

Edward F Kelly

Edward F Kelly is professor in the University of Virginia's Department of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences. Most of his career has been devoted to parapsychology, starting at JB Rhine's Institute for Parapsychology and encompassing both experimental and methodological psi research and books and papers dealing with theories of the brain/mind relation in relation to psi and other phenomena beyond the reach of the currently prevailing physicalist (materialist) worldview.

SummaryLanham, Maryland, USA

Edward Kelly has held professorial appointments in the Department of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia School of Medicine in Charlottesville since 2002. He is also a member of the department's Division of Perceptual Studies (DOPS), which studies psi phenomena and post-mortem survival.

Kelly previously held various conventional and parapsychological appointments, usually with an emphasis on psychophysiology research. His current research work mainly involves EEG and fNIRS neuroimaging studies with gifted psi performers and persons capable of voluntarily entering psi-conducive states such as deep meditative and hypnotic states, mediumsistic 'trance' and OBEs. He is also continuing to explore implications of psi and related 'rogue' phenomena for a science-based picture of the world and our own place within it.

Early Research

During the 1970s, Kelly and colleagues developed a systematic psychophysiological approach to psi research, grounded in the collection, management and statistical analysis of multichannel physiological data.[1](#) This program, abandoned in the mid-1980s owing to lack of funding, has recently been re-established on a stronger technical foundation as part of the ongoing work of DOPS.[2](#)

Kelly compared card-guessing data collected from an exceptionally strong ESP subject with that from a parallel visual task, finding that the subject's systematic errors in the ESP task bore a strong resemblance to those in the visual task, and that this correlation was more pronounced in high-scoring ESP runs. Kelly interpreted these results as confirming the role of involuntary visual imagery as a 'mediating vehicle' for this individual's unusually strong psi performance.[3](#)

Re-Evaluations of Psi Data

In the 1920s, researchers Heymans and Brugmans, based at the newly established Dutch Society for Psychical Research, reported high levels of success in a clairvoyance test with a mathematics student that employed a novel and rigorous experimental design. A detailed re-evaluation of the entire dataset by Kelly and

Sybo Schouten, published six decades later in the *European Journal of Parapsychology*, confirmed and extended the original findings.[4](#)

In 1980, in collaboration with cultural anthropologist Rafael Locke, Kelly sought to situate the study of psi in a larger historical and cross-cultural context, surveying early psychical research on hypnosis, mediumship and major religious traditions, including yoga and shamanism. Their monograph demonstrates that strong outbursts of psi do not occur randomly across space and time; rather, they conspicuously congregate in certain kinds of persons and ritual circumstances that often involve deliberate and pronounced alterations of consciousness.[5](#) On this basis, the authors advocate that psi research be grounded in intensive longitudinal studies of persons selected for ability to enter psi-conducive altered states. An emphasis on studies with exceptional performers, in preference to unselected subjects, has been a central theme of Kelly's career.[6](#)

In subsequent research, Kelly investigated the grouping of hits obtained by six high-scoring ESP subjects in forced-choice experiments, finding significant evidence of non-random grouping in five of them. Of these, four produced long strings of hits and one produced many isolated hits. Grouping effects appeared unrelated to experimental conditions such as trial length, type of feedback or the nature of the task, but rather occurred in connection with psi-conducive altered states briefly established in these special subjects. Grouping effects accounted for most of the overall evidence for psi in these experiments.[7](#)

Books

Irreducible Mind

In 2006, Kelly, his wife Emily Williams Kelly and four co-authors published *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century*, a major work that highlights the challenge facing the reductionist worldview with regard to anomalous experiences appearing beyond the reach of conventional, physicalist explanations. The authors marshal evidence from a wide range of phenomena, including extreme psychophysical influences such as placebo effects and stigmata, and phenomena such as unexplained properties of human memory, psychological automatisms and secondary personalities, to demonstrate empirically that classical physicalism is almost certainly false. They then move on to near-death experiences, genius-level creativity and 'mystical' states of consciousness, both spontaneous, resulting from intense spiritual practices, or induced by psychedelics. Throughout much of the book the authors reference the rich literature of psychical research.

The book concludes by encouraging consideration of alternative theories of consciousness and mind/brain relations, in particular the Myers/James 'permission' or 'filter' model that treats mind and brain as functionally interdependent but perhaps ontologically distinct. Here, states of the brain are conceived as regulating the expression of normally hidden capabilities associated with a more comprehensive and possibly transcendental consciousness (the true source of mind) in the forms experienced in everyday life. Disruption of normal patterns of

brain activity, for instance as a result of ingesting a psychedelic substance, often results in subjectively dramatic expansions of consciousness.

Beyond Physicalism

Subsequently, Kelly, Crabtree and Marshall produced a more theory-oriented volume, *Beyond Physicalism: Toward Reconciliation of Science and Spirituality*,⁸ in which they and a diverse group of colleagues, including physicists, philosophers and scholars of religion, seek to understand how the world must be constituted for the kinds of anomalous phenomena catalogued in *Irreducible Mind* to occur. A third volume, *Consciousness Unbound: Liberating Mind from the Tyranny of Materialism*, is currently in development.⁹

Consciousness Unbound

Kelly and Marshall recently issued a third volume, *Consciousness Unbound: Liberating Mind from the Tyranny of Materialism*, which carries forward the main themes of its predecessors. Its main contents include authoritative state-of-the-science reviews of research on precognition, NDEs, and cases of the reincarnation type, plus five additional theoretical contributions, plus initial reflections on implications of the three books together for consciousness research, for the future of the humanities generally (and for religious studies in particular), and for the current overall landscape of brain/mind theory.

Michael Duggan

Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Kelly et al. (1980).
- [2.](#) Kelly & Dunseath (2019). <https://med.virginia.edu/perceptual-studies/our-research/neuroimaging-studies-of-psi/>
- [3.](#) Kelly (1975).
- [4.](#) Kelly & Schouten (1978).
- [5.](#) Kelly & Locke (1981/2009).
- [6.](#) Kelly & Locke (1981 / 2009).
- [7.](#) Kelly (1982).
- [8.](#) Kelly et al. (2015).
- [9.](#) Personal communication from Edward F. Kelly, October 2019.