WHO'S AFRAID OF PSYCHIC POWERS? ME?
Part 1

In the first issue of The Open Mind we raised the question of why psychic powers should be any more dangerous or subject to abuse than ordinary powers. Some responses have come in already.

If you have ideas to contribute, please write c/o PO Box 371, El Cerrito, CA 94530. Write "Psychic Powers" in the lower left hand corner of your envelope. The notice in the first issue further explains this request. Part 2 will be based on these responses.

In this first article I will describe how my interest in fear of psi was stimulated, outline two theories that partially explain some aspects of the fear of psi, and describe a "belief experiment" that you can carry out.

Some years ago I was at a reception following a lecture I gave on parapsychology. Those present were leading parapsychologists, people who had devoted their lives to researching such psi phenomena as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis. Given the career drawbacks of working in a controversial field, these were clearly people with a very strong interest in psi.

I brought up the topic of fear of psychic abilities, mentioning that I had observed occasional fear of psi in myself. I wondered if anyone else had observed this, and how they had dealt with it? Since many of these parapsychologists had been in the field much longer than I, I expected good information and advice.

As a topic of discussion, it fell absolutely flat! No one was interested...

This struck me as odd. Perhaps I was the only one who had ever felt any fear of psi? On the other hand, there was a funny "taste" to the lack of interest that made me wonder if some people were indeed fearful but didn't want to face it.

To test this I devised what I call a "belief experiment," and tried it on the spot. I have since used variations of this experiment in weekend workshops with quite enlightening results. You will learn a lot if you try it with friends.

A Belief Experiment

I asked everyone if they would give me 10 minutes for a belief experiment. All they would need to do was believe, as well as they could for 10 minutes, what I told them, and then observe their reactions to this belief.

They agreed. I told them that I had developed a new drug, "telepathine." I had some with me. It changed you such that you could now telepathically receive all the thoughts and feelings of everyone in a 100 yard range. There was no antidote to the drug, and the effect was permanent.

Who wanted the drug?

No hands went up. Instead an abstract discussion began about possibilities and implications, a clear avoidance of the question. I asked again, "Who wants the drug?" More abstractions, so I finally shouted, "WHO WANTS THE DRUG?"

No hands went up and there was silence. As people observed their inner mood they realized that when they were faced with the possibility that telepathy might work very well indeed, even if only in a belief experiment, reluctances and reservations, based on fears, arose. My point was made.
Remember that this was in a group of people who were exceptionally interested in psi, willing to sacrifice career success to work in this rejected field. If they have fears, what about ordinary people? What about people who vehemently deny that there is psi?

Do you want to know what others really think and feel about you? Could you handle the power over others that this secret knowledge gave you? The mental and emotional overload that might result? If others knew, would they hate you?

You might not take the drug, but others might. How could you keep your secrets? What about your thoughts and feelings that you think are shameful? How could you control the image you present to people if some could see the real thoughts and feelings behind your outer behavior?

I will focus on two major aspects of fear of psi here. Part 2 will deal with other aspects.

A Social Masking Theory of Psi Inhibition

In a recent article in the Journal of Parapsychology, I proposed a "social masking theory of psi inhibition." Ordinary social interaction is strongly (but not completely) guided by an implicit social contract: "I want to be known on my terms. If you will accept the image of myself I want to project, I will accept the image of yourself that you want to project, and relationships will go smoothly."

We do not let ourselves be completely bound by this, of course. Often we wonder what's behind someone's behavior, and may actively try to find out. We are all very good at controlling what image we project, though, and psychological observations indicate that we frequently don't use our senses at all well in looking behind social facades. We accept them wholesale, especially if they fit our expectations!

Psi abilities are thus a potent threat to the social status quo. We'll consider below how we can deal with the threats psi poses.

A Primal Conflict Repression Theory of Psi Inhibition

The social conflicts that strongly functioning psi could bring about are reason enough for fears of psi to exist, but I suspect an even deeper level of conflict. Let's start with socialization.

We are born with an enormous number of potentials that could be developed, but many of them won't be. We are not born into a vacuum, but into a culture, a group of people who, in the course of their history, only learned about certain parts of the full spectrum of human potentials. Many of our possibilities will be lost to ignorance. Others are suppressed, as they are considered evil.

The parents are the prime agents of enculturation. Aside from the natural love which most parents have for their children, parents have the job of shaping the developing child to become "normal," to give up certain innate potentials and develop only certain others so the child will be like everybody else in fundamentally important respects. The parents have a tough job: many times they must not show their own true feelings, but must act to train children "properly."

The pressure has been particularly strong on mothers the last few decades. Mothers are taught that their child's health, happiness, and welfare depends on the mother doing the right thing. The pressure is on for mothers to be "supermothers", always naturally loving and caring. No woman wants to be considered a bad mother, so this pressure from the culture is often internalized.

We discussed how the possibility of strong telepathy among adults could be very unsettling. You couldn't control the image you wanted to project. How much more intense might this sort of conflict be if one party were an adult but the other a young child, a relationship in which the distribution of power is very one-sided?

I believe that mothers and children have a strong, innate telepathic link. It conveys emotion more than conceptual information. This link probably has a lot of survival value: think of the sort of situations where a mother just has this "feeling" that something is wrong with her distant infant and she'd better go check.
How will this telepathic linkage affect the child, though, when the mother is "acting?" Consider when "supermother" has had a bad day: everything has gone wrong, and the child has angered her over and over again. Mother is not full of unadulterated tender love and selfless concern for her child's ultimate wellfare, she's angry! Her child now breaks the heirloom vase from great grandmother!

A real mother might like to "break" the child at that point, or at least throw a tantrum herself. But supermothers aren't supposed to do things like that. To exaggerate to make the point, supermothers will try to gently chide the child and explain why it shouldn't do things like that. Supermother will try to remind the child that she loves it, that she's only restraining or punishing it for the sake of the child's learning the right thing, that any slight emotional upset she's angry herself. Whew! It's hard being a supermother! Many mothers work hard at pulling it off, though.

What about the telepathic channel in this sort of situation?

The child gets one message on the overt level: "I'm only concerned for your wellfare, I love you." This is the message the child must believe: it is the socially approved message, and the one that reinforces mother's own beliefs about herself and the image she wants to project to her peers. Yet the child's telepathic sense is picking up the strong, emotional message, "Mommy is very angry, she hates me, she wants to make me hurt!"

To explain the primal conflict repression theory I have drawn a rather extreme picture. Not all mothers accept the pressure to be a supermother, even those who do let out their real feelings at times, and there are other and better ways to deal with such feelings than hiding them. The basic point is that contradictory messages can come from a mother, and this is hard on the child.

If you think for a minute about some of the conflicts and terrors of childhood, many of them were much more intense than the conflicts we have as adults. We have much more strength to handle conflicts now, a lot more perspective to defuse them, more knowledge and skills to deal with them. But as children conflicting feelings were so intense! So how does a child deal with the double message of the form "Mommy loves me, Mommy hates me?"

The theory of primal conflict repression is that we deal with these early, primary conflicts by actively repressing our psychic abilities. If you can cut yourself off from the psi information channels, not pay attention to them, or invalidate them as "fantasy," then you don't hear one side of the conflicting message and the conflict seems to go away. Even better, you only hear the sensory communication you are supposed to hear, what mother said, the message supermother (and the culture behind her) wants you to hear. Then you can go along with the image she wants to project to you. When you go along with it, this reinforces her own internalized image of being a good mother.

You can't really keep listening to your psi channels and be "normal" anyway. Mommy will get more angry if you tell her "No, you're lying to me!", and adults or other children won't like it if you keep responding to their hidden thoughts instead of their projected image.

Triggering Conflict in Adults

Let's assume you are a "normal" adult. Your behavior is in the normal, acceptable range, and most of your thought and feeling processes are "normal." Your culture functions unconsciously inside your head, shaping your thoughts and feelings, as well as controlling your behavior. (Like all "normal" people, you probably have some doubts about whether you are really normal. You know you have some thoughts and feelings that are strange and "bad" by social standards, even if you hide them well from others, but you pass as normal.)

Along comes someone talking about psychic powers, reading people's minds, predicting the future, bending spoons, etc. You may have a conversation with them about it in a perfectly rational way. On the surface.

What happens underneath?

There are several possibilities, depending on your particular personality structure, your degree of self-knowledge, the intensity and reality of the apparent psi phenomena, and your style of resolving conflicts. Any of the following
unconscious reactions could take place to varying degrees and affect your apparently rational, overt response. This is not a complete list, of course.

Primal Denial:

Some part of your unconscious mind may make the connection, "To acknowledge telepathy means to acknowledge that Mommy hated me!" This puts it in rather extreme form, but unconscious thinking tends to be like that.

The strength and course of this reaction will be affected by the degree to which you have already accepted this fact that sometimes Mommy was indeed really angry at you: she was a real human being and you did drive her crazy at times! On the other hand, you may have thoroughly repressed this sort of knowledge and invested your self in an image of a mother who was well nigh perfect. In the latter case, rather than face the repressed memories, your unconscious may influence your conscious mind to deny the reality of telepathy and other psi abilities. If there is no telepathy, there is no need to examine potentially unpleasant memories!

Secondary Denial:

The idea of psi activates concern about those unacceptable parts of yourself that you don't want others to know about. There is a realistic and a neurotic level of concern here.

Realistically, we all have secrets that would cause us harm if revealed, although we may not be ashamed of them ourselves. On the other hand, many of the things we are ashamed of may actually be things everybody shares, even if they don't admit to them, or things that are actually minor embarrassments but which are blown up way out of proportion in our own minds. I can recall instances from psychological growth work where someone would finally reveal their "terrible secret flaw," and others' reaction would be "Is that all?"

Depending on your degree of self-knowledge and self-acceptance, psi powers can seem an inconvenience or a terrible threat. Strong repression of your emotional reaction may take place (perhaps in conjunction with primal denial), such that you deny that psi abilities exist, thus apparently avoiding the conflict.

If someone keeps on talking about psi abilities, though, and your mind has chosen a repression/denial defense, what happens? This objectionable person keeps right on stimulating your conflict, and may even get angry at you for being defensive. When we are defensive about something, the last thing we want to hear is someone telling us we are defensive!

We can leave the situation, allow repression to help us forget about it, and hopefully not come in contact with people who talk about (much less demonstrate!) psi. Or we can counterattack.

Counterattack Defenses:

We can label the person who talks of psi a "kook," a misguided fool who ought to know better, or perhaps a charlatan, swindling the gullible. Derogatory labeling invalidates what they say.

In another form of counterattack defense we accept the existence of psi abilities but label them "evil." If something is evil you stay away from it, discourage its manifestation in yourself and others, and try to at least stop if not actively punish people who represent evil. In historical time, it's not long ago since we burned people as witches when we thought they had psychic powers. We don't burn people at the stake today, but sometimes I wonder how many cases there are where someone who had psychic abilities was labeled "insane" and punished with that stigma and loss of liberty and/or drugged or otherwise treated until their psychic abilities were suppressed?

Your Feelings Are?

This has been enough discussion to stimulate thought and feeling. How do you feel deep inside about psi abilities?

I recommend trying the belief experiment with a group of friends willing to share their true reactions. This will further stimulate your own insights.

Parapsychological research limps along now with inadequate funding and only low level, unreliable psi functioning for the most part. But science sometimes has lucky breaks. "Telepathine," or its equivalent, could be invented tomorrow. Will you be ready?

We will expand our discussion of fear of psi abilities in Part 2.
References


Suggestions for Further Reading:

Tart, C., Acknowledging and dealing with the fear of psi. J. American Society for Psychical Research, in press.

REAL EFFORT

G. I. Gurdjieff, one of the pioneers in translating Eastern spiritual insights into forms suitable for Westerners, remarked that people have very unrealistic ideas of what they can accomplish. Either they imagine that they can do stupendous things, which they never put to the test, or they grossly underestimate what they could accomplish with a correct aim and sustained effort. Gurdjieff believed that any "normal" (in the sense of proper psychological functioning, not culturally-relative normality) person should be able to "make his living with his left foot." At another time (Ouspensky, 1949, p. 363) he stated that a psychologically balanced person should be able to support 20 people by his efforts.

This seems fantastic to us. When our self-pitying moods strike us we feel that we already work too hard (and aren't appreciated enough for it!), it's hard enough to support one's self and one's family. Or we associate that kind of hard work with either being compulsively driven or with getting rich. Fanatacism and greed make workaholics of people, but isn't not working the goal of life? How easily we forget that right work is one of the greatest joys!

Last summer I saw an illustration of what Gurdjieff meant by real effort. It made a tremendous impression on me. One man's work, guided by an inner sense of vision, produced something so beautiful, and so sensibly practical, that I now list it as one of the seven wonders of my world. Here is a story of what real effort can accomplish.

Baldasare Forestiere was a native of Sicily, born into a prosperous fruit merchant family. He emigrated to American in 1901. He loved the land and growing things, and wanted to have his own orchard. Adverse financial circumstances at first forced him to work as a laborer, digging tunnels for the New York subway. Finally he saved enough to emigrate to California, and used his savings to buy a plot of land in the San Joaquin valley, in what is now Fresno.

Forestiere was swindled. The land he bought turned out to have hard pan, a rock-like clay layer, just a few feet under the surface. Trees would not be

LUCID DREAMS

The article, LUCID DREAMS: ENTERING THE INNER WORLD, Part 3, as well as a guide to the evolving dream letter network, will appear in the next issue of The Open Mind.
The Wonder

The Forestiere Underground Gardens are now operated by Baldasare Forestiere's descendants. They are open to the public for self-guided touring during the summer months, and are located just off the Shaw Avenue exit from Highway 99 in Fresno. There are acres of underground tunnels, rooms, and gardens. Fruit trees will indeed grow underground: in fact, they will flourish! Sunlight enters around the trees and grape vines, producing beautiful plays of light and shadow. Yet there's not all that much shadow: we think an underground building must be gloomy, but that's not at all the case.

Gently curving tunnels connect one garden court with another, with living quarters, with an underground automobile tunnel 800 feet in length (yes, he dug it by hand!), with a giant underground aquarium (not fully operative now, unfortunately) with a special glass bottom in it. On really hot days Forestiere could go to the room under the underground room with the aquarium and look up at the fish swimming above him. It is hard to imagine a psychologically "cooler" situation!

My wife and I visited the gardens on a July day. The temperature was moving into the 90s by mid morning. Down in the gardens, the temperature was very comfortable. The venturi-shaped sunlight and air openings Forestiere had devised draw the coolest air in from the ground surface and let the warmest air out. When we came back to the broiling surface later, and looked at the vast mass of Fresno all above ground, I couldn't help but think that Forestiere was the first and, unfortunately, the last sensible builder in Fresno!

What cannot be conveyed with words, not even with photographs, is the harmony and beauty of the gardens. Although he worked without any plans, there is a harmony and flow about the whole thing that is quite remarkable. One of my main purposes in writing this description is to encourage a visit. If you're ever in the Fresno area in the summer, call the Gardens (they're in the phone book), and plan to spend a leisurely morning or afternoon wandering through. There are messages about harmony, tranquility, and right effort here that you will hear as you sit on the able to put down enough of a root system for an orchard.

He could have waited a couple of years and then sold the land, probably at a profit, to some new and ignorant immigrant. He was too honest to do that, though, so his dreams of orchards went into cold storage and, aside from building a small house on the land, he worked for other farmers to earn a living.

"Cold storage" is a poor metaphor for something happening in Fresno, though. Summer temperatures can hit 115 degrees Fahrenheit, and Forestiere often found he could not work in the blistering afternoons, regardless of need.

The Initial Vision

He dug a cellar for his house, where it was a little cooler. Sitting in it one summer afternoon, watching a small shaft of sunlight coming through a window, he wondered if enough sunlight would come into a hole in the ground to grow fruit?

Real Effort

Working only with pick, shovel, and a wheelbarrow, Forestiere began digging. He kept it up, year after year. He had no assistants, doing all the work in his spare time after his mornings of working for other farmers. He had no written plans: he had a sense of where to dig. Sometimes he had dreams that he woke from in the night, and he got up and marked the place where the dream had told him to dig. Sometimes his tunnels collapsed: he laughed and said our Eternal Father hadn't wanted him to dig there after all. He started digging in 1906. When he was in his sixties, he finally, after getting a hernia, accepted a little help: a horse hitched to a scraper to drag out the dirt. He dug for 40 years, until his death in 1946, and didn't think he had completed his vision.

Forestiere was not a fanatic. People who knew him described him as a happy, honest, friendly man, the kind of person you wanted for a neighbor. He was not "religious" in a conventional sense, but he had his own sense of the sacred: it comes out over and over in his creation. The creation of beauty has always struck me as one of the finest manifestations of real spirituality.
benches carved into the walls, or wander the tunnels. You will come away with an uplifting vision of what one person can accomplish.

This all sounds like a fairy tale, of course. A poor immigrant lad, alone in the New World, but guided by an inner vision and creating an everlasting wonder. Does it have anything to do with your life? Suppose you sat down and made up an energy expenditure list: where does your time and energy routinely go? How much of it is "necessary" because of what the neighbors would think? How much of it comes out of your heart's desire? How much of your effort is quality effort because it represents your love of what you are doing? Is some change in priorities in order?

Suggestions for Further Reading:


Scheduled Lectures and Workshops by Charles T. Tart


Mar. 31, 1984: One-day seminar, "The Psychic and the Scientific: What do we Know?" University Extension, University of California, Davis, $40 tuition.

May 5-6, 1984: Weekend seminar, "The Psychic and the Scientific: What do We Know?" University Extension, University of California Santa Cruz, $80 tuition, to be held at the Hyatt Palo Alto.

PSI Development Systems

Readers will be interested in a book that has just appeared, "Psi Development Systems," by Jeffrey Mishlove. It is published by McFarland & Company of Jefferson, North Carolina. It is not aimed at a popular audience, so I doubt that it will appear in your local bookstore, but it is well worth ordering.

The book is based on Mishlove's PhD dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley. You would not know it is based on a dissertation from its style, however, as Mishlove knows how to write!

Modern parapsychology knows it has phenomena like telepathy and psychokinesis to investigate, but it can't investigate them very well as they manifest unreliably and weakly in the laboratory. Mishlove recognized that people have been trying to produce "magical" (psi) effects all through history. While the mass of writings they have produced is far from scientific, there may be a lot of useful leads in it for developing psychic abilities. The book is thus a major source of fascinating possibilities. I use it for reference, and it's also good reading.

After an introductory section outlining psi and his approach to it, Mishlove reviews both the teachings of major spiritual traditions about psi development (shamanism, divination, yoga, Buddhism, Sufism, Judaism, and ceremonial magic) and some two dozen more contemporary systems, such as spiritualism, Theosophy, the Rosicrucian Order, scientology, Sylva Mind Control, Transcendental Meditation, and Annette Martin training. Sixty pages are devoted to reviewing modern scientific literature on psi development, and then another 50 pages to a systematic analysis of important factors underlying all of the approaches. I don't agree with all of Mishlove's conclusions, but I think he has produced a marvelously stimulating work!

The possibilities of psychic development covered in this book make a nice counterpoint to the fear-based reasons for not being psychic discussed in this issue.
Letters to the Editor

Subscribers may submit questions about mind, being, psychological and spiritual growth, and related areas to the Editor. A selection of letters and responses of general interest to subscribers will be published as space permits, although individual mail responses will not be possible. The Editor reserves the right to edit and shorten letters when space considerations require it.

Letters should be addressed to The Open Mind, PO Box 371, El Cerrito, CA 94530. Put “Letters” in the lower left hand corner of the envelope.

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