

billion.

"We believe that we now have pretty incontrovertible evidence for this phenomenon," Prof Jahn said. "These effects seem to be broadly spread among human operators - it seems to be a common ability." Past research into PK based on electronic devices has been criticised for not carrying out thorough checks to ensure that the devices are unbiased in the first place, and for relying too much on the success of a handful of subjects.

The Princeton team insists that these criticisms are no longer valid: the effect appeared with different devices, all of which were thoroughly tested beforehand, and with many different subjects. Out of nine different sets of experiments, six showed statistically significant evidence for PK.

In contrast, experiments using random number generators based on fixed mathematical formulas - which should be immune from psychic influence - did not produce any evidence for PK, exactly in line with prediction. "We would now lay claim to have the largest datasets and the most systematic experiments ever performed," Prof Jahn said.

The Princeton evidence follows the discovery of equally impressive evidence for the existence of telepathy by researchers at Edinburgh University. Experiments by Prof Robert Morris and colleagues at the university's Koestler Parapsychology Unit suggest that people can mentally "transmit" images to others by thought alone.

Until now, orthodox scientists have dismissed all such claims as the result of incompetence or fraud. However, even hardened sceptics now admit that these charges are becoming hard to sustain. "I have a lot more problems with these results as a sceptic," said Prof Stephen Donnelly, a physicist at Salford University and deputy editor of UK Skeptic.

But Chris French, the head of psychology at Goldsmiths' College, London, and another long-standing critic of claims for the paranormal, said that he was concerned by the tiny size of the supposed psychic influence. "The effect sizes are so staggeringly small that some people would argue that any sensible person would prefer a non-PK explanation," he said. "There's also a worry that with the huge number of trials needed, conventional statistical theory starts to break down."

But Prof Jahn said the data is now so strong that the arguments over the paranormal must move towards explaining how it works. "We don't see much point in continuing the collection of yet more data," he said. "We're setting up experiments to get a better comprehension of these phenomena."

- 8 February 1997: Animals have paranormal feelings too
- 22 January 1997: Editors of the paranormal in a flutter over angels and the lottery
- 23 November 1996: Playing the spoons

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