

HAVE YOU EVER HAD AN OBE?: THE WORDING OF THE QUESTION

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ABSTRACT

Two groups of students ($N = 96$ in each) were given a questionnaire on OBEs, dreaming and other experiences. One group was given definitions and examples of the OBE and lucid dream and the other was not. 18% claimed to have had at least one OBE, 73% claimed lucid dreams and there were no significant differences between the two groups. The explanations given and questions asked apparently did not affect response rates. OBEers were both older and more often male. Those who reported lucid and flying dreams tended to be male but there were no age differences. OBEs, frequency of dream recall, lucid dreams and flying dreams were all found to be related. The OBEers also answered further questions about the nature of their experiences.

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Previous surveys have obtained figures for the incidence of OBEs ranging from as low as 8% (Haraldsson et al 1977) to as high as 50% in special groups (Kohr 1980). Some of the variation may reflect differences in the populations sampled but there is evidence to suggest that the wording and context of the question may be important and that even with the clearest questions respondents may not understand what is meant.

The wording used has varied considerably. In 1954 Hart asked a group of students 'Have you ever dreamed of standing outside of your body, or floating in the air near your body?'; a question clearly misleading in its reference to dreaming. 25% said 'Yes', but of a second group, asked a question omitting the reference to dreaming, 33% said 'Yes'. Green (1966) first asked 115 students 'Have you ever had an experience in which you felt you were "out of your body"?' and 19% said they had. A second group, asked the same question but without the inverted commas, included 34% who said 'Yes' (Green, 1967). Blackmore (1982a) simply asked 'Have you ever had an out-of-the-body experience?', having previously lectured to the group on OBEs, and only 13% said 'Yes'. It is impossible to know how much, if any, of the variation obtained was due to differences in what was asked or what the respondents understood by the question.

Several recent surveys have adopted the wording first used by Palmer in his survey of 1,000 inhabitants of Charlottesville, Virginia (Palmer, 1979). He asked 'Have you ever had an experience in which you felt that "you" were located "outside of" or "away from" your physical body; that is, the feeling that your consciousness, mind, or center of awareness was at a different place than your physical body? (If in doubt, please answer "no.")'. 25% of the students in the sample, and 14% of the townspeople answered affirmatively.

Using the same wording (or a translation of it) Haraldsson and his colleagues (1977) in Iceland obtained 8%, Irwin (1980) in Australia obtained 20% and Blackmore (1982a) in England obtained 14%. Kohr (1980) sampled members of the Association for Research and Enlightenment, an American association based on the work of Edgar Cayce, and obtained 50%.

With the exception of Kohr's survey, which used a basically self-selected population, these figures are lower than earlier ones. But note the inclusion of 'If in doubt, please answer "no"'. Would this really exclude false positives from those who did not understand the question?

It is such false positives which provide the major problem. If a person has had an OBE, he or she will typically recognise this experience in the question and immediately answer in the affirmative, even without any prior knowledge about OBEs. So there should be few false negatives. On the other hand someone who has not had an OBE may find it an odd question, fail to understand what is meant, and may answer 'yes' on the basis of dreams, daydreams or other experiences which would not usually be classed as OBEs. There will therefore be some false positives and overall the effect will be to produce an overestimate of incidence.

Of course this begs the question of what is to count as an OBE. No current definition provides specific criteria for making the decision. However, the experiential definitions used, for example, by Green (1968b), Tart (1974), Palmer (1978), Twemlow *et al.* (1980) or Blackmore (1982b) allow us to make adequate distinctions. Defining the OBE as an experience in which a person seems to perceive the world from a location outside of his physical body, then we should probably only include experiences in which the person seems to have normal perception, but organised as though he were 'out-of-the-body'. This would rule out most dreams, drug experiences and altered states of consciousness in which the imagery is not specifically organised as though one were out-of-body.

There is some evidence that when descriptions of the experience are asked for the apparent incidence falls. Irwin (1980) did not accept his 20% as the true incidence of OBEs, but on the basis of descriptions ruled out several, leaving only 12% OBEs. As already mentioned I asked 217 parapsychology students whether they had had an OBE and only 13% claimed they had. It could be that this low figure reflects the fact that the students had attended lectures on the OBE, had heard about many examples of the experience and should have understood the question clearly. To test this idea further I questioned a comparable, but small ($N = 33$) group, who had not been told about the OBE. 33% claimed to have had one which is significantly more than in the previous group (Blackmore, 1981).

All these findings are compatible with the hypothesis that estimates of incidence are inflated by respondents not understanding the question adequately. However, it is not clear just how important any such bias is, nor even is the evidence for its occurrence very direct. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of different amounts of prior knowledge on respondents' answers to the OBE question. Two groups were given different amounts of information about the OBE and then asked whether they had had one.

A relationship between OBEs and dreams has often been suggested. There

is physiological evidence that the OBE occurs in a state different from that of ordinary dreaming (Tart, 1968; Morris *et al.* 1978). However, flying dreams and lucid dreams have been likened to OBEs (Green, 1968a; Muldoon and Carrington, 1929; Twemlow *et al.*, 1980) and indeed many lucid dreams fit within an experiential definition of the OBE. Both Palmer (1979) and Kohr (1980) reported a significant relationship between having OBEs and carrying out some sort of dream analysis, having 'vivid' dreams and having lucid dreams, and Blackmore (1982a) found that the same people reported OBEs and lucid dreams in one of two studies. As far as frequency of dream recall is concerned Kohr found it to be related to OBEs, but Palmer and Blackmore did not. To investigate these relationships further questions about dreaming were included in the questionnaire.

METHOD

During 'test week' at the University of Amsterdam, two groups of students (N = 96 in each group) were given a questionnaire on OBEs, dreams (including lucid and flying dreams) and near-death experiences. The questionnaires were identical except for the wording of the OBE question and the introduction. In one case a two-page introduction defined the OBE and gave several examples, one occurring at the time of an accident, one while resting and others during waking activity (from Green, 1968b). The lucid dream was also defined and an example given (from Fox, 1962). The question asked was 'have you ever had an OBE (out-of-the-body experience)?'.

In the second case a similar length introduction concerned altered states of consciousness, was very vague and gave no information about either OBEs or lucid dreams. The question asked was 'Have you ever had an experience in which "you" seemed to leave your physical body, or to be located outside of it, and to be able to see the world from a different location? (If in doubt answer "No")'. In both cases those who answered 'Yes' were asked to complete some further questions about the nature of their experience(s).

The questionnaires are given in the appendix. They were translated into Dutch by Dr. D. Bierman.

RESULTS

In both groups 17 of the students (18%) claimed to have had an OBE. There was no difference at all depending on the explanation given and the question asked. 73% reported having had lucid dreams and again there was no significant difference between the two groups ($X^2 = 3.37$ 1 df $p = 0.07$). 56% claimed to have had flying dreams. For all these experiences the proportion claiming multiple experiences was high. The distribution is shown in Table I.

The results show a strong relationship between having OBEs and frequency of dream recall, lucid dreams and flying dreams. For each relationship chi squared was calculated (pooling cells when necessary) and the results are shown in Table II. They show that the same people tend to report all three types of experience, OBEs, lucid dreams and flying dreams. However, the same people also tend to recall their dreams more often. Therefore some of the relationships may be a secondary result of the fact that frequent dream

Table 1. Distribution of experiences

	No	Yes				% Yes	% more than once
		Once	2-5 times	More than 5 times	At will		
OBE	158	5	23	4	2	18%	85%
Lucid dream	51	20	67	45	6	73%	86%
Flying dream	84	23	52	27	4	56%	78%

Table 2. Relationships between OBEs and dreams

	OBE	Lucid dream	Flying dream
Lucid dream	$X^2 = 8.9$ 3df $p = 0.03$		
Flying dream	$X^2 = 15.6$ 3df $p = 0.0014$	$X^2 = 11.8$ 1df $p = 0.0006$	
Frequency of dream recall	$X^2 = 7.0$ 2 df $p = 0.03$	$X^2 = 16.8$ 3df $p = 0.0008$	$X^2 = 18.8$ 3df $p = 0.0003$

recallers have more opportunity to recall any lucid or flying dreams they may have. At the very least though, these results show a strong relationship between OBEs and recalling dreams.

Ages ranged from 18 to 50 ($\bar{x} = 22.2$) and there were 85 males and 98 females. OBEs were found to be both older ($t = 3.26$ 173 df $p = 0.001$) and more often male ($X^2 = 5.96$ 1 df $p = 0.015$). Those who had lucid dreams and flying dreams were also more often male ($X^2 = 4.19$ 1 df $p = 0.041$ and $X^2 = 3.92$ 1 df $p = 0.048$) but there were no age differences for lucid and flying dreams. 36 respondents (19%) claimed to have been close to death, but of those only 7 (19%) claimed to recall any conscious experience during the crisis. Coming close to death was not reported more frequently by OBEs ($X^2 = 0.60$).

Thirteen further questions asked the OBEs about the nature of their experience(s). Since only 5 had had single OBEs, answers were given for more than one experience. This means that no simple analyses are possible and comparisons with previous findings should be treated cautiously. Figures given in brackets refer to the number of respondents giving any answer.

First the answers confirm the major finding. There seems to be no difference between the types of experience reported by the two groups. Most OBEs occurred during waking activity (8), when in bed but not asleep (10) or when taking drugs (13). LSD and marijuana were mentioned most often. The state of consciousness during the OBE was variously described as like normal (7), like a drug state (7) and like a dream (8). The things seen were rarely like those in a dream though, but were either just like the physical world (11) or with distortions (10).

The experiences lasted from a few seconds only to more than 30 minutes, but many respondents were unable to say how long it took. Less than half of them (16) saw their own physical body, and of these it looked normal to 14 and distorted to 2. 12 didn't see their physical body at all and 2 tried to see it and failed. This differs from two previous case collections in which about 80% saw their own body (Green 1968b, Poynton 1975). As for 'Another body', only 5 reported having one. Most were either a point (7), 'nothing' (7) or some vague shape (2). This is comparable with Green's (1968b) finding of only 20% having a second body, but Poynton (1975) found 75% and Rogo (1976) 43%.

It is often assumed that OBEs are primarily visual experiences and a previous survey confirmed this (Blackmore, 1982a). OBEers were asked to rate the clarity of their perception from 1 Totally clear and vivid, to 7 Very vague and dim, for all five modalities. In the previous survey a score of 7 was given if respondents did not experience anything in a given modality, and the lowest scores were obtained for vision. Here a separate category for 'none' was included and it was found that there was no significant difference in the number of respondents reporting each of the five modalities ($X^2 = 1.804$ df $p = 0.77$). Average ratings for the modalities experienced were Vision 3.5, Hearing 3.6, Touch 3.7, Smell 4.4 and Taste 4.2. So it appears that the experiences were neither extremely clear and vivid, nor predominantly visual in nature.

The OBEers were asked if they had seen or heard anything which they could not have known about beforehand. Only 7 had and 4 of these did not check whether the details were correct or not. Interestingly all 3 who checked claimed that they were correct, but of course no independent verification was made.

Finally, only 5 of the OBEers were frightened by their experiences. Most enjoyed them (20) and would like to have another one (23), which confirms the generally positive effect of having an OBE found by Osis (1979) and Twemlow *et al.* (1980).

DISCUSSION

The lack of a difference in incidence of OBEs and lucid dreams between the groups indicates that the wording of the question and the explanation given did not substantially affect the response. This is perhaps surprising, and is useful to know. It means that response rates are likely to be quite stable in spite of differences in what the respondents are told about experiences before answering.

Of course it does not in any way preclude the possibility that experiences outside any particular definition of the OBE are being included; it only means that the proportion of these is unlikely to vary with the way the question is put. The problem of the range of experiences included in such a questionnaire survey remains.

Another potentially important variable is the context in which the question is asked, for example the other questions in the questionnaire and the stated purpose of the study. In this case the OBE question was followed by detailed questions on the nature of the experience and this may affect response rates.

The distribution of OBEs is not what would be expected if OBEs occurred at random. That is, there are more multiple experiences than expected purely on the basis of the incidence of OBEs. So it appears that a person who has had one OBE is more likely to have another. This confirms high numbers of multiple experiences found, for example, by Blackmore (1982a), Green (1968b), Kohr (1980), Palmer (1979), Poynton (1975) and Twemlow *et al.* (1980). There are several possible reasons for this. Some types of person may be more likely to have an OBE, learning might occur, or the experiences may be so pleasant that people strive to have more. However, if a certain type of person is more prone to OBEs research has not yet revealed what kind of person that is. The age and sex differences found here have not been found in previous surveys, which have generally found no relationship with simple demographic variables (Green, 1966; Palmer, 1979) or various psychological measures (Irwin, 1981; Jones *et al.*, 1980). One possible exception is Irwin's finding that OBEers scored higher than expected on 'absorption', a measure of a person's ability to become absorbed in his experience.

The relationships between dreaming and OBEs found here are strong but it is not at all clear why. If they are an artefact of frequency of dream recall then we should not make too much of them, but it may be that there are certain skills which help in having lucid dreams, flying dreams and OBEs. Experimentally it seems to be something like an ability to change state of consciousness and maintain that state while retaining the thinking and memories from other states. Perhaps this relates to state-specific memory. Current research on absorption (Irwin, 1981) and on imagery (Blackmore, 1982a; Irwin, 1981) may help here, but more generally a better understanding of the factors involved in changes of state of consciousness is needed.

CONCLUSION

The results imply that, within a given context, response rates to questions about OBEs and lucid dreams are unlikely to vary substantially with differences in the exact wording of the questions or any explanation given. The strong relationships between OBEs and dreaming confirm previous findings, but only further research can elucidate the reason for this consistency.

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APPENDIX

INTRODUCTION A

Out-of-the-body experiences (OBEs) have been reported from many ages and cultures, including our own. Also known as 'astral projections' or 'travelling clairvoyance', they are experiences in which a person seems to leave his or her physical body, often observing it from the outside, and to travel to distant locations. Although we call all such experiences OBEs the details may vary considerably. People who have OBEs may seem to have another body, or just to occupy a different location. The experience can last between a few seconds and several hours. Sometimes in the person travels long distances, sometimes remains in one room, or in some apparently imaginary place. Although there is such diversity the most important defining characteristic seems to be that perception is localised elsewhere. Accordingly OBEs are commonly defined as 'experiences in which a person seems to see the world from a location other than that of the physical body'.

OBEs may occur under many different circumstances, for example when awake and carrying out normal activities, when resting or close to sleep, or during an operation or accident or when close to death.

To give you an idea of the types of experience that have been reported a few brief accounts follow.

About 15 or 20 feet above the ground I slipped and fell. . . Objectively the height wasn't great, but I think I was very frightened of the coming pain or death, and for a moment abandoned the idea of living. As I fell I seemed to be 5 or 10 feet out from the rock face, looking at my body falling (in contact with the face).

Other OBEs occur with no apparent reason. Perhaps boredom set this one off:

While delivering the sermon one Sunday evening, I became vividly aware of detachment from my body, and was in the west end of the Church. I saw my body in the pulpit—and—heard my voice.

Sometimes an OBE may occur when the person is just resting.

... I was resting on the bed in the afternoon, when suddenly I saw myself on the bed. I was so surprised, I couldn't believe it . . . so I decided to prove this by first raising my right arm above my head, and then the left. . . . There was no doubt at all that I was outside my body looking down on myself.

Monotonous sounds and vibration may initiate an OBE:

... while driving fast along a road the drone of the engine and vibration seemed to lull me into a stupor and I remember I seemed to leave my motorbike like a zoom lens in reverse and was hovering over a hill watching myself and friend tearing along the road below and I seemed to think 'I shouldn't be here, get back on that bike' and the next instant I was in the saddle again. . . .

It has been suggested that in the last moment before death many people 'leave' their bodies. In this way OBEs form one type of near-death or deathbed experience. Others include the seeing of visions and hallucinations of loved ones or religious figures, feelings of great peace and joy and so on. Many people who have lived after such close encounters with death have described the experience as intensely rewarding and claim to have lost all fear of death.

Other experiences which seem to be related to OBEs are dreams of flying and 'lucid dreams'. A lucid dream is one in which the dreamer realises that he is dreaming. He may ask himself whether this is a dream and then, perhaps because of the oddities in what he sees, concludes that it is. An example follows.

I dreamed that my wife and I awoke, got up, and dressed. On pulling up the blind, we made the amazing discovery that the row of houses opposite had vanished and in their place were bare fields. I said to my wife, 'this means I am dreaming, though everything seems so real and I feel perfectly awake. Those houses could not disappear in the night, and look at all that grass'. But though my wife was greatly puzzled, I could not convince her it was a dream. 'Well', I continued, 'I am prepared to stand by my reason and put it to the test. I will jump out of the window, and I shall take no harm. Ruthlessly ignoring her pleading and objecting, I opened the window and climbed out onto the sill. I then jumped, and floated gently down into the street. When my feet touched the pavement, I awoke. My wife had no memory of dreaming.

Lucid dreams too are very varied and may last only a brief moment in which the dreamer realises he is dreaming, or they may go on for some time allowing him to test out his dream, as it were.

Although many cases of these kinds of experience have been reported many questions remain unanswered, and research is being devoted to them. It would be great help towards this research if you would complete the following questionnaire.

INTRODUCTION B

There has recently been a resurgence of interest in research on altered states of consciousness. However very little is yet known about them and even such basic questions as when they occur, to whom and under what circumstances have not been fully answered. It may seem obvious to you that you are now in your 'normal' state of consciousness (if indeed you are!) and equally obvious that at other times you have been 'drunk', 'stoned' 'asleep' or whatever. We have many names for these states, and we are able to talk about them to others, and yet we do not understand just what they are.

Two of the most common altered states, with which we are all familiar, are dreamless sleep and dreaming, both of which most people experience every night, even though they may not always remember it. These states have been studied in detail but other less common ones have not. Those who take hallucinogenic or psychotropic drugs experience altered states, as do some who practice meditation or other such disciplines. Some people spontaneously find themselves in altered states and others experience them if they have an accident or operation, or come close to death.

Although these facts may seem obvious it is not even easy to define an 'altered state of consciousness'. You will appreciate this by reading one psychologist's attempt at a definition.

'... any mental state(s) induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological maneuvers or agents, which can be recognised subjectively by the individual himself (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for that individual during alert, waking consciousness. . . .'

Another definition is 'an altered state of consciousness for a given individual is one in which he clearly feels a qualitative shift in his pattern of mental functioning. . . .'

Of course what is meant by 'sufficient deviation', 'clearly feels' and so on is not obvious and the definitions seem to take us no further than our own realisation that we can have different states of consciousness. Perhaps we will not be able to begin to understand altered states until we know a great deal more about them. We need to answer simple questions such as when they occur, to whom and under what conditions, what effect they have on the experiencer and so on. In answering these questions it would be a great help if you would fill in the following questionnaire.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name _____ Age _____ Male/Female _____

Please answer the following questions by underlining the appropriate answer. You may underline more than one answer if necessary and please give further comments overleaf if you wish to.

1. How often do you remember your dreams?
(a) Never (b) Rarely (c) Occasionally (e.g. once a month) (d) Often (e.g. once a week) (e) Almost every day
2. Have you ever had a dream in which you are able to fly?
(a) Never (b) Yes, once (c) Yes, occasionally (2 to 5 times) (d) Yes, often (more than 5 times) (e) Can have one at will
3. Have you ever had a 'lucid dream', that is one in which, at the time, you know it is a dream?
(a) No (b) Yes, once (c) Yes, occasionally (2 to 5 times) (d) Yes, often (more than 5 times) (e) Can have one at will
4. Have you ever had a general anaesthetic (for example when having an operation)?
(a) No (b) Yes, once (c) Yes, occasionally (2 to 5 times) (d) Yes, often (more than 5 times)
Do you remember having any conscious experiences during anaesthetic, when your body was apparently unconscious?
(a) No (b) Yes, once (c) Yes, occasionally (2 to 5 times) (d) Yes, often (more than 5 times)
5. Have you ever been close to death (or nearly died)?
(a) No (b) Yes, once (c) Yes, occasionally (2 to 5 times) (d) Yes, often (more than 5 times)
Was this due to (a) Heart attack (b) An operation (c) Other illness (d) Childbirth (e) Drugs (please specify if possible) (f) Accident (e.g. road accident) (g) other (please specify)?
Do you recall any conscious experience occurring when your body was apparently unconscious?
(a) No (b) Yes, once (c) Yes, occasionally (d) Yes, often
6. Have you ever been with anyone when he or she died?
(a) No (b) Yes, once (c) Yes, occasionally (d) Yes, often
Did that person (or persons) report any visions, hallucinations or experiences of 'leaving' the body before death (within 3 hours)?
(a) No (b) Yes (please specify)
- A. 7. Have you ever had an OBE (out-of-the-body experience)?
(a) No (b) Yes, once (c) Yes, occasionally (2 to 5 times) (d) Yes, often (more than 5 times) (e) Can have one at will

B. 7. Have you ever had an experience in which 'you' seemed to leave your physical body, or to be located outside of it, and to be able to see the world from a different location? (If in doubt answer 'No').

- (a) No
- (b) Yes, once
- (c) Yes, occasionally (2 to 5 times)
- (d) Yes, often (more than 5 times)
- (e) Can have one at will

If you have had such an experience then please answer the following questions.

8. Under what circumstances did the experience occur? (If you have had more than one experience of this type you may give the number of times it occurred under each of the headings. For example, if you have had 3 experiences and of those 2 occurred when lying in bed and 1 when taking drugs, then please write '2' by (b) and '1' by (f))

- (a) Normal waking activity
- (b) In bed, not asleep
- (c) Asleep
- (d) After or during an accident
- (e) After or during an operation
- (f) When taking drugs (please specify if possible)
- (g) Other (please specify)

9. What was your state of consciousness like during the experience?

- (a) Like normal waking consciousness
- (b) Like a drug experience (please specify if possible)
- (c) Like dreaming
- (d) Other (please specify)

10. How did the world you saw appear?

- (a) Exactly like the normal physical world
- (b) Like a dream or fantasy world
- (c) Like physical world but distorted
- (d) Like the physical world but with less detail
- (e) Other (please specify)

11. How were the things you saw lit?

- (a) By daylight
- (b) By artificial light
- (c) By some kind of self-luminance
- (d) It was dark
- (e) Other (please specify)

12. How clear was your perception during the experience? (For these questions please underline one number from 1 to 7 to indicate the clarity of your perception. For example, if your vision was very clear underline 2, if rather dim underline 5 or 6, and so on. If you have had more than one experience and they differed in clarity you may underline more than one number. If you had no vision, smell or whatever than please write 'none'.)

How clear was your vision during the experience?

Totally clear and vivid 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very vague and dim

How clear was your hearing during the experience?

Totally clear and vivid 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very vague and dim

How clear was your sense of touch during the experience?

Totally clear and vivid 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very vague and dim

How clear was your sense of smell during the experience?

Totally clear and vivid 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very vague and dim

How clear was your sense of taste during the experience?

Totally clear and vivid 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very vague and dim

13. Could you see your physical body from the outside, and what was it like?

- (a) No, did not notice it
- (b) Yes, it looked perfectly normal
- (c) Yes, it was distorted in some way
- (d) No, tried to see it and failed
- (e) Other (please specify)

14. Of what did 'you' consist during the experience?
 - (a) Another body just like the physical
 - (b) A vague shape
 - (c) A point in space
 - (d) Nothing
 - (e) Other (please specify)
15. Did you see or hear anything which you could not have known about at the time. For example you might have heard the conversations of others or observed locations or details of objects which you did not know about.
 - (a) No
 - (b) Yes, but did not check whether the details were correct
 - (c) Yes, checked the details and they were correct
 - (d) Yes, checked the details and they were not correct
16. How long did the experience last?
 - (a) A few seconds only
 - (b) Less than a minute
 - (c) 1 to 5 minutes
 - (d) 5 to 30 minutes
 - (e) More than 30 minutes
 - (f) Don't know
17. Did you enjoy the experience?
 - (a) No
 - (b) Yes
18. Were you frightened by the experience?
 - (a) No
 - (b) Yes
19. Would you like to have another such experience?
 - (a) No
 - (b) Yes
20. Did you know much about these types of experience before you had one yourself?
 - (a) No
 - (b) A little
 - (c) A lot, had read books about them etc.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

You may be sure that all answers will be treated as entirely confidential.

Brain and Perception Laboratory
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