

The Fourth Hypothesis

“Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

I give to you the primary test of any good investigator, paranormal or otherwise. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle penned this phrase in *The Sign of Four* in 1890, part of the Sherlock Holmes series. He also wrote, “There is nothing as deceptive as an obvious fact,” which also ties into my topic of the week, namely the scholarly work of Professor Tim Barth at Texas Christian University and his colleague, Don Dansereau for *The Fourth Hypothesis!*

While the ASUP has strove to apply Conan Doyle’s enlightened prospective, that in the search for truth, you must accept the improbable after eliminating the impossible, we still tend to second guess ourselves in some cases. Perhaps the famous creator of Sherlock Holmes has overlooked a critical fact, an obvious one that is no less deceptive. The point being that to do the job right, you first must have all the facts, not the convenient ones and guard against the human tendency to adjust fact to fit the desired outcome.

Dr. Barth has addressed these concerns In the creation of *The Fourth Hypothesis*, a flow chart that addressing the need for a paranormal guide map that can be utilized by field investigators in search of the sometimes illusive truth. The flow chart allows the investigator to “fill in the blanks,” to arrive at a solution, no matter how improbably.

Now, it should be mentioned that Dr. Barth is not a parapsychologist, a paranormal researcher or anything of that order. He chairs the Psychology Department at TCU and admittedly has little input from the paranormal community, in fact he spends a good deal of time in the field of nutrition and health in brain function, including in-depth articles on subjects like Aspartame, all a tad bit removed from our studies, but he was still intrigued by what some of us do and how we do it. When asked recently about his views of the existence of ghosts and otherworldly affairs, Dr. Barth shrugged and said simply, “Why not?”

Dr. Bath’s motivation seems simple enough, if you are going to study anything, you have to create a model to follow for that study to succeed. Thus, *The Fourth Hypothesis!*

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There is nothing really new in Dr. Barth's model, obviously Conan Doyle followed the same concept when he created Sherlock Holmes. Every investigation should in theory be uniform, each step fulfilled and then scrutinized to see that we have not lost anything in our translation. The common pitfall, of course, is that we rely on second hand information, thus our interview methods have to be better than just good. Subjects forget things, reinforce things, rationalize, all of which we must be constantly aware of in our work.

In a recent conversation with Nate Riddle, a former student of Dr. Barth, who is now writing a book on those who study the paranormal, I mentioned an old classroom trick I utilized more than once while on staff at John Jay College. The test was devised to bring to light the shortcomings of "eyewitness" testimony, even moments after an occurrence and was utilized in courses most often attended by superior officers of local police departments.

The class would be seated at the normal start time of the lecture. A graduate assistant would be standing at the podium, adjusting a notebook for the lecturer, when a disheveled young man would come into the lecture hall and begin screaming at the assistant. Words were exchanged, the assistant would wrangle the man into a hallway, just out of eyesight, then there would be the unmistakable sound of two gun shots in the hall. Just as the lecture hall was about to empty of the hundred or so cops who had witnessed the affair, I would walk in, block their egress and tell them to sit down again.

I would quickly tell them that they had just witnessed a staged test and proceeded to hand out detailed questionnaires that would later be graded on their perceptions; everything from the color of the "perp's" shirt, to what kind of gunshot they had heard. Uniformly, these trained observers, many of whom supervised other rank and file cops, scored very poorly. The objective was met, if the trained observer did a bad job of describing a three minute event, what could they expect from civilians on the street?

I have spent a good deal of time lecturing the ASUP field investigators on good interview practices. The interviewer is not simply asking questions and soliciting responses, they must engage their subjects, gaining their trust and soliciting full cooperation. They must also become adept at reading the subtleties of body language and environment. If we fail to create a complete package, then we will fail in our investigation as a whole. That is the whole point to

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multiple interviews. The Director of Research will interview the subjects on the phone at length long before a team travels to the location in question. Once there, either the Coordinator or the Director of Field Investigations will once again sit down with the clients to interview them once again, this time in their own environment, recognizing the body language and not just the words.

There really is a good reason why those in-field interviews are done by the Coordinator and the Director of Field Investigations; both are trained law enforcement professionals and after thousands of interviews, they know what answers are forthcoming and which need follow-up questions. How many times have we gone into the field with a full set of interview notes, to learn on site that the client has eliminated a key element previously, thinking it was either not important or somehow embarrassing. That is human nature and a seasoned interviewer will catch it immediately. They may not know what is being withheld, but they can tell something is not in order. Good investigators know that, which of course, has been our point since the earliest days of the ASUP, when I publically said at a meeting of the PRF at Duke that cops and reporters were far better prepared to do field work than academics who spend most of their time in a lab. Obviously there are exceptions, a good clinical psychologist is a professional investigator, but the numbers of lettered professionals with such credentials, who have the time to do field work are few.

Returning to Dr. Barth's flow chart, it is best described as a logical map of how any good investigator of any given paranormal occurrence would hopefully follow. It obviously begins with the Observation, where the investigator describes in detail what has been reported, frequency and differences included. Besides that basic information, it prompts the investigator to learn about the physical, cognitive and emotions of the observers, belief systems and past histories that might influence the observation, historic precedents for this observation and environmental conditions when the observations were made.

Based upon that information, the investigator can make a gross assumption for each of four hypothesis, namely mental construction; Hoax, accident or chance, Natural phenomenon or something Paranormal!

Under hypothesis one, we would look at the possibilities of perceptual distortion or

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memory distortion and based on the mapping of all of those possibilities, rate the probability from one to ten. In hypothesis two, we consider, in depth the possibilities of the reported phenomenon being a hoax, accident or strictly chance, again summarizing all of that information on the same one to ten scale. In hypothesis three, natural phenomenon is put into play, rating again the probability of the observer's misidentification of a natural occurrence and finally, in hypothesis four, we consider the observation as a paranormal phenomena, and rating that information in the same manner.

Each of the four hypothesis have associated mapping instructions. Map one considers perceptual distortion, including subsets that include variables such as expectations, mood and even dream states. The context and setting are considered, poor observation conditions and social influences, such as other's perceptions and interpretations. Map two further dissects the possibility of intentionally creating a misleading observation, technological accidents or the chance of random happenings. Finally, map three considers the possibility of natural phenomenon being misobserved as paranormal., possible weather related, geological activity and/or other physical forces of nature; water, wind, magnetism or optics, for example.

Once mapped, the investigator is asked if there is any possibility that the phenomena is a combination of any elements of the first three hypothesis and that too is given a rating of between one and ten. Once all of that is concluded, the investigator looks at the scores objectively and, as Conan Doyle so long ago suggested, *"Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth."*

Of course, there is one rather large pitfall that we all face when ordering any prioritized collection, our own prejudices! Note well that even Dr. Barth lists mental constructs as the first hypothesis, giving preference to his own field of endeavor. Likewise, we all know that many cases involve multiple layers where they may be a spirit presence, but also challenges that could suggest poltergeist. In that regard, we have to recognize that the phenomenon reflects multiple possibilities, thus the case requires multiple hypothesis to work. You can, for example have a poltergeist and a ghost in the same environment, for very different reasons.

The Fourth Hypothesis is a good ground level step for the intermediate investigator to collect his thoughts and file them in an orderly fashion so that he can come to a rational

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conclusion in a case. It is by no means the end-all of paranormal investigation techniques, but certainly can help eliminate the clutter in many cases. The system is now slated for study in field tests by the ASUP this spring and those using it will file reports on how they individually would alter the program to better suit their needs. Those findings will then be forwarded to Dr. Barth for further consideration. In the meantime, any useful tool to assist field workers is appreciated and the Fourth Hypothesis certainly is a welcome tool! Bravo to Dr. Barth and his colleague, Don Dansereau for a job well done.

** Tim Barth is currently Chairperson of the Department of Psychology at Texas Christian University (TCU). His interest in parapsychology began as an undergraduate at St. Bonaventure University where he completed the class "Religion and the Paranormal" taught by Fr. Alphonsus Trabold a noted investigator of paranormal events in western New York and Pennsylvania. Fr. Trabold was the principal investigator of the Hinsdale haunting during the 1970s (subject of the book "Echoes of a Haunting" by Clara Miller and the episode "Dark Forest" from Discovery Channel's 'A Haunting' series). Dr. Barth received a Ph.D. in experimental psychology from the University of Texas at Austin and began as an Assistant Professor at TCU in 1990. He teaches courses in Parapsychology to both undergraduate and graduate students. These courses are aimed at challenging the belief systems of students by objectively presenting the evidence for and against paranormal interpretations of personal experiences.*

*Don Dansereau has studied cognitive psychology for over 30 years at TCU. His guide maps to effective decision-making have been used in many areas including substance abuse counseling, stress management, and education. **The Fourth Hypothesis: A Paranormal Guide Map** is the product of many conversations regarding possible explanations for paranormal experiences and how to think about them when they occur.*

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