PSI Is Real (For Non-Specialists)

Mitchel, whose wife died from COVID, stood up stiffly from the couch to head to bed when he saw her standing across the room. He blinked and looked again. She was still there. He approached the vision and he clearly heard, “at he bottom of the sewing box. At the bottom of the sewing box.” While I begin with an anecdote, and situations like this abound in the real world, I’ll examine the subject of psi from a scientific perspective in a manner suitable for non-specialists.

There is a considerable body of research on the topic of psychic phenomena (psi). Much of this research is mathematically dense. Research that criticizes psi is often mathematically difficult too. My effort tries to avoid this. Still, once carefully examines the numbers a clear case can be made that psi exists and can be measured using accepted scientific methodology. The greatest difficulty for critics of psi is that psi findings threaten to undermine a scientific foundation that science should have abandoned previously. This difficulty is instrumental in many of the criticisms of psi experiments and their skepticism that these experiments could provide an honest view of reality.

Let’s take a brief tour through a body of evidence for the existence of psi from a variety of avenues. Unfortunately, there is mountain of research on the topic, but after analyzing the quality of the research as honestly as I can, I will rely in this paper on those treatments that are most prestigious and balanced in their efforts. For those who may claim selection bias, all a can say is that I am not twisting the evidence to support the belief in psi. I am after the truth of the matter, and I’ll evaluate the evidence as honestly as I can.

One of the most respected current studies on psi came from Daryl Bem—a prestigious researcher in psychology. Published in 2011, it detailed the results of 9 experiments published in *the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that purported a demonstration that “an individual’s cognitive and affective responses can be influenced by randomly selected stimulus events that do not occur until after his or her responses have already been made and recorded, a generalized variant of the phenomenon traditionally denoted by the term precognition”(Bem). In other words, he claimed to have discovered that people in a controlled laboratory setting could predict upcoming events with greater than expected results. Everything necessary to replicate his experiments were made available for researchers. What followed became a collection of 90 experiments in 33 laboratories in 14 countries. Since the experiments used the protocols from his original work the findings were analyzed through a rigorous mathematical assessment. The results were far beyond what science holds as a decisive standard. When they took out Bem’s original studies and calculated the numbers again it was still beyond decisive that psi exists (Bem et al 2016).

Let’s describe how his experiment was done in clear detail. In the experiment each participant finished 36 trials in a laboratory setting. They were presented two curtains on the computer screen and were to guess which covered a gray screen and which covered a picture. The experimenters upped the ante by including 18 erotic pictures and 18 non-erotic visuals. Randomization of reward images were independent of each other. After each participant’s guess they received their look. They used a computer to randomly assign the image and gray picture again and they’d repeat the process. The reward for a correct guess was the image; poor choices were rewarded by gray.

Participants had to complete two short questionnaires that examined their belief in psi and to uncover their desire for pictures over gray screens. Participants were given relaxation and mind clearing techniques before the trial. They were then removed from the scientists into a separate room and fitted with headphones that played white noise as they made their predictions. Participants should have been rewarded with erotica at a rate of 25%---a number that many scientists and mathematicians would expect without psi, allowing them to claim a waste of time and effort for all involved. The numbers supporting psi though were clear, and compelling—not 25% for erotic hits, but about 33%. The 90 other research studies that tried to replicate his studies found similar results. Since Bem and other researchers found that the numbers clearly supported the psi hypothesis the scientists who hated their results generally ignored them, and occasionally aligned against accepting them due to shortcomings in methodology that I am, even with their help, unable to discover.

Rather than stopping here, some further evidence for psi from a variety of other sources might be helpful. There exists a well-written collection of psi research that preexists the work by Bem by Radin in The Conscious Universe. Furthermore, those who are interested in being mocked by most mainstream scientists can also find a rich and spooky trove of work by the CIA gleaned through FOIA (readingroom/document 2004), and numerous studies from Stanford University. Unfortunately for X-Files fans, all those who claimed special abilities that were investigated in The Conscious Universe (Radin 2009) were either fraudulent or deluded. Still, a smidgen is found throughout the universe through the scientific application of sound, scholarly research. I’m making a case that psi does not appear to be uniform throughout the society at large, but it is closer to artistic talent in the sense that some people seem to have more than others. (I have little skill in either art or psi.) No individual seems to have cornered the market. One can also study with some difficulty the more secret work by the Soviets, eastern Europeans, Chinese, and other world intelligence agencies, and their research into psi. Evidence from disciplines as far removed from academic settings as casino research demonstrate surprising correlations. In fact, the correlation between payouts and lunar cycles is undeniable, and downright spooky. This is true and well researched, even though the bulk of the numbers come from casinos that are far more concerned with getting their 7% than occasional psi, which they cannot effectively control (Radin 2009). Evidence for psi in Yoga and Buddhist practices that can be measured may also be included (Meditation 2015). The evidence for these effects are common and well documented in a number of other scientific sources. I will also note in passing that the acceptance of evidence for psi is extremely varied across academic cultures. This is not intended to be an exhaustive collection as much as suggestive. I exclude in this analysis the sorts of curious events that are commonly experienced by many people, such a Mitchel above..

Let us briefly list and examine the main methodological complaints leveled against the two most well-respected published psi researchers Bem and Radin, in particular. These complaints are numerous, as you’ll discover below:

1. Selective Reporting or File Drawer Effect (Researchers who discover no psi do not publish). This claim strains credibility. In English language journals there have been counted 62 published researchers, 309 experiments, more than 50,000 participants. You’d need 46 unreported studies, all showing zilch, for each one of those mentioned above, to reduce the overall significance of original findings to chance (replication index 2018). This entree went on to criticize Bem’s research using a Bayesian approach, which I criticize next.
2. Using inappropriate mathematics by Bem and Radin. These critics claim that you cannot add up the percentages of correct answers in appropriately controlled studies and then use a these numbers to see evidence of psi. They desire a mathematical approach where the critics’ own belief about the unlikelihood of psi is the starting point, so you need huge numbers in order to be convincing. This is not compelling either.
3. It was suggested by critics that psychological studies need a major change in practices by now treating stimuli statistically as a random factor as they already treat participants. I’ve honestly tried to figure out why this would be necessary. It has not been seen as necessary previously either. I suspect that they insist on this because the way Bem did his study gives them answers they dislike, so they must be undependable. Their suggested new approach weakens the compelling findings they dislike, but more reasonable researchers are not persuaded.
4. The numbers of Bem and Radin are too compelling. They must be cheating somehow. Therefore, the 62 researcher scholars that contributed more than 300 experiments on the topic of psi must be by and large in on the conspiracy too. I’ll also pass on this one.
5. Luck explains the findings. For Bem, for example, to have been right by luck is one chance in 53,612,565,445 (Bem 2016). That’s more than 53 trillion—a poor wager.
6. Generous rounding of numbers by Bem is suggested by some, but even his fierce critics find this wanting.
7. Multiple dependent variables, failure to report conditions, selecting an explanation after their results, exclusion of data, snooping at incoming data, and stopping data collection early, and choosing the wrong participants (only picking people with wizard hats?), may be a problem for some studies but do not seem to be a serious factor in Bem’s work. I’ve seen all of these suggested, but the complaints are so weak it seems a bit like throwing mud at a wall in hopes that something sticks or a least discourages the other side than valid complaints. None of these were compelling criticisms. I lumped these together simply to save time and effort.
8. Another questionable practice that was examined involved only reporting successful studies that produced a significant result. This is essentially complaining that studies that demonstrate well know effects should be published just as often as those where the unexpected or curious outcomes are discovered. Publishing compelling discoveries is common practice. This is how it is supposed to work, but critics hold this against psi studies in particular. I (and most serious researchers) find no reason to challenge the accepted norms of scientific publication standards used by Bem and Radin.
9. It is also suggested that psi researchers must be frauds and liars. This is a far flung and grand conspiracy for little gain. Therefore, this seems like a low order of probability.

The critics of psi finally claim that there is no way to make sense of psi, so it must be wrong.

Where does this leave us? The studies into psi prove that the effect is real and significant. This is based on clear evidence. Anecdotal examples abound as well, and they are often personally compelling. But, as stated above, my position here is based on replicated studies that are hard to dismiss.

Let me share some insights that occur to me as I conclude. I personally suspect that any random numbers that are generated by a computer in these studies are not random in the true sense, as computers are indeed physical systems, after all. This is true in the sense that a coin flip is bound by the laws of physics, but while true it can be honestly used to generate fair outcomes. Computer generated numbers are undeniably trustworthy for the psi experiments as well as countless other respected scientific endeavors.

Since experiments like Bem’s are sound, they make a mess of the philosophical foundation of science. Since this foundation has worked so well for so long, scientists have assumed it as correct and this assumption, as I’ve suggesting in my previous work “Difficulties In Scientific Materialism”, it will prove their undoing.

Bem’s experiment detailed previously does not have as clear a result as is generally often assumed either. Once psi is demonstrated all sorts of bizarre possibilities abound. Perhaps the precognition of the participants may not be the singular cause. Perhaps the computers are conspiring to alter the outcome for reasons that are presently unclear. Perhaps the experimenter or the participants are using their psi to influence the computer. Maybe the researchers are using their psi to influence the participants. Perhaps the line between experimenter and participants is so undermined by psi that it cannot be easily disentangled. The belief in psi makes a mess of current foundations of science (Frontiers 2020).

Historically, findings that threaten the foundations of the established order in science go through a process that precedes their acceptance. The first stage contends that the findings are impossible. The believers of the new evidence are liars, crazy, or simply misled. Stage two admits there’s something there, but it is not especially noteworthy. The third stage holds that contradictory evidence is stronger than the new notion. Stage four is where the new belief is finally accepted as true. This typically occurs when the established critics of the new notion retire. Stage five happens when new scientists claim to have known the new notion was true the whole time. The final stage is usually something like, the new idea was mine at the beginning. I expect the same pattern to repeat here. In the meantime I will make a case that ignoring inconvenient evidence as demonstrated by critics of psi can have real life impacts.

Recall Mitchel. Perhaps after hearing his wife’s words he looked at the bedroom mirror, and her reflection was nowhere to be seen, a bit like the vampires of legend. He looked back to find her gone altogether. Although his hip was giving him a bad time, he nervously dug around, eventually finding her sewing box where he found a cache of money under a bunch of other stuff. She must have secretly squirreled extra cash away for decades. He pondered half the night as to whether to tell his friends and family. Although he was not especially religious, he figured that they’d find solace in the story. He eventually decided. “Nope. The kids might suspect I’ve lost touch, and they might decide I’d be safer in a rest home. There’s no need to fess up. I guess I maybe somehow unconsciously knew about the stash the whole time. Better safe than sorry.” He had no idea that this type of event is extremely common (Journal of Death and Dying 2023). So he kept quiet, but he somehow felt a little guilty.

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