Possessed

Researchers have found that people may become more easily convinced that they've witnessed a case of demonic possession if the event is made to seem plausible.

People studying false memories have established that it's easier to plant a memory of a plausible than an implausible event. Now, in tests with Italian university students, psychologist Giuliana Mazzoni of Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, and colleagues have shown that they can convince even some skeptics that possession is possible.

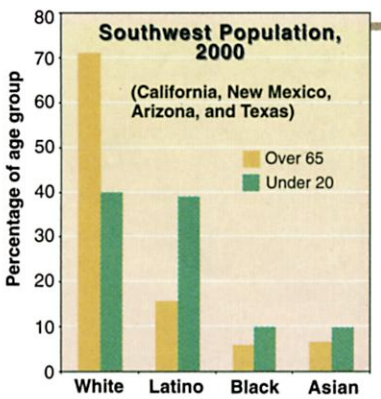
At the beginning of the study, to be published by the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, all 22 subjects said that it was "highly implausible" that they had witnessed a demonic possession in their childhoods. Students then read short articles that claimed that the phenomenon is more common than thought and took a test that revealed their fears.

Remember being there?

The students were then told that their "fear profile" indicated that they probably had witnessed a possession. By the end of the process, four students agreed that it was likely that they had witnessed a possession, while the others remained unconvinced.

The findings might help illuminate how people develop "memories" of such implausible things as satanic ritual participation, alien abduction, and events immediately after they were born, the authors say. And although people's memories were not altered in this study, co-author Elizabeth Loftus of the University of Washington says the work suggests it can be done "experimentally with normal people." Indeed, she predicts a jump in purported possessions this fall, with the rerelease of *The Exorcist* and a Halloween broadcast of "Possessed," a TV documentary about an exorcism in a mental hospital.

The authors argue that the manipulations in their experiment are "a mild version" of what can happen in psychotherapy, where "suggestive communications lead patients to believe that implausible events have happened to them." But psychologist Kathy Pezdek of Claremont Graduate University in California warns that the study doesn't necessarily mean it's easy for a therapist to induce false memories of childhood events such as sexual abuse, "especially when such events are implausible."



Southwest: The Old and the New

Dramatic demographic changes in the southwestern United States are only the cutting edge of the changing ethnic distribution throughout the nation. These trends have spawned a new medical journal, *Medicine of the Americas*, focused on providing health care in a "multi-ethnic culture." Lumping "minorities" together in health statistics, for instance, has become misleading, as different groups have their own distinctive needs, say authors in the first issue of the journal, founded by doctors in California, Mexico, and Asia. In 50 years, they note, the Southwest's population will look far different than it does today.

Judges Shunning Bad Science

Court cases on such inflammatory topics as breast implants and tobacco-related illnesses always confront the problem of winnowing out the good research from the bad. Now a study indicates that the Supreme Court has nudged judges into being more discriminating than they were a decade ago.

In a 1993 case, *Daubert* v. *Merrell Dow*, the high court called on federal judges to serve as "gatekeepers" who would examine for themselves the underlying methodology of scientific testimony rather than simply asking whether it was accepted by the scientific community. The case involved competing claims over whether a drug called Bendectin caused birth defects.

The *Daubert* decision was expected to both allow juries to hear more cutting-edge research and screen out junk science. Progress on the latter objective, at least, has been confirmed by a survey of federal judges. In 1991, the U.S. government's Federal Judicial Center found that only 25% of 303 respondents reported screening out some expert evidence in their most recent trial. By 1998, however, 41% did. Says geneticist Gilbert Omenn of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, "Among scientists as well as the judiciary, there's a real buzz that [*Daubert*] has helped."

Domestic Ape Census

Does your orangutan have a room of his own?

That's the kind of thing the Great Ape Project (GAP) aims to find out in its first census of U.S. great apes: gorillas, chimps, bonobos (pygmy chimps), and orangutans.

GAP is an international lobby group that believes no ape should live in captivity. GAP-USA's ambitious census will need a lot of volunteers, so this summer it put out a call for people to find every ape in the U.S., be it in a zoo, circus, lab, or on Michael Jackson's estate. GAP's downloadable census form (www.greatapeproject.org) goes further than most human censuses, asking about not only housing and sanitation but diet, habits, privacy, and well-being. GAP director Paul Waldau, a veterinarian at Tufts University in Grafton, Massachusetts, says people at zoos are happy to cooperate, but volunteers will have to use their own ingenuity to ferret out "hidden chimps."

Furry survey.

"Making this data available to the entire world will help give nonhuman great apes in the U.S. the individuality they deserve," says GAP.

Frankie Trull, president of the Foundation for Biomedical Research, regards the census as part of an effort to put apes on the same footing as humans. That, she says, "challenges any number of moral, ethical, religious, and scientific principles, and I believe most humans would agree."

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