

# Experimenting with mediumship

by Chris Connelly

I was interested to read in July's issue of PN about the experiment conducted with four mediums giving evidence to empty chairs prior to recipients choosing the particular chairs they would sit in. Having witnessed first-hand the quality of evidential mediumship of both Eileen Davies and Jackie Wright, I certainly agree that their work is of the highest calibre. I will only assume, not personally knowing either Brian Lynch or Paul Brereton, that they too are exceptional mediums.

## Science of Spiritualism

Continuing the theme of experimentation, I thought I would share with you an experiment that was conducted on 6th July at Eltham Spiritualist Church (pictured opposite) when I was invited to conduct a one-day seminar investigating the Science of Spiritualism.

The day started with a look at what is meant by the word 'science' and exploring the steps typically used in any scientific study. There is a vast body of scientific research which supports many of the activities typically found within psychic and mediumistic development circles, and within



Spiritualist churches. From psychometry to Spiritualist trance – all have been researched at some point in some country, often with favourable and positive conclusions drawn.

## 'Barnum' statements

After a short break the discussion led to addressing the common arguments aimed against Spiritualists mediums from the sceptic community. For example, that statements given are either generalisations which could apply to a

number of individuals within the group ('Barnum' statements); or that information is given which is elicited from the recipient through cold-reading techniques.

## The Eltham experiment

A very simple experiment was carried out to try to address these concerns. Obviously, the environment didn't permit compliance with the rigorous experimental controls one would expect to find in research establishments. Nevertheless the

procedure was very simple to follow and the results were interesting.

Ten participants were split into two groups of five. Group 1 consisted of participants that considered themselves able to give a mediumistic private sitting and hence became the test mediums. Group 2 consisted of participants who had never given a private sitting and did not consider themselves able to give a mediumistic private sitting. They were assigned the task of being cold readers.

## How the experiment works

At any one time, one member of Group 1 will be the medium under test and will give a private sitting to the participant to their left (the recipient), with the remaining three participants being observers. The recipient will tally the total number of statements made during the sitting and the total number of statements they could accept. During the sitting each observer also recorded the total number of statements that they too could accept.

The same set-up was used in Group 2, the only difference being that the participant under



test would try and give a private sitting through the process often referred to as cold reading. In other words they made statements based on visual clues such as their recipient's ethnicity, gender, age, manner of dress, jewellery, etc.

A maximum time of six minutes was given in any test-run. After each run the tally of the total, and accepted, statements from recipient and observers was recorded and tabulated, before the next member of the group (the recipient in the previous test run) took their turn to become medium or cold reader. In this way everyone become the participant under test, the recipient and observer.

### **Results exceeded chance**

The tallies from both groups were recorded to show for each test run whether any of the observers in the group

could accept more of the sitting than the recipient. With four participants tallying in each run (1x recipient and 3x observers) there would be a 1 in 4 ( $p=0.25$ ) chance in each run of the recipient tallying higher than the observers, but a 3 in 4 chance of any of the observers tallying higher.

Out of a total of five test runs we would expect by chance alone that only two out of the five recipients scored higher than the observers. This is the score we would expect Group 2 to achieve due to cold-reading techniques and a score which Group 1 (test mediums) should score if the statements given are no more than Barnum statements elicited through same cold reading techniques used by Group 2.

When we collated the results from both groups, we found Group 2 (cold readers) scored 2 out of 5 ( $p=0.0625$ ) – in other words only twice did the recipients tally higher

than the observers. This is precisely what we'd expect to find by chance and thus showed no significant ability above that of chance.

However when we looked at the results of Group 1 (test mediums) we found that in 4 out of 5 test runs ( $p=0.004$ ) the recipient tallied a higher score than the observers. This result is significantly higher than can be accounted for by chance alone and shows that something of interest is going on, which cannot be satisfactorily explained by the usual Barnum or cold-reading explanations.

Of course it's difficult with such a small number of test-runs to conclude anything concrete from the results obtained. But the fact remains that on 6<sup>th</sup> July the five Spiritualist mediums who took part in this small experiment delivered evidential statements for a period of six minutes each which when checked for accuracy with a specific recipient exceeded that

which would be expected from chance alone.

### **Criticism and feedback welcome**

As with all experiments, there will be many who will offer criticism of the methodology, highlighting potential biases and flaws in the experimental design. But I say "Bring it on!" I welcome any and all comments.

### **Try this experiment**

I believe that as a progressive movement we should welcome the opportunity to find our flaws and mistakes so that we can truly progress and remove ourselves from the illusory safety of our churches. I'd also welcome finding out the results obtained by anyone who carries out this experiment with their own church or circle group.