

THE RANDI CAPER

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Parapsychology is the scientific study of “psi”, i.e. purported interactions between organisms and their environment (including other organisms) which appear to transcend space, time, and force constraints. An affiliate member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science since 1969, the Parapsychological Association has set high standards for membership; hence, studies and reports authored by non-members of this professional group should be viewed with some skepticism. Of course, many critics of parapsychology would advise skepticism toward psi research in general because no adequately repeatable experiment of practical application of psi has been produced during a century of scientific inquiry.

Deception is occasionally used by parapsychologists in their attempts to elicit psi responses, i.e. experiences in which individuals obtain information about, or produce effects upon, the external world without the apparent use of the known senses or muscles. In one set of experiments, for example, subjects were asked to identify letters projected subliminally. Without their knowledge, an “agent” in another room attempted to influence the subjects’ performance by concentrating upon the correct answer. Not only were the results of these experiments statistically significant, but a successful replication by a different team of investigators was also reported.

Experimenters themselves were deceived by another parapsychologist at a Parapsychological Association convention where they were asked to fill out two personality scales, one of which was a disguised psi test. Independent judges then divided the subjects into two groups on the basis of how frequently they reported significant evidence of psi in their experiments. The two groups did not differ significantly on the dimensions of the personality tests but the more successful experimenters were the only ones to provide evidence of psi on the covert test.

There have been any number of experiments involving deception which did not yield significant results. I once attempted to determine if a subject would dream about the contents of a picture postcard on which an agent was concentrating. After obtaining significant results in several studies, my colleagues and I at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn attempted deception. On some nights there was actually an agent concentrating on the picture, and on other nights the agent simply went to sleep without opening the randomly selected envelope containing the postcard. In this experiment, neither condition yielded significant results.

In the 1880’s, a prominent member of the Society for Psychical Research, Richard Hodgson, conducted a number of séances featuring S. J. Davey, who claimed to be able to contact “spirit entities”. Only after several society members attested to the genuine nature of Davey’s phenomena was he revealed as a conjuror. Since that time, only a few similar attempts at deception have been made. In recent years, Martin Johnson, as president of the Parapsychological Association, introduced a magician to the group who performed some feats of “mentalism” which still have some researchers baffled. At our dream laboratory in Maimonides Medical Center, a magician named David Hoy masqueraded as a subject and did not reveal his identity until later. However, he was not able to break the experimental protocol and produce any results that could have passed for “telepathy”.

In 1979, Steven Shaw (then 18) and Michael Edwards (then 17) wrote to James Randi praising him for his outspoken criticism of purported “psychics” and offering to help expose them. The two young men volunteered as subjects for tests at Washington University, where Peter Phillips, a physicist, and his staff were embarking on a study of paranormal “metal bending” and related effects. Randi had often objected to what he perceived as a reluctance of parapsychologists to request advice from conjurors when testing subjects whose feats resembled those which could be performed by subterfuge.

Phillips took an attitude of trust and confidence toward the subjects in an attempt to provide what he considered to be a “psi-conducive” atmosphere. In 1981, 13 research sessions took place during Shaw and Edwards’ three stays at the laboratory. Rotors turned under a glass shield, a small clock slid across a table

top without visible contact with the subject, and the endurance of an electrical fuse was apparently modified at a distance. These are approaches used to investigate “macro-psychokinesis” or “macro-PK”.

Even before Shaw and Edwards had made their appearance, Randi had written to Phillips, offering his assistance and even sending a list of procedures which could have ruled out the possibility of fraud. His advice was not immediately implemented with the two subjects supposedly to insure the continuation of the supportive environment. A videotape was presented at the Parapsychological Association’s annual convention in 1981 that showed the two subjects’ purported metal-bending abilities. Randi also prepared a videotape in which sleight of hand was used to bend metal. Some of the parapsychologists observing the two films saw little difference, and urged Phillips to take a cautious approach. As a result, Phillips’ written report used such modifying terms as “apparently” and “ostensible”, indicating his awareness that the conditions of the experiments were not yet secure enough for his laboratory to make definite claims. Following the convention, Phillips drafted a public statement which clearly stated that although remarkable events had been witnessed, alternative explanations (e.g. sleight of hand) had been found for all of them.

In designing the experiments which were conducted in 1982, Randi’s advice was taken as well as that of several parapsychologists. No conjuror was present during the tests, however. Under these conditions, the results were not promising and the laboratory’s work with Edwards and Shaw came to an end in July, 1982.

In retrospect, Phillips has stated, “We certainly were deceived at the beginning; that was a calculated risk in our approach. Just as certainly we took the advice of Mr. Randi and our fellow parapsychologists in the summer of 1981, and the experiments done subsequently reflect these additional safeguards.” Randi commented, “The worst we can say... is that they were far too confident of their abilities to detect fraud, and refused outside assistance because those who offered it lacked academic credentials.”

In the meantime, a psychiatrist and member of the Parapsychological Association, Berthold Schwarz, published a medical monograph describing his work with Shaw in a favorable light. When the hoax was revealed, Schwarz was able to keep the monograph from being widely circulated; the publisher also acted so that it would not be indexed. A number of investigators who were not Parapsychological Association members had also enthusiastically reacted to the abilities of Edwards and Shaw, not suspecting their real identity.

Randi announced the scam at a press conference on January 23, 1983, and in a television special on February 8th. This media coverage led an associate member of the Parapsychological Association, Marcello Truzzi, to state, “Randi is hurting the field with his gross exaggerations.” Charles Tart, a psychologist and parapsychologist, claimed, “I think his goal is to stop research in this area.” Another psychologist and leading critic of psi research, Ray Hyman, noted that no major parapsychologist had endorsed the abilities of the young magicians. As president of the Parapsychological Association, I prepared a statement which read, “Randi’s caper... should be a learning experience for us all. We can learn not only from Peter Phillips’ consistently cautious statements about the two subjects who turned out to be ‘planted’ by Randi, but also from the ease with which deception can be achieved, especially in purported macro-PK.”

Truzzi also asked if fraud could have been justified in this instance. Shaw retorted, “For four years Randi told parapsychologists they were being fooled. But they wouldn’t listen—they had to be shown.” Theodore Rockwell, a Parapsychological Association member, replied by asking, “Is an atmosphere of suspicion and constraint optimum for eliciting psi?”

Because Randi is not a member of a scientific group with a code of ethics, it would not be appropriate for such a group to consider censuring him. Indeed, the caper was not announced in a professional journal but simply as a media event, obtaining maximum publicity for the three magicians. For this reason, many parapsychologists (including myself) are willing to appreciate the humor in the situation and settle for what can be learned. For example, there is no need to have a magician lurking in the wings of each laboratory session, but there are times when the advice of a conjuror would prove helpful. Science, of course, must be carried out in a spirit of free inquiry and with a minimum of paranoia. Yet there are some simple precautions which could prove useful; the Washington University laboratory now has subjects sign a statement stating that they are not perpetrating a fraud. Finally, it’s clear that whatever an investigator’s personal views on the reality of a possible psi event, and even if there is a need for an accepting, supportive attitude toward subjects at the beginning of one’s work with them, a formal claim must await hard laboratory evidence. Phillips’ laboratory never endorsed Edwards and Shaw; as a result, Randi’s deception was painful but not fatal.