

# FRONTIERS

## SOCIAL PARAPSYCHOLOGY

Each of us occasionally makes a decision that, in hindsight, turns out to be remarkably clever or remarkably foolish. Amplify this decision by a few million people, and the resulting collective decisions can be incredibly intelligent or stupendously stupid. These extremes are discussed in two recent books, *The Wisdom of*

*Crowds* by James Surowiecki, and *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* by Jared Diamond. Surowiecki explores the fact that groups can sometimes be smarter than the most brilliant individual in the group—better at problem-solving, complex cooperation, decision-making, or predicting the future. Diamond explores how collective behavior can sometimes lead to breathtaking stupidity, resulting in the collapse of whole civilizations.

The concept of collective amplification of brilliance or madness prompted me to ponder one of the newest horizons in psi research—social parapsychology. Whereas parapsychology has traditionally focused on individual psychic experiences, social parapsychology investigates collective psychic experiences. Until recently, social parapsychology was an interesting idea, but very difficult to study. With the advent of the Internet, research is now becoming feasible.

As readers of *Shift* know, the Institute of Noetic Sciences has been at the forefront of this new domain through our participation in the Global Consciousness Project, headed by Princeton University psychologist Roger Nelson, and through our online psi tests. These programs are collecting massive amounts of data that can be used to investigate collective psi. As of Spring 2005, the psi games at [www.gotpsi.org](http://www.gotpsi.org) (hosted by the Boundary

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Institute) and at [www.psiarcade.com](http://www.psiarcade.com) (hosted by IONS) have generated over 70 million individual trials from nearly 300,000 people worldwide.

One of the games at [www.gotpsi.org](http://www.gotpsi.org) assesses pre-cognitive ability. It tests how well a user can describe a photo that the computer will randomly select after the user's predictive description of the unknown photo is entered. Because this test asks people to imagine a visual scene they've yet to see, I thought it would be interesting to see whether premonitions might enter into the imagination. I examined the words that people used to describe their imagery from September 9, 2001, through the morning of September 11, 2001. This included a set of nearly 900 trials and just over 2,500 words.

On the morning of September 9, a user nicknamed *sean* wrote the following words in a series of three successive trials:

*airliner (seen from left-rear) against stormy cloud backdrop, flashes of streaky cloud, ovoids, two persons firstly a dragonfly? then a log [or] branch suggestive of Everglades, then a fast dynamic scene of falling between two tall buildings, past checkered patterns of windows first tall structure like an industrial chimney, then flashes of rounded crenulated form—peacock-like headdress of*

# of SCIENCE

DREW GALLOWAY. PHOTO: JEANNE CLAYTON



*American Indian woman? then surface like volcanic ash plume or cauliflower*

The user's precognitive descriptions didn't match the photos subsequently selected at random by the computer, but they do provide a rather startling impressionistic sense of the terrorist acts in New York City on the tragic day now known as 9/11. The next afternoon, a user named *shakey* wrote these words in two successive trials:

*it is of something falling; it will be a chaotic scene*

Again these words were a poor description of the targets, but they are meaningful in the context of 9/11. A half hour later, a different user, nicknamed *justatest*, wrote in four successive trials:

*Intense . . . too hot to handle; blasting; is the coast clear? they were checking the coast!!!*

The following morning, September 11, about an hour before the first airplane crashed into the World Trade

Center, user *xixi* wrote the following words in a series of 11 trials:

*White House; gone in the blink of an eye; scald; man's folly; band red; surging; palace; not easily conned; US power base; flexing muscles; surprise.*

Are these genuine premonitions of 9/11? The ideas suggested by these words seemed to be unusual in the context of this experiment, as most of the photos used in the test are of benign landscapes, people, animals, and other scenes with neutral content. Still, this is just a handful of potentially interesting matches out of 900 trials, and they might have been purely due to coincidence. So I devised a way to judge whether the words used prior to 9/11 were in fact unusual from the point of view of *collective* performance.

I considered all online precognition trials that included word descriptions contributed from September 2000 through June 2003; this amounted to 256,000 trials containing 841,000 words. For each trial, I matched the words each user entered against a set of nine concepts capturing the turmoil of 9/11: *airplane, falling, explode, fire, attack, terror, disaster, pentagon, and smoke*. The idea was to see how closely the words used by each person each day matched these concepts. Counting only exact word matches wouldn't be sufficient because someone might have used a synonym that an exact word-match would overlook. So I developed an automated concept-matching technique to form an average score indicating how closely the words used on a daily basis contained terrorism-related concepts.

At first glance, these scores appeared to fluctuate randomly from one day to the next. On closer inspection, however, I found something rather unusual. Rather than *increase* in value, as might be predicted if lots of people were suddenly having premonitions of disaster, a few days before 9/11 the scores *dropped* to their lowest point in the three years of data examined.

To see how meaningful this was, I compared the observed drop against similar values based on randomly

scrambled datasets. I found that the joint odds against chance of obtaining a “terrorism concept” score as low as the observed minimum, and falling as close or closer to 9/11 as observed, was 3,300 to 1. This means people were significantly *avoiding* concepts associated with terrorism just prior to the catastrophe.

As it turns out, I found a virtually identical result in a different gotpsi.org game (an ESP card-guessing game). Collective drops in psi performance in the days before 9/11 suggest that many people unconsciously began to sense trouble brewing, but there was no context for those feelings so they were actively repressed. Only the rare

individual can avoid personally identifying with negative thoughts, and fewer still are willing to publicly admit that they’re having such thoughts. You can’t ask people to report premonitions that they’ve repressed, but interesting patterns do come into focus when daily collective psi performance is analyzed.

I believe that interest in social parapsychology will undoubtedly continue to grow as we find new ways of using the Internet and the media to study the nature and possible applications of collective psi.

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## TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

**H**ow might the Institute’s study of consciousness shed light on the relationship between complex social, political, and ecological processes and the experience of reality? Beginning to answer it in our own small way, we have created a series of applied research projects that link us to the larger world. This initiative—called “Transformation in Action”—includes developing noetic training programs, testing and evaluating these programs, and, if they work, making these noetic interventions available to communities to empower individual and collective transformation. Tackling the specific issues of teen pregnancy and homelessness, we are seeking to apply the findings from IONS’ thirty years of research to challenging social issues.

### CONSCIOUS PARENTING

The Canal District of San Rafael, California, is a low-income enclave with a primarily Latin American population in one of the wealthiest counties of the United States. Here our small team of researchers and community volunteers addressed a complex and challenging issue: teen pregnancy. In particular, we wondered if we might use our research on the health benefits of transformational

practices to enhance the mother/child bond for a group of pregnant girls.

In partnership with a professional social worker named Cio Hernandez, who each day deals hands-on with the social challenges of young Latina mothers, we created an eight-week integral health training program to nurture body, mind, and spirit. Each session included fun and accessible educational and experiential modules on nutrition, exercise, and body awareness. We also included mindfulness meditation, group support, and various practices meant to increase self-esteem and communication with babies, including improvisation led by Nina Wise, body painting led by Nola Lewis, and self-expression led by Hernandez.

Our primary research analysis relied on the examination of birth charts, through which we were able to look at biological differences in birth outcomes between our noetic intervention group and a matched comparison group at a local community center. While this was only a small pilot study, we found differences for the noetic intervention group in several of the biological measures we looked at, such as fewer childbirth complications and reduced time of labor.

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Perhaps more striking than the biological effects in these studies was the chance to learn more about these girls' experiences. The mothers-to-be told amazing stories of their life experiences. Reports of extreme loneliness were shared. One young woman broke into tears as she described her experiences of domestic violence. In another poignant account, a Central American woman described her journey to the US. Trapped in a container on the roof of a vehicle, she stayed for days with the bodies of fellow travelers who died during the trip. In each case, we attempted to create a loving and nurturing setting for these women to tell their life stories and to build their connection to the unborn child. Over the course of the intervention, we noticed a clear sense of bonding and greater self-expression. A follow-up meeting with the girls—with babes in arms—suggested that this strengthened sense of self lasted well beyond the end of the intervention.

## AT HOME WITHIN

According to John Records, Director of the Committee on the Shelterless (COTS), many homeless people dream of having a home. Sadly, they often lack the resources to make the dream a reality, or their ability to develop necessary commitment or intention is undermined by obstacles such as disabilities, trauma, addictions—or a history of failure that discourages them from daring to hope for anything better.

In a new IONS study called “At Home Within,” funded by several private foundations, we are hoping to address this problem by piloting a personal growth program for homeless adults. The study, led by Dr Cassandra Vieten, is applying the latest research on personal growth and transformation to create an intervention that encourages a feeling of being “at home within” while participants seek a home on the outside.

Vieten, a research psychologist and addiction expert, describes the premise behind the work: “This project is based on the idea that while homelessness and associated problems of addiction, trauma, poverty, and unemployment can be incredibly disorienting, many of the world’s spiritual and transformative practices point to a place of refuge within oneself where one can find peace. Some traditions speak of this as a place where

people can not only find a personal internal organizing principle that can direct their lives with a sense of inner authority, but also find a shared common ground with others. Our hypothesis is that direct and repeated experience of connecting to that place can have a profound effect on the capacity to make new choices and overcome barriers.”

Key components of the eight-week training program include body awareness through somatic practices such as walking, stretching, yoga, and t'ai chi; mind awareness through improved understanding of individual learning style and mindfulness practice; cultural awareness through re-establishment of supportive family and social institutions outside of the homeless shelter; and an ecological awareness through immersion in nature. Outcomes that researchers are measuring include increased self-awareness, stress management skills, improved relapse prevention, increased social skills and support, and a more solid connection with self and life-purpose.

## IONS' WORK IN THE WORLD

These two programs build directly upon ongoing studies by IONS researchers about how people from all walks of life engaged in variations of spiritual practice can experience a more meaningful, compassionate, and purpose-filled life. Our study of teachers from a variety of religions and spiritual traditions has revealed the nature of transformational practices that are not only applicable for people who want to improve their quality of life, but also those facing major life transitions. As Vieten notes, “Whether these transitions are life-affirming like marriage, childbirth, or changing careers, or life-shattering like homelessness, incarceration, or addiction and illness, they all provide a window of opportunity for transformation—to make such a fundamental shift in one’s worldview and being that nothing is ever the same again. These kinds of transitions can be very unsettling, but they paradoxically provide a chance to re-orient oneself in an entirely new way, which is more aligned with one’s authentic values and goals.”

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