

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor:

I am writing in response to J. E. Kennedy's generally favorable comments on my chapter "The Case against Psi," in the volume *Parapsychology: A Handbook for the 21st Century* (Stokes, 2015). Kennedy (2016) states that he is absolutely certain that paranormal phenomena occur due to several striking personal experiences of his own (which he does not present). This letter examines the claim that the existence of psi can be proven on the basis of my own personal experiences.

I myself have had three ostensibly paranormal experiences. One of these is a precognitive dream. The following account of this dream is taken from my book *The Nature of Mind*.

I dreamed that one of my star math pupils and I were seated in a dark theater. The student was eating the inner core of a tootsie roll pop, and I was eating the outside layers, which had become detached from the core. I related this dream the next day to a dream study group I was sponsoring at school, which was patterned after the experiential dream sharing/interpretation groups developed by Montague Ullman (1987). I had also made a written record of this dream for the purpose of reporting it to the group. About ten minutes after the dream group ended, I received a phone call from a reporter from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* asking me for my comments about an honor I had received. It turned out that the student of my dream had been named a Presidential Scholar (a very rare honor given only to about 140 students in the country) and that he had named me as his Distinguished Teacher (probably because he was a math whiz and I was his math teacher). We were both to travel to Washington at taxpayers' expense for a week of festivities, including a meeting with President Reagan. Thus, this was a very significant event in my life. The dream seemed to symbolize the fact that my student was getting the central award, whereas I was getting a satellite award. It would be hard to explain my "tootsie roll" dream on the basis of unconscious inference, as I had no way of knowing that my student was up for this award (in fact I did not even know what a Presidential Scholar was until the reporter called me). Also, no one at the school knew of the award prior to my receiving the phone call from the reporter (Stokes, 1997, pp. 18–19).

I have witnessed two ostensible instances of macro-PK involving the anomalous behavior of four malicious copies of Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, which beamed me on two different occasions. In the first such incident, a copy of this book fell off the bookcase above my bed in the middle of the night and landed on my head while I was fast asleep, waking me. No one shared my bedroom and there were only three other people in the house (my nuclear family). This was in the middle of the night (ca. 3 a.m.) when everyone in the house (including me) was asleep. Earthquakes are rare in our area (Buzzard's Bay, Massachusetts), and there were no reports of seismic activity that night (or any other night that I can recall). A few years later, three copies of the same book fell off a high shelf and onto my head as I browsed in an academic bookstore. Perhaps some entity was trying to send me a message. At that point I bought and read the book but found it to have little in the way of personal relevance.

My sister and I experienced a collectively-perceived auditory hallucination of my mother's voice calling my sister's name in an admonitory tone when we were horsing around in the house. We were the only ones in the (stand-alone) house at the time.

I find these events difficult to account for on the basis of standard physics (excluding the bookstore event). The first flying book experience and the shared auditory hallucination immediately seemed anomalous and otherworldly to me at the times of their occurrence. I take them as genuine psi events. So, following Kennedy (and the rules of logic) I too should believe in psi. However, I feel squeamish about overthrowing the laws of physics based on the few experiences I have personally witnessed.

One of my students in a parapsychology course I taught at the University of Michigan told me his father was knocked off a park bench by an invisible blow to the jaw at the same time as his wife broke her jaw on some gymnastic equipment. If this experience occurred as described, it would pretty much prove the existence of psi all by itself (the coincidence hypothesis would not work in this case, as people are not frequently being punched in the jaw by invisible fists).

Although my own psi experiences may lead me toward a belief in the existence of psi, I do not believe that psi can be made to manifest on demand in the context of a controlled experiment or that psi has been experimentally *proven* to exist.

Mystical Experiences

As I emerged from a very serious depression as a graduate student, I experienced deep, repeated, and long mystical states in which I seemed to be merged into a benign collective consciousness. The world seemed to glow with brilliant colors. These mystical experiences deeply affected me (much more than my personal psi experiences as recounted above). They likely underlie my favorable disposition toward philosophical and theological views that are based on the theory of a group mind, world mind, or collective consciousness. In these mystical experiences, it seemed as though I was in direct contact with a higher, transcendent consciousness. Although it might be possible to attribute these mystical experiences to some sort of manic psychopathology on my part, these experiences are still with me and underpin my belief in a collective consciousness much more than a flotilla of flying books will ever do. Please note that these experiences do not constitute evidence of psi.

These numinous experiences also coincided with my decision to pursue a career in parapsychology. These experiences may be factors (along with philosophical analyses) that led me to my current view that the universe is based in mind rather than matter and to my embrace of mentalistic philosophies such as idealism, panpsychism, pandeism, and panendeism. (I find it almost impossible to tease these positions apart scientifically or philosophically.)

Aspects of modern physics such as quantum nonlocality would seem to open the door to psi, although for a different take on this, see Carroll (2016). The existence of a collective mind would also seem to grant an opening for psi phenomena. Thus, these mystical experiences may provide indirect support for psi. Unlike Kennedy, I am a little reluctant to say that I *know* that psi exists, but then I am a solipsist at heart, doubting the existence of almost everything (including the physical world, if taken at face value). Similarly, I neither believe nor know that psi does not exist (it being impossible to falsify an existential hypothesis in any event). However, the existing body of *experimental* data seems to fit the pattern that would be expected if psi does not exist or, more likely, is almost impossible to capture on demand in an experimental situation.

The Elusiveness of Psi

If psi exists, it occurs very rarely and unexpectedly. That's what makes psi events appear to be miraculous and surprising. The idea that one might be able to make psi appear on demand in a controlled experiment may be the height of audacity and undue optimism. It might be similar to a group of physicists setting up an array of instruments on the perimeter of a football field and waiting for a meteor to impact the turf. From a negative result, it would be foolish to conclude that meteors do not exist. The search should be widened to include meteorites that have already fallen (i.e., reports of spontaneous experiences). Although my own psi experiences may lead me toward a belief in the existence of psi, I am skeptical that psi can be made to manifest on demand in the context of a controlled experiment.

Going forward, the analysis of psi experiments should not be exclusively based on tests of overall statistical significance of traditional meta-analyses (in view of the fact that the assumptions underlying such tests, such as the absence of fraud or data selection in the database, are not likely to be met). I would recommend instead an analysis based on the effect sizes produced by individual experimenters or experimental paradigms. I would strongly encourage parapsychologists to revive the study of spontaneous cases along

with narrative approaches to the study of psi. Reports of such cases might be published in the main journals of parapsychology. Anthologies of the best spontaneous cases could be compiled. This might yield evidence for psi that will be far more convincing than meta-analyses of microscopic experimental effects. If anyone is interested in undertaking such a project, please contact me.

As for Jim Kennedy, I've shown you mine, now you show us yours.

References

- Carroll, S. (2016). *The big picture*. New York, NY: Dutton.
- Kennedy, J. E. (2016). [Review of the book *Parapsychology: A handbook for the 21st Century*, edited by E. Cardeña, J. Palmer, & D. Marcusson-Clavertz]. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 80, 99–106.
- Stokes, D. M. (1997). *The nature of mind*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Stokes, D. M. (2015). The case against psi. In E. Cardeña, J. Palmer, & D. Marcusson-Clavertz (Eds.), *Parapsychology: A handbook for the 21st Century*, (pp. 42–48). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Ullman, M. (1987). The experiential dream group. In M. Ullman & C. Limmer (Eds.), *The variety of dream experience* (pp. 1–26). New York, NY: Continuum.

DOUGLAS M. STOKES

424 Little Lake Drive, #3
Ann Arbor, MI 48103, USA
Dstokes48103@yahoo.com

To the Editor:

Doug Stokes sent me a prepublication copy of the preceding letter that discusses his thinking about the role of personal spontaneous psi experiences in forming beliefs about paranormal phenomena. In the letter, Stokes said that he has had a few personal experiences that he takes as “genuine psi events.” But he also said “I feel squeamish about overthrowing the laws of physics based on the few experiences I personally witnessed” and “I am a little reluctant to say that I *know* that psi exists, but then I am a solipsist at heart, doubting the existence of almost everything.” He also stated “I do not believe that psi can be made to manifest on demand in the context of a controlled experiment or that psi has been experimentally *proven* to exist.” In addition, he said that some personal mystical experiences significantly influenced his views about the nature of reality.

Stokes's letter was inspired by my comment in a book review that I am certain that paranormal phenomena sometimes occur based on my personal experiences (Kennedy, 2016c). In his letter, Stokes encouraged me to provide more explanation than my brief comments in the book review. His letter motivated me to write this letter describing my views about psi and the role of spontaneous experiences.

I am less philosophically inclined than Stokes and for me the matter is relatively straightforward. I have had personal experiences that I am convinced were paranormal (outside currently accepted scientific understanding) and therefore I am convinced that such phenomena sometimes occur. Science continually evolves. I take it as a given that some phenomena are currently not understood. However, that does not mean that I believe that all or most claims about psi are true.

I agree with Stokes that psi has not been experimentally proven to exist and I think he is probably correct that psi cannot be made to manifest on demand in controlled experiments. However, I am not certain that he is correct about the latter point because the severely underpowered exploratory research methods used in virtually all past experiments make any conclusions questionable. I expect that the matter will become clear with preregistered, well-powered, confirmatory research and other related methodological improvements, including measures to prevent experimenter fraud (Kennedy, 2016b).

I described some of my personal paranormal experiences and how they affected my life in a paper published in 2000 that is available online (Kennedy, 2000). Prior to that time, I considered the best strat-

egy for handling personal psi experiences was not to talk about them. However, during the 1990s Rhea White frequently advocated that I write a paper about my experiences. Such writings were the basis for her approach to exceptional human experiences. Finally, at the end of the decade, I realized that my personal experiences shaped my thinking about psi. Given the lack of properly designed confirmatory research and the high probability of psi-mediated experimenter effects if the working assumptions for experimental parapsychology were true, I concluded that the available experimental research provided virtually no reliable insights about psi. The phenomena for which I had the most confidence were my personal experiences—and they should not be withheld.

Working on that paper brought into focus the fundamentally different worldviews about psi for spontaneous cases and for experiments. For spontaneous cases, psi is generally viewed as something external to a person that guides a person and is related to spirituality. For experiments, psi is generally viewed as something that a person uses to fulfill his or her personal motivations and is related to technology.

One major point of the paper was that the great majority of my experiences did not have the practical, motivation-driven benefits that would be expected if the assumptions of experimental parapsychology were applicable. The overall effects of the experiences were a sense that my life was guided and had purpose—psi guiding me (spirituality) rather than me guiding psi (technology). When I looked back on the experience that had the most striking practical benefit, I realized that the benefit could have been achieved more easily in a way that was much less dramatic and that was more normal for my behavior. In retrospect, the experience appeared to have been contrived to be a dramatic paranormal experience. A similar evaluation of alternatives would be a useful investigation for other ostensible paranormal experiences that appear to have tangible practical benefits.

I had many other personal psi experiences that are not described in the paper. The paper was intended to convey a sense of the types of events that influenced my thinking about psi. The experiences were not described with the level of detail that would be needed to attempt to convince readers of their paranormal validity. I do not believe that those who are skeptical of psi by disposition and experience will change their worldview based on reading about personal psi experiences of others. My current working assumption is that people basically live in different worlds with regard to the occurrence of and beliefs about paranormal phenomena (Kennedy, 2016a). Research that characterizes these different worlds for paranormal experiences and beliefs would be useful. I do not expect that scientific research will provide bridges between these different worlds in the foreseeable future. However, I hope that this expectation is proven incorrect, and I am supportive of those who conduct research with more optimistic expectations.

My original book review was substantially longer than the word limit for book reviews in the *Journal*. As a compromise, the published review was a condensed version (Kennedy 2016c) and the longer review was posted online (Kennedy, 2016d). The longer version has more explanation of my views and includes the reference with my personal experiences. Given the frequent misunderstandings of my views about psi, I posted on my website a concise (two-page) summary of my current conclusions about paranormal phenomena (Kennedy, 2013).

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 Psychological Research*, *94*, 130–150. Retrieved from <http://jeksite.org/psi/jaspr00.pdf>
- Kennedy, J. E. (2013). Conclusions about paranormal phenomena. Retrieved from <http://jeksite.org/psi/conclusions.pdf>
- Kennedy, J. E. (2016a). Coming to terms with the trickster. *Abstracts of Presented Papers: The First Combined Convention of the Parapsychological Association (59th) and the Society for Scientific Exploration (35th)*, p. 52. Retrieved from http://jeksite.org/psi/trickster_panel_paper.pdf
- Kennedy, J. E. (2016b). Is the methodological revolution in psychology over or just beginning? *Journal of Parapsychology*, *80*, 156–168. Retrieved from http://jeksite.org/psi/methods_predictions.pdf
- Kennedy, J. E. (2016c). [Review of the book *Parapsychology: A handbook for the 21st Century*, edited by E. Cardena, J. Palmer, & D. Marcusson-Clavertz]. *Journal of Parapsychology*, *80*, 99–106.

Kennedy, J. E. (2016d). Review of *Parapsychology: A Handbook for the 21st Century*, 2015, edited by E. Cardeña, J. Palmer, and D. Marcusson-Clavertz. Retrieved from http://jeksite.org/psi/handbook_review.pdf

J. E. KENNEDY

jek@jeksite.org

To the Editor:

This comment concerns your editorial, “Hansel’s Ghost: Resurrection of the Experimenter Fraud Hypothesis in Parapsychology,” in the Spring 2016 issue of the *JP*. In it, you noted that some people critical of parapsychology claim “. . . a significant number of psi experiments were likely successful because of experimenter fraud” (Palmer, p. 5). You examined the evidence, and in a paragraph titled Conclusion, made several important statements which I will reference here.

My comments are from the perspective of a director of an association focused on understanding the nature of transcommunication where the “trans” prefix indicates influence of intentionality across the presumed nonphysical-physical interface. Induced and spontaneous after-death communication and mediumship are forms of transcommunication. I will refer to the study of these as *survival studies*.

With the understanding that psi functioning is fundamental to possibly all paranormal phenomena, an attack on parapsychology is an attack on the entire paranormalist community. As a matter of citizenship in this community, it is important for those of us who are able and reasonably informed to respond. My guess is that you agree, else you would not have made your comments in an editorial for all to read.

You stated in the Conclusion of your editorial that “You can’t conclude anything reliable about the existence of fraud from inference in the absence of evidence,” and, “Fraud must be detected, not inferred” (Palmer, p. 12). This should be self-evident in the context of science where knowledge is assumed to be derived from well-considered research. However, it may not be so obvious when it comes to the society of people who practice and support the process of scientific enquiry. For example, journals of the three parapsychological organizations I monitor routinely include anomalistic psychology articles which ignore existing evidence of psi functioning and survival. Also included are exceptional experiences psychology articles, a study which is shaping up to be the same as anomalistic psychology but with more respect for psi research. The decision to ignore existing evidence is an expression of belief rather than good science. Such omissions are routinely ignored by the parapsychological community.

In the same paragraph, you also said that “Insinuations or allegations of fraud are a serious matter and not something to play mathematical games with, especially when there is any chance that the target persons can be identified” (Palmer, p. 12). This is an ethical question which our community needs to clarify. Public accusations of fraud bypass due process. I have worked with many practitioners and many forms of these phenomena. Of all, I have encountered only one person I felt might be more trickster than genuine practitioner. Yet, even with confidence that I am a reliable witness, I hesitate to claim foul in a public forum.

The reasons for my hesitation are threefold:

First, even assuming considerable experience and technical training, I am probably not aware of all the ways the involved phenomena might manifest. Nor am I aware of all the naturally occurring environmental and technological artifacts that might mimic paranormal phenomena. I submit to you that your detractors are likely no more knowledgeable about the ways the involved phenomena might manifest or technological artifacts.

Second, as you pointed out, real people are involved, and as a society organized by the rule of law, it is required of us to find a way to manage the situation without violating individual rights. Shouting fraud from the bully pulpit of academic publications is simply not acceptable.

Finally, on this far frontier of thought, we live in a glass house and every action is critically observed by mainstream society. As a Wikipedia editor, I played a small part in the arbitration cases in which Pseudoscience, Fringe Science and Paranormal were defined as official Wiki policy. (Access these by way of <http://ethericstudies.org/wikipedia-arbitration/>) (Incidentally, I was banned for life from editing the Rupert Sheldrake article based on my comments in support of what is deemed pseudoscience.) General con-

demnation of all things paranormal as dangerous pseudoscience was only possible because of the lack of pro-paranormal or moderate editors—and abundant accusations of bad science, fraud, and delusion published under the cloak of science. In effect, we gave them our sword!

This is a “what goes around, comes around” situation. You rightfully complain about poorly supported academic attacks on psi research but ignore similarly poorly founded academic-practitioner attacks. We all live in the same glass house.

A seasoned skeptic can easily make our internal squabbling appear to be proof that our research results are fraudulent. People who might have been neutral about things paranormal have little reason not to believe such skeptical opinion setters. Now with public support and the ready availability of labels like “pseudoscience” and “fringe science,” it becomes okay for those who fear disruption of their worldview to more aggressively attack paranormalists.

A social model has been carefully established by the greater skeptic community based on the Wikipedia definitions to show that pseudoscience is a danger to society. This has been accepted by some quarters of the federal government as policy guidance. Anomalistic psychology and exceptional experiences psychology support this model. From my perspective, parapsychology was once based on open-minded enquiry of all forms of these phenomena but is now evolving into exceptional experiences psychology. The result has been emergence of a caste system of sorts in which the PhDs whom laypeople look to for learned guidance concerning survival phenomena have become their detractors. Your editorial is right on but myopic. I invite you to consider the need to expand the scope of your concern.

Reference

Palmer, J. (2016). Hansel’s ghost: Resurrection of the experimenter fraud hypothesis in parapsychology [Editorial]. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 80, 5–16.

TOM BUTLER

tombutler@ethericstudies.org