Susan Blackmore

Susan Blackmore is a British psychologist, lecturer, author and broadcaster. Her main research interests have been consciousness, memetics and parapsychology. She is known as a sceptic of psi phenomena and has frequently appeared in the media promoting a non-paranormal view of out-of-body and near-death experiences. She is currently a visiting professor at the University of Plymouth.

Life and Career

Susan Jane Blackmore was born on 29 July 1951. She earned an honours baccalaureate in psychology and physiology in 1973 at Oxford University, followed by a masters in environmental psychology at the University of Surrey in 1974 and a PhD in parapsychology from the same university in 1980.

Blackmore has two children by her first husband, Tom Troscianko, whom she married in 1977 and divorced in 2009.1 She is now married to writer and broadcaster Adam Hart-Davis.2 While raising her children, she worked at freelance writing and media appearances, and lectured part-time at two English universities. In 1992 she began lecturing on psychology full-time at the University of the West of England.

Blackmore is well-regarded for her book *The Meme Machine*, an exploration of the science of memes. Other interests include artificial intelligence, consciousness, evolutionary processes, free will (which she believes does not exist), lucid dreams, sleep paralysis, spirituality, atheism, religion, Zen and meditation. She approaches spiritual experiences, including near-death and out-of-body experiences, from a secular perspective.

An early believer in psi, she became a convinced sceptic following her PhD research, having failed to find evidence of psi in her own experiments. Her 1993 book *Dying to Live* is an influential explanation of the near-death experience in materialist terms.

Once a Council member of the Society for Psychical Research, she is now a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (formerly the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal).

Her full *curriculum vitae* may be found on her website here.

Blackmore has written extensively about her work in parapsychology and the development of her thought. Much of this introspective material can be found on her website.

Early Psi Beliefs

At Oxford, Blackmore headed the student psychical research society. During this time she had a vivid out-of-body experience which, she has written, 'lasted about three hours and included everything from a typical 'astral projection', complete with silver cord and duplicate body, to free-floating flying, and finally to a mystical experience…'.[3] She further writes:

> I (or some imagined flying "I") set off across Oxford, over the country, and way beyond. For more than two hours I explored strange scenes, entered mystical states beyond space and time, and ultimately lost my self … It was an extraordinary and life-changing experience. Everything seemed brighter and more real than ordinary life; something seemed to tell me that this mattered more than anything else.[4]

At this time she considered ESP to be 'a perfectly natural process':

> All information about anything that ever happened was stored in some way 'out there'. It was something like the Akashic Record I had learned about in my fairly extensive occult studies – a world of 'thought forms'. Anyone could access any of them. If you accessed events directly it was clairvoyance; someone else's thoughts and it was telepathy; your own it was memory. Memory was therefore a special case of ESP'.[5]

When Blackmore left Oxford, she realized she would not get a grant to study parapsychology, so she funded her way through her PhD by taking a part-time job, and also worked for a few months at a parapsychology lab in Utrecht, Holland.[6] Her (unpublished) thesis, titled 'Extrasensory Perception as a Cognitive Process',[7] recounts her attempt to test her theory through experimentation. According to her, testing her ideas proved impossible as her experiments produced no evidence of ESP at all, by her interpretation, no matter what procedures were tried.[8] She writes:

> It is probably for that work that I am most loved or hated because it overthrew my prior beliefs in everything and anything paranormal and set me off on a far more skeptical path.[9]

Parapsychological Research

Out-of-Body Experiences

Reflecting on her earlier out-of-body experience (OBE), Blackmore began to research the phenomenon, for which she was awarded the Perrott-Warrick Studentship in Psychical Research. 'Instead of looking to the red herring of psi to answer my questions I tried to work out what had happened during those few hours', she writes.[10] She developed several theories, tested them and ultimately concluded:

> I no longer think anything leaves the body in an OBE. Rather it is the brain's attempt to construct a convincing "model of reality" from memory and imagination when its sensory input has failed to provide one.[11]

Following her PhD, Blackmore ran two surveys of university students on the incidence of out-of-body experiences and lucid dreaming.[12] In the first, 13% of 217 responders reported having had at least one out-of-body experience (OBE), while 79% reported having had lucid dreams. In the second, 14% of the 115 responders reported OBEs, and 73% reported having had lucid dreams. In the first study, OBEs and lucid dreams tended to be reported by the same respondents, but this was not the case in the second survey. In neither study were OBEs or lucid dreams related to frequency of dream recall.

Further tests aimed at exploring a relationship between the ability to visualize images and their reported experiences found no relationship, confirming earlier findings.[13] Blackmore concedes that this appears to weaken her argument that such experiences are purely psychological in nature, but advises against rushing to accept this conclusion, pointing to the study's limitations.[14]

Paranormal Belief

Blackmore has investigated probability judgment as a possible basis of paranormal belief. 'As soon as I found myself dropping many of my own beliefs I began to wonder why so many people do believe in telepathy, clairvoyance and so on,' she writes. Her surveys revealed that the main reason was personal experience, for which she then searched for a normal explanation, surmising that a person with poor judgment of probability might underestimate the likelihood of a seemingly anomalous occurrence. In testing, she claims her prediction – that people who believe in the paranormal have poorer probability judgment than those who do not – 'largely held'.[15]

In a 1985 study, Blackmore tested the sceptical hypothesis that paranormal belief originates as an inability to process probabilities in an accurate manner. In two experiments, participants completed various computer-controlled probability tasks. In the first study believers in the paranormal performed worse than disbelievers on most tasks and were significantly worse at responding appropriately to changes in sample size. In the second experiment believers were significantly worse at questions involving sampling.[16]

However, a further study reported in 1997 appeared to cast doubt on the sceptical hypothesis. Blackmore published a questionnaire in the *Daily Telegraph* asking respondents to identify as paranormal believers or non-believers and state which of ten statements (such as, I have a cat, I have a scar on my left knee) was true for them.[17] They then estimated the number of statements likely to be true for others. Probability misjudgement theories that are used to explain paranormal belief predict that people should underestimate the number of statements true for others, and that believers should underestimate more than non-believers. 6,238 replies were received, of which 59% were from believers and 52% from males. There was a strong gender correlation: 70% of females were believers compared with 48% of males. The study failed to confirm the prediction. On average 2.4 statements were true for each person but against prediction, believers over-estimated statement correspondences for others, while believers were no worse than non-believers at estimating the distribution of the number of true statements.

Earlier, Blackmore tested a second sceptical hypothesis, that psi-believers are more likely to believe they have control over a process that is actually beyond human control. She arranged for participants to try to influence a computer-controlled coin-tossing task. Half the trials allowed for subject control of the coin and half did not. The experiment showed that believers felt they exercised greater control than disbelievers, regardless of the level of actual control, but estimated they had scored fewer hits. Blackmore surmised that this could be explained if believers misjudged the baseline chance scoring level. Further testing found that psi-believers underestimated chance scores, a 'chance baseline shift' that could underlie the illusion of control and the belief in psi.[18]

Near Death Experience Tunnel Experience

Blackmore studied near death experiences (NDEs), drawing together threads such as OBEs, the 'tunnel experience', life reviews, hallucinations and mystical experiences, and compiled this research into the book *Dying to Live*. Trying to explain all aspects of the NDE without recourse to the paranormal, she conceived a theory, 'that there was no one there to die in the first place':

> It is the illusion that we are a separate self that makes us find a mystery in the relationship between mind and body and fuels the search for evidence that we survive death.[19]

Blackmore posits several approaches to the tunnel experience: the idea of a real tunnel; representations of transition; reliving birth memories; imagination; and the function and physiology of the visual cortex. Blackmore concludes that all these in combination can account for much of the phenomenology of the tunnel experience, and that they can lead to testable predictions.[20]

Imagination and Psi

Blackmore explored folkloric observations of a link between confusional and imaginative states of consciousness and psychic ability: if a relationship exists, is it because such confusions lead people to mistake normal events for paranormal occurrences, or because they enhance psi in some way. She ran an experiment designed to induce false memories of pictures of objects. Thirty three participants were shown slides of actual objects and were also asked to imagine other specified objects that they were not shown. The participants were not aware that half of the imagined objects, randomly chosen for each person, were also acting as targets in a clairvoyance task. Blackmore found no correlation between the number of false memories and paranormal belief, against the sceptical hypothesis. There were significantly more false memories of target objects than non-target objects, appearing to indicate that confusing reality and imagination may be psi-conducive.[21] However, when Blackmore tried to replicate this finding several years later she was unsuccessful.[22]

Healing Pendants

Blackmore and Rose tested claims by alternative medicine practitioners that a pendant can provide health benefits, including reduced stress, increased hand

strength, and protection from electromagnetic radiation from household appliances. She ran three experiments to test the hypothesis that the pendant's supposed effects arose through a bioelectric shield. In the first, twelve participants who work with computers wore one or other of two pendants, one with claimed healing potential and one without, being tested regularly for hand strength and mood changes over several weeks. She found both types of pendant increased calmness, but the 'real' pendants did not have a greater effect.

In two further studies, each with forty participants, hand strength was measured in relation to the use of mobile phones, again using both types of pendants. No effect difference was found. Both studies showed a significant relationship between change in strength with and without the pendant and participant belief in alternative medicine. Blackmore concluded that the pendants appeared to produce a measurable placebo effect but were otherwise ineffective.[23]

Criticism and Controversy

A critique of Blackmore's work has been written by parapsychologist Rick E Berger of the Science Unlimited Research Foundation in San Antonio, Texas, USA. While drafting a review of a book by Blackmore, he was struck by patterns suggestive of statistical significance in her psi experiments. Reviewing her unpublished experimental data, he found discrepancies between it and her published works, and other issues. So-called 'flaws' were engineered to dismiss significant results, he claimed, while other flaws were ignored in studies that produced non-significant results.

Berger asserted that Blackmore's change of viewpoint, claimed by her to be the result of ten years of careful experimentation,[24] actually resulted from experiments done between October 1976 and December 1978 for her dissertation, and that in fact she was entirely sceptical already by 1977 as evidenced by her own account. He writes 'the vast majority of her studies were carelessly designed, executed, and reported, and, in Blackmore's own assessment, individually flawed', concluding that no conclusions should be drawn from this database without a careful meta-analysis of the source material.[25]

On the other hand, Berger argued, 30% of Blackmore's experiments actually reported significant results, contradicting her claims of negative findings throughout.[26]

Responding to Berger's allegations, Blackmore conceded that 'one cannot draw conclusions about the reality of psi based on these experiments'.[27]

Nonetheless, Berger notes, 'Blackmore is extremely vocal in decrying psi research in her writings, on television and radio, and before the sceptical advocacy group CSICOP, citing her own work as the basis for her strong convictions'.[28] Parapsychologist Chris Carter writes, 'Blackmore has made a career for herself as one of the world's most well known skeptics of psi'.[29]

Carl Sargent

In the early 1980s, Carl Sargent was a leading ganzfeld ESP researcher, responsible for around half of significant studies then extant. In 1987, Blackmore published a critique, based on a visit to Sargent's laboratory eight years earlier, arguing that the results could have been fraudulent.30 The full journal article can be read here. Blackmore describes the incident in more personal terms in her 1996 autobiography.31

In a rebuttal, Sargent argued that Blackmore's original paper, written in 1979 and privately circulated, differed in certain details from the paper published in 1987, which had a markedly more sceptical tone.32 He claimed to find errors of fact in her observations and pointed out that her testimony was uncorroborated while his own was backed by witnesses. He took issue with her claim that her attempts to discover fraud, which including searching an office and making covert checks, were 'simple and unobtrusive'. He argued that fraudulent manoeuvres she claimed to expose could not have affected the result positively and that she failed to mention factors that ruled out fraud. Contradicting her objection that he failed to make his data available for reanalysis, he pointed out that during her visit she had spent an afternoon going through it and making statistical analyses.

Sargent also complained that, while at the time she accepted his and his associates' explanations for inconsistencies, she later 'spread defamatory rumours and insinuations of fraud'.

Subsequently, Sargent refused to co-operate in further investigation and abandoned the field shortly afterwards. His co-experimenter Trevor Harley continued to assert his support of Sargent's rebuttal in a communication.33

Works

Books

Parapsychology and Out-of-the-Body Experiences (1978). Hove, UK: Transpersonal Books.

Beyond the Body: An Investigation into Out-of-Body Experiences (1982). London: Heinemann.

Dying to Live: Science and the Near Death Experience (1993). London: Grafton. Sample chapter [Web page]

Test Your Psychic Powers (1995, with A. Hart-Davis). London: Thorsons.

In Search of the Light: The Adventures of a Parapsychologist (1996). Amherst, New York, USA: Prometheus Books.

Seeing Myself: The New Science of Out-of-Body Experiences (2017). London: Robinson.

Book Chapters

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Giving up ghosts and gods (2009). In *Voices of Disbelief,* ed. by R. Blackford & U. Schuklenk, 200-3. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

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Why I had to change my mind (2010). In *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behaviour,* ed. by R. Gross, 86-87. London: Hodder Education.

Thesis

Extrasensory Perception as a Cognitive Process (1980). [PhD thesis, University of Surrey.]

A comprehensive list of Blackmore's publications can be found here.

Videos and Audio Files

Interviews and podcasts may be found on Blackmore's website (along with readings), divided by topic, e.g., Near-Death Experiences, Out-of-Body Experiences, Paranormal Belief, Skepticism and Parapsychology and others. There is an extensive listing of Videos and podcasts, TV appearances, radio appearances, audio CDs and interviews here.

KM Wehrstein & Michael Duggan

Literature

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Blackmore, S. (1987b). A report of a visit to Carl Sargent's laboratory. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 54, 186-98.

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Rose, N., & Blackmore, S. (2001). Are false memories psi-conducive? *Journal of Parapsychology* 65/1, 125-44.

Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1. Blackmore (2018).
- 2. Blackmore (1992).
- 3. Blackmore (2001).
- 4. Blackmore (2010).
- 5. Blackmore (1992).
- 6. Blackmore (1992).
- 7. Blackmore (2018).
- 8. See Blackmore (1980), 2.
- 9. Blackmore (1992).
- 10. Blackmore (1992).
- 11. Blackmore (1992). For her further writings on OBEs see here.
- 12. Blackmore (1982).
- 13. Irwin (1980).
- 14. Blackmore (1982), 310-12.
- 15. Blackmore (1992). Example publications are given.
- 16. Blackmore & Trościanko (1985).
- 17. Blackmore (1997).
- 18. Blackmore & Trościanko (1985).
- 19. Blackmore (1992). For her further writings on NDEs see here.
- 20. Blackmore & Trościanko (1989).
- 21. Blackmore & Rose (1997).
- 22. Blackmore & Rose (2001).
- 23. Blackmore & Rose (2002).
- 24. E.g., the title 'The elusive open mnd: Ten years of negative research in parapsychology.' (Blackmore, 1987a).
- 25. Berger (1989).
- 26. Berger (1990).
- 27. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* 83, 1989. cited by Carter (n.d.).
- 28. Berger (1989), section 'Conclusions'.
- 29. Carter (n.d.).
- 30. Blackmore (1987b).
- 31. Blackmore (1996).
- 32. Sargent (1987).
- 33. Harley, June 2019. Personal communication.