

A CASE OF PREDICTIVE PSI, WITH COMMENTS ON ANALYTICAL, ASSOCIATIVE AND THEORETICAL OVERLAY

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ABSTRACT

A case study is reported in which the author, a psychologist, began spontaneously saying an unusual word, *coup d'état* aloud repeatedly, and then received a letter from a Mrs. Coudetat the following day. Several psychological processes which may distort psi impressions or bury them under noise are then discussed with respect to this and other cases, namely *analytical* and *associative overlay*, which may add confusing analytical and associative material and *theoretical overlay*, which can bias interpretation of psychological factors.

On February 4, 1983, I was working at my office at home on a paper I was preparing to submit for presentation at a forthcoming Parapsychological Association convention. In the middle of the morning I took a break to prepare some coffee. While doing so, I found myself saying the word 'coup d'état' aloud to myself.

I repeated the word aloud six to ten times, finding the rhythm of the sound appealing. I did not know why I was thinking the word, or why I was saying it aloud. I have come across 'coup d'état' in reading about military dictatorships in newspapers and news magazines, but it is not a topic I have given more than passing thought to over the years, and I had probably never said the word aloud before.

It is rare for me to start saying a word aloud, much less over and over, when I am alone. So I was mildly puzzled as to why this word had popped into my head and, as it were, on to my tongue. I do not follow international news closely and could think of nothing in my immediate past that had anything to do with coup d'états. In spite of being puzzled, I enjoyed saying the word aloud over and over, and started thinking about military dictatorships. I thought of cheering crowds when a coup d'état brought a military group to power and deposed a failing civilian government, and the crowd's later disillusionment. I thought that the sound of the word had a stimulating, rhythmic ring of power to it, appropriate for a military dictatorship. I thought that a military government might come to power because a civilian government was too disorganized to run things, that the military might be the most organized group in the country and so naturally take over.

After a minute I stopped saying the word, but occasionally thought about it during the day, discursive thoughts that were quickly forgotten.

The next morning, when I arrived at my office at the University, one of the first envelopes in my mailbox was from a Mrs. Coudetat of San Diego.

I was immediately reminded of my experience the day before, and thought: 'Yesterday was probably the first time in my life that I ever said 'coup d'état' aloud, it's not a word or a concept of importance in my life, and this is the first letter I've ever gotten from someone named Coudetat.'

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Mrs. Coudetat's letter was as follows:

I am writing regarding my son, Robert Coudetat,¹ who was in your Altered States of Consciousness class last semester. Please know that I am not writing to cast blame on you in any way, but I thought you would be interested. Robert never withdrew from your class formally, but he stopped attending about halfway through. Somewhere near the beginning of class you did some simple experiments regarding the nature of reality,² which began for my son an intense process of questioning. I knew he came and spoke to you once, but after that I don't think he wanted to bother you and he didn't really feel like approaching your assistant. He began to have very severe anxiety attacks with a variety of many symptoms—he was dizzy, he could not sleep well and his whole digestive system seemed confused. It was hard for us to help him, long distance—and he was referred by the X Medical Facility to Dr. Y in Davis, whom he saw until Christmas. He struggled through, a fraction of his usual self.

After Christmas he returned to Davis and shortly after registering he returned home feeling terrible. He was diagnosed as having mononucleosis—and now he has withdrawn from Davis. He is going to a psychiatrist here in San Diego, Dr. Z, who is helping him greatly. Dr. Z says it is a 'classic identity crisis and that Robert is very confused.'

My suggestion for you would be that in teaching your class you make sure that students have readily available channels for help, discussion groups, short conferences, or whatever might be needed. My son experienced extreme anxiety and *fear*. I myself am a student of metaphysics and parapsychology, so I appreciate very much the work in which you are engaged. But I now realize that some kinds of thoughts can be very threatening to young minds and need to be approached carefully.'

I immediately wrote Mrs. Coudetat, sympathizing with Robert's problems, describing sources of help available at the University, and suggesting a possible further source of therapeutic assistance in her community. I have not heard any further from her, although I wrote a later letter of inquiry. I presume Robert recovered soon, as such cases are common among college students and seldom have prolonged consequences.

I am not sure I remember Robert's talk with me. My altered states class typically has 150 to 250 students in it, many students from the class (as well as

¹ I have made some subtle, but psychologically irrelevant, changes in certain facts to protect the privacy of the people involved here.

² My Psychology 137, Altered States of Consciousness, is a large lecture course and I have little time to suggest psychological exercises to the students. There are two demonstrations I usually present early in the course to demonstrate the *constructed* nature of perception, however, and either or both of these may be what Mrs. Coudetat is referring to. In the first, a homework exercise, you look in a mirror and mark the top and bottom of your head's reflection on the mirror, then step to the side and see that the size of your head as you *marked* it seems to be only half the size of the head you *perceived* in the mirror. In the second, a class demonstration, we listen to a tape of a single word, 'cogitate', repeated over and over again, with instructions to listen for interpolated words and to write them down. Actually there are no interpolated words, but normal people actually hear many because of auditory and cognitive fatigue. I do teach that much of what we take for granted as simply real is a semi-arbitrary convention, so things we take for granted should be systematically examined (Tart, 1983a).

other students from all over the university) talk with me about all sorts of issues, and so they tend to run together in my memory after a while. When students ask me clear questions I usually answer them directly if I know the answers or suggest sources of information they can turn to. Occasionally students are vague and it is unclear to me what they want. If it seems only an intellectual vagueness from not having thought out what is on their mind, I usually suggest that they think about it some more and come to see me later when it is clearer. If I feel that a student may have strong emotional disturbances (a rare occasion, fortunately), I usually suggest that he or she drop by the Student Health Center for counseling.

PREDICTIVE PSI

Although one can never be certain about just what is and isn't 'coincidence' in spontaneous cases, given the overwhelming evidence for the existence of psi under controlled laboratory conditions, I personally regard this coup d'état case as a clear instance of predictive psi. The unusualness of my speaking repeatedly aloud to myself with no discernible motivation to do so at the time, the rarity of the word coup d'état in my life, and the immediate confirmation of its importance the following morning rule out coincidence as a good explanation in my mind. I call it 'predictive psi', rather than precognition, as the mechanism might just as well have been present-time telepathy as precognition, as I am sure Mrs. Coudetat was thinking about me and her letter to me, which was on the way to me at the time the phrase coup d'état popped into my mind. Whether this specific instance was genuine psi functioning or actually a quite unusual coincidence, the coup d'état incident is a useful basis for some theoretical considerations.

Why did the event happen? My speculation is that it was important for Mrs. Coudetat to communicate with me, out of concern for her son, plus concern for students who might be in a similar predicament in the future, and a mutual interest in parapsychology. Further, she probably accepted, to some degree, her son's feeling that I had not wanted to listen to him, so she would have a strong emotional investment in being sure I listened by writing me. Could Mrs. Coudetat's need to communicate have provided the motivational 'power' that resulted in my unusual behavior of not only getting the critical word but saying it aloud repeatedly, thus sensitizing me to pay close attention to her pending letter? This line of reasoning seems adequate on a common sense psychological level, and is probably mostly true. I shall add some observations and speculations about other relevant factors that may be useful in understanding the multiple psychological factors involved in the manifestation of psi. Let us first look at analytical overlay.

ANALYTIC AND ASSOCIATIVE OVERLAY

The concept of *analytical overlay* has been introduced for understanding results of remote viewing studies (see e.g., Puthoff & Targ, 1976; Targ & Puthoff, 1974; Targ & Harary, 1984; Targ & Puthoff, 1977; Tart, Puthoff & Targ, 1979). Following initial impressions of the hidden target, impressions which may be correct and specific, there is often a tendency for the viewer/percipient to

automatically and often unknowingly associate to, intellectually analyze and elaborate on the psi-mediated impressions.

If the target is a small jewelry store with a large, plate glass window that the outbound experimenter is standing in front of, for example, a viewer might start his report of impressions by reporting impressions of light reflecting off something rectangular and shiny, that the impressions are bright and hard, and an impression of many things behind this rectangular thing, like a store window. So far excellent. Our ordinary minds are seldom content with 'raw' experience, however, automated parts of our mental processing, what I have called the *world simulation process* in other contexts explaining the nature of dreaming (Tart, 1987) and the unrealistic quality of ordinary consciousness (Tart, 1986), function in an automatized, semi-conscious fashion to make raw experience meaningful in terms of a person's ordinary mind set that automatized background interpretive network which Shor (1959) called the generalized reality orientation and I have called the consensus reality orientation. Automatically wondering what these impressions are, for example, the viewer might find that the images remind him of a recent trip to Macy's department store. The bright, hard, shiny rectangle is automatically analyzed as the entrance to Macy's. Now continuing associations, memories and relevant images of Macy's, *associative overlay*, might overlay and distort further psi reception of the actual target. The viewer might go on and describe a large building with long corridors, vast crowds and busyness, completely losing the feel of the small, quiet jewelry store. As analytic and associative overlay increases, the salience of the original, correct imagery can easily be lost, making it impossible for judges to correctly associate this remote viewing report with the target it was intended for. Genuine psi functioning can easily get lost in these kinds of noise, especially if the viewer/percipient is not practiced in detailed observation of his or her own mental processes so as to be able to discriminate different qualities of mental events.

I believe the associations of military dictatorships, cheering crowds, and thoughts about efficient and disciplined organizations taking over when government fails represent analytical and associative overlay following my initial psi impression of the word *coup d'état*. In this case the initial psi impression was so unique that its correspondence to a later event was not smothered by the overlay, but suppose the student's name had been Coffee or Stove? An initial psi impression of *Coffee or Stove* could have easily been buried by 'rational' associations to the coffee I was brewing on the stove.

Analytic and associative overlay are conceptualized here as 'noise', as irrelevant mental processes that obscure the 'signal' of the psi message. They are not 'pure noise', noise in the sense of information that has no causal relationship to the psi signal, however. We could artificially generate pure noise in psychic functioning by using a random generation process to add images to initial images that might have been psi-mediated. If someone had appeared immediately after I had said *coup d'état* aloud and spoken several words, each derived from randomly entering a dictionary, to me, that would be pure noise, unrelated to my initiating mental processes.

Analytical and associative overlay begin as analysis of relevant associations to the psi-mediated impressions, however, and so have some causal and associative relationship to the psi signal. As the analytical and associative overlay processes

continue, however, subsequent associations can become further and further removed from the initial psi-mediated impression, providing more and more information that is less and less relevant. Thus we can get a large body of impressions that may have started with a genuine psi-mediated impression, but in which the psi-relevant impression may easily become lost.

In the present case I was saved from further analytic and associative overlay obscuring the original psi relevant impression ('*coup d'état*') by the prosaic fact that my coffee was ready. I took it back to my word processor and began writing again, easily pushing the *coup d'état* incident aside to focus on writing. It is of interest to wonder how many psi impressions in everyday life are lost because of analytical and associative overlay, and how many are lost in laboratory procedures like the Ganzfeld where the percipient is in an environment that facilitates extensive association? One of the laboratory procedures developed to minimize this dilution of information in remote viewing experiments is asking viewers/percipients for a *single* impression in response to a request for target information. Following a few seconds for the viewer to clear his or her mind, the request for target information is repeated.

This is not to say that associations will always dilute psi-mediated target impressions. They can sometimes be helpful in highlighting or amplifying psi impressions, as has been shown in ganzfeld research (see, e.g., Sondow, 1979) and in laboratory research on inducing telepathic dreams (see, e.g. Krippner, Honorton & Ullman, 1972; Ullman, Krippner & Feldstein, 1966). I believe the important thing is to distinguish between classical free association where one goes on and on from one thing to the next, perhaps ending up far away from the original starting point, and more focused association, such as pioneered by Carl Jung, where after one or only a few associations to a target one is brought back to the initial starting point again. The latter style of associations enriches the focus point without getting too far afield.

THEORETICAL OVERLAY

I wrote up a rough draft of this case, essentially as given above, within three days of the events, as I thought it was of interest in and of itself, as well as a good illustration of the problems of analytic and associative overlay. I suspected that the case might be richer than I perceived, so I immediately (Feb. 7) mailed a copy to psychoanalyst and parapsychologist Jule Eisenbud, asking for his comments. While I do not go along completely with psychoanalytic explanations, I always find Eisenbud's ideas about psi provocative and stimulating (see, for example, Eisenbud, 1970; 1982).

Eisenbud suggested that I consider the possibility of *theoretical overlay*, an *interpretive* bias he has often seen in parapsychologists, and apply it to the *coup d'état* case. The particular bias he emphasized was that parapsychologists, when psychological factors are clearly seen in psi cases, tend to interpret them as idealistically inspired by altruistic concern for others. In Eisenbud's clinical experience, negative motivations are far more common.

Psychological investigation with a skilled therapist, immediately following the events, is the appropriate way to investigate motivations and theoretical overlays of parapsychologists like myself in these kinds of cases. This is not generally possible, of course, for practical reasons. I have spent many years investigating

my own mental and emotional processes, however (see Tart, 1986 as an example), so while some of my memories and feelings have undoubtedly been dimmed by the passage of time, I will make some observations and speculations along the lines suggested by Eisenbud to illustrate a useful direction for the parapsychological and psychodynamic investigation of psi events. I hope this will inspire other investigators to undertake relevant self-examinations.

Although I had not included it in the original writeup, above, as it wasn't clear to me at the time, I had thought of an additional motivational factor that might have made this psi manifestation more likely. In addition to Mrs. Coudetat's motivation, there might have been an unconscious, unresolved concern on my part about Robert, a consciously forgotten but still active feeling of frustration that a student had wanted some sort of help but I hadn't been able to see what he wanted and so help him. I have at least two negative feelings to such incidents, feelings that I prefer to avoid in the first place if possible, or to suppress as soon as possible if I do have them. One is a feeling of frustration that I can't do anything useful when asked for help. This also undermines my own feelings of being a competent person. The second is some anger and feeling of being put upon; am I supposed to be able to solve everybody's problems about everything, especially when they won't even be clear about what the problem is? Such a lingering unconscious residue might have sensitized me to psychically perceiving information coming about Robert (i.e., his mother's letter).

I believe this additional motivating factor has a high probability of being true, given my general psychological knowledge of myself, even though I could not specifically recall Robert's visit to my office. Basically, I am sometimes concerned about other people's welfare, and as a conscious value this has high priority for me. However I also know that I have a positive bias in interpreting events, so I may indeed be manifesting an altruistic theoretical overlay in analyzing this case. Thus some reflections on possible psychological factors in this case that are negative are warranted.

I am certainly selfish and concerned primarily about my own welfare much of the time, like most of us. My values are such that when I see such selfish factors operating in a way that would harm others or violate my values of friendliness and altruism, I usually try to change my behavior to a more positive form, but I don't always succeed. While I have always been interested in understanding my own motivations and the workings of my mind (Tart, 1986), there are undoubtedly many instances where I am not fully aware of my motivations.

Applying this to the coup d'état incident, I hypothesize that I may have had a continuing unconscious concern about Robert that was motivated as much or more by guilt or anger as by altruistic concern. Guilt in that I have a harsh superego that expects me to succeed in *everything* I value, yet I hadn't been able to help Robert, and so, from my superego's point of view, deserved to feel guilty. Anger in that he had come and taken up my time, yet by not making himself clear, he had 'wasted' it.

I might also speculate that my psychic perception of the imminent and somewhat critical letter from Mrs. Coudetat constituted a psychological coup d'état of my own in defending me against possible guilt. In spite of the generally friendly tone of Mrs. Coudetat's letter, she does suggest that I should have better

methods for protecting students against the adverse impact of unconventional, even if valid, ideas. Realistically I do have methods, but by my strict own superego's standards they can never be good enough, so Mrs. Coudetat's letter had the potential to make me feel guilty over my inadequate teaching style. But, by having psychically anticipated the arrival of the letter, my mind became focused on the interesting psychic aspects of the case, using up psychological energy that might otherwise have activated guilt.

Note, too, that Eisenbud's psychoanalytic investigations (see, e.g. Eisenbud, 1970; 1982) strongly suggest that psychic events are typically multiply determined, rather than having a single cause. Thus all the above motivational considerations may be correct to various degrees. This consideration also made me think of another possible motivation for the event.

A few days before the Coudetat letter arrived I had attempted to do some psychic healing, using shamanistic methods like those described by Harner (1980), on a friend of mine who was scheduled for some life threatening surgery. I have never told him about this activity of mine, as such activity is a private part of my life. It would also have seemed egotistical to mention it,³ and I did not know whether it would have any effect anyway. Thus I wanted to help a friend, but had retrospective doubts⁴ about what I had done.

The coup d'état incident excited me. Although I have been firmly convinced about the reality of psychic abilities in general for many years on an intellectual and scientific level, I still have occasional emotional doubts, especially about my own possible ability to actually use a psychic ability in a particular instance. Thus the coup d'état incident strengthened my convictions. Since my friend is strongly interested in psychic abilities and hoped his own might help him through his surgery, I telephoned him and told him about the coup d'état incident a couple of days before his surgery was scheduled. I deliberately wanted to strengthen his faith in his own psychic abilities such that they might help him pull through the operation. Now I see that some part of me might have helped cause the coup d'état incident so that my own faith in psychic abilities might be strengthened and thus retrospectively potentiate my attempts at healing and at strengthening my friend's faith.⁵

Psi functioning is a complex psychological procedure. When we ask a naive percipient to use psi in the laboratory, this is not a simple request. I have argued elsewhere (Tart, 1977a; 1977b; 1978; 1983b; 1984) that we, as parapsychologists, must examine and understand our own psychological functioning, as well as that of percipients. The nature of psi, creating connecting links that are not shielded by conventional physical barriers, implies that *we are part of our experiments*. The way to *maximize* problems with our unconscious and unacknowledged biases is to ignore them.

³ I am ambivalent about mentioning it in this report and do so only for psychological completeness.

⁴ My attitude at the time of doing this shamanic healing procedure was to suspend disbelief for the time and do what I could. While I can suspend doubt fairly effectively sometimes in this way, intellectual doubt usually creeps in later, hopefully when it is too late for such doubt to block the effect I am trying for.

⁵ He came through the operation, which saved his life, just fine.

I hope this brief case study will be useful to others in understanding and eventually facilitating psi functioning.

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