

THE ELECTRIC PEOPLE PHENOMENON

Many cases of so-called high-voltage syndrome, in which sufferers seem to cause electrical devices to fail in their presence, feature paranormal aspects such as psychokinesis. Often the common factor is that these people experienced severe electric shock during childhood.

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Magical Thinking or Physiological Anomaly?

I've lost count of the number of emails I've received over the years from people claiming that they exert an odd—and seemingly paranormal—influence on electrical gadgets of all kinds. The men and women from whom I receive these emails vary widely in age, nationality and profession, and the vast majority of them come across as perfectly sane and sincere. Many of the emails read something like this:

Household appliances frequently break down when I use them. Computers continually crash on me. I can't wear a wristwatch without its malfunctioning within a short period of time. Sometimes streetlamps blink out when I walk past them. Generally these experiences occur when I'm feeling stressed, upset or excited. I've noticed, too, that my body picks up a lot of static electricity, resulting in frequent "shocks". I've often wondered if my unusual relationship with all things electrical relates to the fact that I suffered a powerful electric shock as a child.

Such individuals have come to be known as "electric people", or sufferers of "high-voltage syndrome" (HVS). Sometimes, when the condition applies exclusively or primarily to streetlights, the terms "streetlight interference" (SLI) and "SLider"—a SLider being someone who experiences SLI frequently—are used in association with such individuals.

As with any phenomenon in the realm of the Fortean, opinions are heavily divided over the reality or otherwise of HVS. Among the explanations cited by sceptics are coincidence, magical thinking and observer bias. While the majority of claims of HVS undoubtedly have a mundane cause, can we say this is true of *all* such claims? In an attempt to provide an answer to this question, let's take a look at several cases of HVS, beginning with that of Mavis Price.

Malfunctioning Electrical Appliances

Described in the *Daily Mail* in 2008 as "the super-charged grandmother whose touch *blows up* kettles", Mrs Price, then aged 60, is a retired community development worker from Telford, Shropshire, UK.¹ Price claims that her body "seems to build up an unusual amount of static [electricity]".² Because of this, she says, electrical appliances and gadgets of all kinds, including kettles, irons, printers, vacuum cleaners and computers, have a tendency to malfunction when she touches or stands near them. She further claims that it's not uncommon for televisions to "crackle" as she walks past them, and that sometimes people who touch her—or merely stand near her—either receive a powerful static shock or experience their hair stand on end.

Price says that she goes through periods during which her destructive influence on electrical equipment is particularly acute. She explains: "I had a really bad day last week where I got up, turned the light on, and managed to blow the fuse. Then I went to the supermarket and broke the checkout.

They had to close the checkout down and said nothing like it had ever happened before. Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse I went to get some photographs printed and managed to completely freeze the whole machine."³

Significantly, Price traces the beginning of her strange relationship with electrical equipment to a childhood incident whereby she suffered a severe electric shock while attempting to plug in a television set.

Can Price's unusual influence on electrical equipment be accounted for in terms of electrostatics alone? When sufficiently insulated, the surface of the human body can easily accumulate up to 25,000 volts of static charge. Conditions that favour the build-up of static on the body include cold, dry weather and the wearing of thick-soled shoes.

One common way to experience an electrostatic discharge, or static shock, is by touching a metal doorhandle after walking across a carpeted room.

Being at the receiving end of a 25,000-volt electrostatic discharge sounds deadly!

It's important to realise, however, that the associated current lies somewhere in the microamp range. This explains why electrostatic discharges produced by the human body, though sometimes painful, are far from dangerous and certainly never lethal; the current would need to be much higher for there to be any kind of danger.

Computer technicians know all too well that even very tiny electrostatic discharges produced by the body can cause irreparable damage to sensitive electronic components; therefore, when fixing computers they make sure to wear antistatic wrist-straps and use other antistatic devices.

By comparison, to destroy an electric kettle (or other robust electrical appliance) by the same means would require a fairly significant electrostatic discharge—one presumably bigger than what the human body can deliver naturally. Perhaps, then, electric people have an abundance of static not because their bodies are picking it up but, rather, because their bodies are generating it internally.

Poisoned Convicts Become "Electrified"!



One of the First of the Phenomena, Noted in the Case of "Botulinus Poisoning," Caused By Eating Decayed Canned Salmon, Was That the Body of the Patient Had Become Highly Electrified. He Was Unable, for Example, to Throw a Piece of Paper in the Waste Basket, the High Electric Charge in His Body Attracting the Paper to His Hand.

"Dr. Rosneau, of Harvard University, did not make any investigations of the electric phenomena and only came into the case with reference to the botulinus poison, as it was a rather large group of cases and opportunities for study were unusually good. Of course the newspaper reports were garbled and exaggerated as they usually are when they attempt to report scientific matters. The newspaper accounts were taken from a report made by myself to the Superintendent of Prisons, setting forth the history and development of 34 cases of botulinus poisoning, due to the eating of canned salmon.

"During the course of these cases it was discovered by accident that peculiar static electric power had developed in the patients. It was discovered in this manner. One of the patients who was convalescing crumpled up a piece of paper, I imagine in both hands, and attempted to throw it in a waste basket; it absolutely refused to leave his hand. From this time on experiments were made, and the matter was reported to me, and I found that every case of botulinus poisoning developed this strange power, and that neither the attendants nor nurses associated with them had any such power. All sorts of experiments have been tried and it was found to be a constant condition; that is, that this peculiar power of creating a magnetized (electrified) field by rubbing the hands together, which puts them in contact, will electrify different objects, so that they will retain that electrification for many hours. For instance forms of paper, such as newspapers, and ordinary correspondence paper when electrified by these patients and thrown against the wall adhered and clung to any object for many hours. By again rubbing the hands together and rubbing the electric light bulb the filament will begin to vibrate very rapidly and follow the motions of the hands, and attach themselves to the side of the bulb with a good deal of sparking at the base of the filament. The compass needle of a surveyor's instrument can be rotated with any piece of paper electrified by these patients. A steel tape suspended, will feel the magnetic field in a remarkable manner and sway from side to side.

"What relation there can be between the botulinus toxin and this phenomena of course is difficult to identify; it has been suggested that it is the dryness of the skin which prevents the ordinary passing out or dissipation of the electric currents from the body; but the patient submerged in bath tub performs the same phenomena as when clothed! The ability to electrify is proportionate to the severity of the disease; as the patient convalesces he gradually loses this power and when quite well loses it altogether.

"I might mention further that all these cases were ataxic and developed peculiar reflexes. Many of them were almost entirely blind and had paralysis of the upper lid "Ptosis." Of course, in botulinus poisoning the nervous system is about the first to suffer; one thing is quite clear, therefore, static manifestation is closely linked with the disturbance of the central nervous system and represents, no doubt, simply a much higher degree of static storage in the body than is usual."



Among Other Things the Electrified Patient Was Able to Move a Suspended Steel Tape Measure, and Also to Attract the Filament of an Incandescent Lamp Towards the Side of the Globe.



Electricians Argued That if the Patient Was Placed in a Tub Full of Water, That the Charge Would Disappear, but Strangely of All It Did No Such Thing—and the Patient Was Still Able to Attract a Steel Tape Measure or Other Object by Electro-static Attraction.

Study Astronomy

By Arnold H. Kramiat

Of what value is a knowledge of astronomy? There are those that think it of little or no value to the average man. Their objection is based on the seeming remoteness of astronomic phenomena from the affairs of life. It is not a practical study, they say. "What," they ask, "is there in the subject that any one can put to use in the guidance of his course thru life?"

To these critics, as well as to all who have never studied astronomy, the author wishes to address himself. A study of the subject is of practical value. It furnishes the student with an opportunity for the culture of more than one instrument capable of being used in the pursuit of life's aims. As evidence of this the author submits the following propositions:

First, there issues from the task the benefit of a broadened mental horizon. One is provided with an insight into the nature of the universe of stars and planets. Of what value is a broad mental horizon? Among other things, it bestows upon its possessor a more exact comprehension of the relative importance of things and events.

Thus is made possible the issue of a second benefit, namely, a sharpening or refining of one's sense of proportion. This is a valuable mental acquisition, particularly for the person desirous of co-ordinating into a practical philosophy the numerous and varied elements of his stock of knowledge.

Third, persons of romantic impulse will find a means of satisfaction in the study of astronomy. Absorbingly interesting is the picture of bodies and systems of unthinkable size, poised in the inconceivably vast celestial arena. Impressively grand is the spectacle formed by the play of forces most gigantic, traversing vast distances and bridging aeons of time in their interplay. And

Experiments with Electrified Prisoners

Before dismissing this possibility as absurd, I ask the reader to consider one of the most famous cases of HVS in the annals of Fortean research.

On 20 February 1920, 34 convicts at Clinton Prison in Dannemora, New York, USA, came down with botulinus poisoning as a result of consuming contaminated canned salmon. This, however, was no typical outbreak of botulinus poisoning. For, as detailed in *The Electrical Experimenter* journal, all 34 of the ill convicts developed "peculiar static electric power".⁴

The above quote is from Dr Julius B. Ransom, the chief physician at Clinton Prison at the time, who goes on to state that the odd phenomenon first became apparent when one of the patients crumpled up a piece of paper and tried to throw it into the wastebasket, only to find that the paper "absolutely refused to leave his hand".⁵

From that point on, Dr Ransom and his staff involved the patients in a series of experiments.

In one type of experiment, a patient would rub his hands together and then touch a sheet of paper, causing the paper to become highly charged. Dr Ransom claims that the

charged piece of paper, when placed on a wall (or other surface), would remain clinging to the wall "for many hours".⁶ Furthermore, if the charged piece of paper was brought close to a surveyor's compass, the needle of the compass would rotate.

In another type of experiment, a steel tape-measure was suspended from the ceiling. After a patient had rubbed his hands together (presumably in order to charge them), he was able to cause the tape measure to swing back and forth due to the attraction that existed between the apparatus and his hands. Dr Ransom notes that as the patients recovered from the poisoning they slowly lost their electrified properties.

Listed among the symptoms of botulism—an illness most often caused by eating improperly sterilised canned foods containing the botulinum toxin—is dry skin. This, in combination with the fact that static electricity favours dry conditions, might explain the "electrified" nature of the patients at Clinton Prison. Remember, too, that the incident took place during the winter month of February, the cold weather helping to encourage static build-up.

Have we therefore solved the mystery? Not necessarily. One particular aspect of the case is extremely difficult to explain. Dr Ransom notes that the patients were able to perform the same amazing feats when in a tub of water as when completely dry and fully clothed. Had this been a mundane case of static build-up on the body, being placed in water would have rendered the patients static free. That it didn't render them static free indicates that the electricity was being generated internally.

Assuming that the case is genuine and not an elaborate hoax, it's reasonable to posit that botulism can, in some rare instances, induce HVS—or if not HVS *per se*, then one of the symptoms of HVS: the internal generation by the body of large amounts of static electricity. At the very least, it indicates a close connection between HVS and illness.

Transmitted Electric Shocks and Magnetic Abilities

This connection is exemplified in the case of Caroline Clare of London, Ontario, Canada, as reported in 1879. Apparently, at the age of 17, Caroline developed a strange illness that eluded medical diagnosis. Her appetite waned and she rapidly lost weight. Her health eventually declined to the point where she ended up confined to bed.

Before long, she began to slip in and out of mediumistic trances, during which she'd "discourse eloquently and give vivid descriptions of far-off scenes".⁷

Caroline's condition began to improve as soon as the trances ceased, and before long she was healthy and energetic again. Yet something about her body had changed. The article describes her as "a perfect battery" and says that she was "constantly giving off electrical discharges".⁸

If anyone shook her hand or placed their hand in a pail of water with hers, they received a powerful shock. She was even able to send a sharp shock through 15 to 20 people who were joined holding hands.

Apparently, too, any object she touched remained statically charged for a very long time; anyone who then touched the charged objects would receive a painful shock.

As for Caroline's magnetic abilities, it is said that metal objects were powerfully attracted to her body but that wooden spoons and other non-metal objects showed no such attraction. Knives would jump straight into her hand whenever she attempted to pick them up. She could also suspend needles from the tips of her fingers.

How long Caroline's abilities lasted, assuming they gradually weakened before disappearing altogether, remains unknown.

There are a number of striking similarities between the case of Caroline Clare and that which took place at Clinton Prison. In both, objects handled by the electric person acquired an extremely powerful and long-

lasting static charge, to the point of clinging to walls, hands and so forth for very long periods of time. Static cling of such potency and duration is unusual, if not unheard of.

Also unusual is the attraction of metals. Metals, being excellent conductors, are unable to hold a static charge; only insulators—for example, paper and plastic—can hold a static charge. (Metal objects can hold a static charge only when completely insulated from their surroundings.) Why, then, were metal objects attracted to Caroline's body but non-metal objects were not?

To sum up, although certain aspects of HVS strongly suggest the involvement of electrostatics, other aspects are not so easy to accommodate within the realm of conventional physics. For this reason, it's been suggested that psychokinesis (PK) might well play a role in high-voltage syndrome.

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Static Electricity and Psychokinesis

One case of HVS that brings into focus the possibility of PK is that of Jacqueline Priestman, from Stockport, Manchester, UK.

In an article published in 1985, Jacqueline is described as "the housewife who jinxed every electrical gadget she laid her hands on".⁹

The manner by which Jacqueline became an electric person is most curious. At the age of 22, while pregnant with her second child and caring for her daughter of 18 months, she and her first husband, Ron, had a huge argument. This prompted Ron to take off on his scooter. Just as he was leaving, Jacqueline screamed at Ron that she "hoped he broke his neck".¹⁰

Later that day, Jacqueline's "wish" came true: Ron suffered a serious motorcycle accident in which he fractured his spine and neck. Before passing away in hospital a month after the accident, he joked to the guilt-ridden Jacqueline that if he died he'd come back to haunt her.

Shortly after Ron's death, Jacqueline was taking a bath when the light bulb above her exploded, showering her with broken glass and causing her to cut her arm. She attributed the incident to a faulty bulb and thought no more of it. Later, another light bulb exploded at the moment she happened to be walking past the cupboard where Ron kept his motorcycle leathers.

Around this time, vacuum cleaners, record players, electric kettles, electric irons, washing machines, dryers and other appliances and gadgets in the home kept breaking down altogether or would start "going funny" for no apparent reason.¹¹

The radio would switch stations even though no one had touched it, and the television "would change channels or develop double images without warning".¹² Jacqueline was spooked by the electrical disturbances and became convinced that Ron's ghost had indeed come back to haunt her.

One of the strangest incidents that Jacqueline experienced occurred on the night that her two daughters were christened. Jacqueline chose to have both daughters christened on the same day.

She was anxious about the occasion, however, because Ron had not been a churchgoer and she knew that he would not have approved of the christening. That night, she says, two cut-glass goblets, each of

which bore the name of one of her daughters, suddenly and inexplicably shattered while sitting on a window ledge.

By the time Jacqueline had married her second husband, Paul, an electrical fitter, the electrical disturbances were still taking place. In addition to getting "[static] electric shocks constantly", Jacqueline experienced frequent headaches, passed out often and suffered both bloating and constipation.¹³ Eventually she underwent a nervous breakdown and wanted to commit suicide.

Drawing on his knowledge as an electrical fitter, Paul concluded that Jacqueline was solely yet unintentionally responsible for the disturbances and that the problem stemmed from a high accumulation of static electricity on her body. He noticed, too, that the problem became particularly severe when she was having her period or feeling stressed or upset.

Apparently, Jacqueline's condition was more or less cured when, as per Paul's advice, she began to eat more fresh fruit and vegetables as well as plenty of poached onions.

Paul was correct to identify static electricity as having played a role in the disturbances. Yet clearly it's not the whole answer. In particular, it's difficult to explain how static electricity was responsible for causing the two light bulbs to explode. There is simply no way to explain how a statically charged person can make a light bulb explode, especially without touching it. Plus, the first of the two incidents occurred while Jacqueline was taking a bath;

meaning that she could not have been statically charged.

And what about the shattered glass goblets? If we accept that at the time of the incident Jacqueline was still plagued by guilt over Ron's death, then it's reasonable to assume that attending the christening amplified her guilt and that she herself caused the goblets to shatter by means of PK, albeit subconsciously.

While we're on this line of thought, it's important to acknowledge Paul's observation that the electrical disturbances became worse when Jacqueline was having her period or feeling stressed or upset. And let's not forget that what triggered the disturbances to begin with—that is to say, turned Jacqueline into an electric person—was the emotional impact of Ron's death.

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If we are to consider PK—the supposed ability to influence objects by mental effort alone—as a serious possibility in the Priestman case, we need to make a distinction between conscious, or controlled, PK and recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis (RSPK). The former is self-explanatory. The latter, a term coined by the late William Roll, is used primarily in connection with poltergeist disturbances and refers to the subconscious use of PK ability.

As opposed to supporting the theory that poltergeist disturbances are caused by spirits, most experts view the disturbances in terms of RSPK. That is to say, they believe that the subconscious mind of the poltergeist agent—the person around whom the disturbances occur—is responsible.

As we've seen in the case of Priestman (and others), it appears to be a rule among electric people that they have no control over their "abilities", the disturbances occurring at unexpected moments in response to their mood or state of consciousness. Clearly, then, it would be more accurate to classify the disturbances as instances of RSPK than of PK.

The closer one studies both poltergeist hauntings and cases of HVS, the more it becomes apparent that the two phenomena are closely related.

Poltergeist Activity

Whereas no specific pattern has been identified with respect to age, gender and psychological make-up in the case of electric people, it's well known that poltergeist agents tend to be repressed and troubled young women undergoing puberty. In a poltergeist case that occurred in the mining town of Sosnowiec in southern Poland, beginning on the night of 4 April 1983, the agent was a 13-year-old girl. Named Joasia Gajewski¹⁴, she lived in a cramped apartment with her mother and father.

As is typical of "poltergeists", this one was extremely rambunctious and destructive. It rattled windows, shook furniture and threw items such as plates and glassware in all directions. Some of the items smashed hard against the walls. At the time, Joasia was hardly in the most stable psychological state: in addition to undergoing puberty, she was traumatised by the recent death of her grandmother, to whom she'd been close.

It's significant to note that Joasia became ill, with symptoms consisting of headache and fever, around the same time that the poltergeist phenomenon erupted.

Interestingly, friends and family members observed that her body became highly charged with static electricity in the weeks prior to 4 April. They even described her as "crackling" with sounds similar to those produced by fingers snapping. Later, after coming to the

attention of Polish scientists, including a physician by the name of Dr Eustachiusz Gadula, Joasia underwent a series of intensive medical and psychological tests.

The tests revealed a number of peculiarities with respect to the teenager's health, including that her body was indeed highly charged with static electricity. It is said that her body remained highly charged even when grounded. Also, thermographic studies showed that Joasia exhibited unusually wide and rapid changes in her overall body temperature and, further, that she possessed unusual thermal spots (warm areas) around her head, toes and fingers and slightly above her solar plexus.

While studying Joasia, Dr Gadula and his team witnessed a number of remarkable incidents of apparent PK and RSPK. On one occasion, they watched in amazement as the armchair on which Joasia sat cross-legged (meaning that her feet weren't touching the ground) began moving around. The chair continued to

move even after Joasia had removed herself from it. At one point it lifted off the ground and rotated rapidly. An attempt by three men to hold down the chair proved futile; the chair overpowered them.

Apparently Joasia was able to bend metal cutlery using psychokinesis, in a similar manner to that of the famous Israeli-born psychic Uri Geller. Although the researchers saw her bend numerous pieces of

cutlery, they failed to capture the phenomenon on film; Joasia was unable to perform when the camera was rolling. Assuming that the phenomenon was genuine and not a trick, this supports the theory that the powerful "energies" at work in poltergeist cases can be harnessed to some extent by the agent and directed towards more constructive tasks than the senseless trashing of homes.

Allegedly, the poltergeist disturbances that surrounded Joasia, along with her metal-bending abilities, persisted until she was at least 20, making this one of the longest-running poltergeist cases in history.

A Real or Imagined Phenomenon?

So have we managed to get to the bottom of the electric people mystery? When it comes to assessing the claims of electric people, including those discussed in this article, there are really only two possibilities to consider: either HVS is a real phenomenon, or it's a product of the collective imagination and hence has no basis in reality. Lending support to the former is the presence of certain physiological characteristics in

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Continued on page 81

The Electric People Phenomenon

Continued from page 47

connection with HVS. Its association with illness is hard to ignore. Also, as we've seen, many alleged HVS sufferers trace the origin of their condition to either a powerful electric shock or an intense psychological shock. The human body, of course, is largely electrical in nature. Could it be that such "shocks" somehow disrupt the electrical functioning of the body and in turn give rise to high-voltage syndrome? ∞

About the Author:

Louis Proud is a writer and researcher specialising in anomalous, or Fortean, phenomena. His articles have appeared in *New Dawn*, *Paranormal* and *Fate* magazines, and he has been interviewed on such programs as Veritas Radio, *Paranormal Realms* and Whitley Strieber's *Dreamland*. He is the author of *Dark Intrusions* (Anomalist Books, 2009; reviewed in

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Editor's Note:

This article features material from Louis Proud's book *Strange Electromagnetic Dimensions: The Science of the Unexplainable*. If you've experienced any of the phenomena discussed in this article, feel free to email the author at louisproud@gmail.com.

Endnotes

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