnatural, but it happened. Because I told you how I was, but we did sleep together for a long time, but we slept separate for five years. But this particular night, he’d only been dead about three or four weeks and I was in bed and asleep (well, I must have been half awake and half asleep) and this is honestly true. It’s not imagination. I felt a warm—warmth all going down my back, and I laid like that and it was just as though somebody was in, it needn’t have been a man, it could have been anybody. I had this warmth as though somebody was laying at the back of me for a long, long time. And I laid in bed like that and I thought—Then I woke up. I laid like that and I looked round and I thought, ‘Oh, there’s somebody come upstairs and they’ve got into bed with me!’ and this is true! ‘They’ve got in bed with me.’ This warmth was so intense, and I thought (I know it’s daft now I’m looking back at it) I thought a burglar had got upstairs and laid in—Well, you do read these things! And I laid there I don’t know how long, a good ten minutes, and I dare not move, and I was just like that, holding my stomach like that, and I thought, ‘Oooh!’ and I started to cry, and after a while something made me turn over, and to that day I don’t know what it was. But

I wondered if I'd been dreaming about Jack and this—they do talk about spirits, I don't know—and I don't know. It sounds like an imaginative thing but it really, really happened. God's truth. I'm not just saying it to make you think, 'Ooh, you know, she had to be different!' It really, really happened! (Group Interview Transcript, pp. 34–35).

## Conclusion

We believe that the Leicester work, perhaps by being more open-ended and interviewee-controlled than larger and more formal studies, resulted in clear and poignant descriptions of the nature of the experience, and that comparable material from Manchester confirms the pattern. Our study has also highlighted a number of angles it would be fruitful to explore in future research and suggested areas where the received model might need to be adjusted

Taking the Leicester and the Manchester material together, we have found that there is a clear thematic link between what appear on the surface to be rather different accounts. We have also pointed out that people asked about 'presence' may reply in terms of the dead 'coming to' the living and vice versa, or may mix their messages. We draw two overall conclusions from these observations.

First of all, it seems to us that the differences between the two bodies of material we have presented are often more apparent than real. Many of the differences arise from the context, the degree to which speakers have opted into one or other of the available explanatory discourses, and the interrelationships between these factors. It follows that, if one sets aside the cultural window dressing and examines the phenomenology of the experiences, it is possible to unearth a body of useful information from traditional ghost stories, especially those which feature benign contact with apparitions in recognizable human form.[1] This information may enhance our understanding of the sense of presence phenomenon by helping to flesh out the nature, extent, and especially the contexts of the experience.

Second, we suggest that, because experiencers have access to rival cultural traditions to help interpret what has occurred (what for convenience in this essay have been called the 'materialist' and 'supernaturalist' discourses), they are free to choose which discourse to use on any single occasion; their choice may vary between one occasion and another, or sometimes between one sentence and another. Both discourses are familiar and ready to hand as interpretive and conversational tools but, although the supernaturalist tradition allows people to assert the reality of their experiences, they are often reluctant to espouse it openly, or use its rhetoric, for fear of ridicule. Especially with strangers, or in the context of a scientific survey, they may prefer to opt into the materialist discourse and describe their experiences in the language of illusion. Alternatively, they may prevaricate by using evasive language and letting the researcher make up his or her own mind about the nature of the experience. So sometimes respondents may say that it was 'as if' they had seen or heard the deceased or



'maybe' they were dreaming (for an insightful discussion of 'Ambiguity and the rhetoric of belief', see Hufford [1977]).

Expression like 'dream' and 'as if he was there' on the one hand, and 'I really saw him' and 'he was there' on the other, should not be taken too literally. They may not reflect differences in the quality of the experience (or even necessarily speakers' private interpretations, if they have any). It may be that they are choosing their language according to their assessment of the audience and/or other, usually unpredictable, factors. What one can be pretty certain of is that interviews conducted by strangers will encourage respondents to opt into the materialist discourse they know will be safest and most acceptable, if for no other reason than that scientific researchers often assume that respondents share this worldview. Take, for example, this passage from the work of Glick and his colleagues: "Some widows experienced near hallucinations ... In one case he was sitting in the living room reading his paper ... These widows, it should be emphasized, knew better, no matter what they heard or saw ... they had full insight into the illusory character of their perceptions" (Glick *et al.*, 1974: 147). In these circumstances it would be hardly surprising if respondents chose to describe their experience as 'all in the mind'. One consequence is that formal surveys probably underestimate the number of people who interpret their experience as 'real' in some way, either because the informant misleads them or because they mislead themselves by imposing their own interpretation on what is being said. Carl Jung was undoubtedly right when he wrote:

There are universal reports of these post-mortem phenomena ... They are based in the main on psychic facts which cannot be dismissed out of hand. Very often the fear of superstition, which strangely enough, is the concomitant of universal enlightenment, is responsible for the hasty suppression of extremely interesting reports which are then lost to science (Jung, 1964: 316).

## Note

- [1] One point, for example, is that the presence felt need not necessarily be that of a dead person. Folklore compilations, especially 16th and 17th century ones, abound with stories of the wraiths of living, or just living, people appearing at times of crisis. Among the best known are, of course, Isaac Walton's account of the apparition of John Donne's wife that appeared to him while he was in France (his wife had just been delivered of a stillborn child), and the story of Mary Goff, whose wraith visited her far-away children while she lay on her deathbed (see Beaumont, 1705: 107–108 and Baxter, 1691: 49–52, respectively). Baxter's collection also features a famous account of the evil presence of a living man whose stinking wraith tried to get into bed with his wife in Wales while he was far away in Ireland (pp. 9–16). For presences of the living from parapsychology, see Gurney *et al.* (1886).

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