Writing telepathy back into marketing theory

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Abstract
Adopting a commitment to the principle of heterogeneity, combined with a concern for subjugated and disqualified knowledge, we unravel the debates around telepathy and telementation in marketing theory and practice. We explicate the conditions of possibility for these deliberations, focusing on the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). A close reading of the scholarly outputs published by members of the SPR helps us unpack the theoretical assumptions underwriting telepathy via the concept of the subliminal self. This material forms the foundations for William Walker Atkinson’s ‘practical occultism’. We review Atkinson’s work, making the case that telepathy was central to exerting personal influence. Our account thus diverges markedly from extant histories of influence. Attention is then turned to the jettisoning of telepathic linkages. Changes in discourse reflect ‘epistemological deflation’ in combination with ‘counter-reversal’. Nonetheless, telepathic and telementative assumptions remain central to our understanding of sales and marketing communications. The same can be said of consumer research. Telepathy may also impact our future in a novel, ‘synthetic’ form.

Keywords
Marketing theory, marketing communications, personal selling, telepathy, telementation

Introduction
The types of knowledge given credence are often the result of politically driven processes. In this paper, we engage with these issues, highlighting the importation, promotion and marginalisation of findings derived from experimental psychology in discussions of salesmanship and advertising. This is important as ruminations on telepathy and telementation arose in conjunction with seminal ‘theories of selling’ (Strong, 1925). Yet, they have been subjugated in the last century.

We reinsert telepathic theory into marketing discourse, making the argument that it represents a ‘missing link’ in our theoretical and conceptual knowledge (Jones and Tadajewski, 2018). Its
identification reorients the ontological and epistemological bedrock of sales and marketing communications as well as consumer research.

**Theory and methodology**

Theoretically, our paper is indebted to the work of Michel Foucault. Our concern is with claims to knowledge, their acceptance and deflation. For Foucault (1979), historical self-understanding reflects the contingent outcomes of ‘warlike’ battles between groups. Agreeing with previous contributions, we think these ‘battles’ are profoundly informed by the political interests of different parties (Tadajewski, 2006a). Where we diverge is in holding that such warlike activities do not necessarily lead to one group trammelling all others (e.g. Kuhn, 1996). It might be that an astute participant modifies their paradigmatic commitments to conform to the values of influential groups (e.g. practitioners). This does not mean that the epistemic assumptions adjudged as problematic are completely written out of revised contributions. The picture is more complex. Foucault (1966/2002) indicates that they can be disguised by newly formatted claims to knowledge (i.e. the views of powerful, contemporary groups represent a template which is applied as a layer over old views). Concealment means that the family resemblances between earlier and later claims are capable of excavation.

**William Walker Atkinson and his metaphysical milieu**

Studies engaging with the hierarchisation of marketing theory have explored debates and thinkers who generated considerable interest within and outside the discipline (Tadajewski, 2006a). We adopt an analogous approach, with the case of William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932) concentrating our analytic attention. Atkinson wrote knowledgeably about issues of personal influence, salesmanship, retailing and advertising in the early 20th century.

His family tree contained various grocery retailers (Deslippe, 2012). Following youthful experience in his father’s store, Atkinson became a successful lawyer. Upon being offered a lucrative move to a legal practice in a different state at the cusp of his forties, Atkinson found himself unable to secure appropriate certification. This caused anxiety, stimulating reflection and engagement with the burgeoning New Thought literature (Deslippe, 2013) which he credited with rejuvenating his mental health (Deslippe, 2012). As a discursive formation, New Thought was a 19th century success story, offering an admixture of esoteric teachings punctuated with the glorification of financial success (Griswold, 1934). Atkinson’s writing was, however, multi-layered. There are discernible strands of New Thought combined with Theosophy and this material is empirically fleshed out using the research provided by the Society for Psychical Research. These diverse threads situate him within occultist thinking more generally. Let us briefly elucidate these connections.

For starters, occult and ‘occultist’ are taken as reference points which index ‘secret’ knowledge usually derived from ancient Egyptian or Greek sources (Atkinson, 2011). Typically, it alludes to an ‘unseen world’ that can vitalise and facilitate human agency. Traceable ‘throughout Western history’ (Horowitz, 2010: 7), the label covers a wide range of thought and practice including astrology, divination, mesmerism and positions the mind as an intermediary for and expression of divine power. There is an emphasis on thought as a causative agent in the world which can be honed and deployed to achieve our objectives (Horowitz, 2018).

New Thought commentators including Prentice Mulford (1834–1891), P.P. Quimby (1802–1866) and Emma Curtis Hopkins (1849–1925) articulated popular views about psychology (e.g. mesmerism; hypnosis; faith healing) and the transpersonal nature of humanity (i.e. the notion that
human personality and mind was inter-subjectively porous, forging ties between people, with distance and sometimes discarnate status being no limitation to fusion) (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008). These views were widespread in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and expounded in popular correspondence education courses (e.g. Tadajewski, 2011) which referenced the idea of the mind as a constitutive force in improving health, wellbeing and success (e.g. Tadajewski, 2019). In this context, non-localised forms of mentation (e.g. telepathy) and the influence of mind on matter (e.g. physical mediumship and psychokinesis) gained attention and conjoined with conventional assumptions about hard work and character development. In other words, crafting a ‘magnetic personality’ involved conceptualising thought as shaping the material and social environment (i.e. Mulford’s ‘thoughts are things’). Projecting positive thoughts was the way to gain influence and social mobility.

Widely associated with the writing and institutional activities of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), C.W. Leadbeater (1854–1934) and Annie Besant (1847–1933), Theosophy echoes New Thought regarding the power of mind (e.g. Leadbeater, 1912/1979), engagement with clairvoyance (e.g. Besant, 1904) and telepathy (e.g. Besant, 1920). The point of difference is that Theosophists postulate a more complex ontological framework that takes Indian sources as its departure point. Scholars underlined the simultaneous existence of multiple worlds (e.g. physical, astral and mental) that we can traverse within certain bounds (i.e. moving from the physical to astral world during sleep). These ideas were tied to a progressive, developmental account of human reincarnation (Besant, 1904; Leadbeater, 1912/1979) which presented individual human existence as stretching over thousands of years.

Theosophy was popular among the educated classes between 1880 and 1930 (Goodrick-Clarke, 2008). Atkinson’s publications and pseudonymous work engage with core elements of Theosophical thought in considerable detail (e.g. Ramacharaka, 1903). What links New Thought and Theosophy is a strong sense of human agency. For New Thought advocates, we are world-builders, shaping the social world to achieve our aims and objectives. Theosophical supporters concurred. In a significant way, people produced their character, conditions of life and happiness (e.g. Leadbeater, 1912/1979: 114–115). The point of divergence with New Thought was that Theosophists claimed that our past lives shape our current incarnation. So, people have free will but within reincarnation constrained parameters.

In uniting New Thought and Theosophy, Atkinson draws on the research base provided by the SPR. Their experimental, empirical approaches furnished a sizeable range of studies tackling issues including telepathy, clairvoyance, mental mediumship and related topics. At the most basic level, each of these perspectives shares an interest in non-material forms of engagement and the development of latent skills including clairvoyant and telepathic powers. Cultivating these for self-development was key to Theosophy. Tellingly, Atkinson positions the mobilisation of the subconscious – the receptor and projector theorised in telepathic processes by Frederic Myers – as a ‘secret force’ (Atkinson and Beals, 1922b), thereby associating it with occult writing (Horowitz, 2010). Combining these approaches, Atkinson sought to demonstrate their applicability for business practice (Deslippe, 2011).

Having introduced Atkinson, it is appropriate to sketch the trajectory of his publications dealing with marketing, salesmanship and personal influence. It will help frame an intricate narrative. In a volume first published in 1901 (Atkinson, 1903) Atkinson uses the terminology of telepathy when writing about influence strategies that diverge from normal sensory approaches (i.e. sight, hearing). Subsequently, he explains the term telementation (as a substitute for telepathy) and starts to excise the occult inflection that characterises his work up to 1912. Throughout his earlier material, Atkinson registers the debt owed to the SPR.
His arguments are steeped in occult (Atkinson, 1903) and ‘second plane’ theorising (Atkinson, 1907a). Occult and ‘plane’ thinking was predicated on a largely non-materialistic ontological stance far removed from the empiricism associated with early marketing thought. This is reversed when Atkinson (1912) adopts a managerially acceptable posture, largely shorn of explicit psychical references. Although, this excision is an abrupt shift from his prior writing, when read against the backdrop of his pseudonymous publications, all of which ‘dove-tail’ into each other (Ramacharaka, 1903: 133), a more subtle understanding of Atkinson’s citational strategy is discernible. In later publications, he becomes cautious about quoting Theosophical and psychical inspirations, but they do not disappear from his worldview. We account for his shifting perspective as reflecting ‘epistemological deflation’ and ‘counter-reversal’, that is, a revised continuity with less emphasis on occult ideas that practitioners found problematic (i.e. signifying a partially continuous and partly discontinuous (disqualified) narrative with certain elements filtered from ‘scientific’ knowledge).

In line with Foucault’s ‘principle of heterogeneity’ (Foucault, 2008) (i.e. reading across multiple literatures to illuminate the bridges between them) we orient the reader by introducing the investigations conducted under the auspices of the SPR. Following this, we explain how Atkinson encouraged his students to apply psychical insights.

The Society for Psychical Research

The middle of the 19th century was a period of optimism regarding the revelatory power of the scientific method and technology promised to help humankind harness the natural environment (Gauld, 1968). At the same time, the spiritualist movement was triggered by the phenomena (i.e. rappings) taking place around the Fox sisters. Religious uncertainty, the success of the natural sciences and interest in spiritual matters by groups like the Cambridge University Ghost Club all formed conditions of possibility leading to the establishment of the SPR.

Formed in 1882, with Professor Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900) as President, the SPR expressed its intent ‘to investigate that large body of debatable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, psychical and spiritualistic…without prejudice or prepossession of any kind, and in the same spirit of exact and unimpassioned enquiry which has enabled Science to solve so many problems, once not less obscure nor less hotly debated’ (Gauld, 1968: 138). The reputations of the SPR council and affiliated members were impressive, with Frederic Myers (1843–1901) and Edmund Gurney (1847–1888) making extensive contributions to the literature on hypnotism, alternating and subliminal consciousnesses (Barrett, 1911). It rapidly attracted influential scholars, scientists, politicians and literary celebrities from around the world. Members included Professor William Barrett (1844–1925), Sir William Crookes (1832–1919), Professor Henri Bergson (1859–1941), Professor Charles Richet (1850–1935), Professor William James (1842–1910), Sir Oliver Lodge (1851–1940) and Eleanor Sidgwick (1845–1936) to name a few.

Axiologically central to members aligned with the SPR was the notion that our knowledge of the universe is partial, limited by physiological assumptions and that the ‘order of nature’ is not exhausted by our senses (Barrett, 1911). Even though the SPR established multiple committees tasked with exploring various psychical and spiritualist phenomena (e.g. hypnotism, mesmerism, clairvoyance, Reichenbach’s phenomena, apparitions and the survival thesis), ‘thought transferance’ was a concentration.
**Telepathy**

Telepathy refers to all impressions (cognitive, emotional, visual and auditory) received from a distant source without the mediation of acknowledged senses. Barrett claimed priority in the discovery of telepathy in 1876. Myers, in turn, defined it in 1882. It generated major cultural interest. Initially, the conduit was the ‘willing game’. The willing game involved an individual being asked to leave the room while their fellows selected some object or member of the group for them to identify upon re-entry. When re-entering, a representative placed their hands on the percipient’s (receiver’s) forehead or held their hand. This was the transmission vehicle for the information that the percipient was meant to determine. Importantly, the agent (transmitter) did not make a conscious attempt to influence the percipient. Fascinatingly, the success rate at item identification was large enough that those involved were often surprised by their accomplishment (Gauld, 1968).

The SPR wanted to parse stage versions of the willing game from cases of actual telepathy (Hamilton, 2009). Generally eschewing paid mediums and performers, Myers and Henry Sidgwick were convinced that ‘muscle reading’ did not account for all cases of telepathic communication and their views were supported by experimentation. Overall, their growing collection of case materials led members of the SPR to be optimistic that the evidence supported the existence of thought transference. But the SPR did not base their claims for telepathy solely on experimental research. They accumulated an archive of spontaneous cases. These often involved the percipient being unexpectedly enrolled in the telepathic event due to their connection with an agent who was undergoing a harrowing experience in a different location.

Courtesy of his polymathic knowledge, Myers (1892a) argues that the evidence suggested that psychical and telepathic communications were exemplars of supernormal faculties. They were not usually the result of a ‘supernatural’ force, but traceable to the people involved. Here ideas were starting to converge. It was common for thinkers to reference multiple, coordinating selves (discussed below). Myers led these conversations. He was held in high regard by some of the best thinkers in psychology including Pierre Janet (1859–1947), Charles Richet and William James. In Myers’ hands, the understanding of secondary selves was reworked. He did not agree with the morbid characterisation of these states. He saw glimmers of human potential, reasoning that they could exceed the primary self in terms of their memory, stability and adaptiveness to life (Myers, 1891–1892b; 1892b). It was in this direction that Myers looked for the telepathic faculty.

In the next section, we examine Myers’ work on subliminal consciousness. It links the SPR with Atkinson’s publications intended to assist sales and advertising practitioners (Atkinson and Beals, 1922a).

**The subliminal self**

To understand Myers’ view regarding subliminal consciousness, we need to grasp his interpretation of self. For brevity, self refers to a chain of memory that has some degree of consistency so that it reflects a distinct ‘character’. Our self is constituted by a supraliminal self (i.e. an empirical self) and at least one subliminal self (i.e. operating beneath the limen) (Myers, 1892a). Presenting Reid’s ‘Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man’ as his foil, Myers points out that Reid views identity as identical with our empirical self. What we know about our thoughts, beliefs and feelings are constitutive of self. This self is singular and internally consistent (Myers, 1903/1992).

By contrast, Myers feels affinity for Ribot’s view of consciousness. What the latter contends is that consciousness is only a small part of the psychological horizon, the proverbial tip of an iceberg. Directing attention to the tip means we miss activity taking place below the threshold, the limen. For
Ribot, our conscious self is an element in a much wider psychological coordination. The supraliminal self, then, does not define us (Myers, 1892a). Beneath our everyday self, there is a hidden self or series of ‘submerged’ selves (Myers, 1903/1992). Our empirical and hidden selves all exhibit their own streams of consciousness. The former reflects ‘a mere selection from a multitude of thoughts and sensations’ circulating within our mind (Myers, 1892a: 301).

According to Myers, the limen contingently divides supraliminal and subliminal selves. He maintains that the subliminal processes can act in coordination with supraliminal mentative activities. The barrier between these strata is ‘perfectly miscible’ (Myers, 1891–1892a: 307). It is fluidic, ‘subject to currents and ebullitions which often bring to the surface a stream or a bubble from a stratum far below’ (Myers, 1891-1892a: 307).

Normally, our thought processes seem to be self-directed. Nevertheless, we can be inspired without totally understanding the source which hints at the role of subliminal mentation and the ‘uprushes’ that enable a genius to make original, creative and inspirational leaps in their work whose origins are unclear. In theorising possible links between the supraliminal and subliminal, Myers provides a roll call of individuals from diverse spheres of creative endeavour who referred to alternative forms of mentation informing their thinking. As a case in point, Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of Treasure Island, gave a detailed account of his use of subliminal mentation to produce his fiction. While he slept, the ‘Brownies’ who populated his ‘internal theatre’ performed stage shows he would polish and publish. In fact, he maintained that they produced ‘better tales than he could fashion for himself’ (Stevenson, 1913: 161).

Stevenson was unusual in being able to instigate these dramas, recalling the content and using them to advance his career. Even so, Myers perceived a parallel between the genius who attained insights in supernormal ways and psychics who received information outside of the normal channels of communication. What connects the two groups is the permeability of the boundary between supraliminal and subliminal selves.

There is, Myers speculates, some hidden faculty that extends beyond the traditional senses, enabling telepathy and telaesthesia (perception of distant locations). He indicates that the subliminal consciousness is the place we receive telepathic and clairvoyant impressions which are transferred – sometimes with a delay – to the supraliminal self. Subliminal upruses are one transmission vehicle for these messages, feelings and images.

Let us now turn to Atkinson’s operationalisation of telepathy and telementation.

**Atkinson’s reflections**

Reading Atkinson’s work is meant to provide the neophyte with insight into the twin forces facilitating success: personal magnetism and psychical power (Atkinson, 1903). Atkinson stresses how business leaders are powerful sources of mentative energy, visualising their desires and sending their ‘mentative currents’ into the world using ‘thought-force’. Thoughts, he writes, are things. Positive, desire-laden thoughts impact on the people around us. Their power can be compelling (e.g. Atkinson, 1907a: 52).

By fostering a magnetic personality, enhancing this with telepathy, we can satisfy our desires. Atkinson outlines an account of personal magnetism, how it is transmitted and influences others. He also provides the reader with overviews of telepathic theories. Although titans of industry feature conspicuously, Atkinson avers that people engaged in the sales and marketing of books, magazines and life-insurance are skilful at activating their personal magnetism (e.g. Atkinson, 1907a: 105). Improving self-magnetism involves a combination of traditional and psychical practices. Projecting
a positive self-image through all physiological (i.e. facial, bodily), psychological (i.e. via positive thinking) and material means (i.e. wearing appropriate attire) is vital (Atkinson, 1903).

In nurturing self-assurance, we create what Atkinson calls ‘mentative energy’, the propulsion that powers telepathy, acting as a ‘force upon distant minds and objects’ (Atkinson, 1907a: 104). Personal influence, he explains, is exuded via ‘thought waves’ and ‘thought vibrations’ that are the product of our minds:

‘When we think, we send from us a subtle current, which travels along like a ray of light, and has its influence on the minds of others who are often far removed from us by space, a forceful thought will go on its errand charged with a mighty power, and will often beat down the instinctive resistance of the minds of others to outside impressions, whilst a weak thought will be unable to obtain an entrance to the mental castle of another, unless that castle be but poorly guarded. Repeated thoughts along the same lines, sent one after the other, will often effect an entrance where a single thought-wave, although much stronger, will be repulsed. It…exemplifies the old saying about steady dripping wearing away a stone’.

(Atkinson, 1903: 8–9)

The more we concentrate on achieving our objectives, the greater our power. What is apparent is that Atkinson envisages a structure of influence that stands in marked contrast to other contemporary views of salesmanship and advertising practice.

**Influence, telepathy and telementation**

The way Atkinson sketches the role of thought-vibrations and telepathy indicates that he understands them as elemental in an influence structure that works in combination. Let us focus upon the three main strategies (traditional approaches, telepathy and adduction). Firstly, the desired outcomes are the same. In each case, the sales actor is trying to ‘bend the minds’ of interactants in ways that achieve their objectives (Atkinson, 1907a: 108). We can influence others through personal contact, by listening to their needs and requirements, using these to inform our suggestions, which are accentuated via the repetition of core arguments (Atkinson, 1903). This involves physiological manipulation, adjusting our voice, gaze, style and personality.

Secondly, influence takes place via voluntary thought vibrations intended to establish mind-to-mind contact. The reader is introduced to three perspectives. We focus on the two major theories as Atkinson’s discussion of the third is not featured in SPR literature or developed in any detail. Certainly, he was aware of the cultural factors making telepathy attractive such as comparisons with wireless telegraphy (see Barrett, 1911; Besant, 1920). Focusing initially on brain/thought-wave theory, he considers how vibrations flow through the ether. When arriving at their target, ‘thought-vibrations’ are ‘transformed’ back into thought in the mind of the percipient (Atkinson, 1910a/2010).

The next perspective is partially derived from the work of the SPR and Myers. Atkinson (1907b) reviews seminal SPR experiments. Crosscutting these cases is the elimination of the mediatory function of the ether. Instead, the ‘subconscious’ is elevated to a central role in sending and receiving telepathic messages (Atkinson, 1910a/2010). Atkinson concurs with this perspective (Atkinson, 1909). Pragmatically, he lays out a learning pathway whereby novice telepathists begin by engaging in contact telepathy – a variant of the willing game – with an individual they know. From this, they move to the more advanced ‘thought-wave’ telepathy (Atkinson, 1907b). As is typical of his writing, he emphasises that the latter was ‘in its infancy’ with regards to effective
practice (Atkinson, 1907b: 25). Still, there were primers available, including the instructions sent out to those engaged in the Weltmer experiments on telepathy (see also Cook, 1943: 237–241). Throughout the Weltmer directives, participants are told they can learn how to send and receive telepathic messages. The development of ‘artificial telepathic sensitiveness’ is initially ‘a slow and difficult process’ but promises great rewards (Atkinson, 1910a/2010: 56; emphasis in original).

Moving away from the concept of telepathy in preference for ‘telementation’ (‘mental action at a distance’) which hallmarks the same process (Atkinson, 1910a/2010: 5), he insists that visualisation of the customer is an essential step in materialising ‘thought-forms’ (Atkinson, 1907a: 173). Ideally, we need to envision clients in context (Atkinson, 1907c: 244–245). By improving the clarity of our visualisation, we energise our ‘thought-waves’, making them ‘radiate’ (Leadbeater, 1912/1979) more effectively (e.g. Atkinson, 1907a: 176).

Like a pebble in a pond, thought can literally ripple outwards towards its target. Such an approach is presented as relatively effective (see Besant, 1920: 134). By contrast, a more direct focus – the so-called ‘rifle ball’ strategy – has greater levels of success (see also Besant and Leadbeater, 1905/2020: 42; Ramacharaka, 1903: 85, 130). It involved the following methodological tactic. Prior to a personal meeting with the customer, the pupil is told to cultivate ‘rapport with him at a distance’ (Atkinson, 1903: 52; emphasis in original). To do so, they had to get comfortable, relax and shut out the external world so that they can mentally visualise their buyer (Atkinson, 1903: 52). When visualising, the agent must aim their ‘mental telegraphic apparatus’ at the percipient (Atkinson, 1903: 51), sometimes enhancing these efforts with a ‘telepascope’ to aid focus (Halphpide, 1901: 105):

‘The best results are obtained when you get the impression of looking through a long tube about one foot in diameter, you being at one end and your man at the other. This impression, which can be acquired by concentration, is an indication of perfect rapport, and indicates that you have succeeded in shutting out all outside impressions and have opened up the psychic line of communication. When you attain this stage, you may rest assured that you are making a strong impression, unless the man at the other end of the psychic tube understands the law of mental control and has felt an indication of thought vibrations being directed towards him... The more passive the other man may be at that moment, the better will be the results. A little practice will develop this power, and you will get the impression of the “tube” more clearly, and will form a much clearer mental picture of the other person. Some little practice may be required before you can obtain this mental impression of the long tube’.

(Atkinson, 1903: 53; see also Ramacharaka, 1903: 100–101)

Telepathy held out the possibility of shaping the wider market. Mass telepathic influence was a one-to-many process. Where mentative currents were understood as targeted approaches, we now head into the domain of a managed, controllable form of contagion theory. This involves the ‘mentator’ affecting the entire marketplace through currents and waves, but also via the production of telementative ‘whirlpools’ and ‘cyclones’. The latter two impact ‘all persons and things who are interested in any way in the enterprise, scheme, plan or undertaking of the individual...tending to cause them to...comply’ (Atkinson, 1907a: 170).

The third influence strategy involved adduction. Adduction is a distillation of New Thought. To succeed, salespeople need to telepathically project constructive thoughts. Positive thinking attracts the like-minded and leads to forging business relationships founded upon ‘mutual advantage’. In effect, adduction is the homophily principle in a psychic register. Atkinson postulates that we find
possible customers in those whose ‘thought waves’ are ‘of the same vibratory pitch and quality’ as our own (Atkinson, 1903: 15).

So, to summarise the narrative thus far, telepathy was central to developing and extending personal influence and one element in the structure of control. The occult references and experimental research of the SPR formed parts of an approach to the marketplace and customer that deviates from histories of influence in our subject. In such accounts the imbrication of traditional and psychical influences are absent. Atkinson, by contrast, fundamentally links the areas in his publications. These exist within a complex ontology as we shall see.

The psychology of salesmanship, the sixth sense and ontological complexity

Commensurate with interest in the business world, Atkinson devotes attention to the theories of selling that remain a staple of textbooks. The so-called ‘strong theory’ – AIDA (Awareness/Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) – merits discussion and he takes his student through the process. A point of difference is the blurring of traditional and psychical influences. Trying to manipulate the consumer involves suggestion through physical means and the projection of psychical force via mentation. Here, he introduces the extension of self via a ‘sixth sense’ – ‘the telepathic sense’ (Ramacharaka, 1903: 92).

Taken directly from Theosophical thinking, Atkinson’s ontology becomes extremely dense. It offers a ‘get-out-of-jail-free’ card. Anyone who cannot perceive the visions he enunciates is not sufficiently educated or sensitive (see also Besant and Leadbeater, 1905/2020: 46). They are only on the ‘first plane of life’ and needed to continue along the path of self-development. Ontologically, existence is structured around seven ‘planes’ or ‘worlds’ (e.g. Leadbeater, 1902/1971: 19, 26). These planes interpenetrate, but we are usually only aware of the ‘undulations’ associated with the world in which we live (Leadbeater, 1912/1979).

Via education, self-development and training regimes that span many lifetimes and thousands of years, all people will enhance their awareness of the seven planes. However, only those immersed in Theosophical theory are likely to move beyond the everyday physical-material plane with much speed (e.g. Leadbeater, 1912/1979: 16–17, 25). Nonetheless, Atkinson assumes the reader is ‘a highly developed Occultist and consequently able to see on what Occultists call the “Second Plane”’ (Atkinson, 1907a: 142). He cautions us that seeing on this plane does not involve perceiving the ‘forces’ he describes. Rather, we witness their impact, but must have faith in their existence. This is the plane where mentative waves and flows exert their influence.

In terms of ontological perceptivity, people can feel flows of energy like those associated with thought-waves and magnets. The notion that they can literally see them is, for Atkinson, not accurate. On the second plane of existence, people are too limited perceptually and psychically. It is only when we are elevated to the third plane and beyond that such forces are visible. Third plane sensitives have the faculty of perceiving thought-waves. Curtailing discussion, the remaining planes ‘are subjects that belong to the higher degrees of Occultism, and form no part of these lessons or subject’ (Atkinson, 1907a: 144).

Atkinson’s expository venture into a non-material world which hypothetically had implications for personal influence takes us out of the realm of scientificty for business practitioners (Kuna, 1976). His review of ‘thought-clouds’ and ‘auras’ derived from clairvoyant experiments highlights this most vividly (e.g. Besant and Leadbeater, 1905/2020; Leadbeater, 1902/1971; Ramacharaka, 1903). Spanning ‘a distance of about one yard’, they are ‘egg-shaped’, ‘vapoury’ clouds and differently coloured (Atkinson, 1907a: 148). Colours, he stresses, have meaning. We create these by
virtue of the feelings and vibrations projected outward. For instance, individuals surrounded by blue clouds are spiritual, whereas yellow clouds signal intellectuality (see also Leadbeater, 1912/1979: 47). Green, however, indicates deceit and jealousy (Atkinson, 1907a: 146). For the suitably trained, auras and cloud formations offer a window into being (e.g. Ramacharaka, 1903: 196).

Providing an example of how this perceptivity functions in everyday life, Atkinson explains: two people are walking down the street. The person with the stronger aura, better developed occult skills and personal magnetism will impact more heavily on the weaker individual (the weaker individual is equally influenced by traditional types of suggestion). The former’s aura will modify the latter. This happens in various ways. Those with clairvoyant insight have testified to the existence of ‘smoke-like forms’ that influence others in a variant of the ‘rifle ball’ theory. They project ‘like a volume of smoke being blown from the lips of a cigar smoker. Such forms pour out in long streams, then spread out and broaden, although maintaining the direction originally imparted to them’, influencing the person being targeted (Atkinson, 1907a: 156). Consistent with generalised telepathy, some individuals project from ‘all directions’, others in ways reminiscent of lightning.

Moving into the darker realms of market research, depth approaches to customer behaviour and the ability to read people’s minds without permission, it is possible to engage in an unsanctioned ‘psychic invasion’ (Myers, 1903/1992), accessing private and proprietary information for marketplace advantage (e.g. Atkinson, 1907a: 157–158). In another example, Atkinson says that during a sales meeting, the stronger party’s aura starts to change:

‘...great tongues of colour seem to leap from it, and lap around the other man...These tongues of Mentative Currents wrap themselves all around the other man, and some seem to scintillate as they manifest the action of fairly “pulling” him toward the Positive Man, while others seem to be beating upon him like a rain of tiny flashes of lightning...This gives us a good illustration of Personal Influence in an interview’.

(Atkinson, 1907a: 149–150)

Clarifying this, Atkinson posits that people with similar auras and vibrations are likely to ‘harmonise’ and engage in fruitful discussion. Furthermore, influence attempts are not always successful.

**Genealogical moves**

By 1909, Atkinson was starting to deposition psychical research (e.g. Atkinson, 1909: 158–159; 1910b: 302), often relegating it to pseudonymous work (i.e. in the business literature of Theron Q. Dumont and more esoterically in Swami Panchadasi, Yogi Ramacharaka and Swami Bhaka Vishita’s publications).

In 1912, Atkinson implies that ‘psychism’ was viewed by business practitioners in questionable terms. They disliked references to clairvoyance and telepathy as these notions were redolent of supernaturalism. Such interpretations, in turn, shaped the way psychology was received. Treading carefully, Atkinson proposes that psychology is an adjunct to existing knowledge and tactics. Sales workers still needed to know about their products; take account of seasonal trends; register the growing importance of fads, fashions and symbolic consumption and the existence of market segments with different needs. But from his vantage point, the business world was starting to appreciate that psychological insight can increase success. For Atkinson, psychology is explicitly not psychism. It has practical value since selling is ‘essentially a mental process depending on the
state of mind induced in the purchaser, and...these states of mind are induced solely by reason of certain established principles of psychology’ (Atkinson, 1912: 10).

In his reflection on salesmanship, there are parallels with previous work. There is attention to the crafting of a desirable self-image and reference to appealing personality traits. The language of personal magnetism and shades of Mesmer peppering his earlier publications recede, but the continuing presence of telepathically inflected discussion is apparent. Atkinson, for instance, provides a brief statement on sales practice which is commensurate with telepathy, but minus psychical references: ‘From the entrance of the salesman to the final, closing of the sale, each and every step is a psychological process. A sale is the action and reaction of mind upon mind—...Salesmanship is essentially a psychological science’ (Atkinson, 1912: 24–25; emphasis added).

References to mind-to-mind contact are much more muted. The structured approach to influence is revised dramatically. Reading salesmanship through the prism of psychology means adopting an AIDA framing (e.g. Atkinson, 1912: 137–138). War metaphors are common; the salesperson needs appropriate ‘ammunition’ (Atkinson, 1912: 114). Everything from the demeanour of the sales worker to how goods are displayed must adhere to psychological principles. In this new mode, telepathy does not feature as a method of preparatory influence for the sales interview. Making the process more complicated, sales talks had to be oriented around the factors with greatest salience to the patron. They had their preliminary knowledge to assist them, but it required embellishment springing from interactional cues at the initial meeting including those provided by the client’s environment (i.e. antique furnishings, family pictures, sporting items, all revealed associated interests).

Telepathy is not employed. Intuition takes its place. The more experience the sales employee can secure, the better in terms of honing their judgement (e.g. Atkinson, 1912: 178–179). This is augmented by listening to what the customer says, noting their expressions and general mood. Listening rather than sending mentative currents is essential. ‘Rifle ball’ theory is modified. Mental attitude substitutes for psychical power: ‘It is the Mental Attitude of the Salesman which is the power behind his argumentative rifle-balls’ (Atkinson, 1912: 218). Being polite to the consumer, understanding their needs and creating an appropriate atmosphere was the royal road to success. In this context, the salesman is tasked with painting ‘mental pictures’ of the product, its use and value which leads to interest, desire and some limited rational deliberation combined with emotional responses by the client. Here the sixth sense is important. Formerly the telepathic sense, now it is recast in a non-occult, intuitive form that enables a salesperson to determine when the ‘psychological moment’ has arisen to conclude the presentation and secure the order (e.g. Atkinson, 1912: 227–228). Undertaken appropriately: ‘the minds of the Salesman and the Buyer meet. The result is the Signed Order’ (Atkinson, 1912: 166). This is not, yet, the end point. When leaving the purchaser, the sales operative needs to call forth their psychical powers one final time. Thoughts, radiations and vibrations form part of the repertoire at the culmination of an exchange:

‘You have the signed order, but you must continue your Mental Attitude until you fade from the prospect’s sight...Keep up his good impression of and respect for you to the last. Leave your prospect with this thought radiating from your mind: “I have done this man a good turn.” The prospect will catch these subtle vibrations, in some way not worth discussing and he too will feel that he has done well. Avoid the “Well, I landed this chap, all right, all right!” mental attitude, which shows so plainly in the manner of some salesmen after they have booked an order. The prospect will catch those vibrations also, and will not like it – he will resent it, naturally’.

(Atkinson, 1912: 243–244; emphasis added)
**Epistemological deflation and self-generated counter-reversal**

But this was not the terminus of telepathy. Recalling that telepathy was culturally and epistemologically justified by links to wireless telegraphy, Atkinson and Beals (1922a) repurpose his earlier work, modifying it in line with recent ascriptions of value to radiation. This was not an abrupt move but ties back to Theosophical thought (Leadbeater, 1912/1979), psychical research (Barrett, 1918) and Atkinson’s (1912) own reflections.

Leadbeater (1912/1979), for one, provides an extended reflection on the power of thought-forms. Like Atkinson and Beals (1922a), he explains how thought-forms project their ‘radiation’ toward the foci of attention (e.g. Leadbeater, 1912/1979: 54–55). For the wider public interested in navigating the professional and social world, telepathy is replaced with the terminology of ‘thought radioactivity’: ‘Thought is radioactive, i.e., it is capable of being radiated over space external to the brain in which it is generated, there to produce effects and to cause results’ (Atkinson and Beals, 1922a: 15). In making this case, Atkinson and Beals continue to draw on Theosophical and psychical research. Conspicuously, their analysis departs from Atkinson’s (1903, 1907a, 1907b) prior stance by epistemologically deflating the scientifi c warrant of telepathy. They do not deny its existence, nor that it has some potential utility in the sales environment. Still, they stress that they are not calling for people to adopt ‘occult’ or ‘psychic’ perspectives, nor engaged in ‘propaganda work’ for such material (Atkinson and Beals, 1922a: 82).

More subtly, their discussion is situated within an apparently pluralistic account of communication nested within a paradigm that does not adopt a ‘metaphysical’ or ‘transcendental’ viewpoint. In Atkinson and Beals’s (1922a) musings, the connection between occult, psychical research and scientific psychology is reversed. Scientific psychology is invoked in a ‘counter-manoeuvre’ that attempts to reorder the worldview being outlined. Occult thought is devalued as a source (cf. Atkinson, 1907c). Where ‘occultists’ made absolute claims to knowledge about ‘thought-power’ often on the basis of ‘astral’ perception and communication, psychological ‘scientists’ used a repertoire of empirical methods without making claims about ‘colours’ or ‘astral tints’ (Atkinson and Beals, 1922a: 94). This recharacterises the insights of New Thought, Theosophy and SPR’s experimental research as ‘merely symbolic or poetical illustrations’ (Atkinson and Beals, 1922a: 83). Expressing their commitment to scientific psychology and the scientific method was one way to establish credibility (Leary, 1987), but it ignored the fact that the SPR expressed comparable commitments, were methodologically skilled, attentive to observation bias and aware of the possibility of fraud by research co-participants.

‘Occultist phenomena’ (Leary, 1987) and ‘excessively spiritual’ (Powell, 1979) writings were deflated, with culturally resonant language employed to enrobe ideas that had first been discussed in Theosophical and psychical terms. William James (1961a, 1961b) affirmed that the biases and intolerance of science pushed ‘telepathy’ ‘underground’ as a subject of mainstream attention. Pressing these shifts home, Atkinson and Beals (1922b) warn their readers that ‘psychic’ perspectives were ‘of quite doubtful value’ and sometimes ‘positively dangerous and harmful’ (Atkinson and Beals, 1922b: 165).

**Discussion**

The acceptance by Atkinson of psychical research is unsurprising. The 20th century was hailed as the ‘Psychic century’ (Halphide, 1901). To be sure, the actual functioning of telepathy remained a mystery (Barrett, 1911) and compared to the research being conducted in newly established marketing and psychology departments, the value of psychical research was not immediately
apparent. This was a problem as marketing and salesmanship professionals needed insights to be practically applicable (Sheldon, 1911) and telepathy was unreliable.

The enrolment of occult and psychical research into marketing thus faced multiple hurdles. It was not easily operationalisable and Atkinson’s mentative clouds, whirlpools and cyclones, must have strained credulity. Exacerbating this, Atkinson regularly signalled that developing psychical skills was difficult, required ongoing practice, while sidestepping criticism of his confusing explanations. To deal with these issues, Atkinson largely dethroned personal magnetism and telepathy as central to his system of influence. In their place, traditional ‘theories of selling’ were provided (Strong, 1925).

Given Atkinson’s (1910b) appreciation of an ongoing tension between producing books that sell and his creative impulses, it was consistent with his overall publishing trajectory that he would come back to earlier ideas that sold well, adjusting them to conform to cultural, scientific and epistemic changes (cf. Atkinson, 1907c: 225). His writing with Beals exemplifies what we are calling epistemological deflation and counter-reversal. The epistemological re-ordering of theoretical and experimental research was unambiguous and older material was modified so that it was consistent with developments in radioactivity. In fact, his publishers marketed his later material on the basis that it reflected contemporary scholarship.

The disappearance of telepathy?

As we have noted, telepathy was linked to the wireless telegraph as a way of illuminating its consistency with expanding scientific knowledge (Barrett, 1911; Besant, 1904). The future looked bright. When writing to the SPR, Samuel Clemens (aka Mark Twain) maintained that telepathy would replace telegraphy and the telephone. Both technologies were ‘cumbersome’. Telepathy, by contrast, might deliver ‘a form of communication-enhancing technology that will make things faster, easier, better for market relations’ (Twain in Thurschwell, 2001: 22).

These are discursive moves reiterating ‘ancient’ ideas, including St. Augustine’s reflection on communication between God and angels which assumed ‘spirit-to-spirit’ relations as a ‘normative vision of how intercourse ought to work’ (Peters, 1999: 63). Correspondingly, Barrett (1911: 69) exclaimed that ‘telepathy…furnishes the prospect of a far more perfect interchange of thought than by the clumsy mechanism of speech’. It promised ‘the possibility of communion’ between races irrespective of language barriers. Humanity and ‘every sentient creature’ were to be psychically connected in a matrix of telepathic exchange (Barrett, 1911: 69). Such views were an extrapolation of cases like that of Rider Haggard’s dog who telepathed to its owner that it was dying (e.g. Sidgwick, 1922: 219). In short, telepathy was hypothesised as the ‘universal and common method of communicating’ (Barrett, 1911: 110).

Over the last century, the evidence for telepathy, clairvoyance and psi functioning has continued to flow. For many, the existence of telepathy is axiomatic (cf. Hyslop, 1906). Upton Sinclair (1930), for example, repeated much of the sentiment we have discussed. Based on experiments with his psi sensitive wife, Mary Craig Sinclair, he asserted that telepathy could be learned; drew upon the SPR literature; presented the subconscious as central to the process and his spouse achieved the transfer of images from mind-to-mind repeatedly. As Sinclair closes: ‘TELEPATHY HAPPENS’ (Sinclair, 1930: 239; emphasis in original).

Interestingly, it is Atkinson’s conceptual revision of telepathy to telementation (i.e. ‘mental action at a distance’) that enables us to link it to marketing communications theory. We are not making a case for direct – *citational* – influence. Intra- and inter-disciplinary forces have been mostly effective at subjugating telepathy as a form of influence within our subject. Walter Dill
Scott (1907, 1921) is an exemplar here, characterising it as a ‘medieval superstition,’ and his views were repeated by sales and marketing communications pioneers including E.K. Strong (1922) among others. Scholarly circumscription has been less efficacious at excising telementative assumptions. As a theory of communication, telepathy held that thought, ‘letters, words, and phrases can be communicated from one mind to another’ (Warcollier, 1963: 85). Atkinson, Ramacharaka, Besant and Leadbeater all articulated ‘rifle ball’ theories of transmission. They literally said: ‘Thoughts…are often sent like a bullet to the mark’ (Ramacharaka, 1903: 130). In other theoretical registers, thought transference functioned like a contagion, shaping the cultural context (cf. Atkinson, 1907c: 165, 168). It profoundly moulded public opinion (e.g. Besant, 1920: 36–37).

Our textbooks reference ‘magic bullet’ and ‘hypodermic’ models of communication that are consistent with basic telepathic assumptions in terms of the notion of idea transfer (e.g. Egan, 2007), although they place less emphasis on the ability of the percipient to reject unwelcome approaches (Atkinson, 1907c). Magic bullet/hypodermic perspectives assume that ‘messages’ are ‘magic bullets capable of mesmerizing listeners who passively received and responded to communicative stimuli in an essentially uniform manner’ (Sproule, 1989: 225). Theoretically, it is indebted to American and European social theory exploring the irrationality of crowds and mobs, with the plausibility of its assumption base (Bineham, 1988) enhanced by the successes of propaganda during World War I (Sproule, 1987).

Where Bineham (1988) registers the bullet/hypodermic model as a construction derived from reading across a stream of conceptually and epistemologically intertwined publications, we can now tie this viewpoint to the Theosophical and psychical research of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, the ‘principle of heterogeneity’ directs our attention to conceptual contact and bridges between areas. Atkinson’s (1912) disengagement with Theosophy and psychical research in preference for promoting a psychological, scientific narrative is the ‘bridge’ (Foucault, 2008) between sister disciplines. His rifle-ball accounts associate him with an emergent perspective in communication research before these were labelled ‘bullet theories’ (Bineham, 1988). They also tie him to changing developments in marketing and public relations, especially the wave of interest in psychology after the Great War (Bernays, 1942). These trends are articulated by Edward Bernays (1891–1995).

Bernays saw the success of public relations as contingent upon a ‘frictionless’ form of interconnection between all participants (e.g. Justman, 1994: 465) and he is a model of ‘magic bullet’ theorising. He presents the mass media as powerful (Sproule, 1989) and his approach to public relations chimes with Theosophical thinking on the power of thought to shape context (i.e. Bernays’ ‘created circumstance’) (Besant, 1920). Unswervingly, Bernays is at pains to align his practice with ‘science’ (e.g. Bernays, 1925) Bernays, 1925/2005: 72). He takes a ‘scientific approach’ to manipulation (Bernays, 1942). We go from the ‘psychic invasion’ characteristic of Atkinson’s work to one of ‘psychological warfare’. Bullet theory appears figuratively.

Referencing propaganda efforts, Bernays writes, ‘The United States shot paper bullets over the enemy’ (Bernays, 1942: 239). Relatedly, ‘ideas are weapons’ that possess a distinct psychical aura. The task of the public relations counsel is to create ‘a harmony of understanding’ (Bernays, 1935: 82); they need to ‘project’ their ideas and do so cumulatively. The latter is important. It connects Atkinson (1903, 1907c), Bernays (1935) and Schramm (1949) who in unison proffer that cumulative messages wear the consumer down, ultimately making them receptive to communications (cf. (Bernays, 1925) Bernays, 1925/2005: 76). To influence the audience, every available vehicle for ‘thought-transmission’ (e.g. Bernays, 1928: 969) or ‘transference’ (e.g. Schramm, 1949: 405) should be exploited.
Whether we look at the writing of Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver or Wilbur Schramm, there are distinct parallels with telepathy. Notably, Shannon described the communication process as the reproduction of a message. Warren Weaver, likewise, presented communication as the vehicle through which ‘one mind may affect another’ (Shannon and Weaver, 1963/1998: 3). Lest we have forgotten, Myers defined telepathy as ‘The communication of impressions of any kind from one mind to another’ (in Barrett, 1918: 251). Originally, it was understood as a ‘quasi-mechanical process’ (Barrett, 1918: 256), later underwent developments that shifted it from ‘bullet’ and ‘conduit’ theories and included the transmission of thoughts, feelings and emotions (Barrett, 1918: 258). Telepathists had to sit in a quiet room, focus their attention and visualise the customer (Atkinson, 1907c). They needed to eliminate extraneous influences, that is, ‘noise’, to increase their power.

Fundamentally, telepathy has been positioned as the most universal – potentially friction-free – means of communication. For Warcollier (1963), his experimental studies revealed that mind-to-mind interaction and understanding was possible even when one interlocutor is using a ‘language unknown to the percipient’ (Warcollier, 1963: 85; see also Hyslop, 1906: 120). Scholars expressed it as an ideal, registered failures and distortions in messaging, but also the development of ‘para-psychological harmony’ and ‘polypsychic fusion’ between people who interacted regularly (e.g. Warcollier, 1963: 102). Atkinson’s multi-faceted account of conventional and psychical communications encompassed Shannon, Weaver and Schramm’s views and went beyond them.

Both Shannon and Weaver knew about telepathy. Bell Labs was involved with psychical research, producing a machine used in ESP testing (Shannon’s ‘mind-reading machine’) (Poundstone, 2020: 39). At a Dartmouth College conference in 1960, Weaver addressed the issue of mind-to-mind communication which had continued to receive evidential support courtesy of the work of J.B. Rhine (1895–1980). Weaver said: ‘I cannot reject the evidence’ (in Horn, 2009: 227). These pioneers of communication knew about telepathy, appreciated the growing evidence base and framed their seminal contributions along related lines. Nonetheless, the politics of knowledge were firmly in play when Weaver spoke. There were limits to ‘expressibility’ (Foucault, 1972: 234). Even a figure of his stature was described as having ‘gone off his rocker’ when he said further studies in parapsychology were necessary (in Horn, 2009: 227). The ‘conditions of acceptability’ were against greater engagement with telepathy. Associated transformations influenced our discipline.

**Rethinking the sixth sense**

From the 1920s onwards, marketing was repositioning as a science. This necessitated using ostensibly non-psychical and non-metaphysical prisms to study the marketplace (Tadajewski and Jones, 2012). Encouraged by Percival White and supported by the Ford and Carnegie reports in the 1950s, the revised ‘sixth sense’ of intuition was benched in favour of behavioural and quantitative approaches (Tadajewski, 2006b). The field of sales research was therefore altered, and marketing communications followed a related path, adopting ‘a scientific approach…to be afforded intellectual respect and boardroom trust’ (Miles, 2013: 2006).

The impact of these epistemic shifts has been considerable. Varey (2000: 330), for instance, explains the continuing influence of Shannon’s, Weaver’s and Schramm’s work on marketing. The ‘conduit’ metaphor underwriting it presupposes that we can transmit our preferred thoughts to others via the medium of language (Miles, 2020: 191). This way of approaching marketer-consumer relations has been ‘a tremendously popular way of thinking about communication in marketing’ (Miles, 2020: 55). For Varey (2000), it remains ‘the main basis of the prevailing orthodoxy’ despite changes in the theorisation of communication outside and within our discipline (Wood, 2006).
Arguably, then, what ‘scientisation’ (Stidsen and Schutte, 1972) advocates in our subject theorise are *divergences* from the *ideal* of telementation (i.e. friction-free communication) (Toolan, 1997). Our disciplinary contribution entails the incorporation of mechanistic assumptions combined with feedback from the organism-consumer:

‘Most of the published models of the process by which advertising is thought to work are based on simple, mechanical principles. The general belief is that a sender (advertiser) sends a message via some medium to a receiver who, upon intercepting the message, is variously “caused,” “triggered,” or “stimulated,” to react in accordance with the advertiser’s intentions. The fact that not all consumers react in quite the same manner has been “explained” in various ways. Inattention, selective perception, misinterpretation, forgetting, or just plain fickleness are some of the concepts that have been advanced to account for differences in consumer behavior’.

*(Stidsen, 1970: 47–48)*

Telementative and telepathic assumptions are, therefore, the basis from which we think and theorise. They are the foundation. We work from them to take account of the changing nature of consumer practice and its divergence from the ideal.

The notion of telepathic and telementative influence continues to shape our possible future.¹ The ideal of ideas moving ‘from mind-to-mind in a flawless, friction-free manner’ (Toolan, 1997: 86) is attracting attention and presents a medium- to long-term direction for *positivistic-managerial* marketing communications theory and practice. Recent studies in brain-to-computer (i.e. ‘synthetic telepathy’) and brain-to-brain information transfer all share the kinds of linear communications views discussed above (e.g. Jacobsen, 2017: 385). Typically, these approaches involve influencing an icon on screen using the power of mind via an Emotiv headset (Ahmed, 2010). Extensions of these tools are being rolled out which enable people to control their environment. From controlling pixels, attention readily shifts to thought transfer (Dingemanse, 2020) such as the international (non-psychical) telepathic experiments requiring transcranial stimulation technology (Jacobsen, 2017: 286–287). Brain implants and corresponding applications certainly look to be the next frontier. Elon Musk’s Neuralink, Bryan Johnson’s Kernel company, Facebook’s brainwave research, and Nissan’s ‘Brain-to-Vehicle’ tools all vow to extend the user in neurologically inspired ways (Duncan, 2019). There are ongoing attempts to engineer telepathy so that our brains act like a ‘futuristic walkie-talkie’ (Iozzio, 2014).

Moving in less positivistic directions, telepathy and its associated assumptions have affinities to affect theory² (i.e. in which affect is conceptualised as a ‘capacity to affect and be affected’ (Leys, 2011: 442 n 22)). But, for the sake of comprehension, we need to recall that telepathy includes the more restrictive range of material sent in thought transference (i.e. numbers and colours) and goes beyond this, encompassing the communication of impressions, emotions and feelings (Atkinson, 1912). Impressions, emotions and feelings are not always neatly cognised and can require some level of analytic interpretation (cf. Gurney and Myers, 1884). This perspective shifts us away from the notion that ‘unwritten or unspoken thought’ is ‘fired like a bullet’ (Barrett, 1918: 258).

Developing earlier accounts, Barrett (1918) emphasises the communication of affectively charged forces which blur the boundaries between people in relational terms. Some common forms of lived experience including the use of prayer are heralded as paradigmatic cases of the combination of thought transference charged with positive affect. These can flow between the living as well as between the living and dead, ‘between the spiritual and material worlds’ (Myers, 1898: 241).
Analogous views continue to be articulated (e.g. Higgins and Hamilton, 2019: 1238–1239, 1242–1243, 1245).

Myers, Barrett and Atkinson consequently nest affectively charged notions within their writings. Emotion is telepathed (e.g. Jephson, 1927: 83; Warcollier, 1963: 30, 55). Sensations including pain, taste and touch are capable of transmission. ‘Propagated’ experiences (i.e. feelings) are disseminated via a ‘force or energy acting afar’ (Barrett, 1918: 252), sometimes affecting one person, at other times impacting multiple people in ‘collective percipience’ (Gurney and Myers, 1884). Affects can sediment over time (i.e. they are independent of an individual subject), shaping the ‘atmosphere’ of retail stores, offices and ‘haunted houses’ which can be positively or negatively charged by their past and current tenants (Atkinson, 1907a).

Salter (1934), for example, recalls the power and prevalence of telepathy during periods of affective upheaval, citing the rise in cases of apparitions during World War I. In these cases, ‘vital energies’ play a prominent role, notably, ‘exaltation’ and ‘depression’ which expedite the ‘transference of supersensory impressions’ (Gurney and Myers, 1883: 441). Affect disrupts ongoing activities, communicating danger and death to the percipient (e.g. Salter, 1934: 24). These experiences were shaped by context (Barrett, 1911; Gauld, 1968), often ‘sudden’, ‘persistent’ and responsible for stimulating generalised anxiety (e.g. Salter, 1934: 50). Developing this point, Rhine Feather and Schmicker (2005) draw attention to the telepathic connections between closely fused groups – mothers and children, twins, grandparents and grandchildren, married partners and so forth. These links help channel ‘telesomatic’ experiences and ‘gut feelings’ about the challenges others are experiencing at a given time (e.g. Rhine Feather and Schmicker, 2005: 77, 143).

Barrett (1918) maintains that affective flows are sent consciously or unconsciously with the subliminal self acting as the receptor prior to their ‘uprush’ into consciousness (Myers, 1891–1892a). There are multiple ways by which we could link Barrett’s view to alternative threads on psychical research, telepathy and affect. Blackman traces these connections at the group and societal levels in the writing of Gabriel Tarde, linking them to debates about ‘inter-spiritual action’, the ‘suggestive realm’ (Blackman, 2007) and psychic porosity (Blackman, 2010), thereby resonating with affective and vitalist accounts in our literature. Non-representational studies are indebted to these ideas, stressing their interest in a more relational, porous concept of being (Cofin, 2021), the associated notions of unconscious, pre-conscious and conscious ‘affect flows’ (Leys, 2011), invocation of various ‘energies, moods, and feelings’, felt ‘atmospheres’ (Steadman et al., 2021) and affective attunement (Cofin, 2021). These publications vary in terms of the agency attributed to those people experiencing the affects, with some explications of subject formation articulating a strong version of influence that ‘forge’ individuals in a crucible of affective dynamics (e.g. Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria, 2021).

Alternatively, Barrett’s point about the unconscious transfer of affect provides a bridge to Freud’s (1856–1939) engagement with telepathy. Freud was a member of the SPR and its American cousin. In his earlier writings, he is careful about expressing his views on telepathy due to the problems that associations with ‘occult’ thinking might pose for the scientific accreditation of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1904/1974; 1921/1974). In later publications, he theorises the enabling conditions for telepathic transfer. High levels of emotion appear to enhance transference in waking and sleeping states (e.g. Freud, 1925/1974: 87–90) and Freud offers an example of telepathy between a medium and client, asserting that affective transmission is augmented by conscious wish fulfilment (e.g. Freud, 1921/1974: 62).

For Freud, telepathic case studies represent empirical material that are overlaid with appropriate analytics (e.g. Oedipus complex) along with references to salient elucidatory developments including ‘wireless’ telegraphy and ‘telephonic communication’ (Freud, 1933/1974: 95). In his
opinion, telepathy is a provisionally accepted theory that merits further research (Freud, 1925/1974: 88). Its existence is highly probable (Freud, 1933/1974: 100). Freud’s call was taken up by close associates including Sándor Ferenczi (1873–1933) and Carl Jung (1875–1961), resulting in a sophisticated stream of publications attempting to grasp the telepathic transmission process (e.g. Rabeyron and Evrard, 2012). These engage with the themes of non-representational and affective approaches. Specifically citing the insights of relationality, the transpersonal, extended mind, combined with assumptions of mental, affective and physiological porosity and attunement (De Peyer, 2016; Farber, 2017) as well as developments regarding mirror neurons, inter-subjectivity and telepathy (Rabeyron et al., 2020). Farber (2017), as a case in point, describes telepathy as unconscious-to-unconscious transfers of affect. Her account fuses bullet theory with illuminating psychoanalytic readings. Transference, in her view, is comprehended as ‘an invisible projective missile whistling silently over the boundaries separating the unconscious of the patient and analyst’ (Farber, 2017: 724).

Like the meditations proffered by Myers, Barrett, Atkinson, Warcollier and Rhine Feather, statements of relational porosity are often tempered. We are not psychologically and physiologically bounded entities cut off from the world (Rabeyron et al., 2020). But neither are we completely open to, and hopelessly buffeted by, the flows of telepathic or affective energies from other beings and the environment. Permeability is a relative phenomenon that can perhaps account for the diverse range of psychic and affective sensitivity recorded across populations (e.g. Cardeña, 2019; James, 1910).

Finally, the Theosophical interest in auras and colouration has resurfaced in the Radiant Human project led by Christina Lonsdale. Lonsdale’s (2021) photography aims to penetrate the inner self by capturing our energy signals – an approach that has connections to psychic practice (e.g. Lonsdale, 2021: 35). Her images reveal our auras and disclose that they undergo regular change, including shifts in colouration. Intriguingly, photographing them is positioned as a response to Goffmanesque conceptualisations of the consumer and identity. Whilst we can attempt to perform our ideal self-concept, we cannot hide our energy field (i.e. we are ultimately transparent).

At present, managerial implications are limited to the selection of individuals and teams based on energy complementarity (e.g. Lonsdale, 2021: 40). Salespeople, for instance, are likely to possess an orange aura, indicating adaptability and the enjoyment of new challenges (Lonsdale, 2021: 90); character traits that are congruent with those appearing in job advertisements for marketers (e.g. Woodall, 2011: 177). New Thought, lastly, has been repackaged for the 21st century in an extreme idealist form far removed from its roots in the work cited at the start of this paper (e.g. Byrne, 2010).

**Conclusion**

In this manuscript, we illuminated the attention given to telepathy and telementation in our discipline via the work of W.W. Atkinson. Atkinson was brought up in a family of retailers, possessed considerable knowledge of the trade and immersed himself in various strands of contemporary thought to make an impressive series of contributions to marketing and salesmanship. By now, he has been in the grave for over 90 years, having passed in 1931 (Deslippe, 2011). In tracing the initial displacement of telepathy, a case was made that this reflected a shift in the hierarchical valorisation of knowledge. Even so, telepathic and telementative assumptions continue to pervade marketing theory. This is exemplified in recent turns towards synthetic telepathy, affect theory and relational psychoanalysis.
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Notes
1. Nor did the behavioural turn exorcise the prevalence of marketer intuition in business decision-making. It remains the case that intuition and tact, that is, the ability to deal with diverse people with ideally no friction is an intra-discursive (Foucault, 1972) thread from the time of Atkinson to the present day. For instance, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is marketed as a tool to help practitioners ‘read’ people. Genealogically, its ‘theoretical underpinning’ is partly an ‘extension of the classical communication model’ (Wood, 2006: 198) and calls for the cultivation of intuition, rapport and an appreciation of subconscious and conscious factors impacting upon interaction routines (Miles, 2015; Nickels et al., 1983). The whole approach of NLP speaks to psychic fusion in terms of assisting the sales operative to ‘feel a unity of spirit’ with the client (e.g., Nickels et al., 1983: 5). Practitioners are urged to use these strategies to ‘achieve a meeting of minds’ (Comer and Drollinger, 1999: 21) drawing on what were once ‘mystical forces’ (i.e. the subconscious mind and intuition) in commercial decision-making (Bonabeau, 2003: 116).

2. Affect theory is a complex and diverse set of literatures. Marketing and consumer research, like most other areas applying affect theory, focuses on affect as a ‘capacity to affect and be affected’ (Leys, 2011: 442n 22). Basically, this involves a pluralisation of contexts, subjects (cognitive, corporeal-affective, non-human–human), objects, resonances, intensities and temporalities which impact upon each other in varied, often non-intentional, and somewhat unpredictable ways (Leys, 2011; Steadman et al., 2021). Myers, Barrett and Freud do not present their work as affect theory. Instead of arguing that it could be read as part of a proto-affect tradition, we are merely noting ‘certain similarities’ (Botez et al., 2020) between Myers’, Barrett’s and Freud’s reflections on telepathy and more contemporary forms of theorising in our subject. This material is included as it deals with the capacity of one person to affect another in ways that may be fostered by an ‘affective background’ (e.g., religious insecurity accompanying the materialism of the 19th century; the anxiety, fear and despair associated with World War I, etc.) that incorporates affective resonances, focused ‘atmospheres’ and ‘structures of feeling’ that influence subjective, inter-subjective and transpersonal relations. Put differently, telepathy included the transference – intentional and non-intentional – of ideas, emotions, feelings and more diffused affects.

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