Psychic Detectives: A Critical Examination

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A casual reader of American newspapers and supermarket tabloids would draw the conclusion that American law-enforcement agencies routinely consult "psychics." Such a reader might be excused for wondering how criminals can hope to escape detection in the face of so much paranormal firepower. Digging a little deeper, our reader would even find learned treatises advocating the police use of psychics and recounting the amazing successes of these "psychic detectives." So the case for psychic detectives is conclusively proved? I don't think so.

Psychics Versus the Record

In 1989, I collaborated with two graduate students in the Department of Forensic Sciences at George Washington University on a critical examination of the purported achievements of so-called psychic detectives. My colleagues were both members of the U.S. Army Military Police Corps. Captain Eric L. Provost is now executive officer of the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Laboratory in Camp Zama, Japan. Chief Warrant Officer Jeanette Clark is a U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Division (CID) investigator with many years experience in criminal investigations. We decided to concentrate on psychics who had been recently active in the United States; my colleagues would contact police officials who had supposedly worked with the psychic detectives and solicit their candid appraisal of the contributions the psychics made to their investigations. The psychic detectives chosen for evaluation were selected mainly from the works of Charles R. Farabee (1981) and

A check into the assertions of some police 'psychics' finds serious problems with their stories and alternative explanations for their claims.

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Whitney S. Hibbard and Raymond W. Worring (1982), along with others whose abilities have been touted in newspapers and popular magazines. In some cases, we were also able to interview the psychic detectives themselves and obtain samples of their press clippings.

Many of the false claims regarding the psychic abilities of Peter Hurkos have been exposed by Piet Hein Hoebens (1985). Hurkos provided American police with information in major cases, such as the Boston Strangler case (which Norma Lee Browning's *The Psychic World of Peter Hurkos* credits Hurkos with solving) and the Sharon Tate murders. In fact, Hurkos did not solve the Boston Strangler case, and the information he provided in the Sharon Tate murders was not merely useless but also hopelessly incorrect. According to Ed Sanders in his book *The Family*:

Mr. Hurkos crouched down in the bloodstained living room, picking up the vibes. . . . After his void-scan Mr. Hurkos announced that "three men killed Sharon Tate and her four friends and I know who they are. I have identified the killers to the police and told them that these three men must be stopped soon. Otherwise, they will kill again."

The facts are that only three of the victims could reasonably have been called friends of Sharon Tate. The remaining victim was visiting the caretaker and was killed because he happened on the crime in progress. More important, the killers were two women and one man (a third woman acted as lookout). The killers were already in police custody (although not for the Tate murders). Nor was the Sharon Tate murder case Hurkos's only abject failure. According to Detective John Schaeffer of the Chicago Police, whom we had contacted about another psychic detective, Hurkos became unwelcome among the wealthy Chicagoans on whom he "sponged" after he failed to solve a $60,000 burglary committed against his hosts.

Piet Hein Hoebens has also discredited many of the cases allegedly solved by Gerald Croiset in Holland and elsewhere in Europe. We were able to examine one of Croiset's rare American cases. Hibbard and Worring (1982) claim that Croiset successfully located the missing daughter of the chairman of the Political Science Department at the University of Kansas. We contacted Paul Schumaker, the present department chairman, and Earl Nehring, Schumaker's predecessor. Nehring became chairman in 1972 and had worked in the department for many years prior to that time. Neither Schumaker nor Nehring had heard of any such missing-child case.

Marinus Dykshorn is another Dutch psychic detective. He is credited by Hibbard and Worring with having aided North Carolina State Police in four murder cases. Unfortunately, there is no such organization as the North Carolina State Police. Detective Bill Doubty of the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation (who has been with the bureau for 20 years) has never heard of a psychic named Dykshorn; furthermore, to the best of his knowledge the bureau has never requested the aid of a psychic.

Irene F. Hughes and Beverly C. Jaegers are two other psychic detectives mentioned by Hibbard and Worring. Detective John Schaeffer of the Chicago Police informed us that Hughes was infamous for providing unsolicited information about unsolved crimes and that law-enforcement officers in the Chicago area regarded her information as being without value. Beverly Jaegers
has supposedly organized psychic detectives to work on cases throughout the United States. Although Hibbard and Worring give her place of residence as Creve Coeur, Missouri, the Creve Coeur Police Department had never heard of Jaegers and the local telephone directory has no listing for either “Beverly Jaegers” or “B. Jaegers.” John Catchings, whose work as a psychic detective I discuss below, informed us that he had once met Jaegers, but had not heard from her in 12 or 15 years. Moreover, she had never approached him to join any organization.

Dorothy Allison is a New Jersey psychic who provided police with information in the Atlanta child-murders. More recently, she was apparently contacted by the Fairfax County Police in the Melissa Brannen abduction. Whether she provided any information to Fairfax police in this instance is not known at this time; however, despite the conviction of Caleb Hughes for Melissa’s abduction, Melissa Brannen remains missing. As to Allison’s claim to have aided in solving the Atlanta child-murders case, she provided police with 42 different names, none of which was Wayne or Williams. Wayne Williams was apprehended purely as the result of police surveillance of the bridges over the Chattahoochee River, where Williams was disposing of his victims. We did not contact Allison directly; however, Jeanette Clark interviewed Detective Salvatore Lubertazzi, the Nutley, New Jersey, police officer who has worked as Allison’s liaison with police for 15 years. He helps police interpret Allison’s visions. Lubertazzi added that because Allison works on so many cases she sometimes confuses visions.

John Catchings claims to have located 12 bodies and caused the arrest of 13 people. He claims, however, that his visions are used in conjunction with a commonsense investigation into the circumstances of the case. Law-enforcement officers we contacted felt he had been of significant help in solving cases.

Psychics in the Dock

Despite what tabloid writers might have us believe, law-enforcement officials do not always react positively to information provided by psychics. The cases of Brett Cadorette and Steven Paul Linscott illustrate rather hardheaded responses to information volunteered to police by would-be psychics.

Brett Cadorette volunteered to police that he had
had psychic visions of the throat slashing and sexual abuse of a Staten Island, New York, woman. He described the victim clutching a clump of hair in her hand (a fact not made public by police spokespersons). Police made Cadorette the prime suspect of their investigations, and he was ultimately convicted of attempted murder.

Steven Linscott, of Oak Park, Illinois, volunteered to police details of a dream he claimed to have had about the death of Karen Anne Phillips, who had been sexually assaulted, beaten, and strangled to death. Police in the course of their investigations routinely questioned Linscott (who lived with his wife in Phillips's apartment house complex). Linscott related to police a dream he had purportedly had on the night of the murder. According to Linscott's dream, the victim had been beaten in a downward fashion, and the victim and the assailant had been spattered with blood. He described the murder scene as the living room (correct) of a two-bedroom apartment (incorrect); he saw a couch in the living room (incorrect). He described the victim as black (incorrect). Linscott was arrested and prosecuted for Phillips's murder. Scientific tests found Linscott's hair to be consistent with that left by the murderer. Serological tests showed that the assailant was either an O secretor (like the victim) or a nonsecretor; Linscott proved to be an AB nonsecretor.

Linscott was convicted; however, his conviction was overturned on the grounds of the prosecutor's prejudicial misrepresentations of the scientific evidence. The Linscott case was resolved on July 27, 1992, when all charges against him were dismissed. DNA profiling of semen found in the victim precluded Linscott's being the perpetrator.

Investigation of a D.C. Psychic

The March 15, 1991, Washington Times reported that local psychic Ann Gehman had helped an Alexandria, Virginia, family find the body of Festus Harris, who had disappeared while on a visit to friends about a week earlier. The story quoted a family member who said Gehman had had a vision of "a bridge, a garage... with lots of traffic." Harris's body was found in a small wooded area in the 1900 block of N. Van Dorn Street near the Ramada Inn. The article further stated:

Mrs. Gehman is a nationally known psychic who has aided police in a number of high-profile murder cases, including one that led to the conviction of notorious serial killer Ted Bundy in Florida.

I contacted the article's author, Michael Cromwell, at the Washington Times's Alexandria bureau. He told me that he was somewhat skeptical of the claims made for Gehman; the background information used in the article was provided by her, and he had made no effort to verify it.

I subsequently interviewed Gehman over the telephone regarding this case. She told me that she had been contacted by Harris's niece and her husband or brother (she did not remember which). At that point Harris had been missing approximately one week, the family had combed the neighborhood without success, and the police had not been able to help. The niece had been referred to Gehman by a co-worker.

When queried about the information she had when consulted by Harris's niece, Gehman stated that she knew that the niece lived in Alexandria; the niece also brought (per Gehman's request) two photographs
of her uncle and an article of clothing, a sweatshirt. Gehman stated that she had a feeling of Harris wandering. In her vision she saw a high-rise building and had a sense that Harris had been on the sixth floor. She next saw Harris with a person in uniform and at a telephone booth. She had a sense of a parking lot or garage. Finally, she could see Harris near a bridge and could hear traffic in the background.

Gehman claimed that all of the information in her vision had been confirmed. She further observed that often her visions don’t provide her with any information at all.

Gehman said she came from an Amish background and had grown up in Michigan. Formerly, she lived near Orlando, Florida. While living in Florida she had (she claimed) worked on the Ted Bundy case, specifically on the disappearance of Bundy’s last victim, Kimberly Leach. Gehman said she had told investigators where to find the victim’s body. She said she had described Bundy’s appearance and that of his car and had informed investigators that Bundy was using stolen credit cards. One of the investigators she worked with in this case, she asserted, was an FBI agent. Gehman seemed reluctant to discuss other cases, claiming that this information was filed away and not readily accessible. She also could not provide me with newspaper clippings describing her involvement in other cases. I pointed out that other psychic detectives (such as Ginette Matacia) had such “press kits.” She laughed and said that she was skeptical of many of the claims of the better-known psychic detectives. She feels that many exaggerate their abilities. At the conclusion of our interview, Gehman said she would contact Harris’s niece and see if she would talk with me. (The niece was not named in the article, and Gehman declined to provide me with her telephone number.) Harris’s niece has still not contacted me.

The numerous hits in Gehman’s vision became less impressive when I visited the site where Harris’s body was found. This part of Alexandria has numerous high-rise apartments and parking lots. In fact, on the east side of I-395 high-rises and parking lots alternate for several miles. There are also numerous bridges, some spanning I-395 and others carrying I-395 over streets or streams. As might be expected, I-395 and the neighboring streets carry heavy volumes of traffic. Given the environment in which Harris disappeared, the only features of the vision that turn out to be remarkable are the reference to the sixth floor of the high-rise, the attempted telephone call, and the person in uniform. As I have not been able to interview Harris’s niece I have not been able to confirm that these were indeed hits. Given that one of the niece’s co-workers is acquainted with Gehman, non paranormal explanations for these hits come to mind.

Significantly, in her vision Gehman did not see the large red Ramada Inn sign within a few feet of the site where Harris’s body was found.

It is possible to evaluate at least some of Gehman’s other claims. As for her claim to have worked with an FBI agent in the Ted Bundy case, the FBI does not solicit information from psychics and classifies psychics as unreliable sources. While it may be true that in the Ted Bundy case she provided police with information, her information certainly did not aid in either the apprehension of Bundy or the recovery of the body of Kimberly Leach. Gehman is not mentioned in either Ann Rule’s The Stranger Beside Me or Stephen Michaud and Hugh Aynsworth’s The Only Living Witness, two detailed accounts of Ted Bundy’s criminal career. Bundy was appre-
hended when a police officer spotted the car he was driving coming out of a restaurant parking lot late one evening. Curious to identify the driver of the car, the officer followed Bundy and radioed in a routine check on the car's license-plate number. When the officer learned that the car was stolen, he gave chase and ultimately subdued Bundy after a struggle.

The recovery of Kimberly Leach's body was the result of good forensic work, not psychic detection. According to Ann Rule:

When the Dodge van [in which Kimberly had been abducted] was processed, criminalists had taken samples of soil, leaves and bark found inside and caught in its undercarriage. Botanists and soil experts had identified the dirt as coming from somewhere close to a north Florida river.

The discovery of a pile of Winston cigarette butts near the entrance to Suwanee River State Park had focused police attention on the state park and its environs as a possible search area. The ashtray of Bundy's stolen car had also contained Winston cigarettes. A careful ground search of the forests surrounding the park led to the discovery of Kimberly's body under an abandoned shed. The absence of any references in Rule's book to psychics' helping police apprehend Bundy or find his last victim is significant; Rule professes to believe in ESP, and elsewhere in the book relates the (unsuccessful) attempts of psychics to aid police in solving the murders Bundy committed in the Pacific Northwest.

A Final Note

Lady Wonder has gone down in history as the horse that got Joseph Banks Rhine interested in investigat-

ing psychic phenomena. Less commonly known is the fact that the horse was also a psychic detective. In 1952 she was asked to locate a missing boy. As was her wont, she spelled out her answer by touching lettered blocks with her nose. "Pittsfield Water Wheel," she replied to the police chief's query. After the water wheel had been searched without success, the police chief realized (in the words of Bergen Evans) that Lady Wonder had made "an equinopsychical blunder or horse-

graphical error." He then made the perfectly obvious correction to "Field and Wilde's water pit," the name of an abandoned quarry near the boy's home. The boy's drowned body was ultimately recovered from the flooded quarry. Unfortunately, this case bears a striking resemblance to most of the cases of purported psychic detection. There was a strong will to believe on the part of police authorities and a fiddling of the evidence to make the psychic's prediction come out right.

A Short Annotated Bibliography

Obviously, a complete bibliography of articles on purported psychic detectives would cover many pages, particularly if all tabloid articles were cited. This list is restricted to writings that purport to be scholarly rather than sensationalized.

Farabee, Charles R. "Contemporary Psychic Use by Police in America." Master's thesis, University of Southern California at Fresno, 1981. This thesis, written for the Department of Criminal Justice, is chiefly remarkable for accepting as veridical tabloid accounts of psychic detectives. The level of "scholarship" of this author is indicated by his repeating a claim that Julia Grant, the wife of Ulysses S. Grant, had psychic powers and that the reason the Grants did not attend Ford's Theater with President and Mrs. Lincoln was that Mrs. Grant had had a premonition of danger. Farabee's source cited for this claim was noted Civil War historian Bruce Catton. Had Farabee consulted Catton's Grant Takes Command, he would have learned that Julia
Grant’s reluctance to attend the theater with the presidential party stemmed from her presence about a month earlier at one of Mary Lincoln’s memorable tantrums; Julia Grant was also concerned because she believed that she had been under surveillance by a strange man most of the day.

Hibbard, Whitney S., and Raymond W. Worring. *Psychic Criminology.* Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1982. This is similar to the Farabee work mentioned above. The level of scholarship is reflected by references to *New Times, People, Psychic Magazine,* and *Self-Help Update.* Although the publishing house is well known for its catalogue of forensic science and police texts, this work is indistinguishable in quality from pulp potboilers.


Lyons, Arthur, and Marcello Truzzi. *The Blue Sense: Psychic Detectives and Crime.* New York: Mysterious Press, 1991. An interesting if ultimately unsuccessful attempt to evaluate objectively the claims of psychic detectives. I am less impressed than the authors with the sincerity of some of the psychics discussed. I do endorse this comment by the authors: “The data are simply inadequate for the refined analysis we need. The major problem is the absence of a proper baseline against which we can judge any claims of success, especially a lack of information about the character and number of both successes and failures by psychic detectives.” In the light of this assessment of the state of evidence, the authors’ discussion of the legal ramifications of psychic powers seems premature, to say the least.


Reiser, Martin, and N. Klyver. “A Comparison of Psychics, Detectives and Students in the Investigation of Major Crimes.” In *Police Psychology: Detectives* and *Students in the Investigation of Major Crimes.* Los Angeles: LEHI Publishing, 1982. Reiser’s research involved presenting psychic detectives with items of evidence from major cases. The psychics did not score better than detectives or students.

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Theories Must be Vulnerable to Disproof

[Karl] Popper’s basic idea is of theories having to be vulnerable to empirical disproof, with the more rigid and therefore more at-risk theory to be viewed as preferable to the more flexible (or more flabby). . . . The notion of the crucial experiment to disprove a theory antedates Popper, but the appreciation that this is the principal function of experiment and observation we owe to him.