
Ganzfeld and the Paranormal

While the ASUP Training Pages are presented weekly as a kind of springboard to broader considerations in our field, sometimes these pages have to focus on the past, and sometimes as a cautionary tale. Such is the fact this time, after catching one of the popular ghost hunting programs on TV, which reintroduced the Ganzfeld test to the public. The experiment looks great, right out of paranormal “back lot” and the only device that could be added for more visual effect would be a giant Tesla coil radiating man-made lightning in the background.

The Ganzfeld ("total field") experiments have in the past been hailed by many parapsychologists as providing scientific proof of telepathy or clairvoyance. According to Dean Radin: “We are fully justified in having very high confidence that people sometimes get small amounts of specific information from a distance without the use of the ordinary senses. Psi effects do occur in the Ganzfeld.” Unfortunately, like the OOB experiments at Duke in my youth, later studies have shown that some folks played with the data collected to keep outside funding flowing and did not really prove what the reports suggested. Ganzfeld is another one of those studies. The individual claims sounded great, but the actual breakdown of the data could not prove the original assumptions.

The studies of German psychologist Wolfgang Metzger (1899-1979) in the 1920s and '30s on the perception of the homogeneous visual field (Ganzfeld) were so widely read that *Ganzfeld* was adopted as a generally accepted term. In the mid 1970s, parapsychologists began designing telepathy experiments that called for the receiver to be put in a soundproof room with homogeneous visual and auditory stimuli. The so-called *Ganzfeld* experiments were conducted because it was widely believed by parapsychologists that the Ganzfeld would provide a psi-conducive state. The easiest of these tests simply found the test subject with infrared goggles and noise canceling headphones laying in a reclining chair, creating a poor man’s isolation chamber. The most elaborate involved “floating” the subject in a saline solution in a sealed tank that was light and sound proof. In the recent TV program, the subject had half a ping pong ball taped over his eye, so that his eyes were open, but only the illumination of several “red” light bulbs were seen and a white noise tape was then piped into the subjects headset.

Once I got over the shock of the ping-pong balls (I once saw a subject seriously injured when they flinched and the rough edge of the ball cut like a scalpel around the eye socket!) I found myself questioning the illumination... red light bulbs from K-Mart are not the same as IR! And a white noise tape is not a form of sensory deprivation... but more important is the question, why are they doing this? The show was centered on an alleged demonic possession. Hmmm, Ganzfeld for demon hunting, huh?

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Of course the program had shots of Lorraine Warren holding a blessed candle (she had no speaking part in this episode) and Chip Coffee verbalizing all manner of wickedness abounding, but all of that is pure entertainment. The reincarnation of Ganzfeld however was pure showmanship, given the fact that at no time, did anyone suggest that such experiments could succeed in ghostly or demonic communications... you have just as good a chance by just sitting in a room and talking out loud.

Here is the problem: Ganzfeld, sensory deprivation, OOBIE; et al, were experiments undertaken in the late 1960s and 1970's at universities with a lust for research dollars. Experiments with the Psi Effect were as good as any topic, right up there with cow flatulence and their effect on the ozone layer. Many of these glorious studies were tainted to begin with, and greed only prolonged the process. Ganzfeld had interesting effects. I personally participated. I've been "in the tank" more than once and learned just how far the mind will go to attempt to normalize an abnormal situation, BUT I was also there when clear headed research "rats" mostly post grad students, were pushed to the limits.

Let's call a spade a spade, shall we. Some of those tests... well actually many of those tests were conducted with the subject under the influence of any number of what today are considered either highly controlled substances or outright illegal drugs. You haven't lived till you take a trip in the tank on LSD. These were government sanctioned and funded projects, and what is not widely written about is the number of mental cases that came out of those programs, who entered them as brilliant students. This was highly dangerous stuff. There were suicides and long term disabilities associated with them. Later, the government said that the danger was with the associated drugs, but that was never proven conclusively. There is no doubt in my mind that Ganzfeld can end in severe psychosis.

But, that begs the question. Can the "modified" Ganzfeld create a condition where spirit communications are possible? What might happen if we were to take a subject, ping-pong balls and all, but pipe in the output of the Mini-Box to his headphones, rather than white noise? Does that sound interesting to you? How about we secretly give you a hit of LSD just before the experiment, or go all the way and flood the room with a cloud of smoldering marijuana? We could float you in a salt bath as we do all of this, being careful not to let the power cords dangle too close to the bath, too! And why stop with red light, why not a psychedelic light show? OK, now you are laughing . . . but that suggests that you either have forgotten Dr. Tim Leary or that you are not old enough to have ever heard of him. He did all of that, and Harvard University paid for the party!

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Seriously, on the TV show that prompted all of this, Ryan and his merry band of barely post pubescent ghost hunters added another wrinkle. He performed his experiment while using a piece of headgear that reportedly can generate random magnetic waves. (Why the device raised images of the old quack medical stimulators at a museum I once visited was noteworthy.) The end effect, at least for himself and Mr. Coffee, was the illuminator of demonic entities foretelling the untimely demise of their client. (Aren't you glad we don't get too many of those?)

Let's be sure we all understand what we are dealing with; Ganzfeld is a technique that has been used in the lab to test individuals for extra-sensory perception like the early "Duke" studies of the PRF and similar studies at both Cornell and Harvard, to name a few. It uses homogeneous and unpatterned sensory stimulation to produce an effect similar to sensory deprivation, as I have already outlined. The deprivation of patterned sensory input is said to be conducive to inwardly-generated impressions. The technique was devised by Metzger in the 1930s as part of his investigation into the gestalt theory and later Gestalt Therapy integration, but the later experiments did not address those early concepts.

Parapsychologists such as Dean Radin and Daryl J. Bem say that Ganzfeld experiments have yielded results that deviate from randomness to a significant degree, and that these results present some of the strongest quantifiable evidence for telepathy to date. Critics such as Susan Blackmore and Ray Hyman say that the results are inconclusive, and call for further study before such results can be scientifically accepted. That being said, I have to stress that to be considered significant, the variation might be as little as 10% over the norm. That may be significant in the lab, but would be rejected by most serious field researchers today as anecdotal.

During my time in this area of research, the findings were far from impressive in total, but did show some promise individually in several cases. Whether that was a deviation in the statistical data or a real "blip" on the ESP radar is still open to debate, but many subjects later recanted reported effects both at Duke and of course the Maimonides Medical Center studies in Brooklyn, made famous by my colleague, D. Scott Rogo at the same time. In addition, several other original members of the ASUP team were active participants in other similar university studies funded by the Federal government, including those later labeled as "mind control" experiments at Cornell.

To cut to the chase, this is serious stuff and proven to be very dangerous... not something you want to put before the public as some sort of parlor game. Jokes have been made about the dangers of paranormal investigating in the field but in reality, you are more likely to be harmed in a lab experiment

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than at the unseen hands of a ghost in the field. When you begin to suggest the addition of such experiments as Ganzfeld in routine field work, you are crossing a line that was drawn a generation ago by brighter minds than the ones now of TV. The fact that some of these programs portray the treatment of “possessed” individuals without the benefit of a psychiatric evaluation or even the presence of an EMT or Paramedic during the supposed treatment of the individual is beyond reality. The ASUP doesn’t even go on a routine field investigation without an EMT for their own safety, but TV shows reportedly show clients who stop breathing and not so much as an Ambu-Bag at the ready if it might actually turn into respiratory arrest!

Sometimes lines have to be drawn for everyone’s safety. It is one thing to give a client a K-2 meter or a digital recorder -- it would be another if someone suggested that they hold onto a 220 VAC line with one hand and plug the line in with the other, while standing in a pool of water. I see the Ganzfeld test as approaching the latter. At best you are setting in motion conditions that will scare the hell out of even the well trained subject, and at worst, you can be inviting psychotic episodes, fright and even death. This is no longer the realm of TV entertainment, you are crossing the line.

I once had a group of paramedic students who asked if they could sign out a cardiac defibrillator from a university training lab for the weekend. Obviously, I asked what they wanted it for and one of those blithely commented that they wanted to shock one of their group into full arrest then bring him back so he could report on his experience. These were grown adults, all with paramedic training and emergency experience. I told them they were collectively unbalanced for even considering such a game, and they responded that they had seen the idea in a movie, “Flatliners!” It is therefore not outlandish to worry that some little group will decide in the near future that performing the Ganzfeld test in their living room will brighten up a dull Saturday evening; why not Ryan and Chip did it on TV, right?

Sorry guys, this is crossing the line big time! It is one thing to put some high schoolers on TV while they explore haunted houses, or even to put some testosterone overdosed college students in a reportedly haunted hotel and locking them in for the evening. It is another to show the world how to set up a test that could potentially harm you. Yes, you can find the formula for nitroglycerine online, but at least there, there is a label warning you that the stuff will explode! If folks want to learn about Ganzfeld they can read all about in on the Internet or read Scott Rogo’s book, but your house is not a university lab and should not be used as one!

