

Michael Daniels replies

25 November 2002

Dear Editor

Tom Ruffles makes four substantive critical points about the JSPR coverage of the "Brother Doli Case" (October 2002 issue).

- (1) The report does not address fully the implications of the varying accounts of the case by Rose-Mary Gower that have appeared on the Internet, which seem to be "tailored to the appropriate audience".
- (2) I do not seem to have interviewed anyone outside the family (e.g., the visitors whose possessions were engraved or embossed with Welsh words).
- (3) As shown in the evidence presented in the report, the credibility of the case is so highly suspect that it is doubtful whether it warrants such lengthy coverage in JSPR.
- (4) The Gowers are "active self-publicists" whose endeavours are furthered by coverage of the case in a scholarly journal.

My paper on the case provides the reader with addresses of all the main web sites that have featured accounts of the phenomena at the Gowers' home. It is true that I do not critically compare these various accounts. Several contain inaccuracies. However, they are not all written by Rose-Mary (as Mr Ruffles seems to suggest). In my opinion it serves no particular purpose to analyse these accounts. Similarly I have exercised some judgement in omitting certain incidental events from the paper in the interest of brevity. In my interviews with Rose-Mary and in her various writings on the case, I have detected no significant factual inconsistencies that cannot be attributed to normal lapses in memory. As was indicated by David Gower in his commentary, and as evidenced by some of the

Internet accounts, Rose-Mary does tend to embroider and dramatise her narrations in an attempt to make a good story. However, this is not necessarily evidence of a hoax, since it might be equally consistent with the personality and behaviour of someone who wished, for whatever reason, to publicise a case believed to be genuine.

The lack of independent testimony is a major weakness in the Brother Doli case. All of the apparitions (with the exception of the unverified vision allegedly experienced by the Dooleys) involve members of the family. Outsiders are involved only as unwitting recipients of e-mails, or by having personal belongings moved, lost or interfered with. I have not had the opportunity to interview the few individuals whose belongings were engraved or embossed, although I doubt that this would add anything of great significance.

The question of whether the case merits such a lengthy report in JSPR is, of course, a matter of editorial policy and judgment. For me, this question raises some interesting issues. Ironically, it seems that the detail I was able to present on the evidence has convinced Mr Ruffles that the case is fatally flawed and should not be taken seriously. Yet had I not presented this evidence fully, the case might well have appeared more credible, thus furthering the Gowers' alleged publicist agenda to an even greater extent.

In my opinion it is of vital importance that details of cases in which a hoax is suspected or demonstrated are published in the scholarly literature. This will enable researchers to gauge more effectively the ways in which hoaxing may operate and hence to the establishment of clearer guidelines for distinguishing genuine from fraudulent phenomena. Far from encouraging hoaxes, such detailed exposés should make the hoaxer's job both more difficult and less attractive.

In the area of experimental parapsychology it has become accepted that results of investigations should be published whether or not they produce positive indications of psi. This is primarily in order to counteract the so-called "file drawer problem" in which the publication of only positive outcomes would lead to an overestimation of the extent of psi.

The same kind of problem exists with research on spontaneous cases. On the one hand if only apparently “genuine” cases are reported, this may lead to over-confidence in the reality and extent of psychical phenomena. Much more importantly, however, such a policy effectively stifles research. Researchers will thus be less inclined to investigate cases if (as in most cases) there may be some doubts about the “genuineness” of the phenomena. No sensible researcher would wish to invest the considerable time necessary for a thorough investigation if publication was ruled out whenever results indicated a hoax or other natural explanation. Furthermore, if publication hinges upon a positive outcome, researchers may be less inclined to investigate the evidence critically, leading to general sloppiness or even, perhaps, a tendency to ignore or suppress evidence that undermines a paranormal explanation. Researchers in experimental parapsychology are both encouraged and disciplined by the knowledge that well-designed and relevant studies stand an equal chance of being published whether or not the results show evidence of psi. Psychical researchers, I believe, need the same kind of encouragement and discipline.

Mr Ruffles seems to draw the conclusion that the events at the Gowers’ home indicate an elaborate hoax. Such a conclusion is understandable on the basis of the detailed evidence I presented in the paper, and many readers may well agree with him. For the reasons I outlined and discussed, a hoax is a major possibility in this case. At this stage in the investigation, however, it is not the only explanation of events although it may indeed be the most compelling.

Sincerely,

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