

Coming to Terms with the Trickster

James E. Kennedy
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This paper was presented at the Trickster Theory Panel at the 2016 Combined Convention of the Parapsychological Association (59th) and Society for Scientific Exploration (35th) in Boulder, Colorado. The original presentation was limited to 20 minutes, which resulted in the only reference being the quotes from Beloff (1994). The other references were added for this written version of the talk and support the points made during the original presentation. This presentation followed an introduction and overview of the trickster ideas for paranormal phenomena by George Hansen (2001). This presentation was followed by a talk by Jeffrey Kripal on religion, parapsychology, and trickster ideas.

This paper discusses how the trickster ideas link to traditional parapsychological research. I will start by describing the evolution of my thinking about psi research.

When I was in high school I developed the conviction that I had a calling or destiny to do research on psychic phenomena. During my undergraduate college years, I had numerous paranormal experiences that strongly reinforced this belief and made me certain that paranormal phenomena sometimes occur (Kennedy, 2000).

I worked at the Institute for Parapsychology from 1974 to 1980. During that time I accepted the view at the lab that experimental research was the best way to understand paranormal phenomena, and that personal psi experiences such as mine were of value only to the extent that they stimulated experiments.

I initially conducted experiments, including studies of physiological measures of precognitive anticipation. These were the first presentiment-type studies to be reported and I was very enthusiastic and optimistic about that research. The main goal of the research was to demonstrate that unconscious physiological measures produced more reliable psi results than traditional experiments. However, the research did not achieve that goal.

The four studies I did were basically chasing post hoc results (Kennedy, 1979b). An interesting post hoc finding in one study was not confirmed in the next study, but a new post hoc finding looked interesting—but was subsequently not confirmed.

I came to the conclusion that the large amount of existing research needed to be better understood before new experiments could be meaningfully interpreted. Over the next few years I did several literature reviews, including on experimenter effects and information processing in psi (Kennedy & Taddonio, 1976; Kennedy, 1978; 1979a; 1979c; 1980).

In 1980 I changed careers and did environmental work for a decade. That was a very active period focused on applied science, engineering, law, and politics. Parapsychology had little significance in my life during that time.

In 1990, I changed careers again and started working in health and medical research—which was another type of applied science. This included regulated medical research that had much higher methodological standards than academic research and parapsychology.

In the mid 1990s I also started thinking about parapsychology again. At that time, I had little confidence in psi experiments due to the weak methodology compared to the medical research I was involved with, and due to the inconsistent findings from psi experiments. I came to the conclusion that spontaneous paranormal experiences could provide more reliable insights about psi than did the existing experimental research. That was a significant reversal from 20 years before when I worked at the parapsychology lab.

Given my background in applied science, I thought that two questions needed to be addressed: Why is psi so elusive and what does psi do? I started looking into the writings on the elusiveness of psi.

In one of his last papers, John Beloff (1994, page 7) made the comment that parapsychological research is a “succession of false dawns and frustrated hopes.” For a new line of research, virtually all the initial studies are reported as significant and researchers become optimistic that a breakthrough has occurred. However, the great majority of later studies are not significant and the reliability of psi results has not noticeably improved over the decades.

For example, the first six ganzfeld experiments by Honorton were all reported as significant (Honorton, 1977). Similarly, Schmidt (1973) reported that eight of the first nine studies he conducted with RNGs were significant. However, recent meta-analyses find replication rates that drift in the range of 20 to 33 percent for these lines of research (Kennedy, 2013). Similarly, Braud and Schlitz (1991) reported that the first three studies of direct mental influence of electrodermal activity were all significant with 10 sessions. However, a recent meta-analysis found that a sample size of 650 sessions is needed to have adequate power (.80) for this line of research (Schmidt, 2015). Obtaining significant results on three studies with a sample size of 10 sessions is extremely unlikely if the effect size from the meta-analysis was applicable.

Beloff (1994, page 7) also commented that “paranormal phenomena may be not just elusive, but actively evasive.” That captured a key point. The failure to produce reliable psi effects indicated that fundamental factors were not yet understood. The unrecognized factors were active, not just a passive signal in noise problem. Capricious psi missing was a prominent symptom of this (Kennedy, 2003). Psi missing can be interpreted as psi phenomena defiantly communicating “I am here, but you will not control me.”

Equally or more important, there are established methods for dealing with a poor signal to noise ratio. If a signal in noise was actually the problem, useful applications of psi would have been developed long ago and research would now be well funded from private investments.

The many research programs to apply psi have produced some striking instances of seemingly useful psi—including substantial financial profits. But these results could not be sustained, and the researchers and/or funding sources eventually abandoned the efforts.

Targ and associates used associative remote viewing to predict silver futures. The first study was highly successful and is reported to have produced \$120,000 profits (Broughton, 1991, page 339). However, the third study produced almost equally strong psi missing (Targ, Braud, Stanford, Schlitz, and Honorton, 1991, pages 76–77). The interpersonal relations of the research team deteriorated (Harary, 1992) and the project ended.

As has been noted many times, casinos would go out of business if reliable applications of psi were developed, but casinos appear to make profits consistent with the laws of probability. Several studies attempting to predict the outcome of casino games have provided statistically

significant outcomes, but have not resulted in a usefully reliable application of psi (Brier & Tyminski, 1970a, 1970b; Dean & Taetzsch, 1970, Puthoff, May, & Thompson, 1986). Bierman and Rabeyron (2013) summarized 16 other mostly small exploratory studies that attempted to predict gambling or investment activities—and often reported financial rewards.

The 24-year government-funded Star Gate project to investigate using psi in government intelligence work is probably the most well-funded effort to develop applications of psi and is reported to have produced some striking results, but eventually received a negative evaluation and was terminated (May, 1996). A contracted project to investigate using ESP to find land mines produced statistically significant results in the first few sessions, but the later sessions declined to chance and the project was terminated (J. B. Rhine, 1971). The Sony Corporation is reported to have investigated ESP for several years and found evidence that ESP exists, but terminated the project when the company was unable to develop useful applications (Huyghe, no date). Other efforts to develop applications of psi are discussed in Kennedy (2003).

A similar pattern occurred with research on intercessory prayer or distant healing. A variety of small studies gave encouraging results (Dossey, 1993), but subsequent large, well-funded, carefully designed studies by proponents of distant healing generally did not obtain the expected results (Spilka & Ladd, 2013). One noteworthy study was a NIH grant to investigate glioblastoma multiforme, a very rare, highly lethal brain tumor. In the early stages of the study, the primary investigator, Elisabeth Targ, unexpectedly was diagnosed with the rare cancer she was investigating and died from the condition at age 40 during the study (Bronson, 2002; Davidson, 2002; IONS, 2016). The study was completed by the co-experimenter Andrew J. Freinkel, but has not been published. A “preliminary program” for a psychiatric convention in 2006 included “No Effect of Anonymous Distant Healing on Survival Time for Patients With Glioblastoma multiforme, Andrew J. Freinkel M.D.” (American Psychiatric Association, 2006). Apparently the study was not successful.

The pattern from both experiments and attempted applications is that psi effects can be striking, reliable, and useful for a period of time, but then defiantly seem to avoid the sustained effects that are needed to overcome skepticism by those with pragmatic, materialistic dispositions (Kennedy, 2005). A person who focuses primarily on the reliable-striking phase can be overly optimistic about psi. And a person who focuses primarily on the evasive phase can be overly negative.

The concept of the trickster captures these two phases of psi.

Dealing with the Trickster

I can see four possible strategies for dealing with the trickster characteristics of the experimental research.

1. Ignore the Trickster

One strategy is to ignore the trickster properties and hope that staying the course with experimental research will eventually overcome whatever causes the evasive phase. A major problem with this strategy is that the working assumptions and models for experimental psi research seem to me to make experiments basically uninterpretable.

The working assumptions held today by most experimental researchers are that psi is an unconscious process that is directed by human motivation and generally operates without conscious awareness and without conscious intention. And, virtually everyone has potential psi ability.

I call these the Rhinean assumptions because they were present at J.B. Rhine's Duke Parapsychology Lab in the 1960s (Rhine & Associates, 1965), and they were well established at the Institute for Parapsychology in 1973 when I arrived. These assumptions are the basis for presentiment-type studies (Radin & Pierce, 2015) and for Stanford's PMIR model (Stanford, 2015).

These assumptions also directly lead to the possibility that anyone who has any motivation for the outcome of a psi experiment could influence that outcome. This is widely recognized as making psi experimenter effects likely (Kennedy & Taddonio, 1976, Palmer & Millar, 2015), but it goes far beyond the experimenter. For example, people who are strongly opposed to the idea of psi may influence an experimental outcome even though they are not consciously aware that the experiment is being conducted. They would unconsciously and without awareness use psi to influence the world to conform to their motivations.

In the extreme case, an experimental outcome may be dominated by psi from the general cultural background of attitudes and motivations about the paranormal (Kennedy, 2003). If the Rhinean assumptions are true, sociological and cultural factors are likely to affect paranormal phenomena.

These possibilities are rarely considered when designing and interpreting psi experiments, but they follow directly from the usual working assumptions for psi. The possibility that psi effects are a combined result from the motivations of different people has been noted at various times over the years (e.g., Millar, 1978; Stanford, 1978), but has not been developed.

2. Model a Network of Motivations

The second strategy for dealing with trickster effects is to accept the implications of the Rhinean assumptions and to develop mathematical models of an extended network of diverse motivations and psi influence by many people. This strategy requires a better understanding of the distribution of motivations related to the paranormal than is currently available.

I think this strategy needs to be pursued, but I am not optimistic about the outcome because I have not found these Rhinean assumptions useful in understanding the paranormal experiences in my life. My experiences seem more consistent with psi being directed and constrained by factors that are not just the motivations of living persons.

3. Propose Physics-Based Limitations

A third strategy for dealing with trickster effects is to propose that some physics-based principle prevents reliable psi effects. These proposals include that psi is based on nonlocal quantum entanglement, or analogies with quantum entanglement. It is now generally thought that entanglement cannot be used to transmit signals. A few theoreticians have suggested that the capricious, un-useful properties of psi experiments may result from this no-signal property of quantum entanglement, or analogies with this property (Millar, 2015; Walach, Lucadou, & Römer, 2014)

But the key point is that signals can never be transmitted with entanglement, and by analogy, psi would never occur. The no-signal property of entanglement appears to me to be fundamentally different from the trickster characteristics of psi that effects are sometimes reliable and useful, but cannot be sustained.

Some of my personal paranormal experiences produced useful effects, and therefore I am convinced that useful psi effects sometimes occur.

The trickster characteristics of psi appear to require an agency that is capable of responding to past events and to current human motivations. This appears to me to require information processing that would be considered to be in the realm of a living process rather than an inanimate law of physics. I do not see how a principle of physics that allows striking financial profits from psi to occur in some situations can actively inhibit such profits in other very similar situations. I expect that some physicists with interests in paranormal phenomena have different opinions about this.

4. Consider More than Human Motivation

The fourth strategy for dealing with trickster effects is to recognize the possibility that psi may be directed or influenced by factors that are not the motivations of living persons. The possibilities include that psi effects are due in part to influences from people in the future acting backwards in time or to supernatural entities in additional dimensions such as spirits of deceased persons, angels, God(s), karma, or some type of higher consciousness.

The main scientific problem with these ideas is that they are not parsimonious (Kennedy, 1994). Science progresses by accepting or favoring the simplest, most easily tested model or hypothesis that is consistent with the data, and then resorting to more complex models only when compelled by additional data. The ideas about entities in additional dimensions are dismissed because they are less parsimonious than the assumption that psi is directed by the motivations of living persons.

However, there may be some grounds for reservations about the dismissal of these ideas. I mentioned that in the 1990s I also became interested in the question “what does psi do?” The empirical approach for that question is to ask people how they were affected by their paranormal experiences. Kanthamani and I (Kennedy & Kanthamani, 1995) did a small research project on that and basically confirmed what Rhea White (1994) had previously found. The most common response from people is that their paranormal experiences tended to inspire an altered worldview, enhanced meaning in life, and spirituality.

The research shows that mystical experiences, near-death experiences, and psychic experiences all have similar aftereffects (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009, pages 347-350; Kennedy & Kanthamani, 1995; Ring, 1984; White, 1994, 1998). People feel that their life has purpose and is guided or watched over by a higher power. A key point is that people typically experience the paranormal as something that happens to them, not something they do. Spontaneous experiences tend to be interpreted as psi guiding a person, whereas the Rhinean assumptions are that people guide psi with their personal motivations.

Thus we have two fundamentally different views of psi. The view from spontaneous cases is that psi guides people. This view inspires meaning in life and spirituality. The view from

experimental research is that people guide psi. That view inspires applications of psi for military and business dominance.

This point should be clearly understood, the ultimate goal for experimental research is to convert the paranormal into technology—and the primary uses of the technology will be for military dominance and corporate profits. It is no accident that the greatest funding for research in parapsychology has been for military-related applications. However, I also suggest that it is no accident that this research program was abandoned—like the great majority of other attempts to develop applications of psi.

The message from the trickster is that converting psi to technology is not going to happen. These two worldviews are basically incompatible. If psi becomes technology, the mysterious, mystical, spiritual aspects will be lost. If these aspects are to be retained, psi must have trickster characteristics to avoid becoming technology.

The scientific question is, at what point do we abandon the more parsimonious assumptions and accept that more complex, difficult-to-test models are needed? For those doing parapsychological research, it may also be useful to recognize that at this point in science the simple, parsimonious phenomena have already been discovered and accepted. Phenomena that have not yet reached that stage by now are probably more complex.

Where this Leaves the Field of Parapsychology

People appear to be living in different worlds with regard to the paranormal. Some people are uncomfortable with the spiritual aspects of psi, others are uncomfortable with psi as technology, others are uncomfortable with any form of psi, others are infatuated by anything possibly paranormal, others have their beliefs about the paranormal based on a religion, and many other people simply find the whole subject to be of no interest or relevance for their lives.

I think the most interesting and potentially productive area for research is to better understand the different worldviews about paranormal phenomena: what are those worldviews, what proportion of people hold the various worldviews, and how were the worldviews formed? This is a missing foundation for understanding both spontaneous cases and psi experiments. If the Rhinean assumptions have a degree of validity, it may be inevitable that psi research manifests our worldviews and expectations more than reveals objective properties of psi.

These worldviews can be very strongly held and tend to make people biased. Evidence that supports a person's worldview is found to be convincing, whereas evidence that is inconsistent is rejected as misinterpretations or delusions. Researchers need to recognize their own biases, and to acknowledge the distinction between scientific parsimony versus truth.

My observation is that the worldviews about the paranormal are developed from personality dispositions, sociological, religious, and cultural factors, and life-experiences. A broad interdisciplinary approach is needed.

Of course, some people question the validity of the trickster ideas. Experimental research with good methodological standards should resolve that debate in the next few years. The weaker methodological practices in the past may have obscured the trickster characteristics of psi.

More importantly, the trickster ideas remain the most empirically viable view of psi as long as parapsychological researchers struggle for research funding rather than have well-funded research programs based on psi predictions of commodities markets.

If the trickster ideas are accepted, those whose interest in psi is based on control and application—the masculine approach as described by Rhea White (1994)—will probably abandon psi research.

Whatever happens with experimental research, spontaneous paranormal experiences will continue to occur and to generate great public interest. Spontaneous experiences should get greater attention from researchers. Obvious topics for research include random surveys of the population, and investigation of whether the mystical/spiritual aftereffects primarily occur only for people who have certain personality dispositions.

I also think that it is important to rate spontaneous psi experiences on the likelihood of being truly paranormal versus experiences that could be wishful thinking or other mistaken interpretations. Factors such as independent witnesses, possibility of cues, and probability of coincidence can be considered. I think it is likely that the factors, and particularly the aftereffects, associated with actual paranormal experiences may be different than for misinterpretations such as wishful thinking.

Finally, based on my experiences, I expect that actual paranormal experiences are at least sometimes a manifestation of a larger supernatural factor that creates a destiny for a person to have certain opportunities, experiences, and challenges in life. My observation is that the presence of a supernatural destiny or calling like this varies greatly among people.

Paranormal phenomena may appear to have the characteristics of a capricious trickster from the perspective of human desires and motivations. However, paranormal phenomena may be more orderly in context of a supernatural destiny—or in context of psi guiding people rather than people guiding psi.

More generally, my working assumption now is that there is not just one scientifically correct worldview about paranormal phenomena. Similar to the different personalities that are applicable for different people, different worldviews about psi may be applicable and valid for different people. It appears to me that for all practical purposes, people do live in different worlds with regard to the occurrence and nature of these phenomena.

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