

# ASPR NEWSLETTER

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## PROJECT ALPHA: SHOWMANSHIP VS SCIENCE

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James "The Amazing" Randi describes himself as a "professional charlatan," a term even engraved on his credit cards. At a press conference convened by *Discover* magazine during the last week of January, 1983, Randi disclosed that two apparent PK metal benders had fooled parapsychologists into believing they were psychic superstars. The two young men, Steve Shaw and Mark Edwards, who had been studied by the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research at Washington University in St. Louis, were revealed as magicians at that press conference.

Immediately after that revelation the story exploded throughout the media. Subsequently, the Amazing Randi was featured on numerous TV news and talk shows, including a NBC television special "Magic or Miracle." Articles about Project Alpha (Randi's codename for the project to trick researchers) appeared in major newspapers across the country. *Discover* magazine printed an article about the growing controversy in their March issue under the heading, "The Skeptical Eye."

### *The Controversy*

According to Dr. Peter Phillips, director of the McDonnell Laboratory, the two young men were examined with initial tests from November, 1979, to July, 1981. But because Edwards and Shaw were not from the St. Louis area where the lab was located, and had to travel from Iowa and Pennsylvania, the amount of time spent in this "preliminary data gathering" was only approximately 120 hours over nine months. Despite these facts Randi immediately criticized the length of time he claims — over one-and-a-half years — the two "psychics" were studied before experimental controls were introduced.

Randi then inquired of the McDonnell Lab whether he could help in interpreting the "psychic" talents of the young men. He knew, of course, all about the young men since he had sent them to the lab himself. Dr. Phillips, however, welcomed his offer of help and asked for information about pseudo-PK effects, including a video-tape of Randi's own performances. This was supplied to Dr. Phillips and video-tapes of the two subjects taken at the lab were sent to Randi for his professional comment.

Both video-tapes — Randi's own pseudo-PK and the lab's experiments with Edwards and Shaw — were pre-

sented at the 1981 Parapsychological Association Convention in Syracuse, New York. At that same convention, Dr. Phillips first heard rumors that the two young men were Randi's "agents."

When Dr. Phillips returned to McDonnell Lab the young men were confronted with the rumor, which they "laughed off," according to Edwards' own testimony. But, to be safe, and to avoid any possibility of the subjects using trickery, Dr. Phillips added more controls and new experiments were designed for the two "metal-benders." Under the more rigorous controls their abilities suddenly disappeared.

In fact, Dr. Phillips never claimed the two were genuine. And statements by other researchers about the two were never conclusive and dealt only with their "apparent psychokinetic metal bending" — and this only in a research brief. In short, researchers did not jump to proclaim the two as "psychic superstars" but remained cautious and circumspect. Even Randi, in a January 28 letter to researchers and organizations stated: "It must be emphasized that though the primary investigators were at first convinced of the genuine quality of the performances, they tightened the controls following their eventual consultation with me and subsequently conducted tests that produced negative results . . . Many tests, some of which were attempted replications of classic experiments, produced negative results that were never reported."

According to psychologist Dr. Ray Hyman, a member of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (an organization that Randi helped create): "It's also true that no major parapsychologist went on record about the kids."

It seems the parapsychologists conducted themselves properly and exactly as one should when seeking the truth. What, then, did Randi hope to prove with this elaborate hoax? That unsuspecting researchers can be fooled? No one doubts it. Numerous cases of fraud in medical research, cancer research, and the scientific community at large have established this.

### *Magicians and Motives*

Questions about Randi's own motivations, and the propriety of purposely disrupting the work of serious research-

ers, have been inevitably raised by scientists — both in and out of parapsychology. Let's quote Randi on his own attitude and motives. During his appearance on the NBC special "Magic or Miracle": "It's my personal opinion, mind you, that if we spend say seven or eight years of well-funded research on parapsychology investigating ESP, psychokinesis, and all of these other claimed phenomena, that we would discover that they don't exist. That's a prejudice of mine, I admit."

On the NBC "Today Show" (February 8, 1983) Randi perhaps came closer to explaining his motives. "I had contended for many years that no matter how much funding parapsychologists were given . . . it wouldn't make them smart, it would only make them well-funded. And I also have said for decades now that parapsychologists must consult with magicians . . . when they are faced with a situation where trickery could be used."

One should not perhaps take the criticism about "funding" in parapsychology seriously, especially considering that through his attacks on parapsychology Randi has generated an income — according to some estimates — approximating thirty or forty percent of the total annual expenditures on psi research in the United States.

But let's take Randi's criticism at face value. If "seven or eight years of well-funded research" would prove his point, wouldn't it make more sense to help raise funds for research rather than create an elaborate and devious hoax to disrupt the honest effort of researchers? After all, if a *final* answer to the question of what psi is could be accomplished in only a few years it would seem worth the effort. Parapsychologists themselves would be delighted to have such a definitive response to their questions, even if it is proven that psi is purely a misunderstood or misinterpreted natural phenomenon.

Randi's second point about researchers needing the advice of professional magicians is more germane, and a good number of parapsychologists agree with him. He is probably correct when he argues that magicians, or parapsychologists trained in magic, should be a part of parapsychological research; at least on the basis of informal observations and suggestions for tightening controls against fraud. But to use fraudulent means to prove fraud is possible hardly raises the ethical standards to a high plateau. Also, the metal bending and other PK studies, which seem to be Randi's main targets, are but a small portion of the research being conducted.

Further, the particular magician present at experiments does not have to be the "Amazing Randi," which is what he seems to have been suggesting. There are many qualified magicians who specialize in "mental magic" and are more open-minded and objective. In a psi experiment — and in many psychology experiments as well — a comfortable, stress free environment is important for the subject. There are, of course, magicians who are skeptics or agnostics regarding psi and would not be disruptive during an experiment. Such magicians could be helpful in determining whether an experiment is open to trickery. As a member of the Society of American Magicians I have met many such "objective" experts.

Randi also seems unaware of efforts to educate parapsychologists in magical techniques, such as the John F. Kennedy University course "Creation of Illusion," and the ASPR workshop presented last fall on mentalism (see *ASPR Newsletter*, Jan., 1983).

### *Ethics and Other Magical Problems*

The ethical issues inherent in this type of debunking cannot be avoided. There are, for example, important questions that should be answered about Randi's using trickery on honest experimenters and then exploiting the media with his exceptional showmanship in order to exaggerate Edwards and Shaw's impact on the parapsychological community. The first question involves ethics and the second Randi's personal motives.

Even Randi seemed aware of the problem and of his delicate ethical position when he sent out a letter detailing the results of Project Alpha: "This notice is being sent to all those involved in research with the persons named and to others who have expressed an active interest in Project Alpha. Copies are being mailed 48 hours in advance of a formal press announcement."

This "generous" 48 hours advance notice was apparently given in order to allow those who had been duped to prepare rebuttals, or at least to give their interpretation of Project Alpha. But the letter, dated January 28, was postmarked that afternoon and the formal press announcement came that same day, not 48 hours after the notice was sent out. Indeed, Dr. Phillips, the leading researcher at McDonnell Lab was not invited to the press conference and therefore unable to defend himself. As a *New York Times* article (Feb. 15, 1983) reporting on Project Alpha commented, "The press conference is revealing of their motives . . . If it was solely a search for scientific truth the experiment would not have been terminated in that way."

In the same article Dr. David Mills, director of the Ethics Office at the American Psychological Association, is quoted: "Indeed, if Mr. Randi were a psychologist, the hoax might have landed him in hot water."

A sociologist at Eastern Michigan University, Dr. Marcello Truzzi, has long been a skeptic of parapsychology. He is also the editor of *Zetetic Scholar*, a journal devoted to skeptical analysis of parapsychology, and was quoted in the *Times* on the futility of the hoax: "In no way will his [Randi's] project teach psychic researchers a lesson and make them more likely to trust to magicians' advice. Quite the contrary. This outside policeman thing sets up magicians as the enemy." In fact, Dr. Truzzi goes on to say, "Randi is hurting the field with his gross exaggerations."

Thus, the questions arise: Is Randi truly concerned with helping researchers in parapsychology? Or in just undermining a field of study he feels is a waste of time? Is he truly concerned for the many people who really need objective facts and careful analysis of wild claims (e.g., those credulous followers of street corner psychics and card readers who spend thousands of dollars every year)? Or is he using his knowledge of the conjuring arts to boost himself in the public eye? Should serious researchers consult with someone who is such a visible showman and an entertainer?

Ultimately, only Randi himself can answer the question of motives. As for tightening experimental designs and utilizing professional magicians to insure against trickery, parapsychologists find themselves in the peculiar role of desiring such additional controls, yet being pressured to work with disingenuous critics. Perhaps a mechanism can be set up to employ the expert knowledge of magicians, but that can only be accomplished with open discussion and good will, not deceit and trickery.