Psi-Conducive Experimenters and Psi-Permissive Ones

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Abstract: Some experimenters whose research is properly rigorous usually find significant evidence of psi; other experimenters usually find nonsignificance. Either of two explanations (not mutually exclusive) can account for this difference. One explanation is the psychological experimenter effect. Experimenters can, by tone of voice and other nonverbal cues, create a warm experimental climate in which subjects are at ease, interested, cooperative. This mood permits subjects to feel free and work well. Since psi is a natural ability, they are likely to show psi. Other experimenters, by tone of voice and other nonverbal cues, create a cold climate with expectation of failure. Their subjects feel inhibited and are unlikely to show psi. The other explanation is that an experimenter gifted in ESP or PK can temporarily transfer the ability to subjects, who then make high scores. These experimenters are psi-conducive; those who create a warm climate are merely psi-permissive.

Psi-conducive experimenters who hope to support an invalid hypothesis could conduce high scores that apparently confirm the hypothesis. They thus can threaten the orderly accumulation of scientific knowledge. The discussion proposes methods of damage control and suggests some research with the psi-conducive that might lead to understanding psi-inhibitory experimenters.

Some experimenters, using well-controlled methods, rather consistently find significant ESP or PK data that support a plausible hypothesis. Other experimenters who apparently use the same method rather consistently find data that are nonsignificant. It has become customary to call the former psi-conducive and the latter psi-inhibitory. The terms describe the experimenter's past results. They also have some predictive value because in general, though not invariably (and the exceptions are interesting) experimenters labeled psi-conducive continue to find significant data in well-controlled research, and those labeled psi-inhibitory continue to find nonsignificance.

What causes the difference between experimenters? Two major hypotheses have been proposed. (There are also many frivolous hypotheses, such as attributing all such observed differences to a capricious demon who intervenes in human affairs, or to the kind of bizarre coincidence that Eddington suggested could make a pot of water freeze when a flame was lit under it, or to fraud.) One hypothesis is that the difference is an example of what is called in psychology the experimenter effect. Research has found that factors not mentioned in the formal protocol, such as the experimenter's tone of voice and other nonverbal behaviour, influence subjects' responses either positively or negatively. The experimenter effect thus suggests that some experimenters habitually use nonverbal cues that influence subjects favorably; other experimenters do the opposite. The second hypothesis is that the experimenter uses psi to make the subjects respond as desired. Clearly, the second hypothesis does not exclude the first. An experimenter who uses psi to make subjects respond as desired may also create a warm experimental climate.

This paper will defend and discuss both of the major hypotheses. It will also suggest

a change in our vocabulary: that we reserve the term psi-conducive for experimenters who seem to use psi to influence outcomes. We would then apply some milder term, like non-inhibitory or psi-permissive, to experimenters whose significant results seem instead to have been helped only by the warm climate of the usual psychological experimenter effect.

The Classical Experimenter Effect

It has long been laboratory lore that even when a finding seems well supported, some experimenters obtain null results when they test for it; and conversely, that even when some test has been found invalid, it gives valid results when administered by its inventor. Though generally recognized, these curious observations seldom were noted in publications. They would imply that colleagues made some kind of mistake; they would be tactless. They were treated almost as taboo. Rosenthal (1966) broke the taboo by giving a name, the experimenter effect, to the systematic differences; by performing brilliant research on them; and by compiling and analyzing his own research and that of others. Later (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1984) he showed how well they fit into other research findings.

The clearest demonstrations of the experimenter effect came from meta-experiments that compared one set of experiments with another. All followed the same formal protocol, but preliminary remarks to half the experimenters would make them expect their subjects to fail and remarks to the other half would make them expect their subjects to succeed. In one striking case, all were told that the rats they were testing had been bred for ability. Half were told their rats were exceptionally bright and would run mazes well; the other half that their rats had been bred for poor performance and were stupid. In fact, all rats were from the same strain, and yet those labeled bright ran the mazes far better than those labeled Stupid. Observation of the experimenters showed the reason. All had properly used the same formal procedure, but there was an informal difference. Those who believed their rats were superior lifted them gently from their home cages, often fondled them on the way to the maze, and put them down gently, while those who believed their rats were stupid handled them more roughly. The rats had responded to the differences in handling, yet the handling of rats outside of their mazes is not ordinarily specified in the experimental method. Similar meta-experiments with humans as subjects yielded similar results. When some experimenters were told their subjects were inferior and likely to perform badly and others were told their subjects were superior and likely to perform well, all experimenters correctly used the same formal procedure but their nonverbal behaviour differed. Frequent or infrequent smiling and eye contact, body stance that leaned toward or away from the subject, leisurely or impatient speech or movement patterns, and so on, created a warm or a cold experimental atmosphere. Not surprisingly, this experimental climate influenced how the subjects performed. With a warm experimental atmosphere, and especially when experimenters expected them to succeed, subjects' scores were higher than in a cold experimental atmosphere, when the experimenter expected them to fail.

In the careful research that established the experimenter effect, verbal instructions and setting were identical for the contrasting conditions. Each, however, can be a key factor. It seems obvious that two sets of instructions that give the same information can, with different wording, convey warmth or coldness, and indicate high or low expectation of success. Setting can be important too. In two well known series of experiments, for example, both examined the same response, a response that was affected by anxiety. Each series obtained clear results, but their results were contradictory. Null data were consistently found when the tests were administered by a white-coated experimenter in a medical building with cases of medical instruments prominently displayed; positive results were consistently found when the tests

were administered by a casually dressed experimenter in a familiar college building. The medical setting apparently produced enough anxiety to disrupt the expected response; the familiar setting did not. What is noteworthy is that an experienced experimenter had selected the medical setting for his own convenience, neglecting how the subjects might respond to it.

After research had established that the experimenter effect occurs, ESP research tested for it. Experimenters deliberately manipulated the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the experimental atmosphere and a high or low expectation of success. Each variable, and especially both combined, had the predicted effect on ESP scores (see, e.g., Crandall, 1985; Honorton, Ramsey, & Cabibbo, 1975; Taddonio, 1975 and 1976). But years before Rosenthal gave the experimenter effect its name, ESP research had stumbled across it. One early experiment will be cited here, to exemplify a point mentioned earlier: that an experimenter sometimes shifts between being conducive and inhibitory. Someone who can usually set up a warm experimental climate may inadvertently find that with a different kind of subject, he has produced a cold one.

Pratt & Price (1938) designed research to study sex differences in children. Pratt was a quiet, careful, methodical young man; Price was a charming, friendly, outgoing young woman. Pratt tested boys; Price used the same procedure to test girls from the same institution. When they found that girls had significantly high scores but boys did not, they modified their design. In their new series, both tested equal numbers of boys and girls. Each also acted as the other's research assistant, so that they constantly monitored the procedure and made sure that it stayed uniform. The results were clear. The difference between boys' and girls' scores was now negligible, but Price's subjects again had significantly high ESP scores, and Pratt's subjects did not.

Their interpretation of the findings was that Price's manner, and her friendly conversation with subjects on their way to the experimental room, accounted for the difference in results. Should they have considered the possibility that Pratt was a psi-inhibitory experimenter? Perhaps it would have been appropriate if this had been the first experiment he conducted, but it was inappropriate here. His previous experiments had found high ESP scores when he worked with friends or with others of about his age. Even stronger refutation of the possibility came later, in the extraordinarily significant scores he obtained over ten years of research with a gifted subject, Pavel Stepanek (Pratt, 1973). Stepanek was a shy man, of approximately Pratt's age, who clearly enjoyed their association. It also seems relevant that Stepanek was a pharmacist. To a pharmacist, Pratt's punctilious correctness and careful adherence to protocol would seem congenial and be worth respect. It would produce a warm experimental climate, although to others like the young boys of the Pratt & Price series, the same correctness and care might well produce a cold one.

The conclusion suggested by Pratt's diverse results is that what seems cold and off-putting to one person may seem agreeably warm to another. It is what 'everyone knows.' We greet a friend differently from the way we greet the friend's baby or from the way we greet some authority figure with whom we are only slightly acquainted. Psychological research designed to test for such factors has found that not only the manner of an experimenter but also the sex and the age, the style of dress, and the apparent earnestness can influence how subjects respond to the experimenter's instructions. Some subjects would respond warmly, and others coldly, to a young experimenter wearing sloppy clothes who gave instructions in a casual, breezy manner.

Indeed, the whole principle underlying the experimenter effect is consistent with common sense. Most of us, especially in an unfamiliar testing situation, will feel constrained with a person who seems unfriendly and discouraging, will pull into ourselves, and will do less than our best. And most of us will work more freely and thus more effectively with someone who

seems friendly and whose manner implies that what is asked of us is likely to go well. The principle, of course, extends beyond the laboratory and it has broad social implications. Research in the schoolroom, for example, has found that children whose teachers expected them to succeed not only had higher achievement scores but also scored higher on intelligence tests than comparable school children whose teachers expected them to fail.

These general principles are sometimes hard to apply in specific cases. Consider the recommendation that a leisurely chat before the formal experiment, accompanied by light refreshments, will help produce a warm experimental atmosphere in which subjects feel cooperative. This is usually good advice, but it would have been counterproductive in the subway college where I taught. Volunteers among its students, many holding part or full time jobs, were kind enough to give an hour of their tightly scheduled time to act in my research. Most would have resented spending fifteen or thirty minutes in prolonged small talk, and they would have thought it bizarre for me to serve refreshments. Or consider that having one's chair close to the subjects and leaning forward rather than away will usually imply friendliness. To certain individuals, however, (or to anyone when the distance is too small) an experimenter's physical closeness impinges upon one's private body space and implies that the experimenter is dominating and hostile. Similar cautions apply to almost every recommendation, such as frequent smiling or eye contact. Either can seem unnatural and oppressive if carried to an extreme. Here is one further example. Indicating that a task is within a subject's capabilities is encouraging, but it also when carried to an extreme can create an unfavourable impression. It can imply that the task is trivially easy and not challenging enough to deserve effort.

There may be some ironclad rules for avoiding an unfavourable experimenter effect, such as being on time for appointments and having an orderly presentation of research materials, but most of the recommendations for producing the desired experimenter effect carry no single best way to apply them.

I will add, though it may seem out of place in a general discussion, my suggestion to a novice experimenter who wants to produce both a warm experimental atmosphere and an expectation of success that hits the right balance of encouragement and challenge. It is a one-word suggestion: Pretest. Ask your friends to act as trial subjects, and find from them how they think a stranger would respond to what you did. Modify those parts of your method that seemed to create the wrong impression, and pretest again, with different friends. When you think you are ready, begin the formal procedure but use the debriefing period (after testing is completed) to ask each subject about the impressions you created. If what they tell you shows you created impressions different from what you had hoped, scrap your preliminary data, modify your procedure, and start again.

To return to general discussion: the classical psychological experimenter effect is clearly consistent with parapsychology's best established findings about personality and attitude. A cold experimental climate is likely to make subjects feel defensive and a warm one is likely to make them feel more open; and meta-analysis of defensiveness vs. openness shows lower ESP scores with defensiveness (Watt, 1994). Expectation of success is by definition higher among sheep than among goats, and meta-analysis shows sheep to have higher ESP scores (Lawrence, 1993). Psychological research on extraversion gives us two more relevant findings. Group testing is likely to seem a warm environment to extraverts, but a cold one, compared to one-on-one tests, to introverts; and extraverts' group ESP scores have typically been found higher than introverts' (see, e.g., Palmer, 1978). Extraverts are likely (unless instructions are especially challenging) to feel that forced-choice responses are cold and uninteresting but they usually enjoy free responses. Meta-analysis showed high ESP scores for extraverts with free response but not with

forced choice (Honorton et al. 1990). These and other lines of research converge on the thesis that psi is a natural ability and that, like other abilities, it can be inhibited by a cold experimental climate or expectation of failure, and by uncongenial requirements. Conversely, better psi scores, like better scores for other abilities, are likely to appear in a warm experimental climate, under conditions that the subjects find pleasant, and when subjects have some expectation of success. Some experimenters habitually try, often by the use of extensive pretests, to set up favourable conditions, and they often find significant and meaningful patterns of psi success. Other experimenters do not make the same effort, and (since formal tests are likely in themselves to be inhibitory) those experimenters often find null results. It is as if the 'warm' experimenters try to put their subjects at ease and thus encourage them to respond naturally, in the way that permits them to use their own capacities more fully; the 'cold' ones do not. To call the former 'psi-conducive' implies that their efforts controlled psi and brought it forth, but what they do seems rather aimed at not inhibiting it. I therefore suggest that we describe them as making effective use of the experimenter effect or if that is too long a phrase for convenience, that we describe them with some other mild term, like non-inhibitory, or psi-permissive.

The Experimenter's Psi as an Influence on the Subject

Can someone, by psi, influence someone else? The answer is a clear Yes. Strong evidence from research and dramatic reports about gifted subjects show that psi can influence not only thought content and mood (the usual two topics of telepathy) but also behaviour and physiological processes. Although each of the four deserves a full scale review, I will limit myself to single samples of the supporting material and move quickly to a fifth area relevant here, use of psychic ability.

For thought content, a well controlled experiment by McMahan (1946) used random, shielded targets that consisted only of her thoughts. There was no objective record of the targets, so that clairvoyance was ruled out, and yet her subjects' thoughts corresponded significantly with her own. For mood, Kreitler & Kreitler (1982, 1984) found in meticulously double blind research that schoolboys showed more anger when their schoolmates were angry than when the schoolmates were not. For behaviour, the brilliant reflexologist Bechterev reported that while he was hidden from them and a blind assistant recorded their behaviour, dogs obeyed his mental commands (Vasiliev, 1963). For body processes, careful research by Wirth (1990) found faster healing of surgical wounds when a concealed healer hoped for it than when no healer was involved.

To this wide range of psi effects, another must be added. Psi ability can also be influenced by someone else's psi. Accounts of suddenly enhanced PK or ESP, often mediated by touch, abound in folklore and the lives of the saints. Reports of gifted psychics sometimes show it. An early one, attested by many witnesses, is that D.D. Home could not only hold a burning coal without hurting his hand but could transfer this ability, temporarily, to another person (Crookes, 1874). Since then, many reports have described how different psychics have transferred various abilities. A recent account by Vilenskaya, for example, tells of testing one of the psychics who made objects stick to their skin. The psychic did this with objects Vilenskaya had brought and the psychic had not touched. Vilenskaya then found that while she was there she herself could do so too, with coins the psychic had not touched, but that she lost the ability when she left and did not regain it (Vilenskaya, 1995).

The cases argue that psi ability (whatever it is) can be transferred from one person to another for a limited period. This means, for the specifics that concern us here, that an experimenter who is gifted in ESP or PK may be able to transfer ESP or PK ability to subjects, so that they score high. If so, we should accept as corollaries that a gifted experimenter (or sender) can keep the

subjects from using their psi (Braud, 1985) or can make them use their psi for misses rather than hits. Many experiments support the argument and its corollaries, but I will cite only two.

On the heels of the well-known Pratt & Price research (above) that shows the psychological experimenter effect, came another comparison of two experimenters that had equally clear results but is almost forgotten. MacFarland (1938) reports that his previous ESP researches had found high scores, but a colleague's had not. In a new experiment, MacFarland and his colleague tried simultaneously to act as senders, each with his own set of targets, while subjects made a single set of ESP calls. The senders sat side by side in a room two floors from the subjects' room, with no normal communication from sender to subject during the sessions. They used two procedures. In one, each sender looked at his successive targets and tried to send them; in the other each sender merely held his unopened target deck. When subjects' ESP calls were scored against MacFarland's targets, the scores were significantly high in each of the two procedures; when the calls were scored against the other man's, scores were at chance for each procedure. This cannot be interpreted as the classical experimenter effect because of the absence of either verbal or nonverbal cues. Its results need a less conventional, more radical theory.

What is perhaps the most striking demonstration of the same effect was reported by West and Fisk (1953). West had previously been finding null ESP scores; Fisk had been finding high ones. The two did a joint experiment where experimental materials were mailed to subjects, and the subjects responded by mail. Subjects to whom West mailed materials had null ESP scores; those to whom Fisk mailed them had high ones. When Fisk did all the mailing but half the targets had been prepared by West from a random number table and half by Fisk using the same method and the same table, subjects had null scores on the targets West prepared but high scores on the targets Fisk prepared.

Results like these occurred often enough to be given labels. 'Psi-conducive' was used to denote experimenters like MacFarland and Fisk, and 'psi-inhibitory' for experimenters like MacFarland's colleague and West. Psi-conducive is a strong term, with connotations of an active process. It seems appropriate for results like those MacFarland and Fisk produced, and in my opinion it should be used only for similar effects.

Though the term psi-conducive has become familiar, it is shocking to work through its implications. It must make us question the validity of any conclusions from a psi-conducive experimenter's data. Suppose, for example, that a psi-conducive experimenter thinks some condition, let's say a large target, makes for high psi scores. He runs tests with large targets and his subjects score high. Do his data show that large targets are favourable for psi? Not necessarily. He may merely have brought forth or conduced the high scores that he wanted. Replication in different laboratories will not resolve the issue. Successful replications may mean only that several psi-conducive experimenters in different locations all hoped the hypothesis would be supported. Nor can the question be answered by introducing the usual control condition, a comparison of large targets with small ones, because a psi-conducive experimenter might influence subjects to produce null or negative scores in the control condition. This line of reasoning must make research workers wonder if all our efforts and our attempts at rigor when we conduct an experiment yield meaningless findings that invalidly support whatever bias we hold. More broadly, it casts doubt on a large body of research. The accumulating data that have been so gratifying to process-oriented theorists, the successful replications and the converging results when the same concept was studied by different methods, all now become suspect. When experimenters can be psi-conducive in this strong sense of the word, it threatens the scientific enterprise of parapsychology and its body of knowledge.

But like it or not, the fact remains that some experimenters are psi-conducive. We must confront it; we must consider the issues it raises. I will address at some length the problem of damage control, then mention other questions that may have constructive outcomes. Not every experimenter is psi-conducive. When must the possibility of a psi-conducive effect be taken seriously, and when is it so remote that it can safely be disregarded? On the assumption that only those with exceptionally strong psi can be psi-conducive, three avenues of inquiry open. (1) When the experimenter acted as a subject in psi experiments, how did he or she score? (2) If the experimenter conducted other research, what scores were obtained? (3) What spontaneous experiences has the experimenter had?

We can expect a psi-conducive experimenter acting as a subject to make unusually high scores (or unusually low ones if the research was disliked). Acting as experimenter, we can similarly expect significant outcomes. And there is at least an informal norm for spontaneous experiences. When asked about them, most subjects report having had some, or suspecting that perhaps they did so, and the reports usually fall into a few familiar categories like a vague premonition of good or bad news or occasionally, when the telephone rings, knowing who is on the other side of the line. It is also not infrequent for a subject to report one or a very few experiences that are more striking, such as a dream that anticipates the death of a loved person. We can expect a psi-conducive experimenter to have had more frequent and more striking experiences.

For me, running through this short checklist is reassuring. In my early days as a subject, my scores on ESP cards were so-so: an average that hovered just below 5.2 where 5 is expected by chance. Though I made one hit in Honorton's laboratory, it must be corrected for selection; it was preceded by failures. On spontaneous experiences: some time ago I tried for another purpose to compile mine, and the list was a meagre one. As for my record of research, there were indeed a good many cases of supporting the hypotheses I tested, though in the sheep-goat replications the successful series were interspersed with null series (see Schmeidler & McConnell, 1958, p.47). In later work it often was necessary for me to modify my procedure again and again before finding the results I had anticipated (e.g. Schmeidler, 1961; Schmeidler, 1983; Schmeidler, 1985) and this is consistent with my slowly achieving clearer instructions and conditions that the subjects found more acceptable; it is consistent with the classical experimenter effect. Further, one set of experiments was a real disappointment to me. My hypothesis was that ESP finds its target by successive approximations, homing in on it as more information becomes available. Three formal series were devoted to testing this hypothesis (Schmeidler, 1968; Schmeidler & Lewis, 1968; Schmeidler & Lewis, 1969). Each series showed psi occurring in one or another unexpected way, which implies that the experimental climate was warm enough, but not one series, or even the three combined, gave any support to my hypothesis. This leads me to a conclusion that pleases me but that you may discount as self-serving. The conclusion is that I could find affirmative data only when examining a hypothesis that deserved affirmation.

One method of damage control, then, is using data from experimenters who are not psi-conducive. Others will depend on the limits of experimenter-conduced psi. Once those limits are learned, they can be built into the research design. Suppose we find, for instance, that a psi-conducive experimenter is not effective at one remove. In that case others can conduct the actual testing of his or her hypotheses (and in exchange he or she could run tests, blind, for the hypotheses of those other experimenters). If psi-conducive effects are only short-term, the latter data of prolonged sessions would be usable; given other limits, other designs can be used. There may also be many other methods of damage control. One that is sometimes practical is to test a hypothesis by using data from research that had been conducted for another

purpose, in ignorance of the hypothesis now being studied.

It is time to turn to different issues. A key question asks: What characterises the psi-conducive? This is a variant of an old question that has not yet been answered, about the causes and concomitants of psychic ability. Psi-conducive experimenters might provide parapsychology with its most useful opening wedge here, because they are highly intelligent participants who are already deeply interested in the inquiry. My impression is that they all tend to be open, enthusiastic, and concerned with others; but these general traits are not unique to the psi-conducive. If, however, they discuss with each other what they have in common, their insights may uncover some special facts in their life histories, or some body characteristics, or personality quirks, or even some pattern of brain function that would not occur to an outsider. Follow-up research might then find that any such commonality is a key factor, or one of the key factors, in strong psychic ability. Discussion among the psi-conducive would also identify how they differ from each other, and a difference would indicate that that particular characteristic is not, by itself, a necessary constituent of strong psychic ability.

The same general approach should, of course, be made with the other group that seems to have an unusual effect upon psi scores: those who are called psi-inhibitory. Inquiry may find that some have been producing a cold experimental climate and thus discouraged the openness that is so helpful for psi success, as it is for success with other abilities. But there may be some who are the counterparts of the psi-conducive, and who during experimentation inhibit their subjects' psi. They would be truly psi-inhibitory rather than psi-discouraging. If the research with the psi-conducive is productive and some special commonality found among them, it would not surprise me to find that the psi-inhibitory have the same characteristic — but that in them it is accompanied by a deep reserve instead of by the openness that the psi-conducive seem to show. The control group for studying the psi-conducive is not the psi-inhibitory; it is the part of the population that has shown no unusual psi ability.

The basic question raised by psi-conduciveness is, of course, what happens when it occurs? Only four possibilities have occurred to me. All four are vague and unsatisfactory. I can think of no experimental test for most of them, but mention them briefly here in the hope that others will take them as a point of departure and find a better answer. One is that the experimenter sets up a field within which the psi process functions more readily. (But what is 'a field'? How is it set up?) Another is that a psi field exists and a psi-conducive experimenter can provide a bridge to it or can conduce others to gain access to it. A third is that the experimenter somehow acts upon the targets to make them more accessible to psi. (This is testable by having others, not the previously designated subjects, work with the same targets.) The fourth is that the experimenter uses upon the subjects the sort of process that must be postulated for psychic healing either by directly influencing their responses (which seems unlikely when they are calling separate sets of shielded targets) or by creating in them the mood which makes psi success more likely.

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