

## An Uneven Discussion of Psi in Psychoanalysis and Culture<sup>1</sup>

Etzel Cardeña

Lund University

Review of: *The Paranormal Surrounds Us: Psychic Phenomena in Literature, Culture and Psychoanalysis*, by Richard Reichbart. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018. Pp. 232 (paperback) \$45.00 ISBN 9 780786 495368

To the chagrin of the dogmatic skeptics, surveys in various countries (for a review see Watt & Tierney, 2014) consistently reveal that majorities of respondents throughout the globe have experienced what they interpret as psi phenomena. Thus, psi could be expected to be threaded into the tapestry of life and culture. *The Paranormal Surrounds Us (PSU)* is a collection of 10 articles, an afterword, and 3 appendices that explores this cloth. Six items have been published before, but in fairly inaccessible sources. Some aspects of *PSU* are of great interest and value, others not so much. I start the review with the former.

The author, Richard Reichbart, is a psychoanalyst and J. D., with an interest in literature and anthropology. He was also a short-term analysand of Jule Eisenbud, famous for his investigation of the “thoughtographies” of Ted Serios and for his works on psi and psychoanalysis (Eisenbud, 1968, 1970). The first five chapters of *PSU* discuss apparent psi phenomena in the work of Shakespeare, Tolstoy, E. M. Forster, G. K. Chesterton, Ingmar Bergman, and James Joyce. I appreciated the general thrust of this section, although of course it could be expanded enormously considering that psi has been experienced by, or at least of interest to, many distinguished scientists, writers, and artists (Cardeña, 2015; Cardeña, Iribas, & Reijman, 2012). Having recently had the temerity to embark into Joyce’s *Ulysses*, I could identify synchronistic dreams and other psi events suffusing that work. And it was a delightful surprise to find that Chesterton (n. d.), the creator of the debunking character, *Father Brown*, wrote a play with a magician who has real psychic powers up his sleeve, the same idea behind the more recent play *The Shawl*, by David Mamet (1985). I was far less convinced, though, by some of Reichbart’s statements about *Anna Karenina* and *Hamlet*, which struck me as arguable or inflated (see below).

The second, and largest, section of *PSU* includes two chapters on psi and psychoanalysis, with the author’s reflections on his analysis with Jule Eisenbud, Freud’s conclusions about psi phenomena and more recent psychoanalytic discussion of psi, and some examples of ostensible psi in Reichbart’s practice. What stood out for me in this section was what Reichbart described as Freud’s principles of psi, based on the latter’s papers on ostensible psi in psychoanalytic practice:

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<sup>1</sup> Send correspondence to: Etzel Cardeña, Ph. D., CERCAP Department of Psychology, Allhelgona kyrkogata 16a, Lund 22100, Sweden. [etzel.cardena@psy.lu.se](mailto:etzel.cardena@psy.lu.se)

- “Psi Phenomena Is [sic] a Part of Everyday Life Not Just a Consequence of Traumatic Events in the Past or Early Separation Anxieties.”
- “The State of Sleep May Facilitate Telepathy.”
- “Telepathic Data Can Be Transmitted to a Person’s Unconscious and Can Be Transformed in the Same Way as a ‘Day Residue’ Would Be Transformed in the Manifest Content of a Dream.”
- “The Analyst Can Share Telepathic Data of Which the Patient May not Be Aware to Make an Interpretation.”
- “One Motivation for a Patient Unconsciously Evoking Psi Is to Compete with Other Patients for the Psychoanalyst’s Attention.”
- “The Telepathic Episode Is Often a Function Not Only of Repression of Emotionally Charged Material by the Patient, but of Repression of Similar or Related Emotionally Charged Material by the Analyst”
- “When Psi Does Occur, Popular Explanations for Its Occurrence Need Not Be Accepted and Other Hypotheses for Its Occurrence May Be More Accurate”

As to the first principle, the main current psychological theories of psi (First Sight and PMIR, see Stanford, 2015) posit that psi is a fundamental part of (usually nonconscious) mental life, and that it follows motivation urges. There is also likely some role, first enunciated by the early psychoanalyst Ferenczi (1955), for early traumatic events (and/or insecure attachment) to bring about alterations of consciousness that may facilitate psi experiences and/or beliefs (e.g., Marcusson-Clavertz, Gušić, Bengtsson, Jacobsen, & Cardeña, 2017). The second principle is supported by meta-analyses showing that dreams and other procedures that aim to alter the state of consciousness are more related to psi than the ordinary state (Baptista, Derakhshani, & Tressoldi, 2015; Cardeña & Marcusson-Clavertz, 2015; Storm et al., 2017).

I am not aware of studies on the third principle, but it conforms to my dream experiences, in which ostensible precognitive psi and day residues are often fused and/or metaphorically transformed in similar ways (Cardeña, 2019). Principles 4-6 are in general agreement with some reports from psychoanalytic practice (e.g., De Peyer, 2016) and will be of most interest to psychoanalysts and psychotherapists. Regrettably *PSU* does not mention anything about non-psychoanalytic general clinical considerations, such as in the case of people reporting potentially disturbing psi-related experiences (see Targ & Schlitz, 2000 for a good treatment of this). The seventh principle was formulated lucidly by Truzzi (1987), who advocated the use of the psi hypothesis when ordinary hypotheses proved wanting.

The final section of *PUS* has two chapters on the overlap of anthropology and psi, and one on juridical aspects and psi. The first one provides an interesting but second-hand account of the role and presumed psi abilities of the Navajo Hand Trembler. The other chapter, and the most successful and best written in the book, addresses the relation of magic (in the sense of stage magic) and psi. The thesis of the chapter is that shamans and even some psi researchers (e.g., Batcheldor and Brooke Smith, who investigated the effect of fake table levitations on potentially real ones) deliberately engage in magical

tricks to evoke actual psi. Although *PSU* does not mention it, the real effects of well-staged shamanic tricks include the foundational account of the First Nations shaman Quesalid (Lévi-Strauss, 1963; see also Whitehead, 2000), who learned shamanic “tricks” and despite his own skepticism apparently became an efficacious healer. Besides shamanism, hypnosis, performance, and ritual activities also include “truthful trickeries,” which may start with a deceit to then become genuine experiences and psychophysiological events for the doer and her/his audience (Cardeña & Beard, 1996).

The final chapter discusses how the Western judicial system could be transformed by consideration of psi phenomena. The author’s thesis is not very clear and parts from the unfalsifiable and inscrutable premise that an accident or crime might have been at least partly determined by conscious or unconscious psychokinetic/telepathic abilities of the victim. This scenario follows Tanagra’s (1967) hypothesis that precognitive events should be explained not as abeyances of the commonly experienced (but questioned in physics) linear time, but as psychokinetic (PK) influences by the person having the precognition. While granting the possibility of PK, this explanation does not make sense to me for a number of reasons. Just to mention two, the experimental evidence has only typically found evidence for very small psychokinetic effects. If even a few people could exert powers enough to produce collapses of (precognized) buildings or landslides, we would have become extinct a long time ago given general human aggressivity. And, in the case of many people having dreams of a future disaster, as in the Aberfan disaster, the PK hypothesis would require different people somehow coordinating themselves to make this disaster occur, even resulting in the death of some of them (cf. Barker, 1967).

*PSU* mentions something in passing that should be celebrated, namely that psychoanalysis has rejected in the last few decades Freud’s “phallogentric” (i. e., male) view of all of humankind, but I wish that the content of the book had reflected this change more. For example, the cover shows Shakespeare, Freud, and Bergman, with a silhouette of a male at a distance, as if the “us” in the title only referred to men. And only men (Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Forster, Chesterton, Bergman, and Joyce) are discussed in full chapters on literature, ignoring extraordinary women writers who very seriously considered psi in their work, such as George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans; 1859-2017) in her *Lifted Veil*. Reichbart’s default term for humans is “men” and all generic psychoanalysts are “he”s.

Reichbart also engages occasionally in the kind of evidence-free speculation that has given orthodox psychoanalysis such a patchy reputation. An egregious example is that, when discussing one of Anna Karenina’s dream, he concludes that “a ‘beating in the bedroom’ -from a psychoanalytic viewpoint- represents a classic distortion of what is referred to as the primal scene,’ where a young child, as witness to parental intercourse and so predisposed by temperament and circumstance, may undergo the type of trauma which ultimately leads to suicide” (p. 26). It is arguable whether the dream image represents what Reichbart thinks it does, but what does not seem even arguable is to assert that witnessing one’s parents having sex as a child is a risk factor for later suicide. If that were the case we might not even be here because our tribal ancestors likely witnessed the “primal scene” often and at least those “predisposed” to it would have committed suicide. In a literature search I could not find a single research study supporting the book’s contention.

Reichbart’s literature review of psychoanalytic works discussing psi is adequate, but not his review of the more general psi literature. While I agree that older literature may have much to offer, this should

not be done at the price of ignoring recent work. For example, in “Psi and Psychoanalysis I” the reader is referred only to compendia of the psi literature published in the 1970s. In some cases, this seeming ignorance of recent works helps the author (e.g., he favors the hypothesis that precognition can be explained by PK because he disregards current theories explaining PK through precognition, see May & Marwaha, 2015) and at times it does not (e.g., he could have included current psychological theories of psi to strengthen his case that psi is ubiquitous and most often unconscious). In all cases, this disregard of recent literature works against the reader.

Other aspects of scholarship and proof editing leave much to be desired. Among various other mistakes, Henry Sidgwick is incorrectly described as F. W. H. Myers’s brother; Janine de Peyer’s last name is variously written as de Peyer, Depeyer, and De Peyer; the husband of Anna Karenina, Karenin, is referred to as Karenina; the clinical term “dissociative” is repeatedly written as “disassociative,” and so on.

And one final grating feature of PSU is how extreme are some of its statements. Eisenbud’s work on psi may deserve greater recognition, but it is absurd to write that “[Eisenbud’s] work in parapsychology [is] far and away the most important evidential and theoretical work in the history of parapsychology... All the resources of parapsychology should be put forward toward an examination of the Serious data” (pp. 210-211). And to go from pointing out the importance to Hamlet of discerning the nature of his father’s ghost to concluding that “the play proceeds very much like a scientific research report” (p. 15) is way over the top. Reichbart could have heeded an admonition from another cultural giant, Euripides (2010, p. 215), who mentioned in his *Orestes* that “The gods hate overdoing it, so do the people.”

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