

# P S Y C H I C



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## “The Science of Why So Many People Believe in Psychic Powers”

BY: Proditia Sabarini February 4, 2019 11.03am EST

Mind reading and the ability to predict the future are not skills people generally associate with the human race. Yet, research shows many people genuinely believe in the existence of psychic powers.

You would think that instances of proven psychic fraud over the years would weaken the credibility of psychic claims. There have been historical cases, such as Lajos Pap, the Hungarian spiritualist medium, who was found to be faking animal appearances at seances. And then more recently, self-described psychic James Hydrick was revealed as a trickster. Hydrick confessed his paranormal demonstrations were tricks learned in prison.

Another notable example involved televangelist Peter Popoff. His wife used a wireless transmitter to broadcast information about sermon attendees to Popoff via an earpiece. Popoff claimed to receive this information by paranormal means and rose to fame hosting a nationally televised program, during which he performed seemingly miraculous cures on audience members.

But despite such cases, there are still many people who firmly believe in the power of psychic ability. According to a US Gallup survey, for example, more than **one-quarter** of people believe humans have psychic abilities – such as telepathy and clairvoyance.

### The believers

A recent report may help to shed some light on why people continue to believe in psychic powers. The study tested believers and sceptics with the same level of education and academic performance and found that people who believe in psychic powers think less analytically. This means that they tend to interpret the world from a subjective personal perspective and fail to consider information critically.

Believers also often view psychic claims as confirmatory evidence – regardless of their evidential basis. The case of Chris Robinson, who refers to himself as a “dream detective”, demonstrates this.

Robinson claims to have foreseen terrorist attacks, disasters and celebrity deaths. His assertions derive

from limited and questionable evidence. Tests conducted by Gary Schwartz at the University of Arizona provided support for Robinson's ability, however, other researchers using similar methods failed to confirm Schwartz's conclusion.

### **Vague and general**

Psychic claims are often general and vague – such as foretelling a plane crash or celebrity death – and this is in part why so many people believe in the possibility of psychic abilities.

This is known as The Barnum effect, a common psychological phenomenon whereby people tend to accept vague, general personality descriptions as uniquely applicable to themselves.

Research for example, has shown that individuals will give high accuracy ratings to descriptions of their personality that supposedly are tailored specifically to them, that are in fact vague and general enough to apply to a wide range of people. The name references the circus man Phineas Taylor Barnum, who had a reputation as a master psychological manipulator.

### **Impossible to validate**

Many psychic claims have also proved impossible to confirm. A classic illustration is Uri Geller's contention that he "willed" the football to move during a penalty kick at Euro 96. The ball movement occurred spontaneously in an uncontrolled environment and Geller made the claim retrospectively.

When professed abilities are subject to scientific scrutiny researchers generally discredit them. This was true of Derek Ogilvie in the 2007 TV documentary *The Million Dollar Mind Reader*. Investigation concluded Ogilvie genuinely believed he possessed powers, but was not actually able to read babies' minds.

And when scientists have endorsed psychic claims, criticism has typically followed. This occurred in the 1970s when physicists Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff published a paper in the prestigious journal *Nature*, which supported the notion that Uri Geller possessed genuine psychic ability. Psychologists, such as Ray Hyman refuted this – highlighting major methodological flaws. These included a hole in the laboratory wall that afforded views of drawings that Geller "psychically" reproduced.

### **Mixed evidence**

Another factor that facilitates belief in psychic ability is the existence of scientific research that provides positive findings. This reinforces believers' views that claims are genuine and phenomenon real, but ignores that fact that published studies are often criticised and replication is necessary in order for general acceptance to occur.

One prominent example of this was a paper produced by social psychologist Daryl Bem in the high-quality *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. It was said the research showed support for the existence of precognition (conscious cognitive awareness) and premonition (affective apprehension) of a future event. But other researchers failed to reproduce these results.

### **Mind set**

So it seems that despite occurrences of fakery, forgery and fraudulence – as well as mixed evidence – people will still continue to believe in psychic phenomena. Indeed, research has shown that **one in three** Americans feel they have experienced a psychic moment – and nearly half of US women claim they have felt the presence of a spirit.

Whether this is down to lack of analytical skills, genuine experiences, or just in a bid to make the world a little bit more interesting, it seems believers will continue to believe – despite science indicating otherwise.

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## NEW ARTICLE

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# So Are Psychics Real or What?

By Katie Heaney July 2018



Parapsychology, also called “psi” – the study of mental or “psychic” phenomena which can’t be explained by the laws of science as we know them – used to be a pretty common research subject among early, formative psychologists: Freud studied it, William James (the founder of American academic psychology) studied it, and Harvard psychologist Hugo

Münsterberg studied it. While much of this work focused on exposing fraudulent self-proclaimed psychic mediums, those psychologists who engaged with the subject of psi maintained a genuine interest in the subject, for which similarly interested contemporary psychologists are routinely mocked, according to new research.

Perhaps the most famous modern-day psi-friendly psychologist is Daryl Bem, whose 2011 experiments inspired a crisis in his field. Some of his peers thought his paper was a hoax. Others took issue with his methods, which they admitted were technically correct – but if Bem could “prove” something so outlandish as psychic ability with accepted social-science methodology, they said, there had to be something wrong with accepted social-science methodology.

In his new paper, parapsychology researcher Etzel Cardeña analyzed psi-related research and came to the conclusion that Bem’s results might not have been so crazy after all. Cardeña writes that the strongest support for psi can be found in research which utilizes the “Ganzfeld procedure,” in which blindfolded subjects in a soundproofed room are asked to describe a film clip they have not seen, which they’re either shown after the fact, or which is played simultaneously in another room. If experimental judges can use these descriptions to choose the specified clip from other “distractor” clips, this is considered positive evidence for psi.

Startlingly, meta-analyses of Ganzfeld procedure studies show statistically significant support for this psychic effect. (!!)

Cardeña concludes that existing meta-analyses are supportive of the psi hypothesis, and thus defends the legitimacy (and importance) of future research on the subject. "Psi," writes Cardeña, "cannot be readily explained away by the quality of the studies, fraud, selective reporting, experimental or analytical incompetence, or other frequent criticisms."

Indeed, because of the perceived impossibility of the subject matter, psi research is held to higher standards than other areas of research, which isn't necessarily a bad thing — it might make those results that *do* suggest support for psi all that much harder to ignore. Or so those among us who want to believe/already know we're psychic can hope.

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## NEW ARTICLE

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### "Psychokinesis: Facts About Mind Over Matter"

By [Benjamin Radford - Live Science Contributor](#) October 03, 2017

Scientific evidence for the psychic ability to move objects or bend spoons remains elusive.

"Who here is psychic? Raise my hand!"

That's an old joke, but there are several claimed types of psychic powers, including precognition (knowing the future) and telepathy (describing things at a remote location). But for sheer impressiveness it's hard to beat psychokinesis, the ability to move objects through mind power. The word is derived from the Greek words for "mind" and "motion" and is also called PK or telekinesis.

Fictional psychokinetics are easy to find: The popular X-Men comic and film franchise includes the character Jean Grey, whose powers include extrasensory perception and psychokinesis. The 2009 movie "Push" is about a group of young Americans with various psychic abilities who team up and use their paranormal powers against a shadowy U.S. government agency.

Though many Americans believe in psychic ability (about 15 percent of us, according to a 2005 Baylor Religion Survey), scientific evidence for its existence remains elusive. Some people even link psychokinesis to the spiritual world, suggesting for example that some reports of ghosts — such as poltergeists — are not manifestations of the undead at all, but instead the unconscious releases of a person's psychic anger or angst.

If people could move everyday objects with nothing more than their thoughts, this should be quite easy to demonstrate: Who wouldn't like their latte delivered by a psychic barista from across the counter, floating it right to your hand with a mere gesture?



This doesn't happen, of course. Instead researchers have focused on what they term "micro-PK," or the manipulation of very small objects. The idea is that if the ability exists, its force is obviously very weak. Therefore, the less physical energy that would have to be exerted on an object to physically move it, the more obvious the effect should be. For this reason, laboratory experiments often focus on rather mundane feats such as trying to make dice land on a certain number at an above-chance rate, or influencing a computerized random number generator.

Because of this change in methodologies, psychokinesis experiments rely more heavily on complex statistical analyses; the issue was not whether a person could bend a spoon or knock a glass over with their minds, for example, but whether they could make a coin come up heads significantly above 50 percent of the time over the course of 1,000 trials.

## Spiritualism and mediums

The idea of people being able to move objects through mind power alone has intrigued people for centuries, though only in the late 1800s was it seen as an ability that might be scientifically demonstrated. This occurred during the heyday of the early religion Spiritualism, when psychic mediums claimed to contact the dead during séances, and objects would suddenly and mysteriously move, float, or fly by themselves across the darkened room, seemingly untouched by human hands. Though many people were convinced — including, ironically, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes — it was all a hoax. Fraudulent psychics resorted to trickery, using everything from hidden wires to black-clad accomplices to make objects appear to move untouched.

As the public slowly grew wise to the faked psychokinesis, the phenomenon faded from view. It was revived again in the 1930s and 1940s, when a researcher at Duke University named J.B. Rhine became interested in the idea that people could affect the outcome of random events using their minds. Rhine began with tests of dice rolls, asking subjects to influence the outcome through the power of their minds. Though his results were mixed and the effects were small, they were enough to convince him that there was something mysterious going on. Unfortunately for Rhine, other researchers failed to duplicate his findings, and many errors were found in his methods.



<Uri Geller, shown speaking at a press event in Moscow in 2009, made millions in the 1970s by claiming he could bend spoons with his mind. (Image credit: [Milarka](#) / [Shutterstock.com](#))

In the 1970s, Uri Geller became the world's best-known psychic and made

millions traveling the world demonstrating his claimed psychokinetic abilities, including starting broken watches and bending spoons. Though he denied using magic tricks, many skeptical researchers observed that all of Geller's amazing feats could be — and have been — duplicated by magicians.

Public interest in psychokinesis returned in the 1980s. One person nationally known for claimed psychokinetic ability, James Hydrick, tried to demonstrate his powers on the television show "That's My Line" in 1981, following several successful television appearances. He claimed to move small objects, such as a pencil or the pages of a telephone book, with his mind. Host Bob Barker consulted with skeptic James Randi, who suspected that Hydrick was merely discreetly blowing on the pages to make them move.

To prevent this method of trickery Randi placed styrofoam bits around the open book, as the lightweight pieces would clearly be disturbed if the pages were moving because of Hydrick's breath instead of his mind. After many awkward minutes in front of Barker, Randi, a panel of judges, and the live studio audience, a flustered Hydrick finally said that his powers weren't cooperating. Hydrick later admitted that his psychokinetic powers had been faked, and marveled at how easy it had been to fool the public.

## Frauds and fakery

The history of psychokinesis a history of frauds and fakery, both proven and suspected. Even many researchers admit that the data fall far short of scientific standards of proof; researcher Russell Targ, in his book "The Reality of ESP" (2012, Quest Books) acknowledges that "the evidence for laboratory psychokinesis is quite weak."

Recent advances in virtual reality technology may, however, be the next best thing. In 2017, a company called Neurable announced plans to develop psychokinesis — or at least a virtual reality form of it — for a game called Awakening. Using a combination of eye movement tracking technology and electroencephalogram (EEG) sensors in a headset, the game allows a player to move and manipulate objects in a virtual world merely by looking and thinking. After an initial calibration process that takes several minutes, the players can select and move computer-generated images.



Perhaps one day technology will allow us to actually move objects with our thoughts, but until then we must be satisfied with the power depicted in fiction and fantasy.