

Psychics fail 'Halloween Challenge' at Goldsmiths

Published: 31 October 2012 00:00



Two mediums have failed a scientific test at Goldsmiths, University of London which was designed to prove the existence of psychic abilities.

Professional mediums Patricia Putt and Kim Whitton (pictured above left) undertook the test, which was organised by the Merseyside Skeptics Society and designed by Professor Chris French, Head of the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths, as part of an annual investigation into the psychic industry.

The experiment - which both mediums agreed was a fair and unbiased test of their abilities - saw the volunteer psychics sit before five female sitters, who were required to remain silent and hidden behind a screen. The psychics were asked to write notes relating to the individual sitters.

In order to evaluate the accuracy of the psychics' information, each of the five sitters was then asked to distinguish their own reading from the four other readings. The psychics would have passed the test if all five sitters spotted their own reading. Four out of five sitters correctly identifying their own reading would have been considered scientifically interesting, while three or fewer constituted a failure of the test.

Upon analysing the results, neither Kim nor Patricia scored more than one hit from the five readings.

Professor French explained: "Kim and Patricia felt they'd have no trouble in passing this test. Despite expressing confidence throughout the experiment, neither were able to gain more than a single correct reading, a result entirely consistent with the operation of chance alone.

"We are of course hugely grateful to Kim and Patricia for taking part, and wish them all the best. It's unfortunate for them that they weren't able to pass our test, but we're very pleased they were willing to take part nonetheless."

The two mediums took part in the test after expressing interest in working with scientists to explore the abilities they use in their daily practices.

Kim has more than fifteen years' experience as a spiritual medium and healer, including many appearances at spiritualist churches in and around London. This is the first time she has been involved in an experiment to test her powers. Conversely, Patricia took part in a preliminary test for the James Randi Educational Foundation Million Dollar Challenge, which also took place at Goldsmiths and was administered by Professor Chris French in 2009. On that occasion also, she was unsuccessful.

After hearing the results, Kim said: "I have always wanted to be involved in a test like this as I would like to bridge the gap between psychic energy and science. I felt very comfortable about the test. I know what I do is very real, it's easy for me. I'm glad one of the sitters could recognise so many details about herself. Sceptics need to realise you cannot see, hear, feel everything as solid matter with the human eye, ear, and body. Psychics and mediums use a whole other part of the brain which is under-developed in the average man. Overall, I really enjoyed the experience."

Patricia added: "I am sorry that I appear to have failed but not really surprised. What I would like to point out is that the work I do is always done face to face so working 'blind' is extremely daunting for the medium. It is easier to explain the reading to the sitter verbally instead of the written word which, if it is their first time, most will not have understood. Since doing my first reading after the test, I now imagine Chris sitting in the room and listening to the readings. This improves my work. However, I would like to point out that my gift covers a wide variety of areas and it is historical investigations that I am currently interested in doing. I do have to say that, difficult though the test was, I did enjoy working with Chris and his colleagues."

Michael Marshall, Vice President of the Merseyside Skeptics Society and co-organiser of the test, said: "While the result of our experiment doesn't disprove psychic ability, the fact that our mediums couldn't pass what they felt was a very fair and simple test does seem to suggest claims that these abilities exist aren't based in reality.

"It is very telling that, after hundreds of years of investigating such claims, nobody has ever been able to demonstrate the ability to contact the dead. I believe the overwhelming absence of evidence - despite a huge amount of interest and exploration over the years - is due to the fact that people can't really obtain information by psychic means alone, and that people who feel these abilities are real are often misguided.

"I'd also urge anyone who is thinking of visiting a medium or attending a psychic stage show to think twice, and to question whether their money might be better spent elsewhere."

Science writer Simon Singh, who helped design and conduct the psychic test, added: "Pat and Kim clearly felt that they were receiving psychic messages, and their regular clients are convinced that they have psychic powers, but our test showed no such supernatural power.

"Instead, I suspect that people like Pat and Kim are intuitive and are subconsciously picking up on subtle hints, such as body language, verbal cues and so on. This provides the illusion of psychic power. Our test removed such clues, because the sitters were hidden and silent, and I think this explains why Kim and Pat failed. Nevertheless, I respect the fact that they were willing to come forward and be tested."

Notes to Editors

The Merseyside Skeptics Society is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion of science and skepticism in Merseyside and internationally. For more information visit www.merseysideskeptics.org.uk

More information on Kim and Patricia can be found at www.merseysideskeptics.org.uk/the-halloween-challenge/the-psychics/

For more information about the Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London visit www.gold.ac.uk/apru

The James Randi Educational Foundation Million Dollar Challenge offers a prize of \$1,000,000 to anyone that can demonstrate paranormal abilities under laboratory conditions.

For further information

Peter Austin
Press & PR Manager
Goldsmiths, University of London
t: +44 (0)20 7919 7909
e: p.austin@gold.ac.uk

Michael Marshall
Vice President
Merseyside Skeptics Society
t: 07841 134 309
e: press@merseysideskeptics.org.uk

<http://www.gold.ac.uk/news/pressrelease/?releaseID=972>

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