

Attitudes Toward Strongly Functioning Psi: A Preliminary Survey

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ABSTRACT: Informal experiments and depth psychological studies have suggested that strong fears of psychic abilities frequently underlie ostensibly rational discussions of the subject and may distort scientific research. In this study, a more systematic survey of negative feelings about two kinds of psi was made in the context of a "belief experiment." A mixed population of college students and townspeople were asked to temporarily believe either that a new, safe procedure had been developed that would permanently allow them full access to all the thoughts and feelings of anyone within a 100-yard radius (mind-reading condition, 19 respondents), or that they would permanently be able to move physical objects by thought alone (psychokinesis condition, 18 respondents) within a 100-yard radius. Reactions were predominantly negative in both conditions. In the mind-reading condition, respondents voiced concerns about how they would control this ability, fear of incapacitating overload, the responsibility such a talent created, their lack of maturity to deal with it, fear of others' rejection, and ethical concerns. In the psychokinesis condition, respondents reported concerns with negative things others might do with such an ability, whether they could adequately control its expression, its "unnaturalness," its permanence, and whether the procedure was really safe. If so many negative attitudes and feelings exist just beneath the surface, is it any wonder that discussions of psychic abilities are often heated and irrational?

It has been argued that there is a strong, partially-to-fully unconscious or implicit fear of psi underlying many apparently rational and scientific discussions about parapsychology (Tart, 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c). Such hidden attitudes distort otherwise rational discussion and impede scientific progress in understanding and applying psi. Fears of psi (or of anything) can be dealt with pathologically or constructively, as discussed elsewhere (Tart, 1984a), but all attempts at constructive solutions begin with acknowledgement of the reality of the fear as it exists to various degrees in both others and in oneself.

Because psi usually manifests infrequently in most peoples' personal lives, and does so at such a low, usually trivial, level of magnitude in the laboratory, psi does not ordinarily stimulate peoples' fears very much. Thus, fear of psi remains largely implicit and unconscious. We suspect it is a level or type of fear or fears not usually assessed in the occasional correlations between laboratory psi performance and anxiety scales on personality tests, as these measures do not account for any practically significant amount of variance, even when reaching statistical significance.

A decade ago, C.T.T. devised a psychological method to help people consciously discover what sorts of personal and collective fears of psi they might have. This method has been used in several of his workshops. The method is that of a "belief experiment," which involves asking people to imagine and believe (for a strictly limited time period) that psi would *personally* manifest at a very strong and reliable level for them and then asking them to observe and share their emotional reactions to this experimental belief. Participants who at first thought they had only positive feelings about psi usually find various negative feelings, ambivalences, and reservations as a result of this exercise. Reports to C.T.T. in various workshops over the years constituted an informal but rich data base that has contributed to his theoretical work about fear of psi.

This paper presents the results of a more systematic and neutral application of this belief experiment procedure in a group more typical of the participants in psi experiments, rather than in groups that are self-selected, as workshop participants are, for an interest in psi.

METHOD

Subject Population

This study was carried out in the spring of 1983 with respondents who lived in Davis, California. We initially aimed at interviewing 40 respondents, 20 for each of the two conditions, and we were able to interview 37 in the time available.

Respondents were solicited by an advertisement in the University of California, Davis campus newspaper (which circulated in town as well as on campus) and by an announcement in a large psychology class C.T.T. was teaching in the fall on the subject of altered states of consciousness. The latter announcement was part of a routine procedure in psychology courses in which volunteers are solicited for many psychology projects. Both the advertisement and announcement briefly asked for volunteers for a study of attitudes and parapsychology.

Twenty-six of the 37 respondents were undergraduate students, the rest townspeople. Of the undergraduates, about two thirds (18) had heard an earlier lecture by C.T.T. on parapsychology as part of the altered states class, but this introductory survey lecture did not deal with issues about fear of psi. The size of the student and nonstudent groups was too small to allow any formal comparison of their responses, but because there were no obvious differences, they will be treated as a single respondent group in the remainder of this paper.

Interview Procedure

The interviews were conducted by C.M.L. Each respondent was individually interviewed in a low-key style. After reading standard instructions from the Human Subjects Committee of the University about privacy, the voluntary nature of this study, and the privilege of stopping the experiment at any time, C.M.L. explained that we were interested in people's emotional reactions to a possible new psychological procedure. The belief experiment was carried out, and the respondent's statements were tape-recorded. The belief experiment proposition was repeated if the respondent asked. The only further questions asked were nondirective ones to encourage the respondent to elaborate if their answers were unclear or too brief. The procedure took 10–20 minutes per respondent.

Proposition I

ESP-Type Belief. Approximately half of the respondents (19) were given a belief proposition similar to that used in C.T.T.'s workshops, without specifically using the term ESP. The proposition for belief and subsequent reaction was as follows:

In this experiment, I'm going to ask you to believe that what I'm going to tell you is true, and then we're going to discuss your feelings about it, your emotional reactions. Is this OK with you?
(Wait for assent, which was always given.)

Recently, a new mind-altering procedure has been developed. This procedure is safe, simple, and painless, and we're looking for volunteers to participate. The effect of the procedure is that it enables you to read the thoughts and experience the feelings of anyone in a 100-yard radius.

There is no known way to reverse the procedure. The change would be permanent.

Please give me your emotional reactions to this. Don't worry about justifying or rationally explaining them at first; we can talk about that later. We want to survey your feelings about this.

The exact wording of this proposition is different from the form C.T.T. usually uses in workshops. There is no specific mention of "ESP" or "telepathy" or other words with a specifically psychic connotation. Implicitly, the process might be psychic, but it might also be mechanical, drug-induced, or whatever. We wanted to get the respondents' reactions to the primary idea of high-level mind reading of nearby people with minimal effects from other (even if related) attitudes toward psychic matters or drugs or mind-altering machines.

Proposition II

PK-Type Belief. To get more specifically at attitudes about the psychokinetic type of psi, 18 respondents were given the following proposition, without specifically mentioning PK:

In this experiment, I'm going to ask you to believe that what I'm going to tell you is true, and then we're going to discuss your feelings about it, your emotional reactions. Is this OK with you?
(Wait for assent, which was always given.)

Recently a new mind-altering procedure has been developed. This procedure is safe, simple, and painless, and we're looking for volunteers to participate. The effect of the procedure is that it enables you to move physical objects within a 100-yard radius with your mind alone, just as if you were there physically using your body.

There is no known way to reverse the procedure. The change would be permanent.

Please give me your emotional reactions to this. Don't worry about justifying or rationally explaining them at first; we can talk about that later. We want to survey your feelings about this.

Note that in wording this proposition we wanted to primarily focus on the reaction to the idea of psychokinetic-type abilities per se, rather than additional (but probably somewhat related) attitudes to psychic things or the fear of unlimited power. We definitely limited the power available in this belief simulation by stating that it was in the same range of force as ordinary bodily exertions ("just as if you were there physically using your body") and limiting it to nearby (100 yards) objects.

RESULTS

C.M.L. transcribed the taped interviews and created a set of initial categories of response for each statement. Both of us reviewed the categories to see how well they handled initial data samples, and we revised them until we had a satisfactory system.

Because of the small-to-moderate size of the present sample and the fact that respondents usually gave several responses to each proposition, the percentages of various responses should be considered only approximate for generalizing to people outside of our respondent sample. The important findings are the nature of the responses, not their exact distribution in any population.

Mind Reading—Negative Responses

We will look at the negative responses first because they were predominate.

By far the largest category of responses to believing that one could read the mind of everyone within 100 yards were those concerned with *control*. This is especially interesting because there was nothing in the instructions that stated or clearly implied that there would be control problems, unless the mention of irreversibility could be construed this way. Of the total 109 responses to this belief proposition, 29% of all response statements, from 13 of the 19 respondents (68%), showed concern with the question of how one could control such an ability. Some examples include:

The people who had this ability couldn't deal with it after a while, 'cause like I say, in a crowded room, you've got, you know, if there was 4,000 people that moved into your radius of picking up their thoughts, you'd have them going in your head.

Imagine the crowd. Like spending your life in Disneyland.

I could be swamped by people's dreams. I could never get any sleep.

Some respondents did not elaborate on the consequences of such overload, but others did, frequently using adjectives such as "overcome," "overwhelmed," "inundated," "incapacitating," and even "tortuous."

About half of the respondents indicated that they wanted some control over this ability, such as:

If I could turn it on and off whenever I wanted to use it, . . . choose what to know and what not to know, I would really like to do it.

Seven of the 13 respondents (54%) concerned with lack of control and the resultant overload felt that their own mental states would be badly damaged. Some examples include:

I think it'd drive me crazy; I'd have to go to the mountains to get away from everyone else.

I think I'd just go berserk. I'd have to sort of find a way to get out so that I didn't have to feel these things.

Sounds like an episode from the Twilight Zone!

Six of the 13 respondents (46%) were worried about the confusion that would arise between their own and others' thoughts:

If you had somebody else's thoughts, how would you ever distinguish whether they were theirs or yours?

It would be too distracting for me, who likes to . . . *make sure I know what I'm thinking.*

The next largest response category, after the control issue, was a concern with the irreversibility of the procedure, and this was expressed by 9 of the 19 respondents (47%). This was frequently connected with concerns over control. Some examples include:

It might be fun to do it for a couple of minutes. But permanently?
If it was permanent it'd be too much. If it was temporary, well,
maybe. But to be always aware of what other people are thinking!
No, I wouldn't do it.

The third largest response category, expressed by 8 of the 19 respondents (42%), was a concern about the responsibility inherent in such mind-reading capacity. A typical statement was: "I might find out something I'm not supposed to know."

Some respondents doubted their ability (or maturity) to handle this new information in a responsible and sensitive manner, without exploiting people or being dishonest about their new ability. Some examples include:

If I had it, and I know what someone else is thinking, and if I know they are lying to me, I would be in a bind whether to tell them, "Hey, you know, I know that you're lying to me and this is how you really feel!" or not. It could end up causing . . . emotional strain to the person who's altered.

You'd know so much more, it might be hard just to be able to participate in the society . . . without drastic changes of some sort. You'd have the insight for changes or things like that, but [suppose] no one believed you or thought you were crazy, that kind of thing.

A particularly sensitive response is worth quoting at length:

You know, about Ram Dass. . . . he told the story about how when he was in India, he would meditate. He would just be sitting there and would think all these wonderful thoughts about how he was going to go back to the United States and help people with all the things he'd learned, all the good things he could do. Other times, he would think about how he was going to seduce people . . . with all the new powers he had. And he would go to his guru in the morning, and his guru would say "Oh good, Ram Dass, good boy, you were thinking how you were going to help everybody in America!" and he would hug Ram Dass and Ram Dass would feel really good. Then he would realize how if his guru knew that, you know, he'd know all the other thoughts, but he still loved him just as much! I wouldn't want to do it until I could love the person just as much, no matter what they were thinking, and, you know, I don't think I'm there yet.

Five of the 19 respondents brought up a related issue, violation of privacy. This was the central issue for one woman:

It strikes against my ethics. I think people have a right to keep other people from coming inside of them . . . I don't think I have the right to read somebody else's mind without their permission.

Three respondents expressed concern with the idea that if this procedure could make them mind readers, it could make other

people mind readers. "I wouldn't want my thoughts read, come to think of it."

Four of the respondents felt that this kind of mind-reading ability would spoil life:

It would eliminate the need to have to get to know people. You'd know ahead of time what they were thinking . . . that would take away that excitement of learning to know a person.

I don't know whether I'd like that, because I learn a lot from just . . . going through the . . . emotional whatever of trying to figure people out.

It takes some of the mystery out of dealing with other people.

Two of the respondents (11%) worried about others' reactions to them once they had this new ability and how they would fit in, being "different":

It would freak people out if I started responding to what they were thinking or feeling without them letting me know . . . what they were thinking or feeling.

People would probably avoid you.

Finally, we have some miscellaneous negative reactions, only expressed by single respondents, but which open important topics:

I don't think I would be able to function. You'd be too concerned with what other people were thinking . . . I think what people think about you really affects you, as much as people try and say that it doesn't matter.

Partly it's fear of the power of science to change all the rules. Also anger that the power of science would do that.

Could be dangerous . . . someone could plant stuff in your head. You'd never know if somebody was putting their own stuff in so that he could . . . someone in a hundred-yard radius [would think something] and then you'd pick it up, without intending to . . . and be influenced by it.

Mind Reading—Positive Responses

Most respondents gave both positive and negative responses toward the possibility of this high-level mind reading, but one quarter of the respondents did not give a single, identifiable positive response.

The positive responses fell into two main categories. The largest, given by 10 of the 19 respondents, was some variation of saying it was "interesting." Often there was no elaboration of why it might be interesting.

The second category of responses was of giving particular positive uses for mind reading. Among the more interesting responses are:

It would help communication between human beings. In the long run, it might well be something that could salvage the planet from ultimate destruction.

It could do a lot of good . . . you might be able to be a mediator between people . . . to help people work out things.

You'd learn a lot. Like having these constant differences of opinion or ideas, things that you'd probably never think about. Somebody else does. If you could tap that source, it seems like you'd be a genius in no time.

Psychokinesis—Negative Responses

The most frequent reaction to believing in the possibility of gaining PK-like control over objects within a 100-yard range was a concern, expressed by 10 of the 18 respondents (56%), with what *others* would do with such an ability and what kind of character and ethics these others would have:

If it could be done to you, it could be done to other people too. So that would mean other people would have the ability too . . . that's kind of scary.

I worry that ideas like that will be abused by people. I guess something like that, you couldn't do a terrific amount of damage, but you could still do some damage. The more I think about the way that . . . how irresponsibly people are acting . . . [people could evade] responsibility for their actions. People will do things if their anonymity is guaranteed that they wouldn't otherwise do. . . . It's sort of like, to a person in a big corporation who's protected by this gigantic mass that, "Oh well, it's not me that's doing this, it's just the corporation." . . . And there's always the danger that people who've never explored that [responsibility and ethics] within themselves would fall prey to it.

Other respondents mentioned the possibility of the ability being used for theft or to damage others' personal property.

In contrast to all the expression of concern about what others would do with this ability, only 3 of the 18 respondents (17%) expressed any concern about their own personal maturity in handling such PK-like abilities.

Six (a third) of the respondents reacted with concern over whether they could adequately control this new ability:

You'd still have control over it, right? I mean, if you had no control over it and all of a sudden the room you are in, everything starts getting up and flying around, well, that'd be pretty frightening."

Five of the 18 respondents (28%) worried about the irreversibility of the procedure, a worry linked with either concerns over control or fears about what such an ability might do to people:

It would be kind of hard because of [it's being] permanent. I think I'd have trouble with that. It's not something you can just turn off; you could get carried away with it.

Maybe if they could make it so that it would be reversible it wouldn't be so dangerous. If it didn't work out, if everybody went crazy, you could change it back again.

Both the mind reading and PK belief experiment instructions included the statement, "This procedure is safe, simple, and painless." None of the respondents in the mind-reading condition expressed any concern about the safety of the procedure, but 5 of the 18 respondents (28%) in the PK condition weren't sure about that specification of the belief proposition:

I wouldn't want to be one of the first guinea pigs. When people say "safe" it usually means they don't know yet if it's safe.

I would have to be convinced beyond *my* reasonable doubts, at any rate, that it would not do my body or my mind any permanent or irreversible damage.

I worry about possible side effects that you don't know about.

Five of the 18 respondents (28%) felt there was something unnatural about having PK-like abilities:

It's just not . . . something that humans do, humans just don't move things with their minds . . . it's not what most people consider normal . . . it's like it's something from another world.

It'd be weird.

Among the less frequent negative reactions, two felt that such an ability would make them fat and lazy, and another two didn't like the idea that something would be "done" to them to create this ability. A unique reaction, related to the question of control, was expressed by one woman:

Everything you thought would happen, and a lot of times you're thinking things you don't want everybody to know . . . it seems like everybody would know what everybody else wanted.

Psychokinesis—Positive Responses

Twelve of the 18 respondents (67%) gave a positive response to the idea of having strong PK-like abilities. Seven used adjectives such as "wonderful," "fantastic," "exciting," and "great." The remainder used less enthusiastic adjectives such as "interesting" or "intriguing." Forty-four percent of the 18 respondents also added guarded or qualified positive statements, such as "I don't see any harm in it," or "I could probably see some good in it."

Despite the obvious usefulness of such an ability, surprisingly

few respondents were specific about it. Only five gave a specific use, such as: "It would certainly aid people who had an active mind and an inactive body."

DISCUSSION

Respondents' reactions to temporarily believing that they could have strong mind-reading or PK-like abilities are strongly weighted to the negative side, even though we asked about them in an emotionally neutral way. Irregardless of any favorable reactions to the idea of having either ability, very few of the respondents showed reactions in which the positive outweighed the negative.

A major issue for both abilities was that of control. Could the respondent adequately control such an ability? The question was especially important in light of the widespread concern over the permanency and irreversibility of the abilities conferred in these belief experiments. Lack of control was more fearful for a permanent ability than a temporary one.

Far more respondents were concerned with what others would do with PK-like abilities than with mind-reading abilities. This difference is reinforced by the curious difference that 5 of the 18 respondents (28%) explicitly questioned the safety of the procedure for inducing PK-like abilities, in spite of its being described as safe, whereas no respondent did this for the procedure for inducing mind-reading abilities. Perhaps this represents deeper lying fear of PK-like abilities?

Apparently contradicting this, however, is the fact that although many (42%) of the respondents expressed concern about their personal ability to responsibly use mind-reading abilities, few (17%) had such a concern about their personal use of PK-like abilities. Might the widespread concern about others' use of PK-like abilities actually represent projection of fears about it, to some degree?

Another curious observation was the scarcity of respondents for whom control of either ability was an issue who expressed confidence that they could eventually learn to control it.

The belief experiment procedure used here is not a powerful, sophisticated "depth" psychological procedure. We should not expect it to probe very far below conscious processes in its laboratory setting, although it might go somewhat deeper in some of C.T.T.'s workshops where strong rapport has already been established. Nevertheless, numerous fears of psi-like abilities were discovered in the kind of population typically utilized by parapsychologists in their experiments. Combining the present results with the deeper fears of psi uncovered in clinical work by

psychoanalytically oriented investigators (for just a few examples, see Eisenbud, 1970, and Servadio, 1958) emphasizes how important they may be in affecting both the manifestation, investigation, discussion, and scientific acceptability of psi. It is very important for us to research further the kinds of fears people have of psi, how much these fears are based on real or potentially real attributes of psi, which sorts of fears are unrealistic even if related to individual or group psychodynamics, and methods of dealing with these fears.

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