

The Use of Psychics in Homicide and Missing Persons Investigations

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Abstract

This article discusses the use and success of psychic detectives in high profile homicide and missing persons investigations. A review of relevant literature compares the differences between popular portrayals of psychics in the mainstream media with academic research into the phenomenon published in peer-reviewed academic journals. A study was conducted to ascertain the frequency of use and success rate of psychic detectives, and the results are reviewed within. In addition, this article contains a discussion of various policies and recommendations regarding the use of psychic detectives in high profile investigations.

Introduction

Psychics have long been used by kings, military chieftains, and religious leaders to foretell the outcome of approaching events, but their use for criminal investigative purposes was nonexistent, or at least undocumented, until 1845. The specifics of that first case have been lost to history, but the use of the paranormal to solve criminal cases has gained increasing popularity with the general public over the past few decades due largely to the popularity of such television shows as *The X-Files*, *Fringe*, and *Medium*. These shows frequently portray the utilization of “psychic detectives” by law enforcement entities to solve crimes, usually a high profile homicide or missing persons investigation. Despite these entertaining portrayals, the use of psychic detectives is not as prevalent as the popular media suggests, nor is their effectiveness as high as the populace is led to believe.

Review of Relevant Literature

A review of literature concerning the use of psychics in criminal investigations reveals an array of opinions; opinions that are almost entirely predictable based on the source of the information. A cursory glance at the websites of the country’s most famous psychic detectives, such as Noreen Renier (www.noreenrenier.com) and Nancy Myer (www.nancymyer-psychicdetective.com), suggests that psychic detectives are utilized by law enforcement agencies on a routine basis (both of the aforementioned psychics claim to have assisted with over 600 homicide investigations) with some claiming a success rate as high as 90%. These websites expressively tout the effectiveness of psychic detectives, routinely quoting clients and law enforcement personnel as a means to add validity to their success stories.

A November 2005, article in the popular periodical *Good Housekeeping* is an excellent example of the portrayal of psychic detectives in the mainstream media. The

article gives a brief introduction to Allison Dubois (inspiration for the television show *Medium*), Kathlyn Rhea, and Noreen Renier, all psychics who utilize their abilities to assist law enforcement agencies with high profile investigations. The article specifically mentions Rhea's involvement in the 1983 abduction and murder of Polly Klaas, as well as DuBois's assistance in the disappearance of Elizabeth Smart.

After a brief introduction of each psychic and a quick discussion of their methods, the article then cites two examples of Rhea's success. In 1989, Rhea assisted a local police department with the death of Rachel Lombera, a female found bludgeoned to death in her California apartment. The article states, "From Rhea's vision, police created a sketch that looks exactly like Lombera's married lover who was arrested and later convicted" (Braden, 2005, p. 123).

The article then goes on to cite Rhea's success in the disappearance of ten year old Victoria Santiago in 1979. Rhea informed police she had visions of feathers and a windmill; these clues presumably led police to recover Santiago's body in a field by a nearby chicken ranch. Quoting a former police detective who worked on the case, it states, "Kay is the real deal" (Braden, 2005, p. 123).

After giving examples of a few more success stories, the article briefly turns to a more skeptical, less credulous perspective. Former FBI profiler Clint Van Zandt states, "In my 25 years as an FBI agent, I never saw a psychic provide anything but information so general it was useless in the case" (Braden, 2005, p. 123). A quote is then taken from Michael Shermer, Ph.D., director of the Skeptics Society: "They're just playing the law of numbers. If you make enough statements about enough crimes, inevitably you're going to get something right" (Braden, 2005, p. 123).

While this is only one article in a sea of mainstream media, it is a good representation of the coverage given to psychic detectives in the popular press. It seems all articles in pop culture magazines concerning psychic detectives follow a similar pattern: an introduction to a psychic or psychics, a few success stories, a quote from a law enforcement official or private detective validating the psychic's success, and a brief statement by an unconvinced skeptic. Based on these articles, it would appear psychic detectives are routinely sought out by law enforcement agencies to assist with missing persons and homicide investigations when all traditional avenues of inquiry have failed. These same articles also lead one to believe the success rate of these psychic detectives is extremely high.

However, the information published by independent study groups and peer-reviewed academic journals paints a completely different picture. Over the past sixty or seventy years, a fair amount of scientific research into the phenomenon of Extrasensory Perception (ESP) has been conducted, and the results have almost unanimously shown psychics perform no better than chance under controlled test conditions, nor do they perform any better than the non-psychic test subjects to which they are often compared. Unfortunately, there is very little academic research tying the psychic phenomenon into criminal investigations and providing a legitimate measure of the success of proclaimed psychic investigators. Though the field of study is quite narrow, the research that has been conducted testing psychics in the investigative arena has met with the same results as scientific testing into the study of ESP itself, and the results have been anything but extraordinary.

Research into the use of psychics by law enforcement entities began in 1979 when the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) began to investigate the phenomenon. The research was conducted by Dr. Martin Reiser of the LAPD, along with Dr. Susan Saxe, Clare Wagner (both of the LAPD as well), and Dr. Louise Ludwig, a psychology professor at Los Angeles City College. Their initial research served as the impetus for the study of the effectiveness of psychic detectives, and all subsequent research seems to be based on the foundation laid in their findings, published as "Evaluation of the Use of Psychics in the Investigation of Major Crimes" in the *Journal of Police Science and Administration* in 1979.

The study began by choosing 12 psychics in the Los Angeles area, eight of whom were professional psychics who earned part or all of their income by means of psychic readings. Four were listed as nonprofessional psychics. Four crimes, two solved and two unsolved, were then chosen by an investigator not involved in the research. No information about any of the crimes was given to the researchers prior to the study taking place in order to prevent the researchers from influencing the test subjects in any way (Reiser, Ludwig, Saxe, & Wagner, 1979).

Physical evidence from each crime was then placed in sealed, numbered envelopes. The psychics were then given the envelopes and asked to elicit any information possible from the sealed envelope. They were then asked to open the envelope, examine the physical evidence, and provide any additional information. The following is a response provided by one of the test subjects and is indicative of the types of responses received from the other psychics while holding the aforementioned physical evidence:

I get a man, black. I hear screaming, screaming. I'm running upstairs and down. My head...someone bounces my head on the wall or floor. I see trees- a park? In the city, but green. Did this person live there? What does the number "2" mean? I get a bad, bloody taste in my mouth. The names "John" or "Joseph" or something like that. I am running on the street like a crazy. This is a very serious crime. I can't hold the envelope in my hand (Reiser, Ludwig, Saxe, & Wagner, 1979, p. 19).

After all of the subjects had been given an opportunity to provide information sensed from the evidentiary objects, their statements were compared against verifiable indicators of each crime. In relation to Crime Number One, two of the 12 psychics correctly identified four of 21 possible indicators, while the average of all test subjects was two of 21 possible indicators. The findings noted, "Statistically, this is not better than chance" (Reiser, Ludwig, Saxe, & Wagner, 1979, p. 19).

The results for the other three crimes were not any better. In relation to Crime Number Two, the psychics averaged 1.8 out of 33 known key indicators, ranging from zero correct responses to three. Crime Number Three offered an average of 2.3 correct responses of 28 known indicators, while Crime Number Four produced an average of 2.7 correct responses out of 29 verifiable indicators. All results were consistently no better than chance (Reiser, Ludwig, Saxe & Wagner, 1979).

A 1994 study conducted by Richard Wiseman of the University of Hertfordshire and Donald West of the University of Cambridge tested the success rate of psychics against three university students. The study, "An Experimental Test of Psychic Detection", was subsequently published in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical*

Research in 1996. The paper addresses the claims made by psychics of their extremely high success rate, “Most of these claims are supported by only anecdotal evidence” (p. 34). In addition, the paper briefly discusses past research that has shown psychics fare no better than chance in controlled studies and proposes a new study to further test psychic abilities and their relationship to criminal investigations (Wiseman & West, 1996).

Wiseman and West conducted a study utilizing two control groups. The first group was composed of professional psychics (one being a high profile psychic frequently utilized by police in the Hertfordshire area), and the second group was comprised of three students recruited from the Psychology Department of the University of Hertfordshire. The study noted that “none of these students claimed to be psychic or had any special interest in criminology” (Wiseman & West, 1996, p. 37).

All six participants were then shown three objects that had been involved in one of three different crimes; all crimes utilized were previously solved so that more verifiable information was available. The participants were allowed to handle each object and vocalize their thoughts and ideas in regards to how the object was related to a criminal event. After handling the objects, each participant was presented a list of 18 randomly ordered statements and asked to choose six statements that were true of each crime but untrue of the other crimes.

Once the results were tallied, the three professional psychics scored no better than the three university students; Wiseman and West noted, “None of the subjects were significant and the psychics’ scores were no different to those of the students...neither group performed at above chance levels” (Wiseman & West, 1996, pp. 37-38). The results of the study are exemplified in the table below:

	Accuracy rating (min=0, max=7)	Number of statements	Group scores (min=0, max=7)
Psychic 1	3.87 (2.57)	15	3.83 (0.17)
Psychic 2	3.65 (1.83)	16	
Psychic 3	4.00 (1.96)	8	
Student 1	6.37 (0.64)	8	5.63 (1.28)
Student 2	4.14 (2.62)	7	
Student 3	5.10 (2.13)	5	

Table 2: Individual/group accuracy means, standard deviations (in brackets) and number of statements.

It should be noted “Psychic 1”, the psychic detective often utilized by police in the Hertfordshire area, did not score any better or predict more accurately than the other test subjects.

One area noted by Wiseman and West, as well as many other researchers of the psychic phenomenon in various studies, concerned the number of statements made by the psychics. During the course of the study at the University of Hertfordshire, the three professional psychics made 39 total statements regarding the objects they were presented and their relationship to a criminal event; conversely, the university students only made 20 such statements. Despite attempts to offer more information, the psychics still did not score higher than their counterparts (Wiseman & West, 1996).

Wiseman and West also noted during post-test interviews that all three students believed they performed poorly, while all three psychics believed they performed well. When confronted with the results, the psychics began to retract or retrofit their statements to fall in accordance with the facts of the case. Despite the positive outlook the psychics purported and their attempt to retrofit their given statements, the authors noted, "...this small scale study provided no evidence to support the claims of psychic detection and, as such, the results are in accordance with other controlled studies. The study utilized a novel method of evaluating psychic detection and the way in which participants responded to being told the true nature of the crimes gives some insight into some of the mechanisms which might cause individuals to believe erroneously that they are able to solve crimes by psychic means" (Wiseman & West, 1996, p. 40).

This data correlates with a study previously mentioned by the authors, a test conducted in 1982 by Dr. Martin Reiser of the Los Angeles Police Department. In Reiser's 1982 study, a follow up to his previously mentioned 1979 study published in the *Journal for Police Science and Administration*, three groups of participants were utilized to test psychic abilities in criminal investigations: psychics, students, and homicide detectives. As in other studies, each participant was given physical evidence from separate crimes in a sealed envelope. The findings noted, "The psychic detectives produced descriptions that were, on average, six times the length of the student descriptions...A comparison between the three groups showed that although the psychics produced the greatest number of predictions, they were not any more accurate than either the students or detectives" (Wiseman & West, 1996, p. 36).

A study conducted at Arkansas State University in 1984 tested whether one's belief in psychic ability has any influence on performance and success rate. Entitled "Attitudes Toward the Existence and Scientific Investigation of Extrasensory Perception", the study utilized 261 psychology students attempting to earn extra credit. The students were first given a questionnaire concerning their beliefs in supernatural phenomenon and subsequently assigned to one of four independent groups. Subjects were then given a clairvoyance test using two decks of 25 ESP cards containing five different geometric symbols (Johnson & Jones, 1984).

The ESP cards were randomly ordered, wrapped in aluminum foil, and sealed in a white envelope to prevent identification by ordinary means. Each envelope was held up for 15 seconds, and the test subjects were asked to make their prediction of the geometric symbol contained within the sealed envelope. The study found "the number of hits obtained by the Ss (subjects) as a whole, and by Ss in each of the four groups into which they were divided, is not significantly different from chance" (Johnson & Jones, 1984, p. 21).

In reviewing literature relevant to the use of psychics by law enforcement agencies, one topic of discussion is universally and curiously absent. An accurate

accounting of the resources utilized by law enforcement to follow up on information provided by psychic detectives does not seem to be available. It does not appear any law enforcement agency has ever tracked the amount of money spent, time and resources invested, and/or manpower hours utilized in response to information provided by a psychic. If an agency has tracked such data, the information has remained within the agency and has not been published for public view. Another item to note is that information provided by psychics is inadmissible in court; therefore, no case law is available on the subject.

Method

In April and May of 2012, research was conducted to further evaluate the use and effectiveness of psychics in homicide and/or missing person investigations. A survey was created utilizing the website www.surveymonkey.com inquiring about the solicitation and use of psychics by law enforcement agencies throughout the nation. The survey was sent via email to all graduates of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Academy, all of whom are senior executives in various law enforcement agencies throughout the United States and other parts of the world. Each graduate was asked to forward the survey to his or her respective Homicide/Major Crimes unit for completion.

The survey was also sent via email to all members of the Homicide Research Working Group (HRWC) and the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit. The HRWC is an interdisciplinary and international organization comprised of law enforcement practitioners and academic researchers committed to improving the means, collection, and analysis of homicide data in order to reduce levels of mortality from violence (<http://homicideworkinggroup.cos.ucf.edu/index.php>). The FBI's Behavioral Science Unit is comprised of "supervisory special agents and veteran police officers with advanced degrees in the behavioral science disciplines of psychology, criminology, sociology, and conflict resolution" (<http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/training/bsu>). Along with teaching various subjects at the FBI Academy, the Behavioral Science Unit, a unit often featured in movies and television shows for the practice of "profiling", regularly conducts research into the development of new and innovative investigative techniques.

At the conclusion of the survey, follow-up in person interviews were conducted with experienced homicide investigators in the Central Florida area. Interviewees possess decades of experience in the investigative field and have worked numerous high-profile investigations throughout their career. During the course of these investigations, interviewees have had the opportunity to utilize and/or follow-up on information provided by psychic detectives.

Results

The survey was successfully completed by 102 respondents throughout the law enforcement community. The first two questions concerned minor biographical information of the respondent. Question one simply queried the respondent's gender with nine (8.9%) indicating they were female and 92 indicating they were male (91.1%). One respondent did not answer the question.

Question two asked the respondent to identify how many years of law enforcement experience he or she possessed. Only one respondent (1%) indicated five years or less of law enforcement experience. Eight respondents (7.9%) noted between six and 10 years of experience with 12 (11.9%) noting 11 to 15 years of experience. Twenty respondents (19.8%) indicated they possessed between 16 and 20 years of experience, and 60 respondents (59.4%) stated they possessed 21 years or more law enforcement experience. One respondent did not answer the question. The responses to this question indicate a large portion of the respondents possess significant law enforcement credentials and have been in the career field long enough to form an educated opinion regarding the use of psychic detectives in homicide and missing persons investigations.

Question three asked each respondent if he or she has ever solicited the use of a psychic in a homicide or missing person investigation. All 102 respondents answered the question, with 29 (28.4%) indicating they had solicited the assistance of a psychic while 73 (71.6%) indicated they have never personally solicited the assistance of a psychic detective. Results would indicate the use of psychic detectives by law enforcement personnel is not as prevalent as the mainstream media would have the general public believe.

Question four acted as a direct follow-up to question three. Of the 29 respondents who stated they have personally solicited the use of a psychic in a homicide or missing person investigation, seven (26.9%) stated they found the information to be helpful or instrumental in solving the case. Nineteen of the respondents (73.1%) advised the information was not helpful, and three of 20 respondents did not answer the question.

Question five queried whether or not the respondent's agency has ever solicited the use of a psychic in a homicide or missing person investigation. Thirty respondents (30.3%) advised their agency has solicited the use of a psychic detective at some point, while 69 respondents (69.7%) advised their agency has not. Responses again show the use of psychic detectives is not as prevalent as the media coverage of major cases would have people believe. Three respondents did not answer the question.

Question six served as a direct follow-up to question five. Of the respondents who answered in the affirmative, seven (22.6%) found the information provided by the psychic to be helpful, while 24 (77.4%) did not. A slight discrepancy can be noted related to this question as 30 respondents advised their agency had solicited the use of a psychic (question five), yet 31 respondents answered the follow up question regarding the value of the information provided by the psychic detective (question six).

Question seven asked the respondent if he or she had ever followed up on information provided by a psychic in a homicide or missing person investigation. Of the 98 respondents who answered the question, 43 (43.9%) advised they had with 55

(56.1%) advising they had not followed up on the aforementioned type of information. Responses in this area are considerably higher than the responses regarding personal or agency solicitation, indicating most information obtained from psychic detectives is not solicited by law enforcement entities but provided by psychics of their own accord.

Question eight acted as a direct follow-up to question seven. Of the 43 respondents who answered question seven, only five of them (11.4%) found the information provided by the psychic to be helpful or instrumental in solving the case, while 39 (88.6%) did not find the provided information to be useful. It should be noted there is a slight discrepancy in comparison to question seven, as 44 respondents answered question eight while only 43 responded in the affirmative to question seven.

Question nine inquired of each respondent if their agency had ever followed up on information provided by a psychic even if the respondent was not personally involved. Forty-eight (48.5%) stated their agency has followed up on information provided by a psychic during a homicide or missing person investigation, while 20 respondents (20.2%) stated they had not. Three respondents skipped the question, and 31 (31.3%) advised they did not know if their agency had ever followed up on such information.

Question 10 served as a direct follow-up to question nine. Of the 48 respondents who advised their agency had followed up on information provided by a psychic (even if they were not personally involved), only seven (14.6%) advised the information was useful in bringing the case to a resolution. Forty-one of the respondents (85.4%) stated the information was not useful, while 54 respondents skipped the question.

Question 11 asked each respondent if they had any firsthand knowledge of a psychic detective ever solving a homicide or missing person investigation. The question was answered by 96 of the 102 respondents. Of the 96 who answered, only five (5.2%) advised they had firsthand knowledge of a psychic detective successfully bringing a homicide or missing person investigation to a successful conclusion. 94.8% of the respondents advised they had no firsthand knowledge of a psychic detective bringing a case to a positive resolution.

Question 12 asked the respondents if they had ever known a psychic detective to be helpful in solving a case (even if it was not firsthand knowledge). The results were not significantly different than question 11. Only six (6.3%) advised they had knowledge of a psychic detective bringing a homicide or missing person case to a successful conclusion, while 89 respondents (93.7%) had no knowledge of a psychic detective ever being successful.

Question 13 served as a direct follow-up to question 12. Respondents were then asked if they recommended the solicitation of a psychic detective to assist with investigations. Ninety-five of the 102 respondents answered the question with 20 (21.1%) recommending the solicitation of a psychic to offer assistance. Seven respondents skipped the question, and 75 (78.9%) did not recommend the solicitation of a psychic detective.

The survey's final question asked each respondent if he or she recommended the use of resources to follow up on information obtained by a psychic even if the information was not solicited. It should be noted unsolicited assistance is the most common scenario during a high profile investigation that receives a fair amount of media coverage. Ninety-five of the 102 respondents answered the question with 49 (51.6%)

recommending the use of resources to follow up on information provided by a psychic. Results obviously seem high when compared to question 11, where only 5.2% of respondents had any firsthand knowledge of a psychic having any type of success. Possible reasons for this discrepancy will be discussed later.

The survey also provided each respondent with the opportunity to leave comments about opinions and past experiences with psychic detectives. Some of the comments are listed below:

- You have to follow up on any information given during a homicide whether it was solicited or not.

- All leads should be reviewed and followed up on. Some Psychics may interview family and friends of a victim to give the appearance they know more about a given case.

- Don't believe in ANY use of psychics.

- Never, ever in a million years would I use that crap. I find it utterly ridiculous!!!

- You should not disregard any information obtained in a homicide or missing person investigation. I don't know if I could justify spending much agency money to hire a psychic detective but any additional information could be helpful and should be considered...until the source is found to be totally unreliable.

- My experience with their unsolicited information is that they gathered a good deal of readily available information from media and www and have even contacted principals, parents or survivors. I've found that some are skilled interviewers using all that information coming up with a story based somewhat in fact with information they "couldn't possibly have known" that is broad enough that it can sound credible, cannot be confirmed and when the case is solved claim they can say they provided "factual information" (that law enforcement already had anyway). I've found a couple to skilled at manipulating the media as well hence the necessity to "follow-up on information obtained from a psychic detective"

- We had missing person and a local psychic was recommended. We used her because we were willing to try any and all things available. We were advised to check large wooded area. After searching that area for days, we had NO results. but, it was worth the try and at least we were able to tell the family we tried EVERY possible avenue during our investigation.

- Psychic provided detailed information of the whereabouts of a missing/homicide victim. We didn't find the body at the time but when it was located it was exactly as described by the psychic.

- There is no empirical evidence that a psychic has ever assisted police in a homicide or missing person case.

- I was an FBI profiler in the Behavioral Analysis Unit and have worked on thousands of homicide cases around the country and the world. I have never seen any useful information provided by psychics in those cases where the agency or the family had solicited their help prior to our involvement. The use of psychics is the last resort of desperate agencies. It also telegraphs to the public and the offender that the police have absolutely no leads of value.

In addition to the survey, interviews were conducted with current and former law enforcement professionals who had the opportunity to work with or utilize information provided by psychic detectives during homicide and missing person investigations. The first interview was conducted with Detective Michael Moreschi of the Orlando Police Department. Detective Moreschi has worked with the Orlando Police Department for 22 years and has served in the Homicide Unit for the past six. During his tenure in the Homicide Unit, he has had the opportunity to work extensively on some of the most high profile missing persons cases in the past few years- the disappearances of Jennifer Kesse and Michelle Parker.

Detective Moreschi stated OPD received over 1,000 tips in relation to the Kesse case and over 800 related to the Parker investigation. Of these tips, it is hard to determine the actual amount received from psychics. Many stated they were psychics outright and offered to assist the investigation in any way possible, while some were believed to be from psychics simply based on the vagueness of tip. Of the more than 1,800 tips received between the two investigations, only about 10% provided specific enough information for law enforcement to further investigate. All tips provided by identified psychics proved unfruitful or too vague to even further investigate.

Detective Moreschi stated he spoke with Michelle Parker's family early in the investigation, and one of her family members informed him that she was a believer in the use of psychics to obtain additional information. He informed the family member he was not a believer in psychic ability and has never known a psychic to be of value to an investigation; in fact, they more often than not sidetrack investigators and waste valuable time and resources. However, he assured the family member any tips that contained specific or detailed information would be further investigated regardless of the source of the information. This policy effectively eliminated the use of resources to follow up on tips provided by psychic detectives since the majority of psychic information is very vague and does not contain specific or detailed information.

In high profile homicide and missing person investigations, psychics are generally entertained simply because of media relations. Agencies are fearful of friends and family members of the victim reaching out to the news media and claiming everything possible is not being done. Detective Moreschi advised this scenario was not of great concern to OPD since media coverage made it apparent that hundreds of officers were assisting with the investigation. OPD believed media attention of this type would reflect more negatively on the family than the department, so it did not become a major topic of conversation.

An interview was also conducted with Investigator Robert Jaynes of the Seminole County Sheriff's Office. Investigator Jaynes has 32 years of law enforcement experience with 26 years of experience investigating homicides. In addition to his standard duties in the Major Crimes Unit, he currently serves as the coordinator for the agency's 37 cold case homicides. As an experienced homicide investigator, Investigator Jaynes has had numerous occasions to work with psychic detectives or follow up on information provided by psychics. In every instance, the results were less than impressive. Not only did psychics not provide any useful information, but they routinely distracted and hampered investigators.

Investigator Jaynes relayed a story regarding a high profile missing person investigation conducted by the Seminole County Sheriff's Office approximately ten years

ago. The missing person's mother, a devout believer in psychics, insisted the agency utilize a psychic's services to help find her son. When the agency did not hire a psychic, she provided one on her own and demanded resources be appropriated to further investigate tips supplied by the psychic. In order to substantiate these claims, at least one investigator was given to the family and their psychic for around the clock support. Before the investigation was completed, at least one hundred man-hours had been spent with no positive results to show. The missing person was eventually located in a retention pond less than one mile from the family's home and counties away from where the psychic was allocating resources.

An interview was also conducted with Dr. James Sewell, former Chief of Police of the Gulfport (FL) Police Department and former Assistant Commissioner of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Dr. Sewell received the survey via email and wished to pass along an experience in which he had the opportunity to deal with a psychic during a high profile investigation. The investigation is to this day one of the most famous in Florida's history: the attack of four coeds at the Chi Omega sorority house at Florida State University in Tallahassee, as well another coed approximately eight blocks away, in January of 1978. The investigation would eventually lead to one of history's most famous serial killers: Ted Bundy.

Dr. Sewell was employed by the Florida State University Police Department at that time and served as an important participant during the investigation. He advised the investigators received numerous tips from psychics, all of which were too vague to further investigate or simply not in conjunction with the facts of the case. However, investigators began to receive information from a psychic in South Florida that contained specific information related to the case; information that was not released to the media and could not have been known by the general public.

As in most other cases, the source of the psychic's information had a more prosaic explanation. Further investigation revealed the South Florida psychic's best friend was a resident of Tallahassee and was currently involved in a relationship with a member of the investigative team. Once the link was established and the problem addressed, all psychic tips of potential value ceased.

Dr. Sewell advised he has heard of anecdotal evidence to support the use of psychics in investigations but has no firsthand knowledge or knows of any empirical evidence to support their success. He further stated it is very difficult for a law enforcement agency to establish a policy and/or procedure regarding their use during investigations. The decision on whether or not to utilize their services, or to what degree to utilize their services, will largely be a case by case basis dependent upon the agency's relationship with the victim's family, the agency's relationship with the media, and the current political climate of the area. While he believes it is not always feasible to establish a set policy, he concurs with the Orlando Police Department's policy regarding specific information. Dr. Sewell advised utilizing resources to focus on specific claims and leads is a more efficient use of available resources and is more likely to produce positive results.

Discussion

In discussing the use of psychics as a legitimate investigative tool, a few topics need to be discussed. First, does the utilization of psychics as an investigative tool work, and second, is the use as prevalent as the mainstream media would have the public believe? Both can be answered with a resounding no. In reviewing success stories and success rates of psychic detectives, the results are not encouraging. Mainstream media is filled with entertaining stories of psychic success, but these stories seem to crumble pretty quickly when put under the microscope. Many of these success stories are nothing more than unsubstantiated boasting on the part of psychic detectives, often claiming success on cases in which they were never involved.

Many of the psychic “hits” are questionable at best. Psychic detectives generally only offer their assistance and their vision to cases receiving significant media coverage. This coverage gives them somewhat of an understanding of what is surrounding the investigation and from there certain assumptions are not hard to make. It is not a stretch to say the female homicide victim was murdered by her ex-boyfriend or a missing child in Florida can be found near water. If and when these easy generalizations become true, the psychics and their supporters consider this a legitimate success story even though nothing was provided that assisted law enforcement in any conceivable way. Given this, many of the reported success stories by the mainstream media are largely suspect.

Outside of the mainstream media, nothing can be found in peer-reviewed academic journals or respected law enforcement publications showing psychics have ever been utilized in high profile investigations with much success. The respondents who answered the survey in the affirmative and left comments indicating a successful use of psychic detectives did not provide any contact information for further follow up. No case can be verified in which a psychic unquestionably helped law enforcement make an arrest and gain a subsequent conviction. No case can be identified where a psychic has ever recovered a living missing child/person and successfully returned him or her to friends and family. Even success stories in the missing person category generally only concern the recovery of the missing person’s body.

The results of the survey seem to support the past research conducted in this field, though there does seem to be a discrepancy in the reported success rate of psychic detectives. This discrepancy occurs between question six and question 12. Question six inquired of the respondents if information provided by a psychic was useful in situations where the investigators had solicited the use of a psychic themselves. 22.6% of the respondents answered in the affirmative. This is in sharp contrast to the response to question 12, where respondents were asked if they had any firsthand knowledge of a psychic being helpful or instrumental in an investigation. Question 12 was answered affirmatively with an abysmal 6.3%. While the exact reason for this discrepancy can probably not be fully explained, it most likely has to do more with the power of belief than with the actual performance of psychic detectives. Simply put, when the investigating officer believes in the use of psychics and/or suggest the idea, the psychics are more likely to receive successful marks from law enforcement.

The overall success rate of 6.3% as reported by the survey’s respondents is another topic to discuss. Since psychics generally only offer assistance and tips in high

profile cases with vast amounts of media attention, they tend to come out in droves for these types of investigations, and the sheer number of psychics involved can affect the overall success rate in a way that cannot be truly measured. Given the high profile nature of the case, dozens, if not hundreds, of psychics will call law enforcement and offer tips or assistance. If one happens to be right, the case would be considered a “hit” for the psychics even if a hundred other psychics were “misses.” This means the success rate of 6.3% could, in fact, be too high, and while it is hard to define what a “chance” level of success actually is, less than 6.3% is most likely worse than chance. Data also shows psychic detectives are actually less successful working under their own conditions than they are in controlled conditions where they still fail to outperform control groups.

Not only is the psychic detective’s ability to successfully assist with criminal investigations highly exaggerated by mainstream media but so is the frequency of use by law enforcement agencies. Of the 102 survey respondents, only 30 advised their agency had ever solicited the use of a psychic, though a higher number of respondents (43) stated their agency has utilized resources to follow up on information provided by psychic detectives. Differences here generally occur because psychics often interject and offer assistance of their own volition or at the request of the victim’s family, not at the behest of law enforcement. It is important to keep in mind psychics are most often solicited by the family, not law enforcement, and the relationship between the family and the psychic detective might provide the psychic with better and more reliable information than law enforcement is sometimes able to acquire. The psychic’s ability to cultivate a close relationship with friends and family can produce legitimate investigative leads.

While there is no solid data to support the use of psychics as a legitimate investigative tool, the decision of whether or not to utilize their services is not an easy one. While most law enforcement professionals put little stock in the use of psychics (if it worked wouldn’t everyone do it?), some studies show as high as three out of four Americans believe in the paranormal (Shermer, 1997, p.17).

The contrast in opinions and beliefs of law enforcement and the general public poses a real problem for law enforcement entities. Law enforcement agencies and officials are constantly worried about public relations and the public’s perception of law enforcement and with good reason; law enforcement agencies rely greatly on public support and opinion to effectively perform their functions and evaluate their own performance. Unfortunately, this concern with public opinion can sometimes lead to decisions that are not helpful to the investigation and ultimately waste valuable monetary and manpower resources.

The reality is the decision to utilize psychic detectives is almost an entirely political one. The truth is it is almost exclusively done to satisfy the victim’s friends and family, not to garner legitimate investigative leads. The mother of a missing child telling the news media local law enforcement is not doing all it can to find her son or daughter is a nightmare for any agency involved in such an important investigation. Not only does such negative media attention affect the agency, but such negative press can have a detrimental effect on the investigation as well if detectives become sidetracked by a media frenzy. In such an instance, the decision to utilize a psychic detective is simply the lesser of two evils.

Not only is there a chasm between public and law enforcement opinion in this area, but there is variety of opinions among law enforcement professionals as to what policies to enact regarding the use of psychic detectives. Many feel every lead or tip should be scrutinized or investigated regardless of the source. While this is admirable in theory, it can consume a vast amount of time and resources. Conversely, some detectives feel psychics should not even be entertained as they have never provided any useful information.

In discussing various policies and procedures among different agencies, the procedure implemented by the Orlando Police Department during the Jennifer Kesse and Michelle Parker investigations seems to be the most sound: the use of a psychic will not be solicited; however, if specific information is provided it will be looked into regardless of the source. The focus on specific information effectively eliminates the majority of psychic tips since they are almost always vague and open to interpretation, and this policy works without excluding a specific type of source.

However, there is one small issue that can arise from this policy. In a new investigation gathering a large amount of media attention, the policy will most likely work well. If the victim's family chooses to convey to the media their feeling that the investigating agency is not doing enough, it is easy for the agency to show the vast amount of resources being utilized and put the issue to rest. Unfortunately, the OPD policy will most likely not work with cold cases. Many cold cases have not been looked at in years due to a lack of time and resources. Therefore, the agency cannot show it is doing everything in its power and may have to concede to the family's request and entertain the use of a psychic detective.

While there is no solid empirical evidence to suggest that psychic detectives are useful in solving homicides or missing person investigations, the decision to solicit, utilize, or entertain them is not an easy one. Each individual agency will ultimately have to make that decision based on its own experiences, ideas, and current public and/or political climate.

Lieutenant Jim Smithey has been in law enforcement for 12 years, beginning his career with the Seminole County Sheriff's Office in 2000 after graduating from Florida State University with a Bachelor's of Science degree in Criminology. He was assigned to Seminole Neighborhood Policing for approximately five years, serving as a field training officer during that time frame. He was then transferred to the Major Crimes Unit, where he served for three years before being promoted to sergeant and returning to patrol. After approximately one year, he returned to investigations to supervise the Major Crimes Unit. Jim was promoted to lieutenant in October of 2011 and currently serves as the South Region Commander in Seminole Neighborhood Policing.

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