

[Response to letter on capricious psi]

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To the Editor:

Joop Houtkooper's letter expresses several thoughtful reservations about the hypothesis that some type of higher consciousness may be the factor causing psi to be unsustainable and at times actively evasive. One point that may merit clarification is his statement that this suggestion puts "the cause of unsustainability outside of human control and thereby ... outside science." A more precise statement may be that, under the worst-case scenario, psi could be outside *experimental* science. Psi could be similar to studying the weather. Scientific models and statistical predictions may be possible, but control over the phenomena that allows reliable experimental manipulation may not be attainable.

It is also possible that an independent consciousness or agency could have a role without completely precluding experimental research. That would depend on the characteristics of the higher consciousness. For the near term, the idea of a higher consciousness may affect our expectations and explanations for psi more than the design of research projects.

In the months since that paper was written, I have become even more inclined to favor the idea that the factor that makes psi unsustainable has characteristics of consciousness. It appears to me that psi effects vary to a greater degree than would be consistent with a force-like natural law causing psi to be unsustainable. Psi effects are sometimes impressively consistent with human motivations and at other times seem to actively avoid human motivations and intentions. In addition, the duration of the impressive phase also varies to a degree that does not seem consistent with unsustainability being caused by a fixed law of nature. It is more like a conscious being decides somewhat arbitrarily “ok, enough of this.” Situations when the desired, intended psi effects stop but unintended, undesired internal effects or psi missing occur, seem almost defiant or the result of opposing wills.

Prior to the advent of J.B. Rhine's research program in the 1930's, spirits of some type were widely assumed to have a causal role in paranormal phenomena. That model recognized the limited human control and the independence of the phenomena. Rhine's experimental research program was based on the assumption that psi was guided by the motivations and intentions of those directly involved, and usually by the intentions of designated participants. This assumption was driven by the scientific need for simple, testable models and was fully appropriate at that stage. However, this assumption has not produced significant scientific progress and has provided no useful explanation for either the unsustainable nature of experimental research or the occurrence of the great majority of spontaneous cases. It appears to me that it is time to move on.

I have reached the point where I believe that factors other than the identifiable motivations and psychological conditions of those directly involved have a dominant role in psi, and these other factors fluctuate and seem to have their own agenda in ways that would normally be attributed to conscious or willful behavior. The shammanistic model that paranormal effects occur when spirits of some type are temporarily enticed to fulfill human wants seems more consistent with the phenomena than the assumption that psi effects are predominantly controlled by the motivations and psychological conditions of designated persons.

The emerging model that seems most consistent with available data is that impressive psi is associated with the motivations of certain, selected individuals and operates in a goal-oriented manner, usually as experimenter effects (Kennedy, 2004), but then consciousness or other factors separate

from the person's identifiable motivations come into play and inhibit or sabotage the psi effects. These other factors could be a deeply unconscious component or module of mind that is dissociated from the person's normal awareness and motivations and that has the purpose of preventing sustained psi. An alternative that appears more plausible to me is to conceptualize these other factors as external to the person, such as a form of consciousness not associated with living people or emerging from the combined consciousness of other people.

One research strategy that has great potential for understanding the sources and constraints of psi is to identify and explore the actual function of psi and its effects on people. In retrospect, it is remarkable that in the more than a century of scientific research so little effort has been devoted to considering the basic question of what psi actually achieves. The failure to address this basic question may be a root cause of the lack of progress in parapsychology. A summary of the initial research on this topic concluded "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). For the most part, examination of the function or purpose of psi remains to be done for the entire range of psi phenomena, including experimental research, spontaneous cases, and even mediumistic investigations.

References

- Kennedy, J.E. (2000). Do people guide psi or does psi guide people? Evidence and implications from life and lab. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, **94**, 130-150.
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Return to: [Spirituality and Paranormal Phenomena](#)