
Notes of a Psi-Watcher

Lessons of a Landmark PK Hoax

This is the first installment of a new column by Martin Gardner that we are pleased to announce will appear in each issue of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER from now on.—ED.

The most significant recent event on the psi front was James Randi's Project Alpha. Since Randi himself gives the details in this issue, I will make only general comments.

Was it unethical? I think not, but before explaining why let's consider a few past instances in which deception was used to demonstrate the incompetence of researchers.

Early this century René Blondlot, a respected French physicist, announced his discovery of a new type of radiation, which he called N-rays, after the University of Nancy where he worked. Dozens of papers on N-rays were soon being published in France, but American physicists were dubious. One skeptic, a physicist at Johns Hopkins University, Robert W. Wood, enjoyed playing practical jokes, especially jokes on spirit mediums. His humorous book *How to Tell the Birds from the Flowers* is still in print. Perhaps you have seen on TV a little pinheaded, bald creature with a huge flexible mouth that is produced by painting

eyes and a nose on someone's chin, then viewing the chin upside down. It was Wood who invented this whimsical illusion.

In 1904 Wood made a trip to Nancy to observe N-ray research first hand. In one experiment he secretly removed from the apparatus an essential prism. This had no effect on what the experimenters said they were observing. In another test Wood surreptitiously substituted a piece of wood for a steel file that was supposed to be giving off N-rays. The imagined radiation continued to be reported by the Nancy scientists. Wood told his hosts nothing about either prank. Instead, he went home and wrote a devastating account of his visit for the British magazine *Nature*. It was a knockout blow to N-rays everywhere except at Nancy.

The reaction of the Nancy group to Wood's disclosures was well summed up by Irving Klotz in his fine article "The N-ray Affair," *Scientific American*, May 1980:

According to Blondlot and his disciples, then, it was the sensitivity of the observer rather than the validity of the phenomena that was called into question by criticisms such as Wood's, a point of view that will not be unfamiliar

to those who have followed more recent controversies concerning extrasensory perception. By 1905, when only French scientists remained in the N-ray camp, the argument began to acquire a somewhat chauvinistic aspect. Some proponents of N-rays maintained that only the Latin races possessed the sensitivities (intellectual as well as sensory) necessary to detect manifestations of the rays. It was alleged that Anglo-Saxon powers of perception were dulled by continual exposure to fog and Teutonic ones blunted by constant ingestion of beer.

When N-rays became a huge embarrassment to French science, the journal *Revue Scientifique* proposed a definitive test that would settle the matter. "Permit me to decline totally," Blondlot responded, ". . . to cooperate in this simplistic experiment. The phenomena are much too delicate for that. Let each one form his own personal opinion about N-rays, either from his own experiments or from those of others in whom he has confidence." Like Percival Lowell, the American astronomer who drew elaborate maps of Martian canals, Blondlot could not prevent his strong desires from strongly biasing his observations. He lived another quarter-century. If he had any doubts about N-rays, so far as I know he never expressed them.

Move ahead to 1974. J. B. Rhine had appointed Walter J. Levy, 26, his successor as director of his laboratory. Levy was already famous in psi circles for his "carefully controlled" investigations of animal-psi. (One of them suggested that embryos in chicken eggs had psychokinetic [PK] powers.) Three older members of Rhine's staff were suspicious of Levy's string of successes. What did they do? They set a cruel trap. While Levy was testing the PK ability of rats to alter a randomizer, they watched through a peephole and

saw Levy repeatedly beef up the scores by pulling a plug. Better yet, they installed another set of instruments, without Levy's knowledge, that kept an accurate score. The untampered record showed no evidence of PK. Levy confessed, and vanished from the psi scene.

To me the saddest aspect of this scandal was not Levy's deserved disgrace but the fact that it had never occurred to Rhine to check on Levy's honesty. Rhine himself was deeply shaken by the revelations. If the trap had not been set, Levy's papers would still be cited as strong evidence for animal-psi.

There are two reasons why traps to detect fraud are more essential in PK research than anywhere else. First, the claims are far more extraordinary and therefore require much stronger evidence. Second, the field has always been soaked with fraud. In the days when eminent physicists were convinced of the reality of floating tables and glowing ectoplasm, an enormous service to science was performed by Houdini and others who were willing and capable of setting traps for the mediums.

This brings us to the main moral of Randi's hilarious hoax. Paranormal metal-bending is so fantastic a violation of natural laws that the first task of any competent experimenter is to determine whether a psychic who bends spoons is cheating or not. In England, when physicists John Taylor and John Hasted were convinced that scads of children could twist cutlery by PK, one would have expected the two scientists to devise some elementary traps, but they did not. The only good trap was set by two sociologists at the University of Bath who did not even mean to set it. Puzzled by the fact that no one ever *sees* metal bend—Taylor called it the "shyness effect"—they put some spoon-bending young-

sters in a room, then filmed them through a one-way mirror. The purpose was not to embarrass the children, but to record the shyness effect. To their amazement, they saw the children cheating. Taylor soon became disenchanted, but such revelations had no effect on Hasted's mind-set. Some spoon benders cheat, so what? Not in *his* laboratory. You can read all about his naive experiments in his recently published book, *The Metal Benders*.

Hasted and Phillips typify psychic research at its shabbiest. In spite of many letters from Randi telling him that his two young subjects were frauds, Phillips made no effort to check on their backgrounds. Not until the very end, after Randi had severely criticized his videotapes, did he start to tighten controls. Of course the wonders ceased. On many occasions when controls were unbelievably lax, the two "psychics" suspected a trap. It was never sprung. They overestimated the acumen of their monitors.

Think what the results might have been had the boys decided to become professional psychics. They would have left Phillips's lab complaining that excessive controls were inhibiting their powers. Soon they would be appearing on TV documentaries as wonder workers whose powers had been validated by respected scientists. Uri Geller never tires of talking about how the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International) validated his psychic abilities. Phillips's two young subjects are even better than Geller. One of them invented a way to make one tine of a fork visibly and unshyly bend that is superior to any of Geller's crude methods. When Steven Shaw demonstrated this lovely illusion at Randi's Manhattan press conference, the entire audience gasped. "Can you tell us how you did that?" a startled reporter asked. Shaw walked to the mike and

said, "I cheat." It brought down the house.

It is to Phillips's credit that he had the courage to say (*Washington Post*, March 1, 1983), "I should have taken Randi's advice." It is to the credit of Stanley Krippner, a true believer in PK if ever there was one, that he called Randi's project "a much-needed" experiment. It remained for former CSICOP member and sociologist Truzzi to start the hue and cry about entrapment. Truzzi had known about Randi's trap almost from the beginning, but had carefully kept his own trap shut. "Randi is hurting the field with his gross exaggeration," Truzzi told the *New York Times* (February 15, 1983). "In no way will his 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."

On this point Truzzi may be right. I, too, would be surprised if psychic researchers suddenly decided to study conjuring or to seek the active help of knowledgeable magicians. Conjurors are indeed the enemy. Their bad vibes alone are enough to kill any PK powers just by being there as observers; perhaps (as has actually been suggested by the sociologists at Bath) even their *reading* about the experiments afterwards influences the outcome by backward causality! But perhaps Randi's scam will have a salutary effect on funding. After all, the half-million bucks the McDonnell Foundation gave to Washington University could have gone to worthwhile research instead of down the drain to a group unqualified to investigate metal bending.

Am I saying that all psychic researchers should be trained in magic, or seek the aid of magicians, before they test miracle workers? That is exactly what I am saying. The most

eminent scientist, untrained in magic, is putty in the hands of a clever charlatan. Without the help of professional deceivers—the conjurers—no testing of a superpsychic is worth ten cents of

funding. That is the big lesson of Randi's hoax. That is why it is likely to become a landmark in the history of PK research.

—Martin Gardner



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