

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Shortage of Rabbits or Insufficient Traps? Table-Turning and the Discovery of a Presumably PK-Gifted Person in Argentina

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Abstract—The formation and development of a sitter-group in Buenos Aires is described. Fifteen weekly meetings were conducted, between April and July 2013, attended by 5 to 9 people each. Ostensible movements of a table were reported. One ostensibly psychokinetically gifted member was identified, named Ariel. He had witnessed RSPK at home, when age 11. After identifying him, another 10 meetings were conducted with only this gentleman present (and observers). In these meetings he made a table raise a leg at will, even with additional weight added to the table. All the meetings were conducted with normal illumination, most of them recorded in video. It was impossible to reproduce most of the table movements by normal means. He was not able to achieve the total levitation of the table, nor any movements without hand contact. Gifted people with remarkable psi abilities are scarce, and in the field of physical phenomena objective investigations of macro-PK seem to be stagnant, or at least without the possibility of publishing encouraging results. The results obtained in our studies are promising, nevertheless we plan to conduct further experiments focusing on controlled conditions and in good light conditions.

Background

Since the mid-Nineteenth Century, there have been reports of informal groups, known as sitter-groups, in which after complying with some formulae or rituals and after a variable period of time, the attendees began to hear some creaks or tiny movements of the table they were gathered around and, in the best cases, obtained a complete levitation of the table, raps, apports, and/or lights of unknown origin. Even though there were few reports, there were some similarities, such as the scientific authority of

the organizers, the selection of attendees (those who never before reported other physical phenomena), and the sequence of the phenomena (usually beginning with raps and proceeding to movement, etc.). In these groups there didn't seem to be one special person who was responsible for the phenomena; the entire group took responsibility.

In Valleyres (Switzerland), Agenor Etienne de Gasparin (Gasparin 1854) trained at home a group of 10–12 people. For three months and in more than 30 meetings he observed that a table of 90 kg moved, in some cases with the addition of weights. He proclaimed the existence of a “psychic fluid” which the assistants deployed. Marc Thury (Thury 1855), professor at the Academy of Ginebra, formed a group composed of his friends. He confirmed reports at the Academy of Paris (Chevreul 1882) on the existence of involuntary muscle movements. But he also noted other changes that could not be attributed to that cause. William E. Barrett (1918) witnessed inclinations, movements, and levitation of a table, which increased when participants intoned cheerful songs. William J. Crawford (Crawford 1916, 1919) entered into a family circle where one of its members, Kathleen Goligher, possessed exceptional gifts. However, the discovery during the sessions of weight loss of all attendees, made him reflect on the importance of each of the members in the production of phenomena.

Starting around 1930, the Rhine paradigm of laboratory experiments became popular, and enthusiasm for working with sitter-groups began to decline. Many experiences with similar patterns and results to those mentioned circulated by word of mouth, and were only published by prestigious authors. Among them are the experiences of Jules Eisenbud (Pilkington 1987), and the essays of Stephen Braude (1992), Montague Ullman (1993), and Silvio Ravaldini (1995), who delayed revealing their “secrets” by 54, 24, 60, and 61 years, respectively. Argentina was no exception, and had two groups in La Plata city. In both cases, their members were students or university graduates. One of the groups was directed by the physicist José María Feola (2013) and the other by the mathematician Mischa Cotlar (Gimeno 2008). Both achieved remarkable physical manifestations, but only published as was usual at that time 50 years after their occurrences.

The researcher who included table-turning among the important subjects of modern parapsychology was Kenneth Batchelder (see Batchelder 1966), not only getting results but also moving forward with the theory of induction to PK in small groups (Batchelder 1984), in which he states that PK is a universal human ability, developable by any group that combines serenity, optimism, interest, and persistence, and does away with negative factors such as skepticism and fear. Batchelder's conclusions and success encouraged others to form new groups (Brookes-Smith & Hunt 1970, Owen



Figure 1. The Red Lights Group in meeting #10. Standing from left to right: Laura Fernández, Ariel Fariás, Andrea Altamirano, Juan Corbetta. Seated from left to right: Pedro Saglia, Juan Gimeno, Filippa Sotille, Mary Carballo.

& Sparrow 1976, Storm & Mitchell 2003, Williams & Lang 2002, Wilson, Williams, Harte, & Roll 2010).

The Red Lights Group

In the middle of other parapsychological investigations conducted with Juan Corbetta, we were notified that a recently widowed woman reported that some objects in her house moved without apparent cause. She believed that these were messages from her dead husband.

Instead of following the case as a supposed poltergeist, Corbetta and I decided to organize and direct a sitter-group (Figure 1), called Red Lights, in order to channel the woman's expectations. Eleven people attended the presentation meeting, among them a physicist, an anthropologist, a lawyer, and two healers, all recruited due to their prior attendance at courses and seminars in parapsychology. The commitment was to attend a weekly meeting for three months, even in the case of the non-occurrence of any phenomena. Corbetta and I (hereafter "the organizers") explained that PK group phenomena should be developed slowly, with collective cohesion and camaraderie in mind, by joining in reading and discussing related papers, sharing food and drink, and talking about personal situations related to parapsychology. Each of the members assigned their own probability

to the occurrence of phenomena: The physicist said “impossible,” the anthropologist and one of the invited guests, Ariel, admitted that their attendance was due to curiosity only. The organizers thought it would be very difficult to get the table to move, but the rest of the group considered it possible to repeat the success of groups of the past. Moreover, three of them feared they’d be punished if they disturbed the involved spirits. We tried to calm these people down and minimize their fear.

The sessions would begin with short induction periods of 10 or 15 minutes, increasing with each meeting, with breaks, chatting before and afterward for evaluation. We would sit around the table and would ask, e.g., “If there is someone who can move the table, make *raps* or other physical phenomena, we invite you to try as we are here for that,” and then we would wait. One person in the group would be the observer, sitting away from the table but in the same room, selecting a good place for a view of the whole table and all the people. The organizers didn’t believe in the Spiritist belief regarding the possible agents that produce PK, but it was the explanation for most of the attendees. So, after clarifying our point of view and discussing the methodological difficulties in confirming this hypothesis, we agreed to follow this format.

Every meeting was recorded on audio files and from the fifth session on in video as well, with two mid-quality color cameras. Except for short periods, we always worked in a well-illuminated room. We did not detect any differences in the behavior of the group or the phenomena between dim light and a well-lit room. The group’s name did not oblige us to use red lamps; it was a tribute to the film *Red Lights* directed by Rodrigo Cortés (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3W2wfVtWYI>), which had made me think about such physical phenomena.

Our meeting place was a room, an empty space of approximately 7 by 4 meters. We began by including incidental classical music, but after a few minutes it was rejected by several attendees, so from that moment on we only listened to the questions, some comments, and a few jokes to generate a friendly environment. We agreed to discourage any kind of subjective demonstration, such as telepathic messages, asking only for movement of the table or raps. Finally, the organizers agreed not to produce any artifact (against Batchelder’s recommendation of surreptitiously including or permitting a first fraud—conscious or unconscious—to trigger the PK) and to keep a focused but not invasive control that would be easily accomplished with the good illumination. The amount of light was not measured with an instrument, but it was enough to read a book by without difficulty.

The first meeting on April 5, 2013, was attended by nine people. We sat around a little 4-legged round wood table, with a diameter of 40 cm and



Figure 2. Ariel Farías.

a weight of 2.5 kg. During the first 20 minutes we heard creaking or raps coming from the table. The raps were recorded on the voice recorder and their vibrations were felt on the fingertips of those of us who had our hands on the table. On continuing, after a rest, we reported three tiny movements of the table (a few mm each). From the second to the eighth meeting, we decided to exchange the table for a bigger, rectangular-shaped one, also of wood, 70 cm × 116 cm × 76 cm (height × length × width), with a weight of 22 kg. The former table was chosen in order to be more comfortable and to inhibit unconscious muscle efforts that could have provoked the movements. However, movements had increased with each meeting. Usually, after half an hour or a bit more of listening to raps, the horizontal movements began, with longer displacements each time, compelling the attendees to stand up and walk following the table. In the video of meeting #6, the table is shown to be moving continuously for 27 seconds. Of course these results surprised us, not only because of the unusual nature of the movements, but also because of the enthusiastic and excited behavior of the group. (Everyone was happy, everyone wanted to give their opinion, those who believed in Spiritism wanted to communicate with their dead relatives, etc.)

We established a communication code assigning “Yes” and “No”

answers to table movements. For example, we asked: Are you dead? Did you die more than 10 years ago? At other times we made requests such as: If you are male, move the table forward, if you're female, move the table back. The answers were inconsistent, and often contradictory. Through this method we received the name of "Cristina," who introduced herself as the deceased aunt of one of the attendees; however, we did not get any objective data that supported that identification. Still, we asked "Cristina" to help us with the investigation by moving and/or levitating the table. On some occasions the movements became uncontrollable, while in others the table "answered" questions and accomplished precise requirements such as "We want you to go to the door," "We want you to corner this guy because he doesn't believe you are Cristina," etc.

In only 3 of the 15 meetings did we not get any positive results. The ninth meeting was the most significant. Five people attended this meeting, witnessing in the first part only tiny, short, and imprecise movements. During the rest of the time, we decided to change the usual table to a 3-legged, round one, with a diameter of 65 cm and a weight of 8 kg, with legs inserted directly into the edge of the tabletop.

Almost immediately after recommencing the session, while attendees joined hands letting them rest on the table, it began to move, at first with tiny displacements, then longer ones. When the table was asked to "levitate," it raised one of the legs and then the second, turning around over the third one. At the same time it was moving all over the room, supported alternatively by one, two, or all three legs. In the meantime, those who maintained our hands over the table perceived a strong but elastic push in the upper direction coming from it. The sensation was as though the legs were supported by a mattress filled with air or water. Of course we could easily pass our hands through the empty space between the leg and the floor.

On one of these tours the table came to a corner of about 4 square m, which was elevated from the rest of the floor about 20 cm. The table stopped for a while, raised one of the legs, moved forward, raised the other 2 legs, and hopped on. Immediately, the table was asked to come back to the initial site. The table came back without any problem, earning general applause by this feat. When the movements became uncontrollable, one of the attendees decided to hop on the table; however, the table continued moving along the room, but with certain difficulty. After that, to satisfy another request the table suddenly raised one of the legs and ejected the improvised raider. Immediately after this, the table behaved exactly the same way with another attendee. To the amazement and collective agitation of all present, the table continued moving around the room with the only condition that two people had their hands on the table. There was no way to convince "Cristina"

to say good-bye until next week, so we decided to interrupt the meeting unilaterally and abruptly by simultaneously removing all of our hands from the table, at which point it ceased moving.

As long as the meetings continued, the organizers analyzed the videos and discussed the strategies to carry on. There were two main issues to solve:

1. Was there any possibility that the phenomena were based in some kind of fraud? We concluded that there were some movements impossible to be simulated, such as those in the ninth meeting. Most of them would only be possible if several attendees secretly agreed to cheat by adding muscular force to the table. To discard this possibility, we decided to introduce barriers between hands and table to minimize the effect of friction.
2. On the other hand, the speed at which phenomena showed up suggested that this was not group-PK, but that there was a special PK-gifted person in the group. Analyzing attendance at the various meetings, we found that one of the participants, Ariel, was absent in two of the three sessions in which nothing had happened and had acted as the external observer in the third one. In addition, we detected several moments in which the table stopped its movements when Ariel removed his hands from it.

These speculations led us to a distinctive and revealing fourteenth meeting. A new wooden table was especially built and used from the fourteenth session on. It weighed 12 kg and was 1 m in diameter. It had three legs inserted into the outer edge of the table board. Once the table began its usual movement, a synthetic material tablecloth, then up to three superimposed cotton tablecloths, and an expanded polyurethane tray were placed, in sequence, between hands and table. In all cases, the table continued moving, decreasing its speed and momentum however. After taking some minutes to rest, a decisive experiment was conducted: Each of the attendees was asked to leave the table for some minutes, to go about 7 m away, and then to come back to it. The table stopped its movements only when Ariel left the room. After that, with all members around the table, one after another left the table and did not come back to it, in this way reducing the number of members from six to one, and all the while we were observing that the table continued moving or raising a leg. The last person who remained with his hands on the table was Ariel. In this way, we confirmed that almost by chance we had found a special person, and that radically changed our immediate objectives.



Figure 3. Ariel in action #1.

A Change in Perspective

The unexpected discovery of Ariel's abilities forced us to reevaluate the background information that had guided us which described the behavior of groups without known special people. From that moment on, we had to check the other half of the literature, meaning the reports concerning groups that focused on a special person, such as the one organized by William Crawford with the medium Kathleen Goligher (Crawford 1916, 1919), pay attention to laboratory work done with a single subject, e.g., by William Crookes with Daniel Home (Crookes 1871), and look at some more recent, though precarious and/or incomplete investigations, such as those of Uri Geller (Hasted, Bohm, Bastin, O'Regan, & Taylor 1975), Matthew Manning (Bierman, De Diana, & Houtkooper 1976), and Nina Kulagina (Pratt & Keil 1973).

Moreover, at first Ariel was reluctant to believe that he was responsible for the movements, generating what we understood to be a negation reaction; however, he eventually accepted it due to the overwhelming evidence. At that point, a previous episode in Ariel's life took on significance: In previous conversations he had told us about a poltergeist case in which he was the main witness. A brief description follows:



Figure 4. Ariel in action #2.

Ariel Farías was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on December 13, 1975. He and his family lived in a first-floor flat, in a middle-class neighborhood. His family was composed of his father, José María, who worked as a doorman in the building where they lived, his mother, Nélica Esther, a housewife, and a sister, 7 years his senior. Ariel was a good student, finishing primary and secondary education in a public school. He worked in several places and now works selling linens and blankets for a textile factory. He is an intelligent and sociable person, interested in parapsychology, Chinese language (he studied for five years to be a translator), martial arts (he teaches them in a private institute), and Buddhism (recognizes it as his religion, though he does not practice the rituals). He has been in a stable relationship for several years, and is awaiting the birth of a child in a few months.¹

In the middle of 1986, his father, aged 54, died suddenly. Ariel was completely shocked, not only for the loss but also because of a premonitory dream he'd had in which the time and circumstances were exactly those that finally occurred. From that moment on, he became introverted, gained weight, and began to suffer from a nervous gastritis. At the same time, he experienced learning problems at school, where his classmates bullied him. Two years after his father's death, a series of perturbations began to occur in the flat he shared with his mother (his sister had moved away by then).



Figure 5. Ariel in action #3.

In the beginning his mother said she was sure she saw a passing “shadow,” while at the same time the dog barked loudly, the keys in a keyring moved by themselves, and some things hanging on the walls fell down. On several occasions, when they were both in the kitchen, some noises were heard coming from the bedroom. When they entered the room, they found not only the wardrobe doors opened but also the wardrobe contents spread over the bed. At first they saw these facts as a sort of consolation, as they interpreted them as messages sent by his dead father. The fear they felt after a particularly disturbing episode finally defeated them. It happened while Ariel was alone in the flat: He felt an inexplicable sensation of anguish, and then he heard a detonation and observed a little mirror that was in front of him disappear instantly. It was found afterward broken in many pieces in an external alley. After that, they asked for help from several religious groups and cults, until gradually the incidents ceased approximately a year after the disturbances had begun.

The Second Part

An unsuspected new development in the sitter-group was that most of the members began to show a lack of enthusiasm, mostly expressed in unjustified absences to the meetings and a breakdown of the cordial environment.



Figure 6. Ariel in action #4.

Most of them seemed to be disappointed because they were not the special person. At the end of the three-month time commitment to the sitter-group, we questioned Ariel regarding his feelings. I knew that Ariel was a solitary personality, so we asked him if he was comfortable with the group. He told us that he disagreed with the spiritualistic hypothesis of some members, and that he did not want to be seen as a rare person. After being identified as the special PK subject, some looked on him with envy, others with fear. He wanted to work without pressure, with a group of friends. We had to decide how to proceed. Basically our analysis focused on the two formerly mentioned models to follow: William Crawford's or Sir William Crookes's. William Crawford (Crawford, 1916) stated:

Before we can expect anything worth having in the way of results we must have the following set of conditions as nearly perfect as possible: (a) A very powerful medium. (b) A circle of sitters supporting the medium. (c) The medium and sitters to be imbued with the seriousness and wonder of the phenomena presented to be linked together, as it were, by the one object of getting the most out of the phenomena for the common good. (d) A band of operators who have the same objects in view as those mentioned in (c). Mischievous operators or others who will not or cannot co-operate with

the experimenter are useless. (e) The phenomena must not be produced spontaneously, but must be under command. (Crawford 1916:3)

Later he adds the necessity of working in the dark or with a soft red light. The word “operators” included in (d) is a euphemism for guiding spirits who help the investigator.

On the other hand, William Crookes examined the classic methods of investigation, warning about some erroneous beliefs (Crookes 1874):

One is that darkness is essential to the phenomena. . . . Another common error is that the occurrences can be witnessed only at certain times and places. . . . A third error is that medium must select his own circle of friends and associates at a *séance*; that these friends must be thorough believers in the truth of whatever doctrine the medium enunciates. (Crookes 1874:80-81)

Having in mind that Ariel shared our parapsychological hypothesis about the facts, and knowing how difficult it would be to rebuild the group, we decided to start a new series of meetings with Ariel as the unique person to investigate, avoiding the mistakes enumerated by Crookes and following at least the first and last conditions mentioned by Crawford. Between August and November 2013, a total of 10 sessions were conducted. They were numbered #16 to #25. All of them were held in conditions of good illumination, including some with the natural light that entered through the windows. The amount of light was not measured with an instrument, but it was enough to read a book by without difficulty. The place was the same used by the previous group, with highly polished floor tiles. Also, the table was the same one from the fourteenth meeting. The security conditions to prevent conscious and unconscious fraud were dramatically improved, as there were only three people in the room, two of them observers.

Our main expectations consisted of achieving the total levitation of the table and the contactless movement of tiny objects. We employed diverse techniques, among them suggestion, meditation, and relaxation. None of these allowed us to witness any contactless movement. Nevertheless, the technique that produced the best results was hyperventilation. Ariel accidentally discovered that breathing more deeply and frequently was a shortcut to accelerate the appearance of the phenomenon, so he began to do it when it seemed appropriate.

However, to elicit the phenomena, it was necessary to lessen Ariel’s fear, which stemmed from the terror caused by the “poltergeist” episodes he had experienced as a boy. He told us that with the first creaks of the table previous to the movements, and especially when the table became uncontrollable, he experienced the same anguish that he did then, fearing

that the phenomena would follow him to his house. In this conflict between his rational enthusiasm to go ahead with the work and his fear of repeating scenes from the past, it was impossible for us to have a determining influence on him, considering the scarce available time. Another half-completed objective was the attendance of remarkable people. Only the museologist Fabiana Savall and the psychologist JCA attended meetings #18 and #19, respectively. Ariel performed differently in each session, although in the first one—perhaps because he and the guest knew each other—he was able to obtain the usual results, lifting one leg of the table or moving the table ostensibly at will, with his hands on the board. However, in the second session, with the psychologist JCA, Ariel was anxious about the visitor's opinion of him and he could only produce tiny movements.

In subsequent sessions, however, he made important advances in controlling his PK at will. He could move the table from one place to another when he was asked to do so. One of his big achievements was “learning” how to raise the table leg closest to him, the only one impossible to raise with his muscular force (the other legs could be raised if he exerted a strong downward pressure on the table). Also, but with a minor intensity, he was able to simultaneously levitate 2 of the 3 legs of the table. He repeated these actions several times, with levitations that lasted from a few seconds to more than 7 minutes. During this second part of the experiment, one of us recorded it on video while the other focused on Ariel's feet and legs, asked him to move his hands, to leave only one hand touching the table, and to touch the table only with his fingertips. Lastly, the second investigator also passed his hands through the free space between the raised leg and floor, and other similar alternatives, to rule out any kind of artifice. When necessary, the organizers commanded Ariel to lift the sleeves of his shirt or to move his hands when the table leg was raised, to inhibit any possibility of fraud. Also, the organizers consistently watched Ariel's feet and legs avoiding any contact with the table.

On one occasion the organizers successfully repeated the inclusion of barriers (cotton tablecloth) between his hands and the table. We also repeated raising the table to the stepped place, as had happened in the first part of our investigation. During meeting #21, Ariel tried to levitate a little 4-legged table of wood, set atop a board of 20 by 30 cm, which was placed on the big table. (The reasoning which led us to design this experiment was: If he could raise the corner of a big table, weighing 4 kg, a third of the total weight, then he should be able to completely levitate a little table with a weight of less than 4 kg.) Ariel would also not have to stoop to place his hands on the small table. But he was able only to raise 2 or 3 legs of the little table. Finally, the goal of improving the documentation of

the phenomena, compared to the first sessions, was achieved. We obtained excellent pictures, sometimes with two video cameras simultaneously, from different angles and distances.

Final Considerations

This is only a preliminary report. We still have to analyze in detail the records we obtained. During the 25 meetings, more than 25 hours of good quality video recordings were obtained, as were audio recordings of all of them and some photographs. The methodical and meticulous revision of these documents might give suggestive evidence about the behavior of PK. These records are available to investigators who may want to review or analyze them. I decided not to make them public in order to protect the privacy of some people who appear in them and to avoid someone who might upload the material to the Internet or whimsically edit them to show erroneous effects. On the other hand, the personal interviews with Ariel are also helpful. In these, he details some aspects of his personal life story that may be relevant to other special people. He relates a series of subjective phenomena that he had forgotten about or thought unimportant but realized their value during the past year.

The organizers have decided to complement each other by following two strategies, both generously supported by Ariel: Juan Corbetta is conducting a qualitative investigation, making an ethnography of the table-turning groups, focused on the ritual aspect, in order to establish the reach of these practices and its influence on the beliefs of the attendees. In my case, I gathered a new group at the Instituto de Psicología Paranormal of Buenos Aires (Institute for Paranormal Psychology) with its director Alejandro Parra and Darío Burgo, an electronics engineer. We plan to organize a long-term investigation and reliably document the phenomena, and perhaps replicate some macro PK experiments conducted in the past, adding new strategies, methods, and instruments to elucidate the causes and the variables associated with the phenomena.

I can say that we have developed a program of macro PK without the atavistic suggestions, such as working in the dark, to which others, such as the Scole and Felix groups, adhered. The Scole Group investigators (Keen, Ellison, & Fontana 1999) did not employ adequate controls in order to confirm or deny the phenomena demonstrated in darkness. The investigation of the Felix group by Stephen Braude (2014) and Michael Nahm (2014) has been deterred by accusations of fraud by its “medium” Kai Mügge. We worked with good illumination, and included some skeptical participants. We encouraged productive discussion of ideas. Furthermore, we found remarkable positive correlations in moments of higher hilarity, perhaps

produced as an emotional reaction when faced with the anomalies we were witnessing. I think that laughter has the same function as the religious anthems loudly sung by the Spiritists of the 19th century, with the same good results.

Ultimately, I hope the more important moral would be to contradict—or at least challenge—the collective impression about the impossibility of finding special people or completing successful investigations with ostensible phenomena. Probably what really happened is that investigators stopped looking for these people or for these ostensible phenomena. It is important to remember in this respect what Kenneth Batcheldor wrote:

You can set the best trap, but it does not mean that the rabbit will soon appear. You must be patient and wait. (Batcheldor 1979:6)

We lament the extinction of rabbits when in fact we have stopped putting out traps to hunt them, or at least we are using bait intended for another prey.

Note

¹ Ariel's son was born on February 21, 2015.

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