

PRF Case Study Review: The Johnson Case

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Quite often, likely due to their overt similarities and their traditional association with ghosts, poltergeist and haunt phenomena may be confused with each other. But a close examination of the various cases that have been reported over the years has allowed parapsychologists to find some subtle differences between the two that have made it possible to distinguish one from the other.¹⁻³ For instance, poltergeist cases tend to be of relatively short duration, usually lasting only about 2 to 5 months or so. In contrast, haunt cases may span long lengths of time, lasting many months or even years. The strange sounds and unusual object movements that occur in haunt cases tend to be more widely spread out in time than those in poltergeist cases, and thus, they tend to be much more infrequent. In addition, poltergeist cases tend to reflect *actual physical movement* of objects, whereas in haunt cases, the movements tend to be more *hallucinatory or illusory* – that is, they tend to be “all in the minds” of the witnesses (e.g., someone may hear the crash of something falling in another room, but then find nothing disturbed upon entering that room). But perhaps the most critical thing which distinguishes the two is that poltergeist phenomena tend to be focused around *a certain person* (suggesting that a psychokinetic, or “mind over matter,” effect on the part of that particular person may be involved), whereas haunt phenomena tend to focus around *a certain place*.

Although poltergeists and haunts can be classified as separate phenomena according to these distinctions, one does occasionally come across certain cases in which the two seemingly occur in tandem. One example of this may be found in the Johnson case, a fairly well-known haunt case that was extensively investigated by the PRF’s first Research Director, William Roll.⁴ A brief summary of the case is as follows:

In 1987, Doretta and Ron Johnson purchased a stretch of property in Indiana which contained a home and a small vacant motel. Upon moving in with their two children, they began experiencing various kinds of haunt-related phenomena in the home such as apparitions, phantom sounds suggestive of human presence (e.g., slamming doors, voices singing or speaking unintelligibly), flowery scents and foul odors, cold spots, spontaneous fires, and objects seeming to move about on their own. The family would suffer from bouts of ill health, and open, bleeding scratches would occasionally appear on the skin of Mrs. Johnson and the children. Similar kinds of haunt-related phenomena had also been reported by previous owners of the property.

During the first two initial visits that he made, William Roll noticed that the property was surrounded by a triangle-shaped array of high-tension power lines that transfer the electricity generated by power plants over long distances to smaller urban substations, which supply electrical power to homes and businesses. This array of power lines crisscrossed the boundaries of the property itself, with the Johnson's home being located roughly at the center of this triangle. Roll suspected that the large amounts of electrical current flowing through these power lines was likely producing a strong 60-Hz electromagnetic field that the family was continually being exposed to, and this was later confirmed when measurements taken in various areas of the family home indicated the presence of such a field, ranging in magnitude from 126 to 157 milliGauss. As can be seen from the graph in Figure 1, even at its lowest end, this range is significantly higher than the average field strength found in most homes and businesses.^{5,p.975}

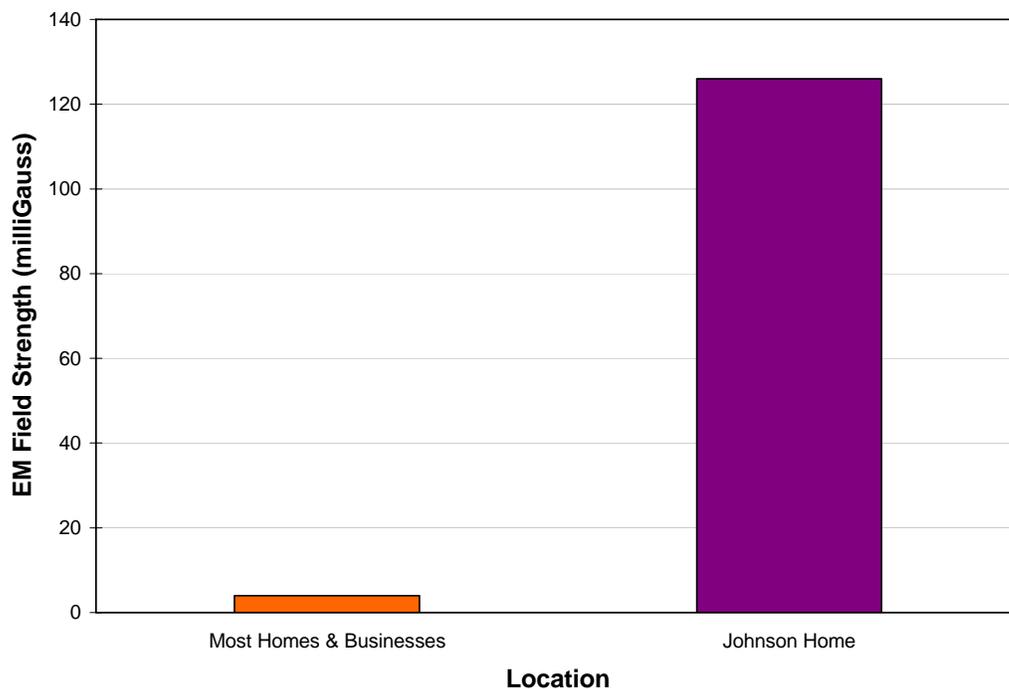


Figure 1. Relative comparison of the average electromagnetic field strength detected in the Johnson home (at its lowest value) with the average field strength often found in most homes and businesses.

Measurements taken throughout the home also revealed an extremely strong local geomagnetic field that ranged between 725 – 847 milliGauss, about 300 milliGauss higher than the average field of the Earth itself. One possible source for this strong field may have been a subterranean stream that was located just beneath the family home, which slightly surfaced in the backyard; this would account for observations made by the family that the backyard was frequently prone to flooding, making it difficult to grow plants there. Such streams may carry charged ions loosened from underground rock as they flow, increasing the conductivity of the water and generating electrical currents which lead to variations in the local magnetic field.⁶ While the exact processes have not yet been fully worked out, the current working hypothesis is that the family's long-term exposure to these high electromagnetic and geomagnetic fields may

have affected their health and brain functioning, leading to mild sensory hallucinations that they may have subjectively perceived and interpreted as haunt experiences.

Counts of the number of charged ions present in the surrounding atmosphere of the home also indicated a high concentration of negative ions at 17,000/cm³. Some study findings suggest that the presence of negative air ions tends to be linked to calm and pleasant feelings⁷⁻⁹, which would seem to be consistent with Mrs. Johnson's stating that she likes her home despite the intense haunt experiences she's had there, which at times have been trying for her. Perhaps this high negative ion count may have had some bearing on her positive feelings.

A Poltergeist Agent Among the Spirits?

One thing which became rather apparent over the long course of the Johnson's residency in the home was that there was a tendency for certain phenomena (such as the physical movement of objects) to occur in rather close proximity to Mrs. Johnson. In one such occurrence, Mrs. Johnson was saying good-bye to some visiting friends in the kitchen when the doors to a set of nearby cabinets spontaneously flew open and pieces of sliced bread began tumbling to the floor from a bread bag (which had also apparently opened by itself) that was kept in the cabinet. Becoming rather irritated by this disturbance, Mrs. Johnson cried out for it to stop, and it ceased immediately afterward. According to Mrs. Johnson, the bread had flown out of the bag at an angle rather than simply tumbling straight down, so it didn't seem likely that the bread slices were merely falling off the cabinet ledge through the force of gravity. She also mentioned that dishes would fall and break from these same cabinets from time-to-time. On the surface, the apparent tendency for things to fall and break from this set of cabinets would appear to be consistent with *area focusing*, a characteristic often found in poltergeist cases in which objects placed *in one certain area* (in this case, the cabinets) are repeatedly moved or disturbed.^{10,pp.390-391}

Mr. Johnson also noticed that some of the phenomena would seem to focus around his wife, stating that she seemed to be getting "the most attention" from them. If that is so, then this would also be very reminiscent of the way in which poltergeist phenomena seem to frequently occur in the presence of a certain person (often referred to as the poltergeist *agent*). This would lead one to wonder whether Mrs. Johnson might be a poltergeist agent herself to some degree, with the power of her own mind contributing to the disturbances occurring around her (which, given the context of her living in a reputedly haunted house, are readily misattributed to the actions of ghosts). The underlying premise here would be that whenever the haunt phenomena stir strong emotions within Mrs. Johnson (given that they've often been disturbing and upsetting to her and her family), latent psychokinetic abilities on her part may be triggered at the unconscious level, leading to the movement of objects. This would be based on the observation that poltergeist outbreaks tend to correlate with bouts of emotional turmoil in poltergeist agents¹¹, as well as experimental findings which are beginning to suggest that there's a possible link between psychokinesis and emotional expression.¹²⁻¹⁴

The potential for Mrs. Johnson being a poltergeist agent of sorts would seem to offer one possible way to account for an intriguing aspect of this case. As mentioned previously, Mrs. Johnson would reportedly find open, bleeding scratches on her body on occasion (as would her children). Although some might find it tempting to assume the involvement of harmful spirits in

this situation, one might also consider two alternate possibilities: The first is that the scratches were psychosomatic reactions brought on by the emotional distress that Mrs. Johnson and her children felt in response to the haunt occurrences (in the same sense that high stress can lead to illness and skin conditions such as rashes).

The second, which ties into the poltergeist agent idea, is that the scratches were the result of a “mind over (living) matter” effect on Mrs. Johnson’s part. This possibility would seem plausible in light of the considerable amount of experimental evidence that parapsychologists have gathered suggesting that the human mind can subtly affect biological systems (such as cell cultures, electrical conductance of the skin, and plant growth).¹⁵⁻¹⁷ In addition, unusual marks on the body were seen in at least one poltergeist case investigated by Roll in the 1970s.¹⁸ In that particular case, tiny puncture-like marks spontaneously appeared on the bodies of a 30-year-old woman and her elderly mother, which would openly bleed at times. Although they were described by the victims as being akin to “bat-like bites,” it was also noticed that these marks notably resembled the kind one receives from a hypodermic needle puncturing the skin. It is also notable that the woman was obligated to give her mother insulin injections through a syringe (as she was diabetic), even though this was something that the mother did not like going through. The two shared a stressful mother-daughter relationship, and this may have helped give rise to the poltergeist disturbances that occurred in their home, which in turn raises the possibility that the puncture-like marks may have been due to a “mind over (living) matter” effect (which happened to reflect a mutual source of stressful contention between them: the insulin injections).

The possibility of Mrs. Johnson being a poltergeist agent might even offer a way to account for another aspect of the case: Among the apparitions that Mrs. Johnson would see in the house was a dark male figure that was also seen by Mr. Johnson at one point. At the time, Mr. Johnson said he was in the hallway when he saw the figure emerge from the wall and stand before him for a few seconds before it passed back through the wall again and disappeared. Though up to that point he’d been quite skeptical of the phenomena occurring in the home, he recalled feeling very awestruck by what he saw.

In the course of counseling her over the distress brought on by the haunt occurrences, Roll conducted a hypnosis session with Mrs. Johnson, and in discussing her feelings toward this particular apparition, Mrs. Johnson seemed to recognize it as resembling a male relative of hers who was still living. Unfortunately, her relations with this man were far from good, as she revealed that he had once molested her when she was a child. This led Roll to speculate that this apparition may have represented a repressed memory from her unconscious, which she was (in a sense) “psychically projecting” out into the surrounding environment through the power of her mind. In this sense, Roll suggests, perhaps some ghosts represent “thought forms” which are psychokinetically produced by the witnesses who see them.¹⁹ In such instances, these ghosts wouldn’t reflect the spirits of the dead, but rather the feelings and preoccupations of the living. Apparitions which seem to symbolically reflect the inner thoughts and feelings of living people have also been reported in at least a few other haunt-related cases, as well.²⁰⁻²³ It may be worth mentioning that two of these cases were ones in which poltergeist phenomena were also seemingly occurring in tandem with haunt phenomena.^{20,22}

Conclusion

Aside from being pretty intense as far as most haunt cases go, the Johnson case seems to offer us a few interesting insights into what might be involved in some alleged haunt cases. The case seems to lend consideration to the idea that some haunt occurrences may ultimately have a purely physical basis to them, as inferred from the exceptionally strong magnetic fields and dense concentrations of air ions detected around the Johnson family home, which may have affected the physical and mental health of the family through their long-term exposure to them. This would suggest that in these kinds of allegedly haunted houses, it's not scary ghosts that people have to be concerned about – it's the health hazards that these houses may potentially pose in the long run.

The Johnson case also urges us to consider the possibility that some of the phenomena in haunts may not be due to ghosts, but to the latent “mind over matter” abilities of the witnesses, which may be spontaneously triggered through the distressful inner emotions felt by those witnesses in response to the other haunt-related phenomena they experience. If that is so, then one might predict that counseling the witnesses through their feelings would subsequently be accompanied by a noticeable reduction in the phenomena. Perhaps to that extent, “hauntings, too, may be person oriented,” as Roll had once observed.^{10,p.400} We have yet to see, through the study of future cases in which poltergeist and haunt phenomena seem to uniquely intersect.

References & Notes

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- ⁶This would be based on the premise that liquid conductors gain their conductivity from loose ions moving through the liquid. See Section 2.5.1. of Griffiths, D. J. (1999). *Introduction to Electrodynamics* (3rd Ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
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