

THE DÉJÀ VU ENIGMA: DOING IT AGAIN FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME

By Marie D. Jones and Larry Flaxman

It comes on without warning. It can happen at any time, in any place, with any one. Suddenly, you get that eerie feeling of “I’ve been here before.” Yet, you are certain that this is the first time you have ever set foot in such a place. Maybe you are in the midst of a conversation, and realize that you have spoken those very same words before, to the very same person now standing before you. But there is no possible way you could have.

Déjà vu anyone?

French for “already seen,” déjà vu is one of the most widely reported, yet least understood, anomalies of the mind. Theories run the gamut from a neural glitch, to a brain slip, to a glimpse into a parallel world, to a backwards memory of something happening in the present instead of the past. But how could you remember something happening...*now*? Yet that is exactly what déjà vu appears to be – the memory of something that is happening in the present moment. Impossible, yet every day millions of people experience just such a phenomenon.

Also known as promnesia or paramnesia, which implies an amnesia of the very near or present, déjà vu gives the distinct and often unsettling sensation of remembering something that is happening in that very same moment, an utter contradiction in terms, for you cannot remember something *as it is happening*, as in instantaneous memory.

“I could swear this happened before, in just the same way,” we hear people say as they scratch their heads in wonder and amazement. “I did this before.” “I said this before.” “I saw this before.” Yet those who have experienced this baffling phenomenon know without a doubt that they indeed did not do, say, or see this before.

The most common theories into déjà vu involve the brain and memory. The latter part of the 20th century has led to some serious scientific study of the

phenomenon as an anomaly of memory recall. To validate this explanation, researchers point to the fact that the “sense” of recollection of a déjà vu is actually stronger than the actual details of the recalled event itself. It is this “sensing” that the focus is placed upon. Some people, studies claim, actually will go on to have déjà vu of past déjà vus!

While this sounds incredible, the emphasis here is on a glitch in the brain’s short term memory processing. This software “bug” in our brain’s programming gives an almost precognitive feel to the experience, like we are getting a peek into the future. Perhaps there is an overlap between the neurological systems responsible for short-term memory and those responsible for long-term memory.

Some scientists suggest that déjà vu is simply one eye perceiving an event in a fraction of a second before the other eye does. The idea is that one eye might record the stimuli fractionally faster; creating the sense of “recollection” once the other eye kicks in and makes the same perception. But this theory has been disproven by research showing that people with only one functional eye still report déjà vu!

Obviously, when an anomaly is presented to science, the result is often to immediately categorize it as a disorder, and déjà vu is not immune. Some researchers have associated déjà vu with everything from anxiety to multiple personality disorder to epilepsy. Of all of the possible syndromes, temporal lobe epilepsy, which is the result of improper electrical discharges in the brain, seems to have the most in common.

In 1955, American-born Canadian neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield conducted his now famous experiments stimulating the temporal lobes of the study participants with electrical charges. Penfield, a pioneer in research into the human mind, found that only approximately 8% of the participants experienced such déjà vu type “memories” afterwards. Could déjà vu be just such a neurological anomaly that only occurs in a select few?

More current research by such noted scientists as Chris Moulin, a psychologist in the Cognitive Neuropsychology Dept. at the University of Leeds and his former PhD student Akira O’Connor (now at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri) has pointed to the use of hypnosis to trigger déjà vu experiences in subjects, as well as a connection with the temporal lobe. Interestingly, many people with temporal lobe epilepsy do report more frequent déjà vu, leading O’Connor to posit that déjà vu may actually originate in this part of the brain.

But you don't have to have a temporal lobe disorder to experience déjà vu. In a December 2008 report published by *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, researchers from Colorado State University studied the parallels between déjà vu and theories of human recognition memory. Headed by Anne Cleary, the research team's findings suggest that déjà vu occurs when a current situation resembles a situation that has previously occurred in one's life. A sort of "situational overlap" leads to the feeling of familiarity. The parts of the brain involved are the same parts involved in memory retainment and recall.

Cryptamnesia, the unconscious recollection of material that sometimes spontaneously rises to consciousness as memory, might also explain déjà vu. Perhaps it is true that learned information is never really forgotten, but instead stored away in the brain, and when a similar occurrence invokes a need for the knowledge learned in the past, suddenly, we remember it NOW, leading to the feeling of familiarity.

Multiple personality disorder, now more formally known as DID, or Dissociative Identity Disorder, hints at the spooky possibility that we all have fractured minds, and when one experiences the same thing as another, within the same time frame, we experience classic déjà vu. Same body, different mind, so to speak. This might explain why we always sense our presence in both worlds, yet know we are only operating fully in one (or are we?). Schizophrenia may also be linked to déjà vu, as a disease of a split mind that could account for the dual recognition of a single event.

Skeptics will argue that we are really just remembering a similar event, or the actual event itself, but one that indeed really occurred many moons ago. Or that we are recalling an event from childhood, or a forgotten situation we barely paid attention to the first time around. The very definition of the word skeptic as someone who instinctively or habitually doubts, questions, or disagrees with assertions or generally accepted conclusions really says it all. One has to wonder, though, what the skeptics would say if they ever had had an intense experience of déjà vu, one that shakes the foundation of what they believe reality to be. An experience that forces them to consider if there is truly some deeper, more implicate meaning to their existence.

Not everyone agrees that déjà vu is an anomaly of the memory, or even some kind of simple brain slip-up. Some suggest that déjà vu is a doorway, or rather, a peek inside the keyhole of a door that leads to other worlds. Or perhaps a

fleeting vision of a past life...or even a parallel life in another dimension, another universe. Think of the incredible possibilities! Are we indeed living double lives? And is déjà vu the connective link between those lives?

There is also the opposite of déjà vu, known as jamais vu, which is the sensation of not recognizing a familiar situation. In this case, someone sees something they have seen dozens, maybe even hundreds of times before, yet, they fail to recognize it for a short time. It could be a word, a person, a place, or a skill. Jamais vu could be the reason behind the popularity of games like Trivial Pursuit, which require quick recall of trivia we all should, but often don't remember (most likely because it IS trivia and thus not important or meaningful enough to be stored in our long term memory bank).

The mind is still a mystery, and the way that memory is stored and recalled still eludes complete explanation. Déjà vu is one of many anomalies of the mind, memory and time that continues to fascinate both scientists and paranormal enthusiasts alike, both of which see clues to their own pet theories in a phenomenon that occurs with more frequency than any other.

When in the middle of a déjà vu experience, many people report being able to literally “mentally” anticipate the next word of the conversation they are recalling a fraction of a second before they speak it. Could this be because the brain works in mysterious ways we have yet to discover? Or are we seeing and experiencing ourselves in another universe, one that exists alongside our own, just for that brief period of time when we know exactly *what comes next*? We know it because we said it before, did it before, experienced it before. Even when logic and reason tells us we are saying it, doing it, and experiencing it...for the very first time.

Marie D. Jones and Larry Flaxman are the best selling authors of “The Déjà vu Enigma: A Journey Through the Anomalies of Mind, Memory and Time.” They can be reached at www.paraexplorers.com.