

ESSAY

Ian Stevenson and the Modern Study of Spontaneous ESP Experiences

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In 1959, in his first paper about parapsychology, “The Uncomfortable Facts about Extrasensory Perception,” published in *Harper’s Magazine*, Ian Stevenson referred both to spontaneous cases and to experiments as primary sources of evidence for the existence of ESP. He summarized aspects of the work of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), as well as the work of J. B. Rhine and his associates at Duke University. In the same year Stevenson visited Rhine and had a conversation with his wife, Louisa E. Rhine, about spontaneous case research. As Stevenson wrote years later:

After the conventional morning coffee with general conversation about parapsychology, Louisa Rhine led me into a side room for a private conversation. There she explained to me her belief that nothing substantial could ever be made of reports of individual cases. In her view, they were all worthless as scientific evidence. In my article in *Harper’s Magazine* I had mentioned individual case reports and wrote that at least some of them deserved the attention of investigators. Louisa Rhine generously hoped to save me from futile endeavors. Her warning came too late. Some of the reports I read by the earlier psychical researchers of what were then called “spontaneous cases” had deeply impressed me. (Stevenson, 2006: 14)

One of us (CSA) remembers Stevenson saying some time in the 1980s that, while he listened respectfully to L. E. Rhine, his polite silence did not mean she had convinced him of her views. Stevenson instead became a specialist in the study of spontaneous cases. In this paper we will discuss his work with spontaneous ESP experiences, relying on his publications that appeared in print from 1960 on.¹

Modern Spontaneous ESP Studies

By the time Stevenson came into parapsychology in the late 1950s the field had changed, largely due to the work of J. B. Rhine and his associates (Pratt et al.,

1940; J. B. Rhine, 1934, 1947). As Stevenson became familiar with the parapsychological scene, he quickly realized the importance of Rhine's work, using it to make several points. He wrote: "Dr. Rhine's experiments . . . showed that extrasensory perception does not depend upon space. . . . Dr. Rhine's group seems to have demonstrated also that some persons have a capacity to influence physical objects without physical means" (Stevenson, 1959: 23). To some extent Rhine's influence changed the field of parapsychology from one in which research was mainly concerned with qualitative studies of spontaneous cases and mediums into one in which the emphasis was on statistically evaluated laboratory tests. By 1959, when Stevenson's *Harper's Magazine* article was published, the Rhines had become the dominant force in American parapsychology, to the point that years later Stevenson characterized them as the "undisputed sovereigns" (2006:14) of parapsychology in that earlier time. Before the meeting in which L. E. Rhine attempted to steer Stevenson clear of spontaneous case research, the Rhines had plainly stated their position on the "proper" place of spontaneous phenomena in parapsychology. In their view, case studies could provide ideas for hypothesis-testing in the laboratory, but they were not useful as scientific evidence for the existence of psychic phenomena. Such evidence could be found only in experimental studies (J. B. Rhine, 1948; L. E. Rhine, 1949). Fortunately for parapsychology, and for those of us who have always felt that the Rhines were too extreme in their views, Stevenson went his own way, providing in later years a much-needed balance for the Duke group's narrow experimental program.²

Stevenson carefully studied the work of the early SPR, such as the classic studies of Gurney, Myers, and Podmore (1886) and Sidgwick et al. (1894). As he began to publish his ESP case studies, there were a few other people in the field with similar interests. L. E. Rhine (e.g., 1951, 1953) was already well known for her ESP case collection studies. Jan Ehrenwald (1955) had published psychoanalytic observations of ESP cases. Celia Green (1960) had conducted a survey, and Hornell Hart (1954) had analyzed published cases of veridical out-of-body experiences. In fact, in one of Stevenson's first papers on ESP experiences, he argued that interest in spontaneous cases had returned: "Psychical research, after a period dominated by experimental work, has entered another phase of interest in spontaneous paranormal phenomena" (Stevenson, 1961:98).³ But even though he was not the only investigator publishing, Stevenson's studies of ESP experiences differed from those of others because of the way he combined attention to evidentiality, phenomenology, and psychological analysis.

Stevenson was well aware that using spontaneous cases as evidence required careful attention to detail and corroboration. In his 1968 Parapsychological Association Presidential Address, "The Substantiality of Spontaneous Cases" (1971a), Stevenson argued that because experimentation was constructed to test phenomena suggested by the spontaneous experiences that occurred in daily life, those experiences could not be set aside without leaving experimentation without its foundational basis. Experimental tasks were, after all, operationalisms of such "naturally occurring phenomena" as telepathic and precognitive dreams,

visions and impressions, apparitions, out-of-body experiences, poltergeists, and cases of the reincarnation type. Spontaneous cases, unlike the experimental data of the era, were qualitatively rich, providing deep descriptions of seemingly paranormal effects that surrounded vivid and dramatic events. Stevenson felt that the process by which ESP information was conveyed and interpreted was more directly visible in well-investigated spontaneous cases for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that it was more possible to identify the ESP “moment” in a spontaneous case than it was in an experiment.

In this Presidential Address, and in two guest editorials published in the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, “Changing Fashions in the Study of Spontaneous Cases” (1987a) and “Why Investigate Spontaneous Cases?” (1987b), Stevenson reiterated the need for thorough investigation. Cases needed to be both authentic (that is, the details of the case report needed to be investigated to the extent that the researcher was reasonably certain that the details occurred as the experiencer claimed) *and* evidential (that is, the researcher needed to be reasonably certain that the events described were mostly likely paranormal). Stevenson was very much aware of the known weakness of some spontaneous cases, from the fallibility of eyewitness testimony to experiencers’ mal-observations and motivated errors. But he contended that such problems of authenticity were not insurmountable.

Stevenson’s approach to case methodology was exemplified both by his more general ESP case research, which he abandoned in the 1970s, and by his work in cases of the reincarnation type. Collecting and authenticating cases could begin with surveys and questionnaires or with unsolicited case descriptions and correspondence, but the process required, insofar as was possible, face-to-face interviews and the independent corroboration of case details and a careful analysis of case features. Still, he was also conscious of the value of unauthenticated cases for their value as a point of comparison to authenticated cases, whether evidential or non-evidential. In actuality, from the spontaneous cases of his earlier period to the cases of the reincarnation type that occupied most of his later working life, his case files represent well a myriad of points along the authenticity and evidentiality continuum. That all the data have been preserved for future analysis is another of his unique contributions to the field.

Stevenson’s Spontaneous ESP Studies

Stevenson’s first published study focused on experiences connected with the sinking of the famous ship Titanic (Stevenson, 1960c; see also a later paper, Stevenson, 1965c).⁴ He presented 12 cases in this paper, discussing their value as evidence for ESP. Drawing on their phenomenological details, Stevenson suggested that the hypothetical stimuli represented in the ESP experience “may activate or push into consciousness images already present in the subconscious layers of the percipient’s mind” (p. 167). He argued that although personal attachments to persons who died on the Titanic and strong general emotions

associated with the perceptions existed in some cases, these variables were not sufficient or even necessary in accounting for the class of experiences because several cases lacked them.

In another paper Stevenson (1961) used a single case to illustrate the criteria for, and characteristics of, precognitive dreams. Mrs. Roger Fellom had a dream in September of 1958 about her daughter Vivian, then 20 months old. Mrs. Fellom wrote: "I very vividly dreamt of entering Vivian's room and much to my shock found her sitting on the sill of the bay window, one leg atop, the other dangling over the edge. She was gaily babbling along, waving her little arms in total unconcern of any danger, when suddenly she started to lose her balance and was about to fall off the 3 foot drop" (pp. 98–99).

About three weeks later, after Mrs. Fellom had been continuously checking on her daughter, she found Vivian in the position and place she had seen in her dream and was able to avoid a possible accident. Stevenson obtained more details in later correspondence, including the statement that Mrs. Fellom had mentioned the dream to her husband, and Mr. Fellom's corroboration of this statement. Stevenson also found that Mrs. Fellom had never had a similar dream prior to that one, nor had her daughter ever been on the window sill before. In addition, she claimed the "dream was more real than reality" (p. 101). Stevenson was careful to discuss the weaknesses of the case, as well as possible conventional explanations. For example, he noted the corroboration was not completely independent because Mr. Fellom testified to having heard the dream before the event took place, but he was not present when the event occurred. To obtain a better perspective of Stevenson's careful consideration of variables, it is worth quoting part of his conclusion:

In considering this dream as a precognitive experience the principal competing explanation is inference. Nearly all children climb and Vivian had climbed a little before her mother had this dream. It seems very likely that Vivian would sooner or later have attempted the climb from her bed to the window sill. . . . That she had never actually done so before the dream favors precognition as an explanation; yet the likelihood, one might almost say the inevitability, of her eventually attempting such a climb makes inference distinctly possible. . . . Although I am inclined to think that the dream was a precognitive experience, we cannot completely exclude inference as an explanation for the dream. (p. 102)

Regarding the issue of the vividness of precognitive dreams, a topic to which he returned in later work, Stevenson argued that the issue deserved more careful investigation. He wrote: "We need a more detailed and quantitative comparison of the frequency of this characteristic in ordinary and precognitive dreams" (p. 103).

Stevenson (1963) reported a contemporary, apparently veridical dream about a plane crash experienced by a physician from Virginia, to whom he referred by the pseudonym of Dr. Rellum. In addition to the evidential aspects of the case, Stevenson returned to the issue of the importance of previous experiences and interests associated with veridical dreams. He found that Dr. Rellum had a lifelong interest in planes, having developed a deep interest in and a fear of

flying. Dr. Rellum had also witnessed three plane crashes in his lifetime. This experiential history, Stevenson speculated, may have created some associations that facilitated the expression of ESP when information received related to airplane crashes but not when other topics were involved. Stevenson wrote:

What I am suggesting is that percipients in psychical experiences will be especially liable to arousal in connection with topics of importance to them. . . . Dr. Rellum had an affinity for airplanes and airplane accidents derived from his life-long interest in aircraft and his witnessing of three serious airplane accidents. We can say that he had become sensitized to matters connected with airplanes. . . . Dr. Rellum's subliminal mind could have been alerted to the occurrence of a crash and then accorded it the greater attention required for a more detailed perception. (p. 192)

In these speculations Stevenson was influenced by the writings of W. H. C. Tenhaeff, among others (see also a later paper, Heywood & Stevenson, 1966).

Stevenson was also interested in both the accurate and the inaccurate images in Dr. Rellum's veridical dream. Stevenson thought it was "possible to suggest a source of each incorrect image of the dream in the percipient's earlier experiences with airplane crashes he had witnessed years before the dream" (p. 202).

Another important but somewhat forgotten contribution in this era in parapsychology's history when there were many surveys of psychic experiences is a survey Stevenson and a colleague conducted with Indian school children (Prasad & Stevenson, 1968). In the survey, they reported some similarities with previous studies of Western groups, including the facts that dreams and impression cases were more frequent than hallucinatory experiences, a high proportion of cases were related to death and serious events such as accidents, and relatives of the experiencers were involved.

In another project Stevenson analyzed cases of precognition of disasters (Stevenson, 1970d), both in previously published reports and in cases he had collected. Stevenson noticed that in previous studies dream experiences were often described as vivid and realistic and that symbolic representation was not frequent. However, "some precognitive dreamers have reported identifying symbols that are, for them, reliable indicators of future events" (p. 199). Regarding the effect of interests and the personal significance of the event to experiencers, Stevenson argued that the percipient's interests were indeed an important factor in the manifestations of these dreams. Finally, he offered an analysis of the specific features of the 125 dreams he had collected (see Table 1).

Stevenson's most important work on spontaneous ESP experiences appeared in his book *Telepathic Impressions: A Review and Report of 35 New Cases* (1970c). In the volume he explored imageless experiences in which the person had thoughts, feelings, emotions, physical symptoms, or raw impulses to take action which corresponded to a relevant event taking place at a distance.

The book was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of an analysis of 160 published cases drawn mainly from psychical research publications. Working before computers were widely used to analyze this type of data, Stevenson carefully compiled the details of each case, presenting most of them

TABLE 1
Features of 125 Precognitive Dreams Analyzed by Stevenson (1970d)

Feature	Percent
Vivid or realistic	45
Dreams occur two or more times with little variation	14
Percipient tried to prevent event	34
Symbolism present	13.5
Event was about	
Dreamer	49
Close relatives	31
Distant relatives, friends, acquaintances	11
Strangers	9

in a 12-page table. The table included a case number, the place where it was published, the sex of agents and percipients, the relationship of percipient to agent, the condition of the agent, whether the agent was focusing on the percipient at the time of the experience, whether the percipient was alone or with others, the number of additional details, whether action was taken by the percipient, whether the agent was identified by the percipient, whether an emotion was felt by the percipient, and additional remarks.

Stevenson found that 62.5% of the cases were reported as involving individual members of immediate families. Furthermore, the agent was frequently dying (41%) or in a serious condition caused by illness or an accident (41%). A smaller number of cases were reported in non-serious circumstances (18%). Another interesting finding was that some of the percipients took action because of their impressions. In fact, Stevenson found a statistically significant relationship suggesting that the percipient took action more often in those cases in which the agent focused on the percipient, as compared to cases without such focusing. He believed these results supported the idea that the agent played an active role in these experiences.

In the second part of the book Stevenson reported on his investigation of 35 new cases. One of them was reported by Mrs. Joicey Acker Hurth, resident of Wisconsin, in a letter written in October of 1968. She had sent her 5-year-old daughter to the local theater where she was to meet her father and brother and watch a Walt Disney movie with them. Mrs. Hurth wrote that she was washing the dishes when: "Quite suddenly while I held a plate on my hand an awesome feeling came over me. I dropped the plate, turned my eyes toward heaven and prayed aloud, 'Oh God, don't let her get killed!' For some unexplained reason I knew Joicey [the daughter] had been hit by a car or was going to be. I was quite conscious of her involvement in an accident" (pp. 61-62).

Mrs. Hurth was so convinced by her impression that she phoned the theater and asked if her girl was hurt. The theater manager confirmed that her daughter had indeed been hit by a car, but that she was all right and that her father was with her. Joicey (the daughter) later said that when she was hit she called for her mother.

In discussing the old and new cases Stevenson again argued that well-investigated cases could provide evidence for the existence of ESP. He noticed two types of cases. Typical cases seemed to consist of (1) awareness that someone was in danger at a distance; (2) a feeling or emotion about that awareness; and (3) an impulse to take action to help the person related to the experience. Other cases were incomplete, containing one or more of these features, but not all of them.

Stevenson also noted that some cases included additional details or imagery that occurred after the initial impression and conveyed new information. He also argued that in some cases, experiencers' description of the process resembled the act of remembering things that one knows but has forgotten, such as names.

The varieties of ways in which ESP manifested, as well as the reasons for such variation, fascinated Stevenson. He wrote:

As we have seen, some percipients experience an emotion, e.g., anxiety, or a physical symptom, e.g., pain, which resembles, or, as it were, copies the same condition in the agent. . . . Other percipients . . . initiate a response of their own, reacting, but not imitating, the condition of the agent. Thus we have percipients who are depressed and grieving over the death of the agent. And one percipient experienced joy in relation to her apparently paranormal awareness of her sister's death. . . . We also have percipients who may develop a physical illness, e.g., asthma, in response to a telepathically communicated stress in a loved agent. . . .

Why extrasensory communications find their way into conscious and manifest expression in these different ways in different people we do not yet understand. The analysis of a large number of cases might well show that imagery, for example, develops more readily in percipients who are good visual imagers in other aspects of life and that perhaps physical symptoms develop more readily in persons liable to react with physical symptoms to other types of stress. And, as I have suggested earlier, the imitative type of expression of a telepathic communication may occur more frequently in those given otherwise to strong identifications with other persons. These are questions of great importance. Their solution will require the investigation of large numbers of cases and the alliance in one person, or in several, of the skills of the student of spontaneous cases, of the clinical psychologist, and perhaps of the experimental parapsychologist. (pp. 147–148)

Concluding Remarks

We chose to emphasize aspects of Stevenson's work with spontaneous ESP experiences because we feel that this part of his legacy to parapsychology is sometimes forgotten in the emphasis on his survival-related studies, particularly those with children who claim to remember previous lives. This may be the case in part because, with one exception (Stevenson, 1992), Stevenson dropped ESP experience research early on, moving in later years to focus instead almost exclusively on reincarnation and other topics with implications for the question of survival of bodily death (e.g., Greyson & Stevenson, 1980; Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1974; Stevenson, 1975, 1984b).

It goes without saying that Stevenson was an important figure—one may say a leader—in the study of spontaneous ESP between 1960 and 1970. He provided

an important balance in parapsychology against those who emphasized laboratory work to the exclusion of all else. In addition, he also countered workers in the field—such as J. B. and Louisa Rhine—who reduced the importance of work with spontaneous ESP experiences to mere hypothesis-generation for experimental work. Furthermore, Stevenson’s interest in the imagery and prior experiences of percipients to some extent represents a link between modern parapsychology and the work of previous students of the qualitative aspects of ESP (e.g., Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886; Warcollier, 1938).

We believe that Stevenson’s work with ESP experiences is still relevant today, especially because it may guide a new generation to conduct process research on new cases. Much useful knowledge remains to be found using Stevenson’s methods and those of the pioneers in the qualitative study of ESP.

Stevenson’s body of research remains as a testament to the importance of the study of parapsychological phenomena as they occur in daily life. His work with ESP experiences—in keeping with his work on other topics—is an example of the profound influence a single committed individual can have on a field of study.

Notes

¹ Related to this work are Stevenson’s discussions of the evidential value of spontaneous cases (e.g., Stevenson, 1971a). Throughout his career he both defended the potential evidentiality of spontaneous cases and outlined appropriate methodologies (e.g., Stevenson, 1962c, 1971b, 1987a,b). Some of these discussions centered on cases of the reincarnation type (Stevenson, 1966, 1975). Stevenson repeatedly defended the validity of spontaneous case research against a variety of critics, including Michael Scriven (Stevenson, 1962a,b), Louisa E. Rhine (Stevenson, 1970a,b), and David Marks (Stevenson, 1986). In addition, he developed rating scales to study spontaneous cases (Stevenson, 1965b; Stevenson, Palmer, & Stanford, 1977).

² This is not to say that Stevenson was against experiments or that he did not conduct experimental work. For example, he was involved in experiments with medium Hafstein Bjornsson (Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1974) and psychic Pavel Stepanek (Pratt et al., 1968). He also conducted studies of psychic photography (Stevenson & Pratt, 1968) and discussed both criticisms of (Stevenson, 1967) and testimony about (Stevenson, 1974) experiments.

³ Other relevant work of the era includes Barker (1967); Dale, White, and Murphy (1962); Heywood (1955); Lambert (1961); Nicol and Nicol (1958); and Sannwald (1959). We are not including work with phenomena other than ESP experiences (e.g., Pratt & Roll, 1958).

⁴ During the 1960s Stevenson also examined published cases of individuals who claimed to remember previous lives (Stevenson, 1960a,b) and was busy investigating new cases (Stevenson, 1966) of this type. He also published cases of apparitions (Stevenson, 1964, 1965a). Among these, Stevenson (1962d) examined the description of an apparition said to have been seen by John Donne. He argued in a later communication that the case was most likely a fabrication (Stevenson, 1984a) and that it had also been reported by Gurney, Myers, and Podmore (1886: vol. 1:lxxix, 394n). In fact, the case has a longer citation history preceding the work of Gurney et al. (e.g., Aubrey, 1857: 72–74; Ferriar, 1813: 63).

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