

## THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT PSI: TWO PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

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**ABSTRACT:** Gross deviations from normal scientific standards of debate in the controversy over psi suggest that they contain a strong unconscious emotional component. Two theories are offered: the social masking theory of psi inhibition and the primal conflict repression theory. Possibilities for research on this problem are suggested.

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Most of the controversy about the existence of psi has focused on issues related to our "ordinary" level of scientific inquiry. At this level, the controversy centers around the clarification and logic of experimental design, theory, and inference; the discussion is cool, intellectual activity.

There is a quite different way of looking at the controversy about psi, though—a psychological approach. Scientists are not just logical, unemotional problem-solvers; they are also human beings. We know that people's verbal descriptions of the situations they are involved in and of what they are doing are often poor descriptors of what external observation suggests is actually occurring. Indeed, people's verbal descriptions are often unrelated to, or even contradicted by, their actions. It is this psychological perspective that I want to discuss with you. My focus is on the behavior of the people involved in the controversy about psi and the possible reasons for their behavior.

### IRRATIONALITY ABOUT PSI

Some kinds of behavior frequently engaged in by opponents of psi suggest that there are strong emotional components behind the issue, rather than just the proper, scientific evaluation of evidence. Having

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This article was adapted from a paper ("Some Psychological Reflections on the Controversy about Psi") which was part of a symposium held at the August 1981 meetings of the American Psychological Association in Los Angeles. The symposium, "The Case for Psi," was organized by K. Ramakrishna Rao. This article is not a comprehensive review of all aspects of resistance to psi, but I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to many of my colleagues who have contributed to my understanding of the psychology of this resistance, researchers such as Kenneth Batchelder, Jan Ehrenwald, Jule Eisenbud, Lawrence LeShan, and Berthold Schwarz, to mention just a few.

occasionally been on the receiving end of what I consider improper attacks, I shall compensate for possible bias on my part by drawing from a study made by neutral parties, two sociologists who themselves took no position on the existence of psi. Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch (1979), in a study of the way scientific parapsychology has been treated by its critics, noted that the mainstream scientific journals, the constitutive forum of established science, publish many articles by opponents of psi in which the ordinary standards of scientific debate and procedures are seriously violated.

These violations center around six types of abuse. (1) There is the publication of straightforward statements of prejudice, such as D. O. Hebb's admission that his own rejection of Rhine's views was in a literal sense prejudice (Hebb, 1951). (2) There is the publication of pseudophilosophical arguments to the effect that because psi apparently conflicts with our already sound scientific knowledge, we are entitled to reject it a priori without bothering to seriously examine the evidence. I find this argument a marvelous example of ethnocentrism and conceit—because I already know everything, don't bother me with uncomfortable facts—but hardly the sort of thing we associate with empirical science.

(3) Furthermore, opponents typically discredit psi by associating scientific research on psi with clearly unscientific beliefs, such as popular astrology, the Abominable Snowman, various cults, and the like. What if I told all of you psychologists that we should give up our present jobs and look for honest work because the psychology we practice is illegitimate, being derived from phrenology? I doubt that too many of us would leave the room, hanging our heads in shame!

(4) Psi is criticized as being trivial, as when Boring (1955) called it "an empty correlation," and (5) it is simultaneously dismissed on the grounds that if it is real, its implications for psychology and physics are so revolutionary that we can't consider the possibility of its being true!

Finally, (6) accusations of fraud against the whole field of scientific parapsychology are regularly made, even without any evidence for actual fraud in specific experiments. The rather lame rationalization supposedly justifying this is Hume's contention that it is preferable to believe that people deceive themselves and others rather than to believe that anything could happen that seems to contradict already established beliefs. Certainly there have been some documented cases of researcher fraud in parapsychology: parapsychologists are human, and we should probably expect about the same proportion of fraud here as in many other areas of human endeavor. But wholesale fraud? If I were to contend that everyone who has collected evidence for subliminal perception is probably a charlatan because the phenome-

non contradicts my knowledge of perception, most of my colleagues would regard this as insulting and would certainly not take it seriously. What is there about psi that allows such unsubstantiated accusations to appear in major scientific journals?

My brief outline of these kinds of gross deviations from normal scientific standards of debate is to make my first major point: there is a strong emotional component to the psi controversy. This emotional component is not being explicitly dealt with, and by remaining implicit, it obstructs and confuses scientific inquiry about psi. What I shall now propose are two theories of why there is widespread, usually unconscious, fear of psi, on both cultural and individual levels. This fear is present in *both* proponents and opponents of psi, to various degrees, and it clearly inhibits the scientific study of the phenomena. By making this emotional conflict explicit, we can study it and compensate for it.

#### THE SOCIAL MASKING THEORY OF PSI INHIBITION

Let us first deal with manifestations of fear of psi on the social level. Occasionally I have given workshops dealing with psi. These are workshops attended not by parapsychologists but mainly by psychologists and other mental health professionals who feel at least mildly positive about the subject and want to learn more about it. I have pointed out to them that although I think psi may be real, in practice we don't know how to make it work on demand; and even when it does manifest, it tends to work at a rather low level of effectiveness. It is of low practical significance as it usually happens. I have then asked the workshop participants to carry out a "belief experiment": they are to believe for the next 10 minutes that research breakthroughs will soon make psi work extremely well. They, or perhaps others, will be able to read people's thoughts and feelings by some kind of telepathy; they or others will be able to influence telepathically how other people think and feel; they or others will be able to move and otherwise affect physical objects just by thinking about it (psychokinesis). I then ask them to observe and report on their gut-level feelings, their emotional reactions to believing this. The results are most revealing.

A common class of reactions is fear of what other people might do to you if *they* had psi abilities and *you* didn't. How could you keep your secrets? How could you present the image you want to present to others if they knew what you were like underneath your social facade? How could you sell your used car if you couldn't conceal or play down its troubles? Aside from your loss of ability to control and manipulate

others through your social skills, wouldn't you be loathed and rejected by everybody once they telepathically scanned your deeper thoughts and feelings? Could they control you by affecting your thoughts and feelings—put you in a sort of psychic slavery?

Interacting with these fears was another class of reactions related to how you would feel about and react toward others if *you* had strong psi abilities and they didn't. Would you *really* want to know how others feel about you? Might their apparent respect and friendliness hide loathing, hatred, or a trivial dismissal of you as an insignificant nonentity? Do they really love you, or are they playing you for a sucker? Could you keep from going to pieces if you knew this?

Further, how would you use this new knowledge and power? If you had psychic powers strongly and others didn't, how would you feel? Like Superman? God? Would it appeal to a naked lust for power and gratification? Would you have grandiose ideas that now you could set the world right with your superpowers? Is there a part of you that fears this acquisition of power, that knows you'll misuse it and destroy yourself, your loved ones, and others in the process?

To summarize this social, interpersonal level of reaction, I find that when people are asked to believe that psi abilities might work very well, they experience strong emotional reactions concerning the fact that the social contract implicitly calls for the masking of ourselves and for much lack of perception (sensory as well as extrasensory). Strong psi could thus drastically upset the social balance. Note too that these strong negative reactions to, and fears of, psi have come from positively oriented, pro-psi believers. When they seriously consider psi actually working well, instead of being an infrequent, weak, spontaneous event, a level of fear and realization of negative potentials comes.

I have seen behavior among scientific parapsychologists that suggests these implicit fears exist to varying degrees among them also. For example, I once asked some of my colleagues in parapsychology to do a belief experiment by accepting a pill from me that would make them completely receptive telepathically, knowing every thought and feeling of whoever was within a hundred yards. The effect was defined as permanent and as having no antidote. No one was willing to take the hypothetical pill!

Now these are observations of people who are normally pro-psi, who consciously are aware of positive aspects of psi. How intense might these unconscious fears be in outspoken opponents of psi, whose conscious behavior already shows, as we discussed earlier, gross violations of scientific standards in their professional lives?

We see then that ordinary social intercourse involves a great deal of masking our true thoughts, feelings, and motivations. Strong psi functioning, unless it could be systematically blocked, would have great potential for drastically disrupting this social balance. We will call this the social-masking theory of psi inhibition. This need for social masking does not, of course, operate in isolation, but in interaction with the primal conflict repression theory presented below and other, more specific psychodynamic theories discussed by others.

#### PRIMAL CONFLICT REPRESSION THEORY OF PSI INHIBITION

Now let me outline a deeper level of fear of psi—one that drives and interacts with the social-masking level of fears. From theoretical considerations and informal observations, I believe there is considerable psi contact between mothers and children, primarily on an emotional level. A mother can sometimes know more about her children's internal state than is gotten from sensory observation, and the child can sense its mother's internal state. I will outline the situation in rather extreme terms to make the presentation as clear as possible.

Consider the situation of most mothers in our culture. Mothers know they are considered almost totally responsible for how their children will turn out, so they must be sensitive, considerate, totally loving, responsive, capable, and so forth. Quite aside from any natural liking they have for their children, they are under considerable cultural pressure to be "supermothers." Everything must be done for the children's good. From the children's point of view, their mothers are goddesses, incredibly knowledgeable if not omniscient, extremely competent, if not omnipotent. A child's survival and happiness depend on learning to please this goddess by accepting her (and through her, the culture's) version of what reality is and what perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are appropriate. A vital part of what must be accepted is mother's own self-image: that she is a loving, understanding, self-sacrificing supermother, always acting in the child's best interests. The mother wants to feel that way, and she wants her child to believe in and reflect that image to reinforce her own belief. She acts in ways to create and reinforce that image.

Now what happens on the days when mother is in a foul mood? The washing machine has broken, she didn't sleep well with that annoying brat crying all night, she had a fight with her husband, the brat is still screaming continuously, has had dirty diapers all day, and

has just crawled over and broken her favorite vase! It is quite likely that a real mother is not too concerned with her infant's ultimate psychological welfare or full of unconditional positive regard at this moment: she is furious, and would like to beat the hell out of the little brat who is driving her up the wall! Indeed, she would enjoy beating the child! *But*, she's supposed to be supermother, and the child is supposed to believe she's supermother, so she will probably suppress most of these outward manifestations of her rage and in an apparently calm manner reprimand the child and only spank it gently, "for its own good"! If she is really "good" at it, she will even suppress her feelings of anger and will consciously believe she doesn't feel that way. The supermother's image is protected *overtly*, for both mother and child.

Suppose, however, that psi is operating between mother and child. The child senses that its mother is absolutely furious and would enjoy beating it and causing it pain. But the overt message of the mother's behavior is that she is not really angry and is acting only in the child's best interests. To say we have a conflict situation is to put it mildly. If you can remember how incredibly intense your emotions were in childhood before you developed adult damping mechanisms, you can understand that the level of conflict could be hellish.

How can this conflict be handled? The child can't say, "I know you really hate me, you want to kill me!" That brings punishment and can create intense conflict in the mother by threatening to lift her repression of her feelings. To be properly socialized, to survive, to avoid further pain, the child *must* believe the approved social message that mother acts only in its best interests. The answer is to repress psi-functioning totally, to learn never to hear the information channel that brings in messages that create such terrible conflict. An ordinary state of consciousness is constructed (Tart, 1975) in which psi has no place.

As I have said, I am exaggerating the picture, but in doing so I am postulating that in most people in our culture there is some fundamental repression of psi that develops out of repeated conflict experiences like the example above. It follows that in many adults there are unconscious connections between the idea of psi and these terrible childhood conflicts about loving and believing one's all-good mother versus seeing negative sides of one's mother that are totally unacceptable. These dynamics further interact with the potentially frightening social aspects of psi discussed above. Reading a report that someone scored significantly above chance at the .001 level on an ESP task is then just a bit of cool data on a conscious, rational level, but it is much more on an unconscious level. Rationality can then become

distorted by powerful unconscious associations, and it is psychologically "safer" to deny the reality of psi than it is to take the chance of opening up these primal conflicts. Because of the intensity and early development (starting at infancy) of these conflicts, I call this theory the primal-conflict repression theory regarding the inhibition of psi functioning.

This has been only a brief outline of these two theories, and there is obviously need for considerable articulation. There are many fascinating research studies possible here. For example, one of the predictions that could be drawn from this theory is that the more self-knowledgeable and tolerant of oneself a person is and the more insightful and accepting of socially unacceptable sides of himself he is, the less threatened he will be about learning more of himself and others, good and bad, and so the more likely that he will have more frequent spontaneous psi experiences or be able to use psi deliberately. As another example, studies that allow psi to operate in a manner that doesn't let the percipients know they are using psi—ignoring questions about effects of deception (see Tart, 1977)—may produce higher manifestations of psi in resistant percipients than do studies in which they know they are using psi. Further, people who have psychologically worked through early childhood conflicts with their mothers ought to be able to tolerate psi manifestations well, as there is no longer a threat of a repression being lifted.

I would also suggest that you may find it personally interesting to try the belief exercise I have described above, yourself. Believe for 10 minutes that psi really exists and that we're going to make it work *well*. How do *you* really feel about it? Try to see if your feelings affect your scientific functioning. Then try deliberately disbelieving for 10 minutes and see how that affects you. After that, you may come back to "reality"!

## APPENDIX

### OBJECTIVITY OF THE WRITER

I want to consider an important issue, the question of my objectivity in raising the preceding issues. I have been attacked in ways I think unfair and unscientific for my limited experimental work on psi. Can I really work adequately in my chosen role as psychologist, objectively observing and theorizing about the psi controversy, or am I just producing rationalizations that are thinly disguised *ad hominem*

attacks on opponents of parapsychology? Is my behavior similar to psychoanalysts who psychoanalytically criticize the inferred unconscious motivations of opponents of psychoanalysis, thus producing an impervious, but hardly scientific, belief system?

My best response is that I have no final answer to the question of my ultimate objectivity. Naturally I think I am rather good at being mostly objective, but I have also done a great deal of personal psychological work on understanding my own mind, so I am also sure I'm somewhat biased about this subject. I know personally, for instance, that I have some fears of psi, and that I don't like some of the opponents of psi and think that they are more neurotically warped than I am. I have also learned that by recognizing hidden biases and needs I can deal with them more effectively than if I pretend I don't have them. I believe that I have dealt well enough with my own biases that the theory I am presenting today about emotional factors behind psi controversy is a reasonable, adequate, and useful model of the real world, and that it generates testable hypotheses. And that is the final answer, of course. What I have discussed in this paper may be a mixture of rationalizations and important insights, but it is testable, and therein lies its potential contribution.

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