



ESSAY

Coming to Terms With the Psi-Trickster

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SUBMITTED October 5, 2022

ACCEPTED June 15, 2023

PUBLISHED March 31, 2024

<https://doi.org/10.31275/20242755>

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HIGHLIGHTS

Trickster-like characteristics prevent psi from being converted to technology, which helps to preserve its mystical aspects.

ABSTRACT

The trickster concept has been proposed as a useful description of paranormal phenomena in response to nine decades of inconsistent experimental results and the inability to develop sustained practical applications of psi. However, the trickster of mythology is too diverse and ambiguous for scientific research. The term 'psi-trickster' is used here to refer to an active factor that makes psi effects inconsistent and unsustainable but can be investigated scientifically. My transition from optimism about psi experiments to reluctantly accepting the psi-trickster is described. The primary purpose of this essay is to describe strategies and options for research given the apparent psi-trickster. Strategies for dealing with the psi-trickster include: (a) hope that continued experimental research will overcome it; (b) accept the far-reaching implications of the usual assumptions for psi experiments and develop models of unconscious conflicting psi influences by many different people; (c) investigate the possibility that reliable psi effects occur in rare conditions, such as after many years of intense meditation practice; (d) propose physics-based models; and (e) consider that factors other than the motivations of living persons may be involved. Experimental psi research has the ultimate goal of converting psi to technology. Like other technologies, the most advanced development will be for military uses and for corporate profits. Spontaneous psi experiences tend to inspire a sense of meaning in life and a belief that the person's life is watched over, similar to mystical and near-death experiences. The psi-trickster characteristics prevent psi from being converted to technology and preserve its mysterious, mystical aspects. An in-depth investigation is needed to understand how paranormal beliefs and experiences affect a person's life and society as a whole. This is the first step in investigating the psi-trickster characteristics and should include the distribution of beliefs in the population for the full spectrum from skeptics to proponents.

KEYWORDS

Empiricism, methodology, Psi, trickster, trickster-psi effects.



INTRODUCTION

Many people with extensive experience investigating paranormal phenomena have proposed that anomalous effects sometimes occur but cannot be reliably controlled in experiments (Beloff, 1994; Hansen, 2001; Kennedy, 2003a; Marks, 2020; Millar, 2015; White, 1994; Walach et al., 2014). Major factors motivating this position include the continuing inconsistent results for experiments after nine decades of effort and the inability to develop sustained practical applications of psi.

George Hansen (2001) proposed the 'trickster' as a useful description for the properties of paranormal phenomena. The trickster concept indicates that the phenomena are sometimes strong but also inconsistent and not susceptible to reliable human control. Hansen delved extensively into research and writings in anthropology, sociology, culture, and folklore, as well as psychology. One of his main conclusions is that paranormal phenomena disrupt the established social order and reciprocally occur more frequently when the social order is disrupted. He also believes that paranormal phenomena cannot be understood in terms of individual psychology. Accordingly, the usual experiments and theories focusing on psychological variables have no hope of making real progress.

My initial reaction to Hansen's writings was discomfort and skepticism. However, as I reflected on my knowledge and experiences with experimental parapsychology, his ideas seemed more consistent with the phenomena than any other models or theories. I had done a review article about psi being elusive (Kennedy, 2001). The next step was a review about the unsustainable nature of psi, which recognized that psi effects are sometimes strong and not elusive (Kennedy, 2003a). That review found much evidence consistent with the trickster concept. The evidence continues to grow, as described below.

A panel discussion about "Trickster Theory" was held at the 2016 Combined Convention of the Parapsychological Association (59th) and Society for Scientific Exploration (35th) in Boulder, Colorado. George Hansen presented an introduction and overview of the trickster concept. I followed George with a description of how I came to accept the trickster concept and what it means for parapsychological research. Jeffrey Kripal followed with a presentation about religion, parapsychology, and trickster ideas. The present essay is an expanded and updated version of my presentation in 2016.

The term *psi-trickster*, as used here, refers to an active factor that makes psi effects inconsistent and not susceptible to sustained, reliable human control. The writings and mythology about the trickster concept, in general, are diverse, with many different meanings that cannot be

reduced to one interpretation (Hansen, 2001). This ambiguity makes the unqualified term trickster of limited use in science. My experience with peer reviews and discussions with researchers over the years has been that using the unqualified term trickster in scientific writings promotes the invalid assumption that almost any writings and speculations about trickster mythology have scientific significance. Any scientific ideas derived from trickster mythology need to be formulated as testable hypotheses. The term psi-trickster is used in this context.

The primary purpose of this essay is to describe strategies and options for research given the apparent psi-trickster characteristics of parapsychological experiments. For background, my transition is described from being optimistic about experimental research to considering that psi manifests as a psi-trickster. As discussed below, some researchers are not yet ready to abandon optimism about traditional parapsychological experiments. I do not expect this essay to change their minds. Rather, my hope is that the ideas presented here may be of practical value to those who consider the psi-trickster model plausible and want to proceed with research.

MY JOURNEY TO THE PSI-TRICKSTER

Early Experiences

When I was in high school, I developed the conviction that I had a calling or destiny to do research on psychic phenomena. During my undergraduate college years, I had numerous paranormal experiences that strongly reinforced this belief and made me certain that paranormal phenomena sometimes occur (Kennedy, 2000).

I worked at the Institute for Parapsychology from 1974 to 1980. During that time, I accepted the view at the lab that experimental research was the best way to understand paranormal phenomena. Personal psi experiences such as mine were considered to be of value only to the extent that they inspired experiments.

My initial experiments included studies of physiological measures of precognitive anticipation. These were the first presentiment-type studies to be reported and I was very enthusiastic and optimistic. The goal was to demonstrate that unconscious physiological measures produced more reliable psi results than traditional experiments. However, the research did not achieve that goal.

The initial results were impressive, but soon deteriorated into chasing post hoc findings (Kennedy, 1979b). An interesting post hoc finding in one study was not confirmed in the next study, but a new post hoc finding looked interesting—but was subsequently not confirmed.

I came to the conclusion that the large amount of existing research needed to be better understood before

new experiments could be meaningfully interpreted. Over the next few years, I did several literature reviews, including on experimenter effects and information processing in psi (Kennedy, 1978, 1979a, 1979c, 1980; Kennedy & Taddonio, 1976). The ominous implications of the widely held concept that psi was goal-oriented and independent of the complexity and information processing steps of the task were a major interest (Kennedy, 1979c; cf. 1995). I also continued to do some experimental research.

In 1980, I changed careers and did environmental work in government and nonprofit organizations for a decade. That was a very active period focused on applied science, engineering, law, and politics. Parapsychology had little significance in my life during that time and was rarely a topic of interest among the many people with whom I interacted.

The 1990s and Later

In 1991, I changed careers again and started working in health and medical research—which was another type of applied science. This included regulated medical research that had much higher methodological standards than academic research and parapsychology.

In the 1990s, I also started thinking about parapsychology again. At that time, I had little confidence in psi experiments due to the inconsistent findings, the high potential for psi experimenter effects, and the weak methodology compared to my experience in medical research. I came to the conclusion that spontaneous paranormal experiences could provide more reliable insights about psi than did the existing experimental research. That was a significant reversal from 20 years before when I worked at the parapsychology lab.

Meta-analysis was much in favor in parapsychology in the 1990s, but appeared to have negligible value for resolving controversies about psi. Retrospective meta-analysis is a form of post hoc analysis with many methodological decisions that are susceptible to bias (Kennedy, 2013). Meta-analyses in parapsychology typically ended in unresolved debates, with each side believing that they had prevailed. Based on my experience in regulated medical research, I considered pre-registered, well-powered, formal confirmatory research as necessary to obtain convincing experimental evidence about psi (Kennedy, 2004a, 2013, 2016). That type of research was extremely rare in parapsychology.

Elusive, Unsustainable Psi

With my background in applied science, I thought that two questions needed to be addressed: Why is psi so elusive, and what does psi do? I started looking into

the writings and ideas about the elusive, unsustainable nature of psi (Kennedy, 2001, 2003a).

In one of his last papers, John Beloff (1994, p. 7) commented that parapsychological research is a “succession of false dawns and frustrated hopes.” For a new line of research, virtually all the initial studies are reported as significant, and researchers become optimistic that a breakthrough has occurred. However, the great majority of later studies are not significant, and the reliability of psi results has not noticeably improved over the decades.

For example, Schmidt (1973) reported that the first five experiments he conducted investigating PK effects on quantum-based random number generators (RNGs) were all statistically significant. Research utilizing quantum processes was a major methodological development and justifiably inspired optimism about the future of parapsychology. Similarly, Honorton’s first six Ganzfeld experiments were all reported as significant (Honorton, 1977). However, the percentage of subsequent studies with significant results for these two lines of research has drifted in the range of 20 to 33 percent (Kennedy, 2013). That is much lower than the initial studies and than the 80 or 90 percent that is expected for adequately powered confirmatory research for a real phenomenon.

Similarly, Braud and Schlitz (1991) reported that the first three studies of direct mental influence of electrodermal activity were all significant with ten sessions. However, a later meta-analysis found that 650 sessions are needed to have statistical power of .80 for this line of research (Schmidt, 2015). Obtaining significant results for three studies with ten sessions is extremely unlikely if the effect size from the meta-analysis was applicable.

Beloff (1994, p. 7) also commented that “paranormal phenomena may be not just elusive, but actively evasive.” That expressed a key point. The failure to produce reliable psi effects was not just a passive signal in the noise problem. Capricious psi missing was a prominent symptom of this (Kennedy, 2003a). Psi missing can be interpreted as psi phenomena defiantly communicating, *“I am here, but you will not control me.”*

Applications of Psi

It seemed obvious to me that reliable applications of psi would have been developed if parapsychologists had made any meaningful progress. Experimental research is based on a model of a signal in noise. Methods for enhancing a signal in noise are well established. If a signal in noise was actually the problem for psi research, useful applications of psi would have been developed long ago. Research would be well funded from profitable applications of psi.

Many research programs have attempted to develop applications of psi and have produced some striking instances of seemingly useful psi—including substantial financial profits. But these results could not be sustained. The researchers and/or funding sources eventually abandoned the efforts.

Targ and associates used associative remote viewing to predict silver futures. An initial series of trials was highly successful and is reported to have produced a \$120,000 profit (Broughton, 1991, p. 339). A later series of trials was also successful, but the next series produced equally strong psi missing (Targ et al., 1991, pp. 76–77). The efforts ended, and the initial research team became mired in disputes about what happened and why (Harary, 1992).

Bierman and Rabeyron (2013) attempted to find all reasonably credible efforts to use associative remote viewing for financial profits. Most of the 17 experiments they found were small exploratory series that were not published with peer review. They concluded that “most of the series led to profit, and some of them in considerable profits” (p. 13). They also noted that confirmation of these results “could be the end of the financial problems in the field of psi research” (p. 1). Unfortunately, the hope that precognition can end the financial problems for psi research has not materialized, and two more recently published experiments reported investment losses (Katz et al., 2018; Kruth, 2021).

As has been noted many times, casinos would go out of business if reliable applications of psi were developed, but casinos appear to make profits consistent with the laws of probability. Several studies attempting to predict the outcome of casino games have provided statistically significant outcomes but have not resulted in a usefully reliable application of psi (Brier & Tyminski, 1970a, 1970b; Dean & Taetzsch, 1970; Puthoff et al., 1986).

The Star Gate project to investigate using psi in government intelligence work was the most well-funded research program. The project received almost \$20 million dollars between 1972 and 1995. The initial work was sufficiently impressive to attract continued funding. The project was terminated in 1995 after a project evaluation reported the usual debates about whether psi exists and concluded that any effects were not sufficiently reliable for intelligence work (C.I.A., 1995, 2003).

A contracted project to investigate using E.S.P. to find land mines produced statistically significant results in the first few sessions, but the later sessions declined to chance, and the project was terminated (J. B. Rhine, 1971). The Sony Corporation is reported to have investigated E.S.P. for several years and found evidence that E.S.P. exists, but terminated the project when the company was

unable to develop useful applications (Huyghe, n.d.).

A similar pattern occurred with research on distant healing or intercessory prayer. A variety of small studies gave encouraging results (Dossey, 1993). However, subsequent large, well-funded (several million dollars total) studies by proponents of distant healing generally did not support the effect (Spilka & Ladd, 2013).

One noteworthy study was an N.I.H. grant for \$823,346 to investigate distant healing for glioblastoma multiforme (GBM), a very rare, highly lethal brain tumor (grant information Targ, 2000; study registration Freinkel, 2002). In the early stages of the study, the primary investigator, Elisabeth Targ, was unexpectedly diagnosed with the rare cancer she was investigating. She died from the condition at age 40 during the study (Bronson, 2002; Davidson, 2002). One tribute to her pointed out that new cases of this type of cancer occur in only about 2 or 3 people per 100,000 annually (IONS, 2016). The possible relevance of this extreme coincidence for the psi-trickster model cannot be missed. The study was completed by Andrew J. Freinkel (2015), who concluded that “distant healing is not effective in the treatment of patients with GBM” (p. 1). The study has not been published but was presented at conventions (A manuscript is available online).

A Cochrane review of “Intercessory prayer for the alleviation of ill health” (Roberts et al., 2009/2014) had conclusions that were similar to the other efforts to demonstrate useful applications of paranormal phenomena:

These findings are equivocal, and although some of the results of individual studies suggest a positive effect of intercessory prayer, the majority do not, and the evidence does not support a recommendation either in favor or against the use of intercessory prayer. We are not convinced that further trials of this intervention should be undertaken and would prefer to see any resources available for such a trial used to investigate other questions in health care (para. 7).

Jørgensen et al., (2009) challenged these conclusions as overly positive about prayer. Their criticisms included that one of the studies was published in jest as a retroactive prayer study 4 to 10 years after the patients had died or left the hospital alive. One of the authors of another study was sent to prison for fraudulent activities, and there were various unresolved questions about the study.

It Looks like a Psi-Trickster

The pattern from both experiments and attempted

applications is that psi effects can be striking and useful for a period of time but then defiantly seem to avoid the sustained effects that are needed for reliable use or to change the views of those with skeptical dispositions. Experimental parapsychology has remained in this state of limbo for nine decades since J.B. Rhine began conducting experiments in 1930 at Duke University. As indicated by the examples above, many millions of dollars have been invested, and the research has provided numerous promising opportunities to break out of this state—but that has not happened.

The concept of the psi-trickster captures the inconsistency of the effects and the associated state of limbo. From my perspective, the initial highly successful results for a new line of research are consistent with a combination of psi and inflated effects from exploratory methodology. Those who are more skeptically inclined interpret the initial effects as entirely due to biases from exploratory methodology (Wagenmakers et al., 2012).

Some optimists believe that the positive claims from retrospective meta-analyses will be reliably confirmed with pre-registered studies. Initial adequately powered pre-registered confirmatory experiments have not supported that optimism (Kekecs et al., 2023; Maier & Deschamps, 2018; Schlitz et al., 2021; Schlitz & Delorme, 2021). However, confirmatory research is needed for many lines of research. Ganzfeld studies with participants selected for certain characteristics is one of the most promising (Baptista et al., 2015). Caroline Watt's (2017) ongoing pre-registered prospective meta-analysis of Ganzfeld studies is an example of the methodology that is needed.

These confirmatory studies will establish whether the optimism about retrospective meta-analysis is correct or whether the psi-trickster model is more viable. If the optimism about meta-analysis is correct, reliable confirmatory results will be obtained, and that will demonstrate that the psi-trickster model is not valid for experimental psi research. If the confirmatory results are not reliably successful, that will demonstrate that the optimism about retrospective meta-analysis is misplaced and that the psi-trickster model is more viable.

Distinguishing between the psi-trickster model and the skeptical interpretation that psi does not exist will be more challenging. One possibility is that the state of limbo will continue with 20% to 35% of confirmatory studies successful, rather than the $\leq 5\%$ expected if the skeptical interpretation is true or the $> 80\%$ expected if the proponents of meta-analysis are correct. Improved research quality control measures that address computer programming and other unintentional errors, computer system security, and experimenter fraud will be important

when evaluating confirmatory evidence for the psi-trickster (Kennedy, 2016; cf. Kekecs et al., 2023).

From my perspective, the psi-trickster remains the most empirically viable view of psi as long as parapsychological researchers struggle for funding rather than have well-funded research programs based on profitable applications of psi.

DEALING WITH THE PSI-TRICKSTER

I can see five possible strategies for dealing with the psi-trickster characteristics of the experimental research.

1. Ignore the Psi-Trickster

One strategy is to ignore the psi-trickster properties and hope that continued experimental research will eventually produce more reliable effects. However, if most of the formal confirmatory studies are not successful, the funding sources will likely stop supporting this strategy.

A major problem with this strategy is that the usual working assumptions about psi make experiments uninterpretable. The working assumptions held today by most experimental researchers are that psi is an unconscious process that is directed by human motivation and generally operates without conscious awareness and without conscious intention. And virtually everyone has potential psi ability.

I call these the Rhinean assumptions because they were present at J.B. Rhine's Duke Parapsychology Lab in the 1960s (Rhine & Associates, 1965). They were well established at the Institute for Parapsychology in 1973 when I arrived. These assumptions are the basis for presentiment-type studies (Radin & Pierce, 2015) and for Stanford's psi-mediated instrumental response (PMIR) model (Stanford, 2015).

The PMIR model takes the Rhinean assumptions to their logical conclusion of a magical power (psi) that operates in the background to make a person's wishes come true. The primary obstacles to the operation of this background psi are certain psychological conditions. The discussions of the PMIR model usually focus on individual psychology and do not consider the seemingly inevitable interactions of motivations and associated psi from many different people.

The Rhinean assumptions in full force directly lead to the conclusion that anyone who has any motivation about the outcome of a psi experiment or application can influence the outcome. This is widely recognized as making psi experimenter effects likely (Kennedy & Taddonio, 1976; Palmer & Millar, 2015), but the effects go far beyond the experimenter. For example, people who are strongly opposed to the idea of psi may suppress an experimental

outcome even though they are not consciously aware the experiment is being conducted. They would unconsciously and without awareness use psi to influence the world to conform to their motivations.

The outcome of a psi experiment may be dominated by psi from the general cultural background of attitudes and motivations about the paranormal (Kennedy, 2003a). If the Rhinean assumptions are true, psi-trickster characteristics could emerge from fluctuations in a near-balanced background of strong positive and negative motivations.

These implications from the research assumptions are virtually never considered when designing and interpreting psi experiments. The possibility that psi effects are a combined result from different people has been noted a few times (e.g., Millar, 1978; Stanford, 1978) but has not been developed.

2. Model a Network of Motivations

The second strategy for dealing with psi-trickster effects is to accept the implications of the Rhinean assumptions and develop mathematical models of diverse psi influences by many people. This strategy requires a better understanding of the motivations and distribution of motivations related to the paranormal than is currently available. The first step is to conduct research to better understand the distribution of motivations about the paranormal in the population.

Those who are committed to the Rhinean assumptions may consider this strategy as the obvious explanation for the psi-trickster characteristics and a useful line of research. However, I am not optimistic about the outcome. This strategy may or may not lead to falsifiable hypotheses. Also, the Rhinean assumptions have not been useful in understanding the paranormal experiences in my life. At this point, I doubt that the Rhinean assumptions have a meaningful degree of validity.

3. Propose Reliable Effects in Rare Conditions

Another strategy is to propose that the psi-trickster characteristics can be overcome in certain rare conditions. The conditions must be extremely rare, given that they have not become established after many decades of research.

One common hypothesis is that sustained, reliable control of psi can be attained after many years or decades of intense meditation practice, as described in various meditation traditions (Roney-Dougal, 2015). This hypothesis is difficult to test because no clear measure of meditation attainment has been developed, and those with the highest meditation attainment may not be interested

in psi experiments (Roney-Dougal, 2015). Some meditation traditions say that focusing on psi effects is counterproductive and should be avoided (Kennedy, 2004b). The psi effects supporting this hypothesis will need to be sustained, not just one or a few episodes of strong psi, as has been common for new lines of research in parapsychology.

This meditation hypothesis can easily become unfalsifiable. Failure to obtain reliable effects can always be interpreted as indicating that the practitioners were not sufficiently advanced.

4. Propose Physics-Based Limitations

A fourth strategy for dealing with psi-trickster effects is to propose that a physics-based principle prevents reliable psi effects. These proposals include that psi is based on nonlocal quantum entanglement or analogies with quantum entanglement (Maier et al., 2022; Walach et al., 2014). As described in these writings, the current understanding is that entanglement cannot be used to transmit signals. The capricious, useless properties of psi experiments are hypothesized to result from this no-signal property of quantum entanglement or analogies with this property (Maier et al., 2022; Walach et al., 2014). However, the strict no-signal principle that inspired these models must be discarded or altered if the models predict that psi can sometimes occur (Millar, 2015).

The psi-trickster characteristics appear to require information processing and decision-making that is more like a living process than like an inanimate principle of physics. A replication study produces different results than an initial study, even if the physical procedures are identical. Tracking whether a study is a replication and responding accordingly appears to require information processing. As discussed in Kennedy (2023), the term information is sometimes used in quantum physics theories as a label for unknown processes that are assumed to have information processing abilities of a living system but apparently would be in a different realm than biological life. "Because the human experience most analogous to quantum probability waves is the imagination of hypothetical futures, the attribution of information and mental properties to the quantum domain may be irresistible" (Kennedy, 2023, p. 29).

An implied realm of quasi-living information processing that operates as if it has its own agenda and makes decisions should be made explicit in presenting such models. The models based on quantum entanglement are basically hypotheses about the agenda or properties of this realm of information processing.

5. Consider More than Human Motivation

The fifth strategy for dealing with psi-trickster effects is to consider that psi may be directed or influenced by factors that are not the motivations of living persons. The most common popular ideas include supernatural entities such as spirits of deceased persons, angels, God(s), and karma. Other possibilities include psi effects from people in the future acting backward in time and some type of non-biological information processing capability that is currently not understood, has its own agenda, and underlies or interacts with quantum physics and/or life.

The main scientific problem with these ideas is that they are not parsimonious (Kennedy, 1994). Science progresses by accepting or favoring the simplest, most easily tested model or hypothesis that is consistent with the data. More complex, difficult-to-test models are considered only when additional data are not consistent with the simple model. The ideas about entities or processes beyond our current scientific understanding are dismissed because they are less parsimonious and more difficult to test than the assumption that psi is directed by the motivations of living persons. However, these ideas can be tested.

This research strategy focuses on identifying the apparent agenda or agendas of the factors that influence psi effects. For example, a recent line of research investigated certain ideas about how the psi-trickster might be limited based on models from quantum physics. After a series of experiments, the researchers concluded that the proposed hypothesis was not true (Walach et al., 2021). Although the outcome may not have been what the experimenters hoped, this case does demonstrate that hypotheses about a psi-trickster can be scientifically investigated.

More empirically based hypotheses about the agenda for psi-trickster can be developed by considering the question, "What does psi do?" As mentioned above, in the 1990s, I became interested in that question. An empirical approach is to ask people how they were affected by their paranormal experiences. Kanthamani and I (Kennedy & Kanthamani, 1995) did an exploratory research project that basically verified what Rhea White (1994) had previously found. The most common response from people is that their paranormal experiences tended to inspire an altered worldview, enhanced meaning in life, and spirituality.

Mystical experiences, near-death experiences, and psychic experiences all have similar aftereffects (Hood et al., 2009, pp. 347-350; Kennedy & Kanthamani, 1995; Ring, 1984; White, 1994, 1998). People feel that their life has a purpose and is guided or watched over by a high-

er power. A key point is that people typically experience the paranormal as something that happens to them, not something they do. Spontaneous experiences tend to be interpreted as psi guiding a person, whereas the Rhinean assumptions are that people guide psi with their personal motivations.

Thus, we have two fundamentally different views of psi. The view from spontaneous cases is that psi guides or influences people. This view inspires meaning in life and spirituality. The view from experimental research is that people guide psi. That view inspires applications of psi for military uses and corporate profits.

This point should be clearly understood: the ultimate goal for experimental research is to convert the paranormal into technology—and the most advanced development of the technology will be for military dominance and corporate profits. It is not an accident that the greatest funding for parapsychological research has been for military-related applications. However, I also suggest that it is not an accident that this research program was abandoned—like virtually all attempts to develop applications of psi.

The message from the psi-trickster is that converting psi to technology is not going to happen. If psi becomes technology, the mysterious, mystical, spiritual aspects will be compromised or eliminated. The psi-trickster characteristics prevent psi from becoming technology and preserve the mysterious, mystical aspects. "The question at this point is not whether psi can inspire a more spiritual worldview, but whether it does anything else" (Kennedy, 2000, p. 139).

The transformative aspects of psi are contingent upon spontaneous experiences being explicitly recognized as paranormal (Kennedy, 2000), whereas the traditional Rhinean assumption is that psi frequently operates without recognition. Although both hypotheses or agendas could be valid, the transformative, spiritual agenda has a clear place for the psi-trickster, whereas the psi-trickster is basically out of place with the traditional Rhinean assumptions.

The scientific question is: *At what point do we abandon the more parsimonious assumptions and accept that more complex, difficult-to-test models are needed?* At this point in science, simple, parsimonious phenomena have already been discovered. Phenomena that have not yet become accepted are probably more complex.

WHERE THIS LEAVES THE FIELD OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY

People appear to be living in different worlds with regard to the paranormal. Some people are uncomfort-

able with the spiritual aspects of psi, others are uncomfortable with psi as technology, others are uncomfortable with any form of psi, others are infatuated by anything possibly paranormal, others have their beliefs based on religion, and many other people find the subject to be of no interest or relevance for their lives.

I think the most interesting and potentially productive area for research is to better understand the different worldviews about paranormal phenomena. What are those worldviews, what proportion of people hold the various worldviews, and how were the worldviews formed?

If the psi-trickster characteristics are due to human motivations, a thorough understanding of the diverse motivations related to psi is essential. The inconsistent results with experiments may reflect an inadequate understanding of the relevant motivations, including the potential cultural background of motivations and associated psi.

More generally, understanding how paranormal beliefs and experiences affect a person's life and society as a whole is an essential first step for investigating the psi-trickster characteristics and discovering the agenda or agendas of the psi-trickster.

The available research about paranormal beliefs is much too narrow. For example, questionnaire items that do not distinguish between paranormal effects as a human ability versus supernatural interventions may be ambiguous for many people and receive arbitrary responses (Kennedy, 2003b). Past research has focused on those who believe in paranormal phenomena with virtually no attempt to consider the development and strength of beliefs for skeptics. This has resulted in proponents of psi rallying around speculations about skeptics and skeptics making dubious assumptions about their own rationality and intellectual superiority (Kennedy, 2005).

The different worldviews can be very strongly held and resistant to change (Kennedy, 2005). Those who have strong beliefs are often biased about these topics. Researchers need to recognize their own biases.

However, the proportions of the population that hold strong pro or con worldviews about the paranormal are unknown. This is an important topic for research. Extreme worldviews may receive a disproportionate amount of attention. I suspect that the majority of people do not have strong opinions about paranormal phenomena and do not consider them significant in their lives.

My observation is that the worldviews about the paranormal are developed from personality dispositions, sociological, religious, and cultural factors, and life experiences. A broad interdisciplinary approach and team is needed.

RESEARCH PROGRAM

An optimal research program would start with qualitative research, conducting in-depth, open-ended interviews with a diverse range of people. Proponents, skeptics, and those in between would be included. Participants about age 50 to 70 would be ideal to start. At this age, people have much life experience to draw upon and still have memories reasonably intact. The interviews would discuss the participants' beliefs and how those beliefs were formed, including personal experiences, innate tendencies, education, and influences from relatives, friends, books, media, and spiritual or religious groups. The strengths of various beliefs and changes over time would be included, as well as likely bidirectional causation between beliefs and experiences.

A key question is to what extent attitude toward the paranormal is based on innate personality dispositions versus environmental and cultural influences (Kennedy, 2005). At a minimum, a personality test would also be administered. Hansen's ideas about paranormal phenomena and disruption of the social order should also be considered.

Those who conduct research primarily to verify their own strongly held views should leave this initial research to others. This includes researchers who have personal discomfort with the possibility of paranormal effects, spirituality, or supernatural interventions. It also includes researchers who hold strong opinions about those who do not share their firm beliefs about paranormal phenomena or spirituality. This initial qualitative stage of research requires an open mind that allows diverse beliefs and experiences to emerge.

The interview data would be used to develop a questionnaire for wide use that covers the full range of attitudes and worldviews about paranormal phenomena. The final step would be to include questions about the different worldviews in random or representative national surveys. Another questionnaire that covers the types and aftereffects of paranormal and mystical experiences could also be developed.

This project would provide much-needed information about the distribution and degree of paranormal beliefs and skepticism and the relationships among personality dispositions, spirituality, paranormal beliefs, and paranormal experiences. Information would also be obtained about the types of paranormal experiences and the distribution and relationship among the different types of experiences. This information would be valuable to researchers, whether they are proponents or skeptics of paranormal phenomena.

The important question of whether the mystical/

spiritual aftereffects of spontaneous psi experiences primarily occur only for people with certain personality dispositions or cultural expectations could also be addressed in this and other research efforts. Research on the aftereffects of paranormal experiences remains at an exploratory stage with little information about basic questions such as the range of aftereffects, prevalences, and conditions for occurrence. Another important question is whether the factors and aftereffects associated with spontaneous experiences are different for experiences that appear to be possible psi than for experiences that appear to be misinterpreted as psi. Examination of reports of spontaneous psi experiences has found that about 70% to 80% of the reported experiences appear to be misinterpretations rather than possible psi (Kennedy, 2005).

More generally, my working assumption now is that there is not just one scientifically correct worldview about paranormal phenomena. Similar to the different personalities that are applicable for different people, different worldviews about psi may be applicable and valid for different people. In effect, the agenda of the psi-trickster is different for different people. It appears to me that, for all practical purposes, people do live in different worlds with regard to the occurrence and nature of these phenomena.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

The psi-trickster model is consistent with the history of parapsychology. If pre-registered, adequately powered confirmatory research does not produce reliably successful results, the inevitable conclusion will be that parapsychological experimenters do not have a meaningful understanding of a real phenomenon. Interest in the psi-trickster ideas will continue to increase, and the focus of research will shift to spontaneous cases. The proposed in-depth investigation of the diverse beliefs, worldviews, and experiences related to paranormal phenomena, including by skeptics, is needed to understand the occurrence and aftereffects of spontaneous paranormal experiences and to understand the motivations that are assumed to determine the psi effects in experiments. This research may allow inferences about the agenda or agendas of the psi-trickster. The practical implications of the psi-trickster characteristics will depend on the agenda or agendas. The available evidence suggests that a significant component of the agenda is to inspire altered worldviews and enhanced meaning in life and spirituality. With this agenda, spontaneous experiences are specifically intended to be recognized as paranormal. The traditional assumption in parapsychology that psi has a significant unnoticed role in life may have little

applicability if the primary purpose of psi is individual transformation.

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