

[Letter on capricious psi]

By Joop M. Houtkooper

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To the Editor:

The article by J.E. Kennedy (*JP*, **67**, 55-74) is a sign that parapsychology takes its hardest problems seriously. Being one of the pioneers of research into experimenter effects, Kennedy challenges parapsychology as a science to come to terms with the difficult - "capricious, actively evasive, unsustainable" - properties of its subject matter. However, such challenges may overstretch the abilities of the researchers: The scope of experimenter effects became clear in the 1970s, and this resulted in a crisis in process-oriented research because any experimental result could be due to the preferences of the experimenter instead of the subjects partaking in the experiment. However, as forgetfulness of uncomfortable facts is part of human nature, experimenters could not resist the temptation to try both old and new experimental paradigms, such as the ganzfeld, in the hope that the experimenter effects would somehow not play an important role. Interesting results were obtained, although the experimenter effect was never resolved by a better methodology. That is, the success of the ganzfeld was "merely" fortuitous, for reasons which still have to be thoroughly understood.

Kennedy's article raises a different challenge, as he considers the often-observed breakdown of replicability in the results of parapsychological experiments. His arguments for calling psi "unsustainable" are apt, but when he calls psi "actively evasive," one has to consider the consequences. Going beyond a mere phenomenological description, Kennedy suggests the existence of an "evading agency" and indeed sees the likely cause of what happens in "some type of higher consciousness." The fact that Kennedy starts his article with an eloquent citation from William James, in which James holds "the Creator" responsible for psi results "eternally remaining baffling," illustrates both authors put the cause of the unsustainability of psi outside of human control and thereby - one can hardly interpret this line of reasoning otherwise - outside of science.

How does one avoid getting stuck in a dead end, even if in awe? First of all, I am an optimist and thus believe in the adaptability of the scientific method to eventually meet the challenges by the subject matter, whatever they are. Anyway, we shouldn't stop thinking, and in this case I see a strong parallel with the poltergeist. Cases of recurrent spontaneous PK, or poltergeist phenomena, originally were often ascribed to, literally, a ghost, as the activities suggested both nastiness and intelligence. (The word "poltergeist" means "brash ghost," although in the German parapsychological literature the term "Spuk" is more common.) As research into poltergeist cases has shown, the more likely explanation is a "focal

person,” often around the age of puberty, who is in stressful circumstances but is inhibited from expressing him- or herself in any other way.

Therefore, the explanation of poltergeist cases is not, as the term poltergeist suggests, intelligent behavior by an immaterial being, a ghost. By the same token, the “actively evasive” behavior observed in psi experiments should not readily be ascribed to a “higher consciousness.” Rather, we should look for the focal person or persons and their motives for causing the unsustainable nature of psi in experiments.

My interpretation of psi's unsustainability is two-fold: First, the experimenter may have a large influence on his or her data, being possibly the most motivated person about the outcome of the experiment. However, this motivation may be a bit contradictory: On the one hand, the experimenter wants a good result, to which the application of his or her psi would be helpful. On the other hand, he or she wants an objectively valid result, so that the findings are generalizable, but this should exclude the role of the experimenter's own psi. The problem of interference by the experimenter's psi was paramount in the experimenter effect crisis of the 1980s. Secondly, my interpretation of the unsustainability is that psi defies attempts at control. Specifically, what would control imply? Anyone remembering the experiments by Remy Chauvin in the mid-1960s with PK on the radioactive decay of uranium might suppose that with some more effort, harnessed by control over PK, nuclear warheads might easily go up in smoke and produce fission products. A healthy reluctance and fear of control might cause experimenters to influence their experiments in such a way that psi appears to be escaping control. There might be no easy way to prove this view, but its possibility should be appreciated. The ganzfeld is a case in point: It is hard to see how the apparent transfer of information while one is sitting relaxed under reduced sensory inputs might be used in destructive ways.

Kennedy's favorite hypothesis of “some type of higher consciousness” causing psi's unsustainability may be seen in another way: We may well need to entertain bold hypotheses in order to eventually solve the problems we encounter in parapsychological experiments. An example from physics is the model of the atom proposed by Bohr, Kramers and Slater in the early 1920s. This involved abandoning some of the holy shrines in physics, namely the laws of conservation of energy and momentum. Such bold, desperate efforts led to the theory of quantum mechanics a few years later.

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