INTERVIEW

An anomalistic psychologist

Chris French tells Lance Workman about his journey into weird stuff

You started out in neuropsychology, but over the years you've become well known for anomalistic psychology. Talk me through this transformation.
My PhD, which was at Leicester University, used EEG to look at hemisphere differences, so it's very much a neuropsychological background. Subsequently I've worked in a number of areas. I've done quite a lot of work with my wife Anne Richards on cognition and emotion but then developed this interest in the psychology of, for lack of a better phrase, 'weird stuff'. Initially it started off pretty much as a hobby or side interest. I would do occasional lectures on it and these went down well with the students. Then I'd do occasional student projects looking at various aspects and it kind of grew from there. And now it is the main focus of my research. I used to have a bit of a dilemma about what I called myself because when people asked me 'what is your research interest' and I would say 'it's the psychology of paranormal beliefs and ostensibly paranormal experiences', which is a bit long-winded. So I took to using the term 'anomalistic psychology' – I didn't come up with it but I think it best describes what I do. So now I say 'I study anomalistic psychology' and they say 'What the hell is that?'

Was there one key event or person that planted this seed of interest in anomalistic psychology?
Absolutely, I used to be a believer in most of these kinds of claims. Then, when I was doing my PhD, I read a book called *Parapsychology – Science or Magic?* by James Alcock, a Canadian social psychologist. It dealt with all of the kinds of thing I was very much interested in – but from a sceptical perspective and offered explanations in non-paranormal terms. It made me realise there was a sceptical literature, but at that time it was quite hidden so it was difficult to track down. I started subscribing to sceptical magazines and got involved in sceptical conferences. It grew from there.

I still occasionally come across the attitude 'We all know it's nonsense, so why do you study it?' Well, there are various reasons. For example, most people believe in this stuff and a sizeable minority claim to have had direct experience of it. As psychologists, we need to explain this. Also the fact that there's a multi-billion dollar industry built around it and that people base important decisions about health, relationships and financial investments on it means we can't just ignore this area and pretend it's not there.

> "Sceptical voices are heard a lot more than they used to be"

How can people come to believe astonishing things, like they have been contacted by aliens or have regressed to a past life?
There's a multitude of reasons for these beliefs. One of the good things about anomalistic psychology is that we can cherry pick from all of the other subdisciplines of psychology. So if we look at alien abduction, I think the main explanation is the development of false memories – then the whole psychology of false memories comes into play and lots of cognitive research underlies that. Also there's lots of work on individual differences that shows different kinds of personality factors might be involved. There's various kinds of neuropsychological explanations that might lead people to believe they may have been abducted by aliens. One of the most common explanations is sleep paralysis – they put that experience down to alien abduction as an explanation.

In one of your articles you describe yourself as a 'relatively moderate sceptic'. Can you unpack that for me?
As a teenager I was interested in this kind of thing, and there was no sceptical literature out there so I pretty much believed it all. When I read Alcock's book, it was my epiphany, and I became an extreme sceptic. I had the attitude that all parapsychologists were incompetent, that all self-proclaimed psychics were deliberate frauds, that no aspects of paranormal belief were beneficial, and so on and so forth. All of those things I now think I was wrong in thinking. I think we have a natural human tendency to see the world in black-and-white terms and I was falling victim to that. I now think there are certain paranormal claims that should be taken seriously by the scientific world. I'm not saying that I believe they have established that paranormal forces exist – but the evidence is not as weak as the wider scientific community might assume. Again I think it's worth taking such claims seriously because, if the wider scientific community is correct to be sceptical and to assume that paranormal forces don't exist, then it gives us great insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the scientific process itself – issues that arise with respect to appropriate statistical analysis, whether appropriate controls have been used, publication bias and replication issues. All of those kinds of things arise with a vengeance in parapsychology. So when I'm teaching about anomalistic psychology I like to look at the strongest evidence and give my reasons why I'm still not convinced by it. Also, at the other end of the spectrum, I like to look at what I would consider to be extremely weak evidence in favour of paranormal claims, because that gives us a great insight into everyday reasoning that people use to come to the conclusion that they have had a paranormal experience. But maybe there are other much more plausible non-paranormal explanations available.

I'd be interested to know what do you think about Rupert Sheldrake's claims that he has demonstrated things like telepathy, given he was a senior science academic.
I think Rupert is a very articulate and intelligent proponent for the other side of the argument. I'm actually a closet fan of Rupert Sheldrake. I don't think he's right – but I think the reasons he is wrong are really interesting. He is one of those rare individuals who has the golden touch when it comes to demonstrating ostensibly paranormal effects. I always find that when I try to replicate his effects we don't get the same results – which is interesting. I think of Rupert as a personal friend, and I wondered why he got positive results and I don't, so I suggested

let's do something collaboratively. But those collaborative studies have never produced replicable statistically significant results. One of the problems of course in general is that researchers are far less inclined to write up failed replications than they are to write up significant ones. Also journals are far less likely to publish failed replications.

Can you give me an example here?
Yes, as you may know the well-known social psychologist Daryl Bem published a study in 2011, in a very well respected journal, that consisted of nine studies that demonstrated precognition, that is, that, in a sense, people can predict the future. He claimed that, whereas we all know that if you give people a list of words that is presented only once and another list of words that they are allowed to rehearse they will remember the rehearsed words better than the unrehearsed words. Bem's results showed that, even if you do the rehearsal *after* they have been tested, they will still perform better. So the claim here was that, in some mysterious way, the effects of the future rehearsal can reach back in time and improve your performance. Now we were intrigued by this – that is myself, Richard Wiseman and Stuart Ritchie – and we agreed that we would each carry out an independent study [see also tinyurl.com/psycho0512]. Bem asked for replication studies and very kindly made his software available. We didn't replicate his findings, but when we wrote up our results and sent the paper to the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* the editor politely rejected it without sending it out for peer review. We thought this was not acceptable given the original paper had caused a huge amount of media coverage and it had made an explicit appeal for people to try and replicate the effects. We then got the same treatment from *Science Brevia* and from *Psychological Science*. We then sent it to the *British Journal of Psychology* where it was sent out for review – but it was rejected. One of the referees was very positive about it, but the second referee had reservations and rejected it. It turned out the second referee was Daryl Bem! Fortunately, *PLoSOne* did decide to publish it which meant we were eventually able to make our point. I think this experience raises issues…

How can psychology possibly move forward if many journals won't publish failures to replicate studies! It's almost as if 'this has been shown therefore we can tick that box and move on'. Moving on ourselves, one phenomenon you've looked into is near-death experiences. Can we explain this in scientific terms?
I think there are two major hypotheses about near-death experiences. First, is that near-death experiences are exactly what they appear to be – the person is having the experience that consciousness has left their physical body, that they have had a glimpse of the afterlife. The second way to explain it is what is known as the 'dying brain hypothesis'. This is the idea that it is a hallucinatory experience with all of the experience happening inside the person's head. Now each of those components of that experience does occur outside of near-death experiences and there are plausible proven explanations in terms of what was happening in the brain at the time.

In terms of trying to support the paranormal angle, if you could prove that people really were able to pick up information from remote locations that they couldn't possibly have known about in any other way that would be a real challenge to sceptics. I'm a great supporter of these studies that are going on in hospitals around the world where there are targets that are at vantage points high up in hospital wards that you can only see if you are high up. So far those experiments have been going on for several years and no one has yet reported one of these hidden targets. But we'll see. There is certainly lots of anecdotal evidence – but it does not seem to stand up well when studied scientifically.

You've appeared a lot on TV and radio looking into paranormal beliefs. Has anything ever happened during one of these that really does open the door to the paranormal?
In all of the studies that we have done and all of the TV and radio programmes I have taken part in there has been very little that constituted a real challenge to my scepticism. But then again there are one or two TV programmes I've done where at the end of it I've put something in a mental box with a question mark next to it. To give you an example – there was one case of a programme where a man called David Mandell claimed he had dreams that could foretell the future and he would paint pictures about what is going to happen. As he was an artist he could produce quite good representations of what was going to happen. Some of the examples include the Twin Towers collapsing. He painted this twice, one of which was five years before it happened. He would go down to his local bank and have his picture taken with that painting and that day's newspaper. Spookily enough the date was 11th September.

That kind of thing could just be coincidence. The depiction did not correspond exactly to how it happened – but it was pretty close and difficult to explain.

As a (kind of) sceptic do you think we are moving in the right direction, or do you think we are more open to believe whatever we are told these days?
There has been a polarisation. There's no doubt that sceptical voices are heard a lot more than they used to be. On the other hand there is no evidence of any fall-off in belief in things new age and paranormal.

I think it's down to a lot of factors, the internet being the main one. People can now pass information and ideas on and get together more easily. One of the things that I'm most pleased about is so many cities now have a 'sceptics in the pub' evening where someone will come along and give a talk and people can question them. Also I'm delighted that the AQA's psychology syllabus has anomalistic psychology as an option. So lots of kids are asking questions about the quality of the evidence they have been given. Personal experience is generally seen by people as the most reliable form evidence, but as psychologists we are aware that people misremember, misperceive and misinterpret. We need to get people to question things using the most appropriate critical thinking tools.

Finally you've done a great deal, but is there anything that you still have burning ambition to do?
Burning ambition is the right term – I would really love to do a fire walk!