

RESPONSE TO MATLOCK

By Claus F. Larsen

Matlock points to the critical review by Bem (2005) as a different interpretation of some of the results and suggests that I should have included it in my critique, as it would supposedly have changed my conclusion that nothing paranormal was going on.

I was somewhat surprised that Matlock brought up Bem's critique of Schwartz's experiments, as Bem is pretty harsh on Schwartz's methodology, and deservedly so. The only example of possible paranormal activity that Bem points to is a test that Gary Schwartz did with medium Laurie Campbell (LC):

To pit the afterlife hypothesis against the psi hypothesis, Schwartz conducted a follow-up experiment in which he created a list of 12 people, 6 living and 6 dead, writing the name of each on a separate index card. As LC sat in the same room with him, he pulled out an index card, concentrated on the person listed, and then asked her three questions: Is the person male or female? Young or old? Living or dead? Schwartz hypothesized that "the living subjects would not be aware of LC's attempts to communicate with them, and therefore they would be unlikely to 'communicate' with her. So we expected she would receive more information from the deceased people than from the living" (p. 43). Even though LC did not know who was on the list of names, she correctly answered all 3 questions for all 12 people, a perfect score. If we ignore the problems of potential sensory leakage and concerns about randomization using a closed deck of alternatives, then this result favors the psi hypothesis. In fact, the most parsimonious interpretation of this study is that it is a (badly controlled) test of telepathy between the medium and the experimenter. (Bem, 2005, p. 175)

This is symptomatic of the poor standards that mar too much of parapsychological research and reveals just how deep wishful thinking goes: Bem acknowledges that the experiment was badly controlled, yet he concludes that telepathy, and not trickery, is the most parsimonious interpretation. Not so.

The reason may be hard to understand, but is also scientific to its very core: If we accept a badly controlled experiment as evidence of a paranormal phenomenon, whatever that may be, just how low

should the bar be set for us to come to the contrary conclusion? Carl Sagan popularized the phrase “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,” and it still stands: We cannot, and should not, lower the bar for paranormal evidence, but instead set it higher.

As for the problems of sensory leakage, did it not strike Bem (or Matlock, for that matter) why Campbell suddenly could get a perfect score when tested for telepathy, when she was struggling to get hits when tested for mediumship? A *psychic* who scores perfectly when tested for *telepathy*?

Had I included Bem’s critique, as Matlock suggested, I would certainly not have focused on the one thing in Bem’s critique that is favorable, however unwarranted, to Schwartz’ results. I would instead have included everything else, which is strongly critical of Schwartz’ experimental setups, and especially his own interpretation of the results. In other words, I would not have focused on the—supposed—hit, but ignored the misses. Including Bem’s critique in my own words would thus not have altered my conclusion but only strengthened it: Schwartz did not find evidence of anything paranormal.

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