

Acknowledging and Dealing with The Fear of Psi¹

CHARLES T. TART²

ABSTRACT: Unacknowledged fears of psi can create unconsciously motivated behaviors that inhibit and/or distort the operation of psi in the laboratory. Observations suggest that unacknowledged fear of psi is widespread among parapsychologists, as well as others. The ingenious approaches of K. Batcheldor and J. Isaacs for producing psi may be effective because they bypass fears of psi, but have long-term limitations through not dealing directly with it. A social masking theory of psi inhibition and a primal conflict theory of psi inhibition are discussed, and 10 strategies for dealing with this fear are presented. Denial, avoidance of triggering circumstances, rationalization/distraction, and dissociation/repression strategies all have inherent psychopathological aspects. Desensitization and bypass defenses have healthy as well as psychopathological aspects. Cognitive/affective acknowledgement, learning adaptive coping skills, accepting responsibility, and personal growth strategies are the most desirable ways of handling the problem of the fear of psi.

INTRODUCTION

For some years, I and many colleagues (see e.g., Batcheldor, 1966; Eisenbud, 1963, 1970, 1972, 1979, 1982; LeShan, 1966; Pearce, 1973, 1974; Rogo, 1977) have been concerned with the issue of conscious fears we may have of psi phenomena and with the effects which these fears, particularly when unacknowledged, have on research. Thus I was quite intrigued by the emphasis on fear of psi and consequent resistance to psi in the two preceding papers in this *Journal* by Kenneth Batcheldor (1984) and Julian Isaacs (1984).

Batcheldor has consistently emphasized the problem of resistance to psi and provided a number of useful ideas for setting up experimental conditions that will affect mood in such a way that

¹ This paper is partially based on material presented at a symposium on the Batcheldor approach held at the combined Twenty-Fifth Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association and the Centenary Conference of the Society for Psychical Research at the University of Cambridge, August 16-21, 1982.

² My understanding of resistance to psi has been aided by comments from John Beloff, William Braud, Douglas Dean, Jan Ehrenwald, Jule Eisenbud, C. A. Meier, Carroll Nash, Carl Sargent, Gertrude Schmeidler, Berthold Schwarz, Ian Stevenson, and Rhea White.

fear may be bypassed. Too, his emphasis that it is the “belief” of the *moment*, rather than long-term personality characteristics, that are liable to be important in determining whether psi phenomena manifest, is particularly valuable. The consistently low magnitude of correlations of long-term personality traits with psi performance should long ago have convinced us that these factors are of little practical importance in dealing with psi.

Isaacs has taken a number of Batcheldor’s ideas and combined them with his own to broaden their application beyond the sitter-group setting. His initial results in producing apparent psychokinetic effects in the laboratory suggest the value of this approach. In this paper, however, I am going to focus not on Batcheldor’s and Isaacs’ contributions, despite their great value, but on what they left out of their approach. I shall overemphasize my points, without doing full justice to the sophistication of their arguments, because I think these points need to be made very strongly. The basic thrust of my theory—that we parapsychologists, as well as other people, have a lot of unacknowledged fear of psi—requires strong emphasis to even begin to get past the unconscious resistance we have to these ideas.

Manipulation versus Collaboration

Before dealing with the issue of fear of psi per se, I want to point out that there is a psychological element running through the current presentations of Batcheldor’s and Isaacs’ approaches that complicates the fear and resistance problem, and so must be dealt with. They implicitly follow the dominant psychological and parapsychological research tradition of passive subjects who are manipulated by a knowledgeable experimenter in order to produce effects. As I have argued at length (Tart, 1977), this “colonial paradigm” in which passive subjects are manipulated for the benefit of others is a major drawback in both experimental psychology and experimental parapsychology. Participants in experiments are not passive; they are active problem solvers, using their intelligence to hypothesize the real purpose of the experiment, this hypothesis being subject to their own beliefs, knowledge, personality characteristics, and needs. Feelings of being manipulated, even if it is a “benign” manipulation intended to make them feel better, can have unconscious reactive effects. These effects are highly variable and, being generally unacknowledged, can greatly increase random error variance and introduce systematic effects quite contrary to the intentions of the experimenter. I have discussed this at greater length elsewhere (Tart, 1977), and an excellent comprehensive review has been made by Silverman (1977).

I would suggest that both Batchelder's and Isaacs' approaches could be modified toward the humanistic direction I have proposed as an alternative model (Tart, 1977). In that approach we do not experiment on "subjects," we work with "colleagues" and "collaborators" in a situation that does not involve manipulation or deceit. Ideally, there is total openness and honesty between "experimenters" and "subjects." The needs of people in all roles in the experiment should be considered so that everyone learns something and, we hope, experiences personal growth as a result of participating in the experiment. This collaboration model of an honest, shared endeavor among colleagues of equal status should greatly reduce the reactive effects of the standard "colonial paradigm." This result is highly desirable in and of itself, and it also simplifies attempts to deal with fear and resistance: Who would honestly reveal their fears to someone whom they suspect is manipulating them?

Now let me turn to the more important issue of dealing with fear.

FEAR OF PSI

I believe, both from observation of others and observations of myself, that there is a widespread and unacknowledged fear of psi among people in general, as well as among parapsychologists. I have recently formalized some of my understanding of this fear in the form of a social masking theory of the inhibition of psi functioning and a primal conflict theory of the inhibition of psi functioning (Tart, 1982).

Briefly, the social masking theory recognizes the fact that our implicit social contract often calls for not really understanding other people. It is as if we had contracted, "I'll support your illusions if you'll support mine." By "illusions" I mean the incorrect perception of our true motivations and feelings because we attend to a more acceptable fantasy in order to avoid seeing unacceptable aspects of our true self. Persons might consciously believe, for example, that they are sympathetic listeners, when they are actually driven by an unconscious, unacceptable fear of feeling inferior and being rejected: Thus identifying with the myth or illusion of being a sympathetic listener simultaneously avoids the unpleasant feelings of fear of rejection and subtly obligates others to accept the person because he or she acts like a sympathetic listener. Some of the functioning of ordinary social work depends on manipulation and deceit, sometimes of oneself as well as of others. Psi, insofar as it is seen as an unknown way of gathering information *that may not have any limits*, that may be uncontrollable, is highly threatening. Thus there is a fear of psi as something

which would shatter our and others' illusions and rob us of the social power that comes from effective control of our own and others' illusions. Consequently we are enculturated in ways that deny the existence of psi, or restrict it to special areas of life so that it does not occur in ordinary social processes.

The primal conflict theory of psi inhibition hypothesizes that mothers and their babies have a natural, emotional telepathic bond which probably begins before birth and certainly is very strong after birth and through the first few years of life. Because of social pressures, particularly in contemporary society, mothers feel totally responsible for the psychological health and welfare of their infants, and they are expected to want to care for their infants at all times. Real mothers, of course, often have negative feelings about their infants, but because of social (and internalized) pressure they try to hide them. They may succeed on an overt level, telling their infant or child that, for example, they are only punishing them for their own good. This may extend to repression on the mother's part of her negative feelings.

Since it is essential for the child to accept the mother's overt picture of the way she feels and the consensus reality of society represented by the mother, an enormous conflict can be induced if a telepathic channel gives information denying the overt (and vital) message. I hypothesize that a general suppression of psi faculties is carried out by the infant or child in order to deal with this primal conflict, so that only the overt message is received and the immediate conflict seems to disappear. In the adult who has long ago gone through this primal process, there is an unconscious linkage between the existence of psi and extremely painful, negative experiences with the mother. Aside from any fearful qualities of psi per se, great fear is associated with it because of these painful childhood conflicts. Psychodynamically this results in a denial of the existence of psi and/or other surface defenses against psi functioning. We will consider these defenses later. (For a more extended discussion of these two theories, see Tart, 1982.)

Batchelder and Isaacs acknowledge various fears of psi far more explicitly than most parapsychologists, and this is an excellent start on dealing with it. Judging from their procedures, however, instead of dealing directly with this fear they bypass it. That is, they work up ways to try to make the participants in their experiments feel better about themselves and/or not notice the fears of psi that they have.

I'm sure this approach is effective to some degree and may account for the apparent high level manifestations of psi in both of these researchers' studies. It is quite consistent with my two theories about inhibition of psi functioning that this approach

should produce short-term results, but, from psychodynamic considerations in the above theories, I do not think that bypassing the issue of fear will be successful in the long run. I shall devote the rest of this paper to a consideration of some of the strategies that can be used for dealing with fear of psi. I hope that these suggestions will lead to appropriate research.

DEALING WITH FEAR

I shall outline 10 general methods of dealing with fear. I have probably overlooked some other ways. Of these 10, four are predominantly negative and psychopathological in the sense that they exact a high psychological price in terms of wholeness and unconscious complications and reactions. Four are quite positive ways of dealing with fear that lead to personal growth, and two are mixed, having both psychopathological and growth aspects.

My assessment of what is psychopathological and what is psychologically healthy in the following discussion of defense and coping strategies is based on a humanistic and transpersonal ideal. Briefly, a healthy, growing person has full and undistorted reality contact with the outside world, restricted only by the inherent limits of humanness, and full understanding of and conscious responsibility for his or her mental functioning. Psychopathology, by contrast, involves strong distortion of one's perception of external reality and of other persons, and distorted and incomplete understanding of one's mental processes, frequently accompanied by substitution of emotionally invested fantasies for realities. Real people live on a continuum between these extremes, and psychological growth is movement toward the healthy ideal.

Denial

A major way of dealing with the fear of psi is to deny that psi exists. After all, if there is no psi, there is nothing to be afraid of, so one has no fear to acknowledge.

When someone claims to be making objective, factual statements about a subject, but behaves in a way that suggests there are strong emotions operating, it is generally a good psychological bet to suspect there are unconscious processes involved. The vehement denial of the existence of psi, as in the case of some pseudocritics whose behavior suggests they are protecting their "faith" against heresy, strongly suggests that fear of psi is quite strong in them at an unconscious level. Insofar as psi is an aspect of reality, its denial is inherently psychopathological.

A variation of the denial defense is to admit that psi exists, but to

deny that one has any fear of psi. The statement that "I am not afraid of psi" may be correct for some people, but I suspect that for many people, since they have not actually dealt with the fear of psi to begin with, a denial of having any fear of psi is simply a defense mechanism.

Avoidance of Triggering Circumstances

A common way of avoiding experiencing fear of something is to avoid getting oneself into situations where that fear is liable to be triggered. If one fears dark alleys, for example, one doesn't go into dark alleys. Perhaps one doesn't even get close to dark alleys! This is a way of manipulating oneself, consciously, semiconsciously, or unconsciously, to avoid the triggering of fear. If the fear is strong this avoidance has to actively circumscribe behavior, as one cannot depend passively on circumstances not triggering one's fear.

I believe the phenomena I have called the "religion of the .05 level" (Tart, 1980) is an example of this style of defense among parapsychologists. Briefly, I have noticed that when an experiment produces psi results that are trivial in terms of their actual *magnitude*, but *statistically* significant at the .05 level, there is usually very little criticism of the experiment from fellow parapsychologists. The existence of the mystery (psi) has been reaffirmed by an intellectual abstraction (statistical significance test), but the actual level of manifestation is so trivial that it does not evoke an emotional response. The occasional psi results that involve obvious high level psi functioning usually provoke strong criticism from some parapsychologists, a far more intense focus on possible methodological flaws than is applied to studies that are merely significant at the .05 level. Such a bombardment of multiple criticism has the psychological effect of denying the reality of the high level manifestation of psi. It is a manipulation of oneself to get away from the triggering circumstance, the apparent high level manifestation of psi, which is beginning to trigger fear.

Rationalization/Distraction

When a feeling of fear begins to manifest, alternative mental processes may drain off all the energy so that the fear is not consciously experienced. An active process of rationalizing feelings about psi so that psi seems to be something pleasant or good, and/or an active indulgence in a related process that effectively distracts one's attention from the circumstances that are triggering the fear, can allow one to avoid facing the fear. The many metaphysical and philosophical systems, for example, that say that psi comes from a "higher level" and so is inherently good can serve

as a sort of rationalization defense, whether or not there is any truth in such ideas. An obsessive focus on technical and methodological aspects of psi experimentation can similarly distract one from implications of psi that might trigger a fear reaction.

Dissociation/Repression

A fourth pathological method of dealing with fear of psi is to dissociate psi functioning from one's conscious self. To small degrees this can be done by giving the credit for psi abilities to a "system," such as Tarot cards, a ouija board, "radionic" devices, or the like. "It's not *me*; I'm just a channel for something else; I'm just reading the cards." The full-blown form of the dissociated defense can occur with the development of a trance personality, which clearly takes responsibility away from the individual showing the psi. This eliminates the problem of what Batcheldor called "ownership resistance." Insofar as there is total amnesia for the doings of the trance personality, psi is put at a great distance from one's conscious personality, thus avoiding triggering fears and conflicts about psi. Conflicts about possible "craziness" may have to be handled, of course, but some people may find this easier than dealing directly with psi per se.

Note that I am showing how dissociation/repression may be used as a form of defense against fears of psi, not commenting on whether or not there may be genuinely synchronistic events involved in acts like Tarot card reading (Tart, 1981) or the possible reality, in some cases, of spirit guides.

Desensitization

Desensitization is the first way of dealing with fear that has both positive and negative long-term qualities. Desensitization defenses consist of repeated exposures to the circumstances triggering one's fear until the initial shock wears off and one becomes largely habituated. The process often includes starting with low levels of the fear-producing stimulus and progressively increasing its intensity as one adapts. This is a mental toughening that may be quite effective. Insofar as it strengthens one's conscious ability to handle the fear without actually dealing with the causes of the fear, however, it may allow other unconscious defenses against psi to continue to operate and distort psi functioning.

Bypass Defenses

This is the sort of defense strategy that Batcheldor's and Isaacs' papers ingeniously use, namely, setting up external situations,

with consequent effects on one's internal psychological processes, such that one manages to bypass the problem of fear and still make some psi manifest. For example, using a target system that is prone to many artifacts, such as happens when many hands are upon a table, may allow a genuine psi response to come out, but since the table movement could be dismissed as an artifact, this allows one to avoid a direct confrontation with fear of psi. This is similar to rationalization/distraction defenses.

Another way of carrying out an end run defense is to give the experimenter great authority (something experimenters often like) and to believe that the experimenter's manipulations (personal actions and environmental control) are responsible for the psi. The authority relationships common in the colonial paradigms, insofar as they mesh with needs to have some authority take control of responsibilities in areas where "subjects" are fearful, may work out very well in the short run. Like the earlier defense strategies, however, the bypass defense is inherently psychopathological, even though useful in the short run, because it abrogates one's own responsibility and distorts self-knowledge about what is really going on.

Cognitive/Affective Acknowledgement

Here we consider the first of four positive ways of dealing with fear in general, as well as with fear of psi specifically. In this coping strategy one fully accepts the fear and experiences it, not just on an intellectual level but on an emotional level. One has to be fully able to experience and acknowledge that one *personally* fears various aspects of psi. This may have some adaptive effects in and of itself. Many specific fears are magnified by a fear of being afraid. This can vanish with full acceptance. This cognitive and affective acknowledgement is a necessary basis for the following three positive coping techniques.

Learning Adaptive Coping Skills

Having acknowledged fear of psi, one begins to try to deal with specific aspects of the fear, trying different ways of handling it and seeing what seems to be successful. It involves, of course, a certain tolerance for fear such that one can mentally or behaviorally try various coping techniques while experiencing the fear. It is comparable to learning gun safety. To a person who knows nothing about handling guns, a hunting rifle is indeed dangerous. To a person who has been trained to always treat the gun as if it were loaded and

never take any chances, some fear may remain but fear is largely replaced by adaptive coping skills.

Accepting Responsibility

This adaptive coping strategy, based on a cognitive and affective acknowledgement of the fear of psi, involves a step in personal growth in which one recognizes the negative sides of one's nature. It may be possible, for example, to use psi abilities to injure someone. Whereas people without much psychological insight might believe that *they* would never do such a thing, a mature person would recognize that in the right mood they could not only use psi abilities to injure someone, they could enjoy doing that, feel justified in it. Having recognized that aspect of themselves, they could then cope by further accepting the fact that they are responsible for the consequences of their actions and could choose to consciously use psi to injure others, but be consciously responsible for what they have done, or consciously choose not to use psi negatively. Psychologically speaking, denial of one's negative side generally leads to disguised forms of aggression which may be considerably nastier than conscious, controlled aggression. This acceptance of one's negativity and a conscious decision not to use it is a more adaptive coping strategy than denial.

Personal Growth

In general, the more psychologically mature a person becomes, the less a problem should exist with fear of psi. In the course of discovering and accepting one's negative side and, what is often harder for people in our culture, in discovering and accepting one's positive side, one becomes more self-accepting and less fearful in general. This kind of psychological growth will have involved a great deal of adaptive dealing with fears of all sorts, and so dealing specifically with fear of psi is less of a problem. Psychologically mature people have dealt with fear in a constructive way before, and so they have confidence that they can do so again.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the great discoveries of modern psychology is that unconscious processes exist and that they cannot be effectively handled by pretending that they are not there. I believe that unconscious fear of psi is very strong among parapsychologists, as well as people in general. This unacknowledged fear is a primary reason for the generally trivial manifestation of psi in our laboratories, and

it will continue to stifle progress in our field until it is acknowledged and dealt with. There may be real reasons for fearing some aspects of psi, such as potential military applications (Tart, 1978; 1979), but dealing effectively with such real problems will not be possible if our unacknowledged personal fears are unresolved.

The usual scholarly discussion is oriented toward the reader's intellectual processes. This paper is also oriented toward your emotions. It is not intended to insult the reader; since I have had to deal with many of my own fears of psi in the past, I am quite sympathetic. Perhaps you have dealt with your own fears of psi or were lucky enough to have a developmental history that didn't create any significant fears. Perhaps your personal fears of psi are so strong that you will simply forget the points of this article or you will rationalize that since you have no significant fears of psi, you can dismiss this discussion as of academic interest only, applying perhaps to other people. I suggest that it would be more profitable, both personally and for our field, if you would seriously look for evidence that you have strong fears of psi and try to acknowledge and deal with such fears. Research projects on others' fears of psi are fine, but probably will not get very far if we haven't first examined our own fears.

REFERENCES

- BATCHELDOR, K. J. (1966). Report on a case of table levitation and associated phenomena. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 43, 339-356.
- BATCHELDOR, K. J. (1984). Contributions to the theory of PK induction from sitter-group work. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 78, 105-122.
- EISENBUD, J. (1963). Psi and the nature of things. *International Journal of Parapsychology*, 5, 245-269.
- EISENBUD, J. (1970). *Psi and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Grune & Stratton.
- EISENBUD, J. (1972). Some notes on the psychology of the paranormal. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 66, 27-41.
- EISENBUD, J. (1979). How to make things null and void. An essay-review of Brian Inglis' *Natural and Supernatural*. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 43, 140-152.
- EISENBUD, J. (1982). *Paranormal Foreknowledge*. New York: Human Sciences Press.
- ISAACS, J. (1984). The Batcheldor approach: Some strengths and weaknesses. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 78, 123-132.

- LESHAN, L. (1966). Some psychological hypotheses on the non-acceptance of parapsychology as a science. *International Journal of Parapsychology*, 8, 367-382.
- PEARCE, J. (1973). *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg*. New York: Pocket Books.
- PEARCE, J. (1974). *Exploring the Crack in the Cosmic Egg*. New York: Julian Press.
- ROGO, D. S. (1977). Parapsychology and the genesis of doubt. *Parapsychology Review*, 8(6), 20-22.
- SILVERMAN, I. (1977). *The Human Subject in the Psychological Laboratory*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- TART, C. (1977). Toward humanistic experimentation in parapsychology: A reply to Dr. Stanford's review. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 71, 81-102.
- TART, C. (1978). A survey on negative uses, government interest and funding of psi. *Psi News*, 1(2), 3.
- TART, C. (1979). A survey of expert opinion on potentially negative uses of psi, United States government interest in psi, and the level of research funding of the field. In W. G. Roll (Ed.), *Research in Parapsychology 1978* (pp. 54-55). Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.
- TART, C. (1980). Cultural roots of the communication problem. In W. G. Roll (Ed.), *Research in Parapsychology 1979* (pp. 39-40). Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press.
- TART, C. (1981). Causality and synchronicity: Steps toward clarification. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 75, 121-141.
- TART, C. (1982). The controversy about psi: Two psychological theories. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 46, 313-320.

Department of Psychology
University of California, Davis
Davis, California 95616

