

Psychic Detection

Psychics are often involved in police work, helping to solve crimes and trace missing persons. Their record is mixed, with striking successes offset by complete failures. Some police officers and organizations deny that psychic detection is helpful; others acknowledge its usefulness, although more as an aid to conventional detection methods than as a means to solve cases outright.

Early Claims

An early account of psychic detection appears in the Bible's Book of Samuel,^{[1](#)} where Saul pays a local seer to help find missing livestock. Stories of spirits communicating the names of their murderers are found in the folklore of ancient cultures from Rome to China.^{[2](#)} The identification of criminals was often carried out by shamans in tribal cultures, and by 'cunning men' or 'wise women' in medieval times.^{[3](#)}

A story is told of the disappearance of a young Englishwoman, Anne Walker, in 1631. A miller in a nearby town was reportedly visited by her ghost, who said she had been murdered with a pickaxe by a man hired by her uncle and her body thrown down a well. The miller reported this to the authorities, who searched the well and found the body. The uncle and the killer were tried and hanged in 1632.^{[4](#)} In 1693, a French abbot published an account of Jacques Aymar, a wealthy peasant famed for his dowsing abilities, who led police to the murderer of a wine merchant and his wife in Lyons.^{[5](#)}

A comprehensive history of psychic detection is given in the book *The Blue Sense* (1991) by Arthur R Lyons and Marcello Truzzi.^{[6](#)}

Methods

Psychic detectives employ a variety of methods:

- dreams during which the psychic experiences emotion, knowledge or images of events related to a crime, or perceptions that contain crime-related information^{[7](#)}
- dowsing or divining, used for locating bodies and missing persons and objects, most often with a map and a pendulum.^{[8](#)}
- psychometry, in which impressions about a crime are picked up from objects associated with it or with the victim^{[9](#)}
- clairvoyance or remote viewing, the perception of images beyond the limitations of time and space^{[10](#)}
- mediumship, in which information about a murder is provided by the spirit of the victim or other discarnates (for instance, the cases of Anne Walker, above, and Jacqueline Poole, below)^{[11](#)})

Psychics may have particular abilities, such as finding corpses generally (John Catchings),^{[12](#)} finding the corpses of those who died in specific ways such as by

drowning (Greta Alexander),[13](#) or tracing missing children (Kathlyn Rhea).[14](#)

Psychics can help law enforcement by providing descriptive information about crime scenes and motives[15](#) and about potential new suspects. This can include verbal information including names, and visual descriptions embellished by sketches made by the psychic or by a police artist using the psychic's description.[16](#) Some psychics, such as Dixie Yeterian, prefer to visit the crime scene; others, such as Greta Alexander and Noreen Renier, work at a distance.[17](#)

Some psychics, working with a type of retrocognitive telepathy, see the crimes from the perpetrator's perspective. Dorothy Allison says that what she does is 'hop on the killer and stick with him every minute of his life'.[18](#) Others relive crimes from the victim's point of view. Renier writes:

I have had my throat slit. I have been shot, knifed, stabbed, raped, drowned, and strangled. I have been inside the last moments of many murder victims. I feel their pain, I speak their words, I live their deaths. I see the faces of their murderers, and sometimes I become them. I don't like to get killed more than two or three times a week – it's just too exhausting.[19](#)

Other occupational hazards include public ridicule; the threat from killers still at large (Dixie Yeterian survived two murder attempts);[20](#) and being arrested by police who cannot believe the psychic could have access to the information about a crime without having been involved in it (as happened to Etta Smith, who successfully sued for wrongful arrest).[21](#)

Sample Cases

Jacqueline Poole (Christine Holohan)

Jacqueline Poole was murdered in her West London flat in 1983.

Psychic Christine Holohan lived three miles away and on the night of the murder claimed to have seen the apparition of a woman, who gave her name as 'Jacqui Hunt' (Poole's maiden name) and details about the murder. Holohan contacted the police and gave 131 separate statements, including descriptions of the murder scene whose accuracy impressed the first detective who arrived there, Tony Batters. Holohan also gave a detailed description of the murderer's appearance and used automatic writing to give his nickname, identifying him.

The detectives were unable to obtain sufficient evidence and the case remained unsolved until eighteen years later, when the development of DNA technology allowed the case to be reopened. A pullover belonging to the man Holohan had identified as the murderer had been kept, and upon examination produced conclusive forensic evidence. He was convicted and jailed for life. Batters avowed that without the information given by Holohan, the detectives would not have retrieved and preserved the pullover or ascertained the murderer's movements around the time of the murder.

Parapsychologists [Guy Lyon Playfair](#) and [Montague Keen](#) conducted interviews with Batters, Holohan and others, and examined their notes. They concluded that no normal explanation could account for the accuracy of Holohan's statements, which were all relevant to the case and correct with a single exception.[22](#)

Mary Cousett (Greta Alexander)

Mary Cousett vanished in April 1983 near her home in Alton, Illinois, USA. Her boyfriend, Stanley Holliday, was arrested for her murder, but no case could be made against him in the absence of her body, and this could not be found. Asked for assistance, psychic Greta Alexander identified a location by means of map dowsing. The area had already been searched, but a new team was sent and the body was found. 22 of 24 statements made by Alexander were determined to be correct. Holliday was convicted and police credited Alexander publicly for her achievement.[23](#)

Mayme Knight and Edna Imkin (John Catchings)

John Catchings acquired a reputation throughout the US for finding bodies, as the following two cases exemplify.

In 1985, Catchings was asked to help locate 74-year-old Mayme Knight, who had wandered from a home in Hempstead, Texas, USA. He led police to a swampy field two miles from the home; her body was found less than fifty feet from the point he had indicated. In 1981, he was credited by a Texas sheriff with having found 74-year-old Edna Imkin, who had been missing for six weeks, indicating a portion of a field that had already been searched, but where the body was eventually found.[24](#)

Yorkshire Ripper (Nella Jones)

The 'Yorkshire Ripper' carried out thirteen brutal murders of women in northern England between October 1975 and January 1981. Bereft of leads, the police consulted medium Doris Stokes, who provided just one hit among many misses, that the murderer was a truck driver. Information provided by other psychics proved similarly useless. Discouraged by their poor performance, police ignored clues provided by psychic Nella Jones, which were put on record in early 1980, that the killer was a truck driver from Bradford named Peter, who worked for a company whose name started with a 'C', and lived in a house with number '6' on the door and reached by a flight of steps – all of which were true of the murderer, Peter Sutcliffe, who was eventually caught by non-psychic means. Jones also accurately predicted the date of the next (and last) murder.[25](#)

Experiments

Psychic detection has fared poorly in controlled experiments.

In 1960, Dutch police officer Filippus Brink performed a study in which psychics were shown photos and objects and asked to describe related crimes. He concluded that they provided no useful information.[26](#)

In 1979, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) tested twelve reputable psychics from the local area. Four crimes, two solved and two unsolved, were used as test material; physical evidence from each crime was placed in sealed envelopes. The psychics were asked for information about the contents and then, upon opening them, asked for information based on the contents. The researchers concluded that the hypothesis that psychics can provide significant additional information in crime solving was not supported, although they observed that the psychics tended to be accurate with regard to the sexes of suspects and victims and the type of crime committed. The study has been widely cited as disproving claims with regard to psychic detection.[27](#)

Lyons and Truzzi identified potentially serious flaws in the study, including the failure to distinguish between wrong answers and absent answers.[28](#) In 1994, one of its authors, Martin Reiser, responded by publishing the findings of another experiment.[29](#) Here the psychics were split into two teams of four and eight, and there were two control groups, one formed of homicide detectives and one of college students. No significant difference was found in accuracy levels of information provided by the groups. However, critics argued that the scoring was done the same crude way and that the psychics in both experiments lacked police endorsements or track records, also that no consideration was made of the possibility that the students and detectives might have exercised their own latent psychic ability.[30](#) As the authors of the first experiment conceded, the samples they used were 'limited and may not be generalizable to all psychics or to all cases'.[31](#)

In 1994, the producers of [Arthur C Clarke's Mysterious Universe](#), a television documentary on the paranormal, invited British sceptic [Richard Wiseman](#) and parapsychologist [Donald West](#) to test three professional British psychics, one of whom had been endorsed by a police department.[32](#) The experimenters asked the psychics and a control group of students to handle objects that had been involved in solved crimes and voice any information that came to them. They were then presented with eighteen statements about the crimes, of which six were true about each crime but untrue about the others, and asked to match them to the crimes. On both measures, both psychics and students performed at chance level.[33](#) This study was criticized for the absence of motivation, which many psychics claim drive their ability and which was missing with the use of solved crimes.[34](#)

In a study published in 2000, Ciaran O'Keeffe and Laurence Alison asked eight psychics and twelve control participants to examine objects related to crimes and read for the characteristics of the offender. The psychics attained no more accurate results than the controls. But the hypothesis actually being tested was whether the psychics would use 'cold reading' techniques: statements that are vague or ambiguous statements, likely to be true or seek to acquire information from the questioner, along with characteristics such as false modesty, melodrama and the projection of confidence. This was confirmed by the analysis.[35](#)

Scepticism

Sceptics of paranormal phenomena have heavily criticized claims of psychic detection. A 1994 anthology, *Psychic Sleuths: ESP and Sensational Cases*, edited by

sceptical writer Joe Nickell, claims to debunk the work of psychics Peter Hurkos, Gerard Croiset, Dorothy Allison, Noreen Renier, Bill Ward, Rosemarie Kerr, Phil Jordan, Greta Alexander and others.³⁶ The book was positively reviewed by Brian Davies³⁷ and negatively by Marcello Truzzi, whose co-authored work *The Blue Sense* Nickell criticized for appearing to endorse some psychics thought it negatively assessed others). Referring to his own characterization of Nickell and other debunkers as 'deniers rather than doubters', Truzzi writes:

Though we clearly indicated that psi remained unproved rather than disproved, for 'true disbelievers' like Baker and Nickell a position of 'undecided' seems intolerable. It must therefore be classified as too friendly to the opposition and thus located within the believers' camp ... This mindset permeates much of Nickell's book, and it is a perspective that not only distorts the position of opponents but also produces blind spots that made Nickell and his collaborators neglect to apply the same critical analysis used against opponents to works congruent with their own biases.³⁸ &&

Police Attitudes

Police share the wide spectrum of opinions about psychic ability found among the general population.

A survey by Jane Ayers Sweat and Mark W Durm, published in 1993 in *Skeptical Inquirer*, quizzed the police departments of the fifty largest American cities about whether they used psychics. (The study did not distinguish current and regular use from occasional, experimental or past use.) Of 48 departments that responded to this question, 31 (65%) answered no while seventeen (35%) answered yes. The authors warned of a possible 'underrater bias', since to admit to the use of psychics could be viewed negatively.³⁹

Invited to comment, many respondents said that psychics were useless and sometimes hampered the investigation. Others said psychics had helped locate bodies, informed police that a missing child had been murdered and how, and described potential suspects. None considered information provided by psychics more useful than other information. One said, 'it depends on which psychic was used'.⁴⁰

A second study by Sweat and Durm quizzed police departments in 75 medium and 75 small American municipalities. Results were similar to the large-city survey, with 27% and 19% of the departments respectively reporting they had used psychics and that the information was no more useful than information acquired by normal means.⁴¹

In 1993, Detective Bruce Walstad surveyed 263 police officers attending fraud seminars. Of these officers, 36% agreed they would personally use a psychic in an investigation, 6% said that their departments currently used psychics, 23% said that they had used one or more in the past, and 14% said that psychic information had helped solve cases.⁴²

All three surveys showed that psychics were most often used in cases of homicide and missing persons.[43](#)

Psychics themselves claim that they are used more than police admit. Deborah Schurman-Kauflin, a retired criminal profiler and psychic, wrote in *Psychology Today*: 'I even know a homicide lieutenant who used a psychic to locate a body only to say he'd never admit that publicly for fear of ridicule'.[44](#) Speaking with police, parapsychologist and mentalist Loyd Auerbach reportedly found that 'they are usually fearful of openly admitting that a psychic has played a major role in an investigation, but privately can be much more forthcoming'.[45](#) Truzzi notes that anyone knowledgeable about police use of psychics is aware that they tend to be used informally or unofficially only. 'In fact', Truzzi notes, 'my files contain many news stories of psychic detection cases, including even interviews with the police involved, in several cities whose departments had told Sweat and Durm that they had never used a psychic'.[46](#) Lyons and Truzzi quote one detective, Robert Mallwitz of Strutevant, Wisconsin, US as saying (emphasis original), 'I talk to cops from all over. They *all* use psychics. It's about time this part of the country woke up'.[47](#)

Authors Jane Randles and Peter Hough note that police can have unrealistic expectations of psychics, expecting information they offer to be as detailed and verifiable as from a crime lab, or for them to be able to turn on their ability 'like a tap'.[48](#) Even on their best days, psychics often receive information in fragmented form that needs to be interpreted carefully; most agree that it is in the interpretation stage that most errors are made. Psychic detection tends to be more successful when the psychic has a spontaneous vision or realization than when they try to respond to questions.[49](#)

Pursuing a high-profile case, a police department might be contacted by thousands of people saying claiming to be psychic and providing purported leads, each of which the department is obliged to follow, wasting time and resources. For this reason, police prefer not to use psychics with such cases unless they are already registered on a list of informants of proven ability.[50](#)

Some police departments have created written guidelines for using psychics. A book-length work *Psychic Criminology* by private investigators Whitney Hibbard and Raymond Worring, was criticized for using only anecdotal material and failing to properly cover the parapsychological literature in chapters discussing psychic abilities, scientific evidence and theories; however, it was also praised for its voluminous chapters of practical advice, with instructions on how to identify, recruit, test and work with psychics, drawing on the authors' extensive experience, and interspersed with case studies.[51](#) *Psychic Criminology* was republished twenty years later in expanded form with the help of a third author, Richard Brennan, adding a new section on remote viewing, new documented case histories and critique of paranormal criticism. A sample 'Intuitive Investigation Report Form' and a glossary are also included.[52](#)

Police say that psychics tend to overstate their success rates as being in the region of 80-90%. A more realistic view, voiced by Dixie Yeterian, is that 'my success rate is high in giving information leading to solutions. But as far as actually solving the cases, my rate is not high'.[53](#) Psychologist Louise Ludwig, who worked with many

psychic detectives, is quoted as saying, 'a good psychic can hit 20-25%; on a good day 40%; and on the best day of his life, 80%'.⁵⁴ Noreen Renier states that a psychic should be called on for assistance only 'as a last resort, when traditional methods have been exhausted'.⁵⁵

Video

The television show *Psychic Detectives* (aka *Psychic Investigators*) was aired on Court TV, now TruTV, a crime-oriented American cable channel owned by Turner Broadcasting, running from 2004 to 2008. The show recounts cases in which psychics aided police in solving cases, but does not formally investigate them. An episode guide can be seen [here](#). Many episodes can now be found on YouTube, viz:

- [Psychic Detectives playlist](#) on YouTube
- [Psychic Investigators episodes](#) on YouTube

[New Thinking Allowed](#) with [Jeffrey Mishlove](#) has produced several videos on psychic detection including:

- [Psychic Criminology with Nancy du Tertre](#), published 12 December 2015
- [Psychic Detectives](#) with [Stephan A Schwartz](#), 'Video Nugget' published 16 August 2018

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). 1 Samuel 9.
- [2](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 14-15.
- [3](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 17.
- [4](#). Bourn (1810).
- [5](#). Lorrain (1693).
- [6](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 24-41.
- [7](#). See Randles & Hough (2001), 59-66.
- [8](#). See Randles & Hough (2001), 80-83.
- [9](#). See Randles & Hough (2001), 83-90.
- [10](#). See Randles & Hough (2001), 91-7.
- [11](#). See also Randles & Hough (2001), 84-5.
- [12](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 80-81.
- [13](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 81.
- [14](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 81-2.
- [15](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 90-91.
- [16](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 91-3.
- [17](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 76-7.
- [18](#). Cited by Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 77.
- [19](#). Renier (2008), xiii.
- [20](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 76 and Randles & Hough (2001), 239-47.
- [21](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 4. See also [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) starting at 18:22.
- [22](#). Playfair & Keen (2004). All information on the Poole case is drawn from this paper.
- [23](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 202-10.
- [24](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 80-81.
- [25](#). Randles & Hough (2001), 188-96.
- [26](#). Brink (1960).
- [27](#). Reiser, Ludwig, Saxe & Wagner (1979).
- [28](#). Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 60.
- [29](#). Reiser & Klyver, 1994.
- [30](#). Truzzi (1994), 434-5.
- [31](#). Reiser & Klyver (1982), 265.
- [32](#). The episode linked to is not complete, however it contains the full experiment.

- [33.](#) Wiseman, West & Stemman (1996).
- [34.](#) Stanford (2000), 218.
- [35.](#) O'Keeffe & Alison (2000).
- [36.](#) Nickell (1994).
- [37.](#) Davies (1995).
- [38.](#) Truzzi (1994), 433-4.
- [39.](#) Sweat & Durm (1993).
- [40.](#) Sweat & Durm (1993).
- [41.](#) Sweat & Durm (1994).
- [42.](#) Walstad (1993).
- [43.](#) Eastwood & Snook (2006), 14.
- [44.](#) Schurman-Kauflin (2012).
- [45.](#) Randles & Hough (2001). 174.
- [46.](#) Truzzi (1994), 439.
- [47.](#) Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 105.
- [48.](#) Randles & Hough (2001), 174.
- [49.](#) Randles & Hough (2001), 174.
- [50.](#) Randles & Hough (2001), 175.
- [51.](#) Hibbard & Worring, (1982). See Hansen (1982).
- [52.](#) Hibbard, Worring & Brennan (2002).
- [53.](#) Cited in Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 211.
- [54.](#) Cited in Lyons & Truzzi (1991), 211.
- [55.](#) Cited on her [website](#).