

The Super-Psi Hypothesis

The super-psi hypothesis is the claim that psychic functioning is considerably more extensive and controllable than its seemingly modest experimental manifestations suggest, so much so that it might even play a pervasive role in everyday affairs and operate on a large scale. Parapsychologists are divided on the plausibility of the hypothesis. However, clarification of the issues dividing them should help to resolve many of the disputes.

Sketch of the Super-Psi Hypothesis

Probably it is only within the context of discussing the evidence for postmortem survival that parapsychologists have made a genuine attempt to evaluate the super-psi hypothesis. There, the issue is whether the evidence suggesting survival can be explained in terms of refined, motivated [psi](#) on the part of living agents; within that context, some argue, the super-psi hypothesis should be termed instead the 'living-agent psi hypothesis'.¹

However, the possibility of super-psi has been raised in other contexts as well. For example, if one rejects a retrocausal account of [precognition](#) in which future states of affairs cause subjects to have earlier precognitive experiences, we can still explain the data in terms of clockwise causation and an apparently high level of [ESP](#) or [PK](#) on the part of the precognizer.² Moreover, all evidence of a [macro-PK](#) naturally raises the issue of how extensive or refined PK effects can be.

Some confusions about the merits and substance of the super-psi hypothesis can undoubtedly be traced to the unfortunate term 'super-psi'. After all, it is hardly clear what 'super' means, and as with other normative expressions, it seems to be used according to different evaluative scales (what is super for one person may not be for another). Moreover, the use of 'super' in this context seems more closely related to its use in 'super hero' than in 'super glue'. That is, it suggests that the degree of psychic functioning required is antecedently implausible. Hence, to many it suggests – right from the start – that the super-psi hypothesis should not be taken seriously.

However, at this point in parapsychological history, and outside the context of discussing the evidence for survival, there is arguably little to gain by abandoning the expression 'super-psi'. For one thing, by now it is fairly well entrenched in the parapsychological lexicon. And for another (as will be explained below), certain initially tempting replacements for 'super' – such as 'extensive', 'large-scale', 'refined', and 'virtuosic', at best capture only one aspect of the range of phenomena presumably picked out by the term 'super-psi'. Probably, the term 'super-psi' can be used safely so long as one remains alert to its pitfalls and tries to determine carefully what the most plausible and potent form of the super-psi hypothesis is.

Fortunately, some fundamental features of the concept of super-psi are fairly easy to pin down. Initially, one might think that any large-scale psi effect would be an instance of super-psi. But in fact, it is easy to think of counter-examples, most of

which concern the transitivity of causes – that is, the idea that if *A* causes *B* and *B* causes *C*, we may say that *A* causes *C*. For example, an unimpressive or insignificant psi event might trigger a causal chain that leads to a much more outstanding effect. But if psi plays no further role following the initial psi event, we would probably not consider the impressive concluding event to be a case of super-psi. If so, then we do not classify an event as an instance of super-psi simply on the basis of event magnitude. Often, it has to do with matters of control and refinement.

The following analogy should make this clear. Suppose that, while walking along a mountain ridge I unwittingly dislodge a small stone, and suppose that the stone falls down the mountain side, derailing a train that just happens to be passing by. If causation is transitive, then since I caused the stone to move, and since the stone's movement eventually derailed the train, we could say that I caused the train to derail. But of course, my role in the affair was hardly impressive. The derailment is not something I achieved or for which I could be held culpable. All I did was to dislodge a stone, and even that was unintentional. By contrast, suppose that I *wanted* to derail the oncoming train, and suppose that I accomplished that task by throwing a nearby stone the great distance onto the track below, at just the exact position and the exact time necessary to derail the train. Now that *would* be an achievement, and the reason it is impressive has more to do with the exquisite control of my stone throwing than with the magnitude of the event to which it led. After all, my control over the stone's trajectory would have been impressive even if there had been no train in the vicinity.

Nevertheless, my derailing the train in this way is analogous to at least one conceivable type of super-psi, in which a small psi effect is cunningly or expertly calculated or coordinated to have a large-scale result. For example, suppose one causes an aeroplane to explode by intentionally and psychokinetically igniting the fuel in its tank, or suppose one causes the death of a despised person by producing a well-placed blood clot in his brain. Or suppose one causes an apparently precognized mine collapse by psychokinetically affecting a very small section of the mine's support system, which through clairvoyance was discovered to be that system's sole weak link.

But super-psi might also take the form of huge, uncontrolled psychic outbursts. For example, it would presumably be a case of super-psi if a person paranormally produced a massive shock wave that collapsed the mine and surrounding mountain, even if the shock wave was an unintentional PK effect and the mine just happened to collapse as a result. Moreover, one would think that super-psi might also take refined forms that have no immediate large-scale consequences. For example, suppose that a person uses ESP to steal a secret formula from a business competitor or government agency, or uses PK to erase nothing but that formula from one of the competition's computers. If those achievements count as instances of super-psi, it would presumably be in virtue of their precision and accuracy.

So let us tentatively define 'super-psi' (admittedly, rather loosely) as 'psi functioning of a highly controlled or refined nature, or else psi of great magnitude (whether refined or not)'. Obviously, that definition is still vague, and some types of frequently reported phenomena will still be difficult to classify. For example, some might question whether the object levitations and materializations reported during

the heyday of Spiritualism are sufficiently large-scale or refined to count as instances of super-psi. They might consider those phenomena to be impressive, but reserve the honorific term 'super-psi' for something even more remarkable.³ In any case, borderline cases are to be expected and should not prevent us from dealing profitably with some important and interesting issues.

General Considerations

Before tackling objections to the super-psi hypothesis, let us briefly review the main reasons for taking it seriously. First of all, assuming that psi exists, it is probably not the sort of thing that would occur only in conspicuous ways. Generally speaking, human faculties or capacities occur in degrees, and their manifestations run the gamut from the mundane to the arcane and the inconspicuous to the conspicuous. In fact, it would probably be unprecedented if psi functioning failed to exhibit similar variabilities.

So assuming that psi occurs, it is likely that we recognize only its more striking manifestations. For example, instances of telepathy are likely to be noticed only between persons who know and communicate with one another. Similarly, cases of apparent precognition or real-time clairvoyance are likely to command our attention only when they concern events that impress us for some reason (usually because they are crises or other sorts of unexpected or unpleasant occurrences). But presumably we might be interacting all the time with the minds of strangers, and acquiring information by ESP of events to which we give little or no conscious attention. Similar observations undoubtedly apply in the case of PK; we should probably not expect typical PK effects to be flagrantly obvious. For example, object levitations do not occur under normal circumstances, so that sort of PK effect will undoubtedly stand out rather starkly. But if everyday PK is doing such things as affecting the cycle of traffic lights, foiling radar traps on the highway, stalling elevators, or aggravating a co-worker's arthritis, it could easily go unnoticed.

Moreover, no matter how counterintuitive (or simply repugnant) the super-psi hypothesis might seem, some would argue that the theoretical alternatives to super-psi are even more problematical. For example, as far as precognition is concerned, the only possible types of psi explanations are (on the one hand) the retrocausal analysis and (on the other) what Jule Eisenbud called the *active* analysis, analyzed in terms of refined clockwise ESP and PK.⁴ But if (as some maintain) appeals to retrocausality are unacceptable,⁵ one could argue that the active analysis does comparatively little violence to our received scientific or broader conceptual framework and thus appears to be the more viable alternative. Furthermore, some argue that super-psi may make particularly good, systematic sense out of some coincidences (synchronicities) and other sets of everyday events that would otherwise seem mysterious or unrelated.⁶

Furthermore, we do not understand how even the smallest-scale PK violates or circumvents the usual constraints on influencing other physical systems. Indeed, opinions remain quite divided on that issue and conflicting theoretical proposals abound. So one could argue plausibly that at our current – and considerable – level of ignorance about the nature and natural history of psi functioning, we are in no

position to set limits in advance on how far those apparent violations may go.⁷ The only way we could ever be entitled to set clear and useful upper boundaries on the range or refinement of psi effects would be on the basis of a thoroughly-developed and well-supported psi theory, one that embraces *all* the available evidence for psi (not just the laboratory evidence) and explains how or why psi functions both in and out of the lab. But at present, no decent and comprehensive theory forbids large-scale psi. In fact many, like observational and decision augmentation theories, deal only with small-scale laboratory manifestations of psi and make little or no effort to address conspicuous instances of apparent psi in life. Evidently, then, at our current (and still quite impoverished) level of understanding, we must consider super-psi to be as viable as puny psi.

Moreover, one could argue that the super-psi hypothesis even has a kind of empirical support. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century physical mediumship seems to demonstrate that psi effects may be far more varied, elaborate and refined than those countenanced by psi theories restricted to the data from laboratory studies. But if we accept the reality of those mediumistic phenomena, there is no clear justification for ruling out the possibility of still more dramatic, refined or wide-ranging psi effects. In fact, some argue that in most instances where super-psi hypotheses seem to be viable alternative explanations (such as in survival or precognition cases), it is unclear whether the degree of psi required has to be more dramatic or wide-ranging than that already documented in the best cases of mediumship.⁸

But how would the super-psi hypothesis work in connection with everyday sorts of events (rather than cases suggesting survival or ostensible precognitions)? Consider just a few obvious scenarios. For example, once one entertains the possibility that psi might insinuate itself into everyday affairs, it is easy to see how an appeal to super-psi might explain phenomena or regularities that would otherwise be considered mysterious or fortuitous. Pervasive and refined PK and ESP could explain why some people are healthier than others, or remarkably luckier or unluckier than others. It could explain why some soldiers escape serious injury, despite taking repeated heroic risks on the battlefield. It might explain why incompetent or reckless drivers continue to avoid the automotive catastrophes that befall others and emerge unscathed from those that they initiate. It might even explain why some always seem to find parking spaces.

And however distasteful the thought might be, consistent bad luck or misfortune could be an external PK analogue to psychosomatic illness. One should perhaps explore the relationship between a person's misfortune and his/her self-image (for example, the person's degree of self-hatred), and be prepared to see people as psychically disposing or arranging events to reinforce their self-image as victimized, cursed or unworthy individuals. Of course, an even more sinister possibility is that others are the cause of one's misfortune. One should perhaps investigate the deep relationships between unlucky persons and their acquaintances and relatives – possibly even connections with strangers whose interests or goals conflict with theirs. But on the brighter side, refined unconscious psi might undergird the careers of those who are successful in business and finance,

and who seem to have a knack for speculation. It might even play a role in athletics.⁹

It is important to note that taking these suggestions seriously is not the same as writing a blank super-psi cheque – that is, licensing the cavalier use of the super-psi hypothesis to explain everyday events. Indeed, defenders of the super-psi hypothesis would argue that if psi really is operating under the surface, its role is probably anything but straightforward. They would contend that this is the reason why psi is probably not responsible for *every* bit of luck or misfortune. Similarly, that is why it might not be the reason we find a lost article of jewelry, or happen to meet ‘by chance’ someone we needed to see.¹⁰

These, then, are the sorts of issues that have inspired the major objections to the super-psi hypothesis. So we are now in a position to examine the strengths and weaknesses of those objections.

Objections to Super-Psi

There is no evidence for super-psi

This surprisingly common objection suffers from an obvious and fatal weakness – namely, its reliance on an indefensible assumption about what the evidence for super-psi would look like. Braude has called this the *sore thumb assumption*.¹¹ Very generally, the assumption is that if super-psi occurred, we would know it if we saw it – that is, it would stand out like a sore thumb. More specifically, the sore thumb assumption is that everyday occurrences of super-psi will not blend in smoothly with (or be masked by, or be indistinguishable from) the network of surrounding events of which they are a part. Instead, they will be conspicuous or readily identifiable as instances of super-psi.

Of course, the problem here concerns the possibility of sneaky or naughty psi. Once we grant that psi can occur in real-life situations, we must also grant that those occurrences may go undetected. For example, there is no reason to suppose that all instances of observable PK must be as flagrant and incongruous as table levitations or other movements of ordinarily stationary objects. Nor must occurrences of PK be preceded by some kind of overt precursor or warning (a paranormal counterpart to a flourish of trumpets). For all we know, everyday PK could blend smoothly into ordinary surrounding events. There needn’t be any observable difference between (say) a heart attack or a plane crash caused normally and one caused by PK. The only difference may be in their unobservable causal histories. Clearly, similar observations can be made about ESP. Just as occurrences of PK might inconspicuously permeate surrounding events, our mental lives might conceal a rich vein of telepathic and clairvoyant interactions. And as with occurrences of PK, instances of ESP needn’t announce their paranormal ancestry beforehand or in some other way display their paranormal nature.

A related problem with the sore thumb assumption is that there is no reason to think (a) that psychic functioning occurs only when parapsychologists are trying to induce it, or (b) that we can infer either the role or the limits of spontaneous psi from its manifestations in psychologically straitjacketed experimental settings.

Moreover, unsolicited occurrences of ostensible psi-in-life are what drove researchers into the lab in the first place. So one would think that any responsible psi-theoretician would have something to say about the possibly broad role and specific applications of psi in its natural setting, away from the artificial constraints and contrived needs of formal experiments. Even mediumistic séances encourage displays of psi (such as materializations, object levitations) that might be quite different from its manifestations in more humdrum everyday situations. Although séances are perhaps less artificial than formal experiments, they are still highly ritualized or structured settings. Therefore, one should also be wary of taking séance-room psi to be paradigmatic of spontaneous everyday psi.

Those who argue that there is no evidence for super-psi are also guilty of a general methodological error, sometimes noted in other contexts. For example, in a discussion of the evidence for UFOs, astrophysicist Peter Sturrock notes the dangers of what he calls *theory-dependent arguments*.¹² He writes,

if we entertain the hypothesis that the phenomena may be due to an extremely advanced civilization, we must face the possibility that many ideas that we accept as simple truths may, in a wider and more sophisticated context, not be as simple and may not even be truths.

The point applies equally to the possibility of extremely refined or large-scale psi. We must not reject a novel or world-view altering hypothesis on the basis of arguments or interpretations of data that presuppose the denial of the hypothesis. For example, the super-psi hypothesis holds that psi might be sneaky and naughty. That is, for all we know, psi might be triggered unconsciously; it might be in our interest for it to work surreptitiously; and it might be used to fulfill our least admirable needs and interests. So we cannot evaluate the super-psi hypothesis by presupposing that psi will always be conspicuous and well-behaved.

There is evidence against super-psi

This objection assumes two different forms. According to the first, the evidence strongly suggests that, although psi may be impressive, it has limits well below the realm of the super. And according to the second, the evidence demonstrates that super-psi does not occur. Let us consider these in turn.

(a) The first version of this objection has been clearly articulated by Roger Anderson.

D.D. Home made objects weighing some hundreds of pounds move and sometimes levitate, but he never made a house fly or visited a distant friend by means of that peculiar power of locomotion. Nor has any other physical medium exhibited phenomena that would lead us to suppose such feats within the realm of accomplishment. ... Like other human abilities, we may not be able to state a priori what the limits of PK may be, but it seems a safe bet on empirical grounds that they will not far exceed the virtuosic manifestations recorded with PK superstars like Home.¹³

Anderson's argument is thoughtful, and it raises an important point about observed ostensible manifestations of PK. But the argument is problematical nevertheless, for several reasons. First, it assumes unjustifiably that psi phenomena occurring within the peculiar dynamics of physical mediumship are paradigmatic of psi phenomena in radically different contexts. But as noted earlier, we are not entitled to suppose that the best examples of mediumship indicate what non-mediums may do, or what forms psi is likely to take in situations where needs, interests, and overall belief systems of the agent are different. So we cannot assume that DD Home (or any other medium) represents the best psi can do *outside* a certain set of conditions appropriate to a séance or associated with mediumship generally.

The varieties of classic mediumistic phenomena may have been influenced, first, by the psychology of the medium – for example, the medium's normal capacities and interests, and of course the medium's conceptions of psi and its place in nature. DD Home had firm beliefs about the conditions favorable to the production of phenomena, and those beliefs may have influenced his success rate under those conditions. For example, he thought the 'power' was strongest in dim light (and under the séance table), even though phenomena frequently occurred in relatively bright light (and away from the table). Analogously, Eusapia Palladino thought a 'cabinet' facilitated the production of phenomena, and in her case perhaps it did. And perhaps more important, both Home and Palladino genuinely felt that discarnate spirits caused their phenomena. So it is not surprising that their mediumistic phenomena took forms appropriate to spiritualistic beliefs and attempts at communicating with the dead.

The belief systems of the investigators might also have influenced the forms taken by mediumistic phenomena, once again most clearly in the case of physical mediumship.¹⁴ For example, it is intriguing that WJ Crawford, an engineer, reported phenomena of the sort that engineers in particular would appreciate. Kathleen Goligher's ectoplasmic productions mimicked the operation of a cantilever when levitating a table. By contrast, Richet and Schrenck-Notzing – a physiologist and a physician, respectively – observed ectoplasmic phenomena that behaved more organically than mechanically. It is a pity that these investigators never experimented with each other's star subjects. It would have been interesting (and a welcome inquiry into parapsychological experimenter effects) to see what results Richet (for example) would have obtained with Miss Goligher, or Crawford with Eva C.

It seems clear, then, that the phenomena of physical mediumship may not be representative of PK in other contexts, where the underlying psychodynamics and hindrances to optimal psi functioning may be quite different and idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, there have been no reports of houses flying (at least during periods of meteorological and geological tranquility) or people levitating over to a friend's house for a visit (although some accounts of apparent bilocation are at least as interesting¹⁵). One may wonder, along with Anderson, why not? If psi functioning can assume virtually any form, isn't it reasonable to think that something of this sort might have been reported by now?

The answer, presumably, is that we *cannot* be certain what is reasonable to expect. One problem, discussed more fully in connection with claim (2b) below, is that we

are not entitled to make the inferential leap from 'Event *E* can occur' to 'Event *E* will (or is likely to) occur'. For example, even if thoughts can kill, it does not follow that they will, and (in fact) phenomena that are empirically possible will always be subject to many real-life constraints.

Moreover, many would assume (plausibly) first, that real-life or everyday occurrences of psi are likely to be driven by our deepest genuine or perceived needs and concerns, and second, that it is generally in our interest for those occurrences to take forms that are culturally and psychologically appropriate (including remaining inconspicuous). But from that perspective, one must ask: In what sort of credible context would it be appropriate to make a house fly or to make oneself levitate great distances? (And before answering that question glibly and quickly, keep in mind that constraints on psychic functioning would presumably issue not only from oneself, but from others, just as others constrain our day-to-day activities both with their actions and their beliefs, desires, etc.)

Consider: St Joseph of Copertino's indoor and outdoor [levitations](#) apparently covered what some would regard as considerable distances. But quite apart from the fact that any levitation would have been seen as astonishing, the form and extent of Joseph's feats seem to have been appropriate to the contexts in which they occurred. Perhaps Joseph could have levitated over to a neighboring monastery, but it is not clear why he would have done so. His levitations seem to have been caused by local and fleeting inspiring events, not by incidents requiring long-distance levitation as an appropriate response (that is, appropriate for Joseph). If a casual remark in the garden or an introduction to the Pope was sufficient to induce a levitation, it would seem more fitting, and more relevant, for Joseph to fly to a nearby tree or to the altar than to take off and disappear over the horizon. Granted, observers would probably have considered the latter to be even more miraculous than Joseph's run-of-the-mill levitations. But witnesses apparently found Joseph's local flights to be miraculous enough.

In fact, a long-distance flight would probably have seemed either superfluous or meaningless. Joseph's levitations were straightforward expressions of sudden ecstatic states, and those euphoric eruptions could be expressed easily and appropriately without recourse to long distance travel. In fact, Joseph's levitations seem merely to be a paranormal analogue to more familiar forms of religious awe or appreciation – for example, falling to one's knees, looking heavenward, and proclaiming 'Praise God' – which likewise can be expressed on the spot. So if we understand Joseph's levitations, plausibly, as nothing more than an eccentric and paranormal version of that sort of activity, there would be no reason for him to leave the scene, either on foot or aloft.[16](#)

The second problem with Anderson's argument concerns another apparently unwarranted assumption. Anderson seems to be saying that the best evidence is for the existence of phenomena still a long way from super-psi. He claims that it is 'a safe bet on empirical grounds' that the best psi 'will not *far* exceed' that of the great mediums (emphasis added). Presumably, Anderson's claim rests on a tacit standard of qualitative distance, but it is unclear what that could be. If Anderson is concerned only with the magnitude of the effect (such as levitating a house as compared to a table), it is true that we have no direct evidence for effects of certain

magnitudes. But one must also remember that large-scale effects of different, and possibly more psychologically relevant, sorts might occur surreptitiously in less contrived or ritualized human contexts. On the other hand, if Anderson has in mind the refinement or sophistication of mediumistic phenomena, then it is no longer clear why mediumistic phenomena would be radically different from presumed occurrences of everyday super-psi. Certainly, there are no obvious criteria according to which musical performances on untouched instruments, or materializations of lifelike hands, would be less impressive than (say) causing a detailed sequence of events to conform to a precognitive dream.

This last point is reminiscent of an observation made by Charles Richet, concerning materialization phenomena. Many have objected to full-figure materializations on the grounds that they are inherently more incredible than other PK phenomena (including partial materializations). The reason, we are told, is that a full-figure materialization is inherently more impressive than the other phenomena – in fact, so much so as to be beyond belief. But Richet demurred.

... it is as difficult to understand the materialization of a living hand, warm, articulated, and mobile, or even of a single finger, as to understand the materialization of an entire personality which comes and goes, speaks, and moves the veil that covers him.[17](#)

(b) The second (and stronger) version of objection (2) seems much less convincing than the first. Its general strategy is to argue that if super-psi indeed occurs, and especially if it plays a role in our daily affairs, then many things would be different from the way they are. For example, some argue that if large-scale lethal PK were possible, then given the enormous amount of hostility in the world (both conscious and unconscious), few people would be alive or intact today. Moreover, John Beloff argued,

a monster, such as Hitler, who provoked so much ill-will, could not have survived for any length of time. ... [But] far from suffering as the result of being the target of so much hatred, Hitler was exceptionally lucky in his career and was only finally overpowered at a prodigious cost in lives and by a stupendous world-wide effort.[18](#)

Similarly, one might argue that if hostile thoughts can kill, most parents and children (or bosses) would be dead, or that if our thoughts can be *benignly* efficacious, then most people would be happier than they are.

But this argument is exceptionally weak. Even if psi is theoretically unlimited in refinement or magnitude, it might still be severely curtailed in practice. For one thing, most (if not all) of our abilities or capacities are situation-sensitive; the manner or degree to which they are expressed depends on many contextual factors. For example, our capacity for circulating blood, digesting food, or remembering what we have read is not constant or uniform over time. It varies with our mood, health, age, time of day et cetera, and in general it can be diminished or enhanced in many ways. Even virtuosic abilities are vulnerable to various influences. For example, the performance of a great athlete can be impaired by injury, illness, temporary loss of confidence, preoccupation with personal problems, great

opponents, or even weak opponents having a great day. Similarly, a great comedian's ability to be funny can be undermined, countered or neutralized in a variety of ways and to varying degrees. Analogously, one would think that no matter how extensive, refined or virtuosic psi-functioning might be, it will also be subject to actual case-by-case limitations.

Presumably, then, hostile psi would be subject to various constraints, just like normal forms of hostility. It would be embedded within an enormously complex web of interactions, psi and non-psi, overt and covert, local and global, and it would be vulnerable to equally potent interferences or checks and balances (including psychic defenses) within that network. Analogously, we often fail to satisfy our normal malevolent desires, despite our apparent best efforts. We can be defeated by guilt, incompetence, outside distractions and interference, or adequate defenses. The difference between these all too familiar normal cases and that of hostile psi is that in the latter, we must entertain the possibility of an exceptionally broad range of countervailing factors, including psychic interactions that we will never discover. If we do not think in these terms, we will simply not be taking the possibility of hostile psi (or super-psi generally) seriously. In fact, we would be committing the mistake noted by Sturrock, and in addition we would be failing to place the operation of psi within a reasonable context of competing needs and interests.

Therefore (to return to Beloff's comment above), Hitler's success in surviving the paranormal influences of worldwide enmity could be explained in terms of an extensive network of competing or crisscrossing causal chains. For one thing, Hitler had his admirers as well as his detractors – probably even among those who denounced him openly. And for another, Hitler presumably would have made his own contributions to the underlying network of causal influences, mounting his own defenses or undertaking evasive tactics.

Furthermore, any interests, feelings and intentions specifically relating to Hitler would have been embedded within a much larger network of possibly equally potent interests, either irrelevant or indifferent to Hitler's welfare. But in that case, some of these additional competing influences might have neutralized attempted psychic attacks on Hitler's life. Analogously, even the world's most accomplished assassin might be thwarted, *fortuitously*, by a vast range of ongoing processes having nothing to do with his particular mission – for example, a flat tire, delayed train, lost luggage, icy roads, elevator malfunction, a migraine headache, upset stomach or a mugger. In order to deny these possibilities, one would have to argue (quite implausibly) that attempts at psi influence can never be interfered with (even by other comparable psi influences) and that the psychodynamics of paranormal hostility are radically different from those of normal hostility

Super-psi is preposterously complex

Some argue that the super-psi hypothesis requires a degree of psychic functioning that is simply too intricate and precise to be believed. Not only is it more complex than any psi achievement required by more conservative rival hypotheses, it is also antecedently implausible. For example, in order to explain precognition or the results of PK experiments with prerecorded targets in terms of super-psi, it may be necessary to posit an incredibly complex array of refined clockwise psi events.

Consider: In order to explain the precognition of a plane crash, we have, first, the option of positing a relatively straightforward (although controversially retrocausal) interaction between the later event and the earlier precognition. But if we try instead to explain that precognition in terms of super-psi, that would seem to require positing an imposing series of successful ESP (and PK) tasks – for example, learning recondite facts about the mental states of several people or the condition of the plane in order to draw the appropriate unconscious predictions or in order to influence or affect the appropriate people or most vulnerable parts of the plane. And in survival cases (such as instances of so-called ‘drop-in’ communications), many would say that the most straightforward and compelling option is to explain the evidence in terms of an unexpected communicator’s needs to contact the living. By contrast (critics would say), the super-psi alternative – supposing that one or more living persons unconsciously collected information from widely scattered contemporary sources – is both needlessly and absurdly complex.

This objection, however, has several flaws. First (and somewhat ironically), it is not a line of reasoning that many parapsychologists can endorse. Following Helmut Schmidt’s work with PK on random event generators, some would contend that the success of a psi task has little if anything to do with task complexity (such as knowledge of the target and the nature of the target system).¹⁹ Second, it is unclear whether this objection appeals to a defensible standard of complexity. The issue here is similar to that raised earlier concerning the magnitude of PK effects. As noted above, one could reasonably consider the most dramatic phenomena of physical mediumship to provide direct evidence of super-psi – or at least something pretty close to it. Presumably, one could adopt an analogous position regarding the complexity of those phenomena. There is no obvious, credible, and objective standard according to which materializations, music from untouched instruments, and earthquake effects, count as less (or significantly less) complex than the types of psi posited in super-psi accounts of precognition, PK experiments with prerecorded targets, and so on. One could take a similar view in the case of the thoughtographs of Ted Serios.²⁰

Furthermore, there are at least two versions of the super-psi hypothesis, only one of which takes super-psi to be a collection of controlled and monitored psi tasks. That version of the hypothesis is a variant of what some have dubbed the *cybernetic* model of psi. According to that model, psi agents acquire information by ESP concerning the system they wish to control, and then they monitor and guide their actions on that system by means of a continuing supply of ESP information (or feedback). From this viewpoint, PK is analogous to riding a bicycle or driving a car, because in those activities we modify our behavior in light of feedback from the system we are controlling. Presumably, then, super cybernetic psi would be a more extreme or convoluted version of this sort of activity, requiring the agent either to control and monitor an extremely complex system, or else (as in tests with prerecorded targets) to complete an imposing series of well-coordinated cybernetic tasks.

But one could also treat super-psi as something that is relatively or completely indifferent to task complexity. According to this *magic wand* hypothesis, the most

relevant causal influence in producing psi effects is the subject's need,²¹ and there may be no underlying process of any significance to study or describe. Perhaps psi of that sort would be analogous to effects sometimes reported in connection with biofeedback, hypnosis and healing.²² For example, subjects have learned through biofeedback to fire a single muscle cell in the arm (and no surrounding cells), and researchers have successfully treated children's warts by painting them with what the children believed was a magic dye. In fact, that method of treatment was found to be as effective as surgical excision of the warts. Similarly, the history of hypnosis documents an impressive number of astonishing physiological effects. For example, surgical procedures have been performed without bleeding on hypnotized hemophiliac dental patients. In these cases there is no need or reason to suppose that subjects monitor and selectively control intervening and underlying bodily processes. In fact, the subjects usually have no idea what those underlying processes might be.

The super-psi hypothesis is unfalsifiable

Apparently, this objection has the virtue of being true, because it seems that we can never prove or demonstrate that psi did not occur, no matter what the evidence turns out to be. If psychic functioning can be inconspicuous and pervasive, if it can be triggered by unconscious needs and desires, and if we cannot specify limits to its degree of magnitude or refinement, then we cannot, strictly speaking, falsify hypotheses positing its operation.

However, this alleged problem may be of little significance, so long as we are willing to appeal to higher-level theoretical criteria for choosing one hypothesis over another. For example, even if a car crash caused by sneaky psi is indistinguishable from one caused normally, we could still have reason – although never a conclusive reason – for choosing one explanation over the other. As with many conspiracy theories, we might have to string together a cumbersome and convoluted array of facts to support the sneaky-psi alternative, but in principle it could be done. We would have to find plausible links to the needs and interests of the presumed aggressor and tell a reasonable story about (say) conflicts of interest between that person and the driver of the car. We could also look for revealing patterns in the data (such as accidents befalling people the agent does not like). Of course in many cases, we will have too little information to know whether the psi explanation is a live option rather than a mere possibility in logical space. But in those cases where we can make educated guesses of the aforementioned sort, we can look for the story that makes the most sense systematically and which appeals to our instincts about explanatory simplicity. And although the process is probably more fallible and uncertain than we would wish, it is essentially the procedure we follow any time we explain human behavior.

Indeed, we frequently find ourselves weighing rival, but strictly unfalsifiable, hypotheses – in fact, nearly every time we speculate about the mental lives of ourselves and others. Consider the hypotheses 'S is angry with me' and 'S is not angry with me'. In many real life situations there may be no way to decide conclusively between them – at least not with anything like the certitude many feel we should aim for with legitimate scientific hypotheses. For example, even if S says

he is not angry, one can always interpret that remark as (say) a sign of S's reluctance to admit his anger, or a sign of self-deception or lack of self-awareness. Similarly, in many cases there is no way to distinguish evidence suggesting the absence of anger from evidence suggesting veiled anger. Nevertheless, some people are much better than others at selecting among these sorts of rival hypotheses, and accordingly they make less of a shamble of their lives than those who are more explanatorily challenged.

In fact, our psychological survival depends on our ability to weigh rival hypotheses about others' mental states. It is by means of such a process that we reliably determine whom to confide in, how to speak to other people (such as which issues to avoid, what 'tone' to take), whom we can rely on in times of stress, and so on. And clearly, the ability to do this requires a mastery of a certain kind of theoretical activity: something at least very similar to generating hypotheses about people's intentions, desires, needs, interests and capacities. And even though these hypotheses (or conjectures) may not be falsifiable, many are highly justifiable on pragmatic grounds. That is demonstrated by the way they successfully guide our dealings with other people.

No doubt the uncertainty of hypothesizing about super-psi is generally greater than the uncertainty of our everyday conjectures about others' mental states. There may not even be many psi-regularities, or (for the reasons noted earlier) they may be far less conspicuous than ordinary psychological regularities. Or perhaps very few of our psi efforts successfully negotiate the complex underlying network of competing interests and interactions in which all such attempts would be embedded. Nevertheless, in both cases, the information needed to choose one hypothesis over another requires a certain amount of digging. Of course, in the case of psychic functioning, the process is more daunting, and in many cases we will simply have to conclude that we do not know what to say. But that is not unprecedented, or a sign that we are entertaining hypotheses that are empirically defective. Many times in the case of acceptable everyday attempts to explain human behavior, we likewise do not know what to say.

Conclusion

Consider, finally, what sort of utility, if any, we can anticipate from a judicious application of the super-psi hypothesis. Even if we grant all the obvious obstacles to determining whether psi of any magnitude was operating in a given case, we can still speculate about how it might manifest. That is, we can consider whether there are certain kinds of events or regularities in particular which an appeal to extensive or refined under-the-surface psi might help explain. For example, as suggested earlier, some people seem to be remarkably lucky or unlucky. Now undoubtedly many cases of exceptional luck or misfortune can be explained easily by reference to familiar processes. But other cases seem to have no obvious explanation, especially when streaks of luck or misfortune continue for a while. Similarly, some people seem consistently to have a knack for making highly profitable speculative business or investment decisions, whereas others seem regularly to fail at this activity. Some (but not others) seem repeatedly to operate within a surrounding maelstrom of chaos or disaster, and of these some always seem to be victims, while

others seem always to escape unharmed. Why are these sorts of regularities sometimes strikingly long-term? Why is it that the lives of certain people are regularly filled with annoyances and difficulties, apparently not of their own making, while those of others are relatively trouble-free in the same respects? Why do some people repeatedly have difficulties with the postal service, mail-order companies, bank computers or personnel, or automobiles, appliances, or other purchases (including items noted for their reliability), while others seem never to have any such problems?

We need not assume that there are simple answers, or any conclusive answers, to these questions, and we certainly should not take it for granted that psi is operating in these cases. After all, streaks of good or bad luck might still be fortuitous. But if psi functioning does operate in the world on a day-to-day basis, one might reasonably expect it to manifest in these ways, even if it does not do so consistently or often. And in that case, it might be worthwhile to carry out depth-psychological studies of lucky and unlucky people. We could look for connections between their good or bad fortune and such things as their self-image, hidden agendas, and relations with others. Of course (as already noted), no definite conclusions about the presence of psi will emerge from such studies. But occasionally a psi hypothesis might be particularly enlightening or suggestive in the way it systematizes an otherwise motley array of unconnected occurrences, or in the way it makes sense out of otherwise seemingly paradoxical features of a person's life.

Stephen E Braude

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) See the *Psi Encyclopedia* entry on [Postmortem Survival](#). Also Braude (2003, 2009, 2014); Sudduth (2014, 2016).
- [2.](#) Braude (1997); Eisenbud (1982).
- [3.](#) Braude (1997) has argued that the phenomena of physical mediumship may be considered kinds of *bridge* phenomena, linking small-scale psi manifestations (usually in the lab) to the even more impressive conceivable achievements, and lending some plausibility to claims for the latter. He sometimes refers to them as instances of ‘dandy’ psi, which illustrates again how fuzzy, elastic, and ultimately unhelpful, such normative terms are.
- [4.](#) Braude (1997); Eisenbud (1982).
- [5.](#) See the discussion in Braude (1997).
- [6.](#) Braude (2007); Eisenbud (1970, 1982, 1992).
- [7.](#) Consider, e.g., the ostensible large-scale effects of Ted Owen, the so-called ‘PK Man’ (Mishlove, 2000).
- [8.](#) Braude (1997, 2003); Eisenbud (1982, 1992); Sudduth (2014, 2016).
- [9.](#) Murphy & White (1978).
- [10.](#) For conjectures about why that might be the case, see Braude (1997, 2003) on the psychic causal nexus. See also Eisenbud (1992).
- [11.](#) Braude (1997, 2003).
- [12.](#) Sturrock (1987), 93.
- [13.](#) Anderson (1987), 10.
- [14.](#) But see Eisenbud (1992, Chap. 14), for a possible example of experimenter influence on the content and presentation of mediumistic communications.
- [15.](#) See, for example, the case of Dadaji, discussed in Braude (2003, 263ff), and in Osis & Haraldsson (1976).
- [16.](#) See Grosso (2016) for a full account of Joseph’s career and phenomena.
- [17.](#) Richet (1923/1975), 491.
- [18.](#) Beloff (1985), 114.
- [19.](#) See, e.g., Schmidt (1975, 1976), and the discussion of task complexity in Braude (2002).
- [20.](#) Eisenbud, 1967, 1989. See also the *Encyclopedia* entry on [Ted Serios](#).
- [21.](#) See, e.g., Eisenbud (1970, 1982, 1992).
- [22.](#) Basmajian (1963, 1972); Crabtree (1993); Frank & Frank (1991); Gauld (1992).