

KNOWING THE UNKNOWABLE: PUTTING PSI TO WORK, by Damien Broderick. Vancleave, MS: Surinam Turtle Press, 2015. Pp. 264. \$18.00 (paperback), \$35.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-60543-861-0

Not everyday does one run across a parapsychology treatise that actually reads like a crime novel, even as it deals with lots of numbers and what would normally be a batch of tedious statistics. Indeed, I'm not sure one *ever* comes across such a work. Until now, that is.

In less capable hands Damien Broderick's recent book, *Knowing the Unknowable* might have been as compelling as a pile of last autumn's leaves. But his mastery as a writer and a storyteller is such that he engages our curiosity and sense of adventure, keeping us turning pages just to see what happens next. At the same time we are informed, educated, and even (subtly) lobbied for an argument that not only makes a lot of sense, but is also almost certainly true. At least, I was convinced.

Broderick's premise is, first, that one of the most consistent sources of ESP effects can likely be found in experiments yielding large numbers of responses –either many participants contributing a few responses each, or a few contributing many responses each. However, as he also makes abundantly clear from the outset, the devil in the details shows up when one tries to tease out the signal from all the psychological “noise” that results any time human mental processes get involved. In the end he is persuasive in arguing that with enough noise- and error-correction of the right kind, psi can usually be found.

The whole book is a survey of sorts. Along with the sleuthing elements, it is also a quite useful annotated chronology of the history of these kinds of mass-data experiments. Beginning with the Woolley/Lodge card-guessing experiment broadcast on BBC in the 1920s, there are mentions (where there are not enough available data) and descriptions (where there are) of most, if not all of the public and private mass-response experiments up until the recent past. Where the available data are sufficient, such as in the Zenith Radio experiment in 1937-38, the 1950s-era West, Fisk, and Michie series, and Ryzl & Stepanek's work of the late 1950s and early 1960s (among several others), Broderick proceeds with an in-depth analysis of what went right, what went wrong, and what we can learn that will improve success in future similar mass-response exercises. He spares not even himself from investigative scrutiny. Thanks to the special access to the data he has, his own 1973 mass-response experiment done through the auspices of a newspaper in his native Australia is submitted to perhaps even more intense investigation than many of the others.

One of the more surprising outcomes of his examination of each of these experimental sets is the discovery that some of them which at first seemed to show some (or even strong) evidence of psi effects, upon further analysis actually did not; others that seemed to show no psi effects

actually did; and in at least one case an experiment that at first looked like a strong psi statistical “hit” but was shown not to be, was then proved to actually have a significant psi effect, albeit for different reasons than what had been originally expected.

But this is not just a history of this family of experiments. The book also catalogs and, just as importantly, serves as somewhat of a tutorial in dealing with the kinds of noise that prove so troublesome in finding the signal amidst large numbers of responses. As Broderick notes, “Often, in these experiments in repeated guessing with majority vote evaluation, we get a batch of raw data that is distorted by certain recurrent biases. This is basically ‘noise’ in our data that can overwhelm valuable results”. He finishes this thought with the question, “Can we do anything about that?” (123) Answering that question is what a large part of this book is about.

Discussed here are effects well known to most experienced parapsychologists. The (in) famous decline effect is one of them, as well as psi-missing. Among the others are preference biases; position or sequence biases; perceiver bias, and so on. For each case, Broderick answers his earlier question about what one can do about the problem –how such noise can be identified and dealt with to winnow out the signal from what is usually a vast overburden of mental or statistical static.

Thus, *Knowing the Unknowable* also chronicles the improvements in experimental technique, showing how mistakes of the past have led to improvements over time into the present. Though doing this requires some pretty technical discussions at times, his dryly humorous style and no-nonsense, one-step-at-a-time explanations go a long way toward making the subject not only comprehensible but remarkably palatable.

I was particularly taken with how well he can take a difficult concept and render it comprehensible to the average reader. For example, in a discussion of how to deal with preference bias (where participants select certain target choices far out of proportion to others, regardless of whether those targets were the correct ones), he notes that at least part of the cure requires statistically “normalizing” the responses to help account for the preference-bias effect. But he then goes on to explain why that step, though necessary, is insufficient.

It’s as if we took a crowd of 81 people with the usual assortment of heights, gave one person in nine a small box to stand on, shuffled them all up, and made everyone stand behind a fence in order of visible height. Could you tell which nine people looked taller than they really were? For that matter, could you be sure any of them were standing on boxes? (102)

Not to say that getting through the book is not rough going at times. As Broderick himself notes “You *will* find some numbers in this book. Tables of them in many chapters. Decimals that are added and changed into percentages and subtracted and turned on their heads. Don’t be alarmed. As I just promised, there will be no calculus or anything resembling advanced mathematics, or even strict statistics.”

Even without the calculus, though, it can be a challenge. You *can* read this book without engaging with all those tables and decimals and percentages. Broderick is conscientious about giving you in the text the gist of the points he is trying to make. But to fully understand what is happening, it helps to dig in to the actual tables, numbers, and relations. He tries to point the way for you, often briefly outlining and highlighting what he wants you to notice in the charts and

tables. But it is not always so easy. There are the occasional “exercise left to the reader” remarks that may leave the arithmetically-challenged among us not quite sure what the figures are trying to show.

Fortunately, Broderick alleviates all with strategically-placed bits of humor. “I could go on for a while with charts and additional tables of numbers”, he observes in one such passage. “But this really is not a book of formal science but rather an entertaining glance (I hope) at some of the hairier patches of fringe science, and frankly I’d rather go off for a brisk walk, don’t you agree?” (p. 196).

The book is not one-faceted. It is not aimed just at proposing and then demonstrating a way of looking at oft-ignored experiments and the data they produce. Rather, it is also, in a way, a defense of psi. Though Broderick says at a number of points that he is not out to produce yet another attempt to “prove” the reality of psi and ESP, he does pause appropriately to add points of defense for his thesis and to give critics and skeptics a few good thumps.

In one example, early in the book he deals with an objection that is likely to be brought up, given the scope that these mass experiments demand. Considering the often mind-numbingly large numbers of participants and/or guesses required to produce a distinct result, it could be argued that the logistics and scale of such experiments make them impractical in terms of time and resources. Broderick puts it back in perspective by comparing and contrasting with the imposing quantity of people and parts necessary for such massive mainstream science projects as the Apollo Program or the Large Hadron Collidor to find their successes. From that perspective the demands of mass psi experiments seem modest indeed.

He also has some pithy words for the skeptics. In showing how an error-correction protocol produced impressive scores in a mass experiment originally thought to at best show weak psi results, Broderick notes “...it seems to me that the qualitative insights suggested by this reanalysis are provocative. Investigating claims of dramatic ‘miracles,’ whether as evidence for psi or as a paradigm for shooting down psychic pretensions (as James Randi and other skeptics do), is almost wholly pointless” (p. 102).

If there is a weak point to the book, it is the conclusion. I read along, expecting to arrive at the end to find a satisfying reveal that summed up the case, tying up all the loose ends in neat little bows. That does not happen here, at least not precisely. It turns out that all the takeaway points have been scattered throughout the text. As Broderick comes down off a discussion of associative remote viewing and how it might fit into the rest of the context of the book, there is a page or so of summation, though it is not a summation of the book itself. Rather, it is a philosophical speculation about how psi in general might be a positive element in the future of the human race. A hopeful and forward-looking thought to be sure, and one with which I agree wholeheartedly, but hardly the denouement one might be looking for after following the clues and investigative leads that thread throughout this deep and detailed story.

Perhaps I am just quibbling over book formatting, as it seems the true conclusion might be the appendix that immediately follows. Emblazoned in all-upper case letters as “BASIC DO-IT-YOURSELF PSI FORECASTING”, this section is a compendium of the lessons-learned throughout the book and serves as an informal recipe for what to do and what not to do if you want to succeed in your own mass-response ESP experiment. Many who engage with a book often ignore what they perceive as peripherals before the first chapter and after the last, so they may

ignore this crucial appendage. To get a full sense of this book the appendix is essential reading. With some filling out this section would have made a great concluding chapter.

But given the value inherent in this book, that is a small concern. This is an essential book to the libraries of any discerning person committed to the science of parapsychology. But it is more than that. It is also a formula for how to get a reliable effect out of a relatively neglected psi experimental paradigm that, if one goes to school on the lessons offered among the pages of *Knowing the Unknowable*, could have seriously valuable practical implications for solving problems in the real world.

Paul H. Smith  
POB 2636,  
Cedar City, UT, 84720, USA  
phsmith@rviewer.com