

CONCERNING FRAUD AND ERROR*

WORK WITH A FRAUDULENT PK METAL-BENDING SUBJECT

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During a seven-and-a-half-month period in 1983-84, I worked with a self-alleged PK subject at the University of Edinburgh's Psychology Department. (Drs. John Beloff, Julie Milton, and Julian Isaacs also participated in this research.) The subject, Tim (a pseudonym), participated in 20 sessions representing approximately 60 hours of work. At the time of this study Tim was seventeen years old. Bright and very affable, he appeared to be an almost ideal subject. Eager to demonstrate his ability in a controlled laboratory environment, he was exceptionally cooperative. He readily followed our instructions and often contributed useful ideas and suggestions of his own. Tim claimed to have started bending metal, mostly cutlery, at the age of four and to have been doing so ever since. He claimed that some objects bent without his awareness of them having done so, while at other times he could bend things purposefully by simply concentrating on doing so. During the course of our work, Tim also claimed to have developed fire-raising abilities.

The work with Tim covered many different areas, including micro-PK, macro-PK, fire-raising sessions, and Ganzfeld sessions. There were also several (at times emotionally intense) counseling sessions. Throughout our work together Tim never succeeded in producing any apparent psi effects under properly controlled conditions, although many effects were produced under less secure circumstances. Eventually, due to mounting evidence suggesting fraudulent behavior, a hidden camera was utilized to film the subject without his knowledge. This film revealed blatantly fraudulent activities. When confronted with evidence of his deception, the subject denied that his activities had been fraudulent. The work with Tim ceased at this point, and several months elapsed before contact with him was reestablished. When it was, Tim confessed

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to deceptive behavior. He said that he was a practicing magician who had wished to see if it were possible for a magician to pose successfully as a psychic in a laboratory.

Our work with Tim highlighted several factors which may be of concern to other macro-PK researchers. The primary "lesson" that arose from this case was that as researchers we must never let ourselves forget that our subjects may be deceiving us. Nor should we let our judgment be influenced by our personal knowledge or perception of our subject(s). In keeping these dictates in mind, it may be of use to consider the different manners in which a subject may provide deceptive information. In the broadest sense, this may be done in two ways: deceptive information may be conveyed intentionally or unintentionally.

Unintentional deception refers to cases in which the subject genuinely believes the information he is providing is accurate, whereas in fact it is not. Thus, a subject may believe that some occurrence was paranormal in origin, when its actual cause was quite normal. In such situations the subject will be entirely genuine in his portrayal of events, as he will be entirely convinced that his interpretation is correct. When working with Tim his performance was so convincing that I frequently considered the possibility that he was deluding himself about the genuineness of his psi ability.

In other situations the subject may be quite purposefully trying to deceive the researcher. In such cases, one of the subject's first priorities would be to present himself to the researchers in as genuine and convincing a manner as possible. As Tim demonstrated to me, one should never underestimate the consummate acting skills that one's subjects may possess. Researchers should also be wary of confirmation of abilities or events from others, even when the reference is from an apparently reliable and unbiased source. It is always possible that others may have been either taken in by, or be acting as confederates with, one's subject.

The distinction drawn between intentional and unintentional deception is not meant to be absolute. A subject who has genuine psi ability, or believes he has, may resort to intentional deception upon occasion. This may be done for a variety of reasons. Perhaps fraud may be used to heighten a genuine effect, or it may be resorted to if the "real thing" does not appear to be forthcoming. The subject may even think that there is nothing wrong with "helping the effect along" if he is convinced that his ability is genuine.

This situation can pose a dilemma for the researcher. If one has evidence suggesting both genuine ability and fraud, does one continue to work with the subject? In Tim's case we had no strong evidence of PK ability. Once we had acquired firm evidence of fraud, we concluded that no one was likely to benefit from further

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work together. However, this decision was not taken without reservations. Several months elapsed between the time the work with Tim ceased and his admission of being a magician. During this period I still had doubts as to whether Tim might have possessed genuine PK ability and had only resorted to fraud out of frustration at not being able to produce PK under controlled conditions.

With hindsight, these doubts seem surprising, given that I had discovered obviously fraudulent activity, had other evidence suggesting fraudulent behavior, and had no strong positive results. Why had I been willing to give Tim's PK ability the benefit of the doubt when the evidence was against doing so? In considering this question I discovered two aspects of my relationship with Tim that may have contributed to my apparent reluctance to recognize that Tim's claims were false. Firstly, I was biased towards liking Tim, both initially and as our relationship developed. Secondly, I was biased towards believing him. The factors that gave rise to these feelings are inherent in many experimental situations and thus may be of interest to other researchers.

In parapsychology it is generally regarded as advantageous to have a friendly and open rapport with one's subject(s). We want our subjects to feel comfortable, which includes wanting them to like us to some degree. If we perceive that we have been successful in this pursuit it seems a natural facet of human nature that we will, in turn, like them. This may be particularly true in macro-PK work, where a subject and researcher may work closely together for a relatively lengthy time. Researchers thus may feel that they have come to know their subjects well, and a genuine friendship may develop. Having a good rapport with subjects may be quite beneficial. A good researcher/subject relationship will not only make any investigation more pleasant for all concerned, but it may also be helpful in eliciting psi. But this should not blind researchers to the possibility that they may be more trusting of subjects whom they like or feel they know well than of other subjects.

Another facet of liking our subjects involves the fact that we need them. In most cases subjects will travel to research centers and give their time for little, if any, compensation. Thus, they are helping us with our work and we are indebted to them for doing so. In Tim's case, he devoted a great deal of his time to working with us and also had a relatively long journey to and from our lab. These things, particularly when combined with his very cooperative and friendly manner, may well have biased me towards liking him. This, in turn, may have colored my perspective in viewing his claims.

It is also possible that I was biased towards believing Tim. We are all familiar with the difficulties arising from the so-called "elusive nature of psi." In short, we cannot study a phenomenon unless we can first produce it. Thus, Tim's claims that he could

produce macro-PK at will suggested exciting possibilities. I wanted his claims to be true, and this desire may have influenced my evaluation of his performance.

Fortunately, any biases that may have arisen from liking and believing my subject did not lead to any obvious errors in judgment --in this case. The criterion of accepting only evidence produced under thoroughly controlled conditions was used in all the work with Tim. Strict adherence to this criterion did not allow any judgmental errors caused by personal biases to arise. However, as researchers we should be aware of the possible occurrence of these biases to ensure that they are not allowed to influence our findings.

An unfortunate reality which parapsychological researchers must never forget is that we work in an area that will continue to attract those intent upon deception. Not only must we protect against fraudulent and/or misleading activity on our subjects' part, but also we must recognize that unintentionally we may contribute to our own deception. Only if we are aware of and guard against these factors will our field be able to advance unembarrassed by deceptions others may try to perpetrate.

FACTORS AFFECTING JUDGMENTS ABOUT THE OCCURRENCE OF PSI IN SPONTANEOUS SETTINGS

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This paper describes three areas of research in social and cognitive psychology concerning errors in everyday human judgment and decision making which may be relevant to the study of errors in decisions about the operation of psi in spontaneous settings. At their most general level, these decisions either take the form "psi has occurred" or, alternatively, "psi has not occurred." When somebody decides "I have witnessed psi" when in fact there is a normal explanation for their experience, we may call this a "false positive." Conversely, the conclusion "I have not witnessed psi" when in fact psi was in operation may be called a "false negative."

Attribution Theory: Objective Data Vs. Subjective Theories

Attribution theory studies how people decide what caused an event that they witnessed. It has often been described as the study of the causal explanations of the layperson. In fact, there