BOOK REVIEW

Eric W. Price, MA, MS
University of North Texas


I first developed interest in studying after-death communication (ADC) after taking a course on the transpersonal perspective in counseling during my doctoral studies at the University of North Texas. Since then, following on Jenny Streit-Horn's (2011) research, I have reviewed and evaluated over 35 published books and articles related to ADC. In that work, I found that many researchers in the fields of psychology, counseling, bereavement, and parapsychology have examined ADCs using robust and rigorous social science research methods (Arcangel 2005; Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1995; Palmer, 1979). In their studies, these authors provided evidence that transpersonal experiences are encouraging, natural, and common to the human experience. However, very few researchers have examined ADCs that involve the telephone as a communication medium.

In 1979, Scott Rogo and Raymond Bayless published the book Phone Calls from the Dead in which they examined case reports of people who claimed to have received messages from the dead via the telephone. Reviewers, such as Anderson (1981), criticized the work on the basis that the authors had not utilized empirical research methods to collect and analyze their data. In Calum E. Cooper's book, Telephone Calls...
from the Dead, he aimed to fill this gap in the literature by offering a refreshed commentary on the original work, adding new cases, and discussing possible theories as to how these phenomena occur. In my view, Cooper, a paranormal psychologist in Northampton, England, UK, provided a well-researched, unbiased, and fascinating narrative about telephonic ADCs. However, I found that he did not deliver much new material, as he spent a good deal of his book providing commentary on the original text rather than insight into his own research. Although Cooper acknowledged a need for stronger empirical methodology, I found him to have been vague when explaining his own research process.

Cooper opened his book with an introduction to the field of parapsychology and his personal discovery of the work of Rogo and Bayless (1979). He outlined his personal hopes for writing the current volume and appeared eager to continue the work from the original study in a manner that addressed previous criticisms. In chapter two, Cooper provided biographical background for Rogo and Bayless. In the third chapter, he reviewed historical information related to spiritual telephone calls. His review dated back to 1913 when David Wilson discovered an untraceable and mysterious telegraph message, and it continued to recent research by Massimo Biondi who provided much of the case data in Cooper’s revised study.

In chapter four, Cooper classified the calls into five different “anomalous telephone experiences” (p. 45). The first four call types involve telephone calls between a deceased person and living receiver. These types include simple calls, in which the deceased caller says a few words to the receiver and then is unresponsive; prolonged calls, in which the receiver has an entire conversation with the deceased without realizing they are dead; answer calls, in which a caller calls someone without realizing they are dead and the deceased answers; and mixed calls, in which a prolonged conversation occurs with awareness that the caller is deceased. In the fifth call type, intention calls, no deceased person is involved; rather, the anomaly is that a living person receives knowledge of an intended phone message from another living person without an actual call having taking place.

In the fifth chapter, Cooper provided an analysis of the calls and recognized the challenge to find hard evidence in spontaneous transpersonal events—those involving the transcendence of the usual personal limits of space and/or time. He encouraged researchers to attend to the persons’ subjective experiences of the world. Moreover, he acknowledged limitations from Rogo and Bayless’s (1979) original study and
agreed that although thought-provoking, the writing appeared less academic in nature. Finally, Cooper provided a frequency table based on the prevalence of call types. In the sixth chapter, he examined miscellaneous calls that somehow involved telephones but that did not fall into other categories, such as calls that occur in dreams, voicemails that originate from the deceased, and haunted telephones that ring without a connection.

In chapters seven and eight, Cooper proposed potential psychological and paranormal theories as to how and why anomalous calls occur. Additionally, he established the need for researchers to use a ruling out process to eliminate the potential for rational explanations of these calls. In chapter nine, he shared recent data related to new technology such as email and text messages that originate from unknown sources. In the tenth and final chapter, Cooper concluded his book by reviewing and evaluating comments from peers.

Throughout his book, Cooper delivered a well-informed narrative with rich and detailed background information. He looked deep into the literature and discovered rarely mentioned cases dating back over 100 years. For example, in the second chapter, he reviewed the work of Oscar D'Angonnel, a Brazilian medium active during the 1920s who claimed to have the ability to communicate with the dead via telephone. Cooper also identified several inventors who attempted to create devices, such as ghost boxes and psychic phones, to manifest encounters with the dead. Finally, Cooper cited several previously unpublished case examples of telephone ADCs, one of which involved a woman who allegedly experienced several prolonged calls with a deceased friend.

Throughout his work, Cooper infused both passion and skepticism into his writing. Although I found him to be enthusiastic about his subject matter, I also thought he remained unbiased as he adequately addressed the limitations of case study research by repeatedly insisting on the possibility that these incidents of seeming telephone communication with the dead might be based in fraud, technical malfunction, or human error. Cooper encouraged readers to follow the data to reach their own conclusions regarding the genuineness of each case and of the phenomenon overall. Finally, Cooper remained open-minded to comments and criticisms from experts in his field. He even dedicated his entire concluding chapter to sharing his process of integrating feedback into his text.

From a researcher’s perspective, I found some limitations in Cooper’s work. He carefully evaluated Rogo and Bayless’s (1979) previous
work, acknowledging the flaws in their design and calling for more stringent and academic-based research. However, other than stating that he used a “thematic content analysis” (p. 80) throughout his own research process, Cooper did not provide a description of his research methodology. Furthermore, he noted reviewer bias stemming from lack of understanding of the distinctions between parapsychological and scientific research. However, I know from my own research that some studies related to parapsychology and ADCs have indeed utilized traditional social science research methodology (Arcangel 2005; Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1995; Palmer, 1979), so his distinction did not seem to me to reflect the complete body of ADC research. Additionally, throughout the book it seemed as though Cooper relied very heavily on the work of Rogo and Bayless (1979) and less on his own research. At times, I had difficulty determining which data originated directly from Cooper’s own work and which data came from previous studies. Finally, I found the title Telephone Calls from the Dead to be provocative, yet inaccurate, because he included calls that did not involve the deceased, such as his type 5 described above.

Overall, I found that Cooper made a strong case that unexplainable incidents related to the deceased do occur via the telephone. In fact, as I was writing this review, I received an email from my doctoral advisor detailing an account from a nurse who learned of an “answer call” from one of her patients. In addition, a few months ago I had an experience in a play therapy session with a child that seemed to involve an ADC with a toy phone; although I showed the session to several of my colleagues who can attest to the phenomenon, the session recording was then lost, erasing an objective record of the occurrence. I personally attributed both the email and my own clinical experience as indications that these experiences do indeed happen and mostly go unreported. In my final analysis, despite its limitations, I found Telephone Calls from the Dead to be a captivating read that redefines ADC literature and indicates a genuine need for continued research in this area.

References
