

Solo Vigils

This type of investigative technique is usually associated with paranormal TV shows or commercial groups rather than with evidence based investigations. I propose the solo vigil is too fraught with methodological flaws to be considered a valid data collection technique. There are two main issues from an investigative perspective, one psychological and one methodological.

Psychological

The obvious psychological issues involved with solo vigils are suggestion and expectation. To understand why these factors are fundamental to the flaws of a solo vigil, we need to look at what a solo vigil is and what suggestion/expectation does.

In a solo vigil an individual will remain unaccompanied in a reportedly haunted location for a period of time. They will usually be cut off from the rest of the group. The vigil will often be conducted in the dark. Those undertaking the vigil will either sit in silence for the duration or occasionally call out for any spirits to make themselves known by giving some sort of sign. Phenomena witnessed during a vigil can include visual or auditory phenomena, the feeling of being touched or merely sensing a presence.

Suggestion and expectation are a major contributory factor in this context. To understand why, we need to understand something about what suggestion/expectation do to our perception.

Individuals are continually in a sea of stimuli. These stimuli come in the form of sensation and perceptions facilitated by our senses. Although we may sense all the stimuli around us, we don't perceive all of them. To put it another way, we can be subconsciously aware of many environmental stimuli, but we only attend to some of them. The best example of this is the "cocktail-party effect".

Think back to a time when you were in a bar, cafe or restaurant. The room was most likely full of conversation. However, unless one focused on a specific person or conversation, it will merge into the background noise. Think of all the other stimuli present in the room – the clink of glasses and cutlery, the faces of the people, people's clothes, the decor, the view through the window etc. If we were consciously aware of all of these at the same time, it would overload our senses. However, we focus on what is most salient.

Essentially, suggestion and expectation prime us to focus our attention on events or stimuli that we might expect to experience in a given situation. In the paranormal context we might expect to experience knocks, footsteps, voices, orbs of light, mists or being touched by unseen hands, as these are commonly reported by witnesses to paranormal phenomena.

Crucially in the paranormal context, what suggestion and expectation can further contribute to are an increase in the misattribution of a paranormal cause for an event or effect, an

increase in the likelihood of confirmation bias (pertinent to those with a prior belief in the paranormal) and the under-estimation of the probability of coincidences being chance events. In layman terms, what this means is assuming events are being generated by a paranormal entity, neglecting to look for any possible alternative explanation or cause for an event other than a paranormal one and a lack of awareness that because an event happened in a specific timeframe (i.e. the vigil), the two are not necessarily connected or have a causal relationship.

Methodological

The main issue with the solo vigil as a useful investigative technique is that of verification. If the individual reports any phenomena, unless another investigator is present, their account cannot be verified. Although the vigil can be recorded via camcorder or audio recording equipment, there are still flaws with this.

Firstly, the reported phenomena could be reported as being located out of the view of the camcorder. If a visual phenomena, this would not be recorded on the camcorder or audio recording equipment. If a noise is reported outside the view of the camcorder, it may be recorded by both the camcorder and audio recording equipment but there will be no visual evidence for the lack of an obviously prosaic explanation for the noise (i.e. fraud, wildlife, falling masonry etc.).

Secondly, it has often been reported that phenomena can occur that the witness can perceive but is not recorded on any equipment. Conversely, phenomena have been reported to have been captured on audio or camera without being perceived by the individual.

There are two advantages to there being at least one other witness to a reportedly paranormal event. The additional witness could verify if they had also witnessed any phenomena, thereby reducing the possibility that the event is solely attributable to an individual's misperception or neurophysiology. Additionally, the extra witness may suggest viable alternative explanations for any phenomena which may not be readily available to the other witness.

Although there is still the possibility that the two (or more) witnesses could influence each other's perception or interpretation of an event, in addition to other group psychology factors, generally speaking, the benefits of two or more witnesses to an event outweighs any disadvantages and the corroboration value of two or more witnesses to an event is more beneficial in investigative terms than the testimony of a single witness.

Health and Safety

There is an additional issue of health and safety in relation to solo vigils. If an individual is cut off from the rest of the group, psychologically this could increase the likelihood of a fear response, whether phenomena are reported or not. If a fear response is extreme, the individual may seek to flee the location of the vigil. Considering that most vigils take place in the dark, with the added possibility that the rest of the venue may also be unlit, this can increase the chance of personal injury caused by falling or running into objects. In a state of panic, the individual may be more focused on fleeing a location than accounting for any

potential hazards to personal safety. This is especially pertinent in locations that may be wholly or part derelict or run down, where there may be the likelihood of fallen or crumbling masonry or associated hazards.

Conclusion

In terms of an evidence based investigation technique, the solo vigil is too flawed to be of reliable use. The likelihood of suggestibility and the lack of verification regarding any experiences make the solo vigil a poor evidence based investigative technique. This in addition to risk of personal injury would suggest this technique would only serve the “adrenaline junkie” type of investigator, who is more interested in the potential thrill of ghost hunting rather than the collection of data, or for those who have paid to be part of an investigation and want to experience the “scare factor” of ghost hunting. Additionally, one may want to conduct a solo vigil to prove something to themselves or others in the group.

The issues stated against the use of the solo vigil in evidence based investigations are not negative *per se*, but only in relation to gathering verifiable evidence. The solo vigil can however be part of an evidence based investigation - if the vigil itself and its participant are the subject of a sub-investigation or experiment that is designed to measure any psychological or other factors associated with a vigil.