

Will Parapsychology (Study of PSI) Ever Be Accepted by Mainstream Science

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ABSTRACT

Paranormal happenings across globe are baffling the mankind for times immemorial. Paranormal events, termed as “psi” are being studied under Parapsychology. Parapsychology is still not accepted as science and Parapsychological researchers are researching to get it its rightful place in mainstream science. This article tries to give details of the reasons which are preventing this field from being recognized by scientific fraternity as a mainstream science subject. The impediments are gigantic but since the frequency of paranormal happenings are so large in numbers and are happening across the world, we just cannot brush these aside as non- sensical. There has to be scientific reasons, which, we are not in a position to figure out currently. May be that the physical sciences have not advanced to a state whereby these events can be explained using the known scientific means. As we all know, brain is still not fully explored, majority portion of our brain is still not known to our medical sciences and medical research is going on to understand the mysteries lying in these unexplored reasons of brain. We are, also, not having full understanding of “Consciousness”, i.e what causes it and how consciousness makes us aware of world around us. Research in this field will also help in answering many paranormal secrets, including the reasons for possibility of life after death. There is a need for collaborative research in which parapsychologists, neuroscientists and medical researchers join together and take the research forward to help the mankind.

Keywords: *Parapsychology, PSI, Mainstream Science*

We come across events that are not perceived through our normal five senses. We have heard events where a person sitting miles away from his house perceives that there is fire around his house and it actually happened; there are occasions when someone tells you what is going in your mind and it comes to be true ; some people see relative sharing a secret known only to him and you are dumb struck to have received the communication because the relative had died long ago; many a times premonition of an event comes true and so on. These are baffling events and are not normal, hence, termed as Paranormal. The paranormal events are happening from time immemorial across the world. The term “psi” is taken to notify these paranormal events. Term psi is derived from 23rd letter of Greek alphabet and the first letter of

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word Psyche. Study of psi forms the subject, “Parapsychology” which studies the paranormal (psi) events.

Different research organization define psi differently but all include ESP(extra sensory Perception---which covers psi events viz., telepathy, premonition, precognition, remote viewing, clairvoyance) and PK(Psychokinesis ---influence of mind over matter viz moving an object (without touching it) only by gazing at it) in psi definition but some even go on to include survival after death, out of body experiences, ghosts, dreams coming true and so on..

The psi research is going on in different parts of the world but still we have not reached a stage where we can say that Parapsychology is recognized as Science. This article studies why it is so and whether in future psi evidence can ever be accepted in mainstream science.

There have been efforts by many parapsychological researchers to make psi accepted by mainstream science. In their pursuit, they came across many impediments.

C D Broad (1949) suggests that psi tends to violate basic principles of science, namely: -

1. General principle of causation
2. Limitation on the action of mind on matter
3. Dependence of mind on brain
4. Limitation on ways of acquiring knowledge

Besides him, other researchers, namely, Wiseman (1999), (Hannah J & John Beloff ,1980), also give different reasons which prevent Parapsychology to enter mainstream science. These are summarized here-under: -

- 1. Lack of commonality in definition of subject matter** --- the matter being discussed is not defined in a unanimous way by various parapsychological researchers / research organizations. Hannah Jenkins (university of Tasmania, Australia) considers that psi has two broad constituents- anomalous communication (ESP) and Anomalous action at distance (Psychokinesis (P K)).

Whereas Parapsychological Research Organizations tend to define psi in different ways: - Parapsychological Association (PA) considers psi to encompass telepathy, clairvoyance, remote viewing, psychokinesis, psychic healing and precognition. The Venerable Society for Psychic Research of Britain takes psi to include psychical research concerning exchanges between two minds and exchanges between mind and environment which means that this encompasses a larger domain which not only includes ESP & PK but also goes on to include near death or out of body experiences, survival after death, ghosts, apparitions, hauntings and hypnotic aspects.(www.spr.ac.uk/about.html).American Society for Psychical Research, on the other hand, is confined to research in ESP, Psychic healing, survival after death and dowsing. (www.aspr.com/topics.html)

Thus, the field of research by different researchers does not have a common core knowledge base unlike the mainstream science. This lack of commonality approach for defining psi goes on to dilute the claim for including psi in mainstream science.

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- 2. Negative definition of psi**---psi happening is seen as occurrence of an event which is not happening through known senses, e.g Telepathy is transfer of information between two brains **in absence of normal mechanisms which can account for it** ---the definition does have a negative base.

The problem arises because psi phenomena are not defined by what they are but in terms of what they are not. Since mainstream science dwells on positive theories, psi is left behind and its study (i.e Parapsychology) does not get its place in mainstream science.

- 3. Failure to achieve replications:** - the major factor against Parapsychology being accepted as a subject in mainstream science is that the psi events are not replicable. Alcock (2003) cites many research papers to bring home this point, rather, he goes on to say that parapsychologists have never been able to produce demonstration that can be reliably replicated by researchers

JB Rhine did impressive research in laboratory for telepathy where the subject was asked to guess the Zener cards (special cards developed by Zener –these had different symbols) correctly which were kept with face down. Large number of trials were done and number of correct guesses were recorded. The correct guesses, if occurred, more frequently than the number expected by chance, psi presence was supposed to be proven. He found that many persons could do correct guessing with probability much more than the chance probability--- The statistically significant results went on to establish that psi event had happened. The laboratory experimentation by J B Rhine gained lot of popularity and the world at large started taking telepathy seriously. The book, “Extra Sensory Perception” by J B Rhine explained psi through laboratory experimentation. His research was acclaimed by whole world but it lost credibility over time by researchers when future researchers were not able to replicate results in their laboratory experimentation.

Later Ganzfeld experiments studying telepathy in a different but improved way, became popular. In a typical ganzfeld experiment, a "receiver" is placed in a room relaxing in a comfortable chair with halved ping-pong balls over the eyes, having a red light shone on them. The receiver also wears a set of headphones through which (music called white noise or pink noise) is played. The receiver is in this state of mild sensory deprivation for half an hour. This brings the receiver in a state where his psychic abilities are enhanced due to sensory deprivation. During this time, a "sender" observes a randomly chosen target and tries to mentally send this information to the receiver. The receiver speaks out loud during the 30 minutes, describing what he or she can "see". This is recorded by the experimenter (who is blind to the target) either by recording onto tape or by taking notes, and is used to help the receiver during the judging procedure.

In the judging procedure, the receiver is taken out of the Ganzfeld state and given a set of possible targets, from which he selects one which most resembled the images he witnessed. Most commonly there are three decoys along with the target, giving an expected rate of 25%, by chance. Large number of experiments were conducted using same sender and receivers and success rates were recorded. If success rate occurrence was above 25%, the telepathy success was supposed to be statistically significant and the phenomena of telepathy was thought to exist. Palmer observed heterogeneity in results of Ganzfeld experiments and asserted that these were not replicable.

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Some researchers go on to claim that psi can never be replicated because of psi experimenter effect. (Schmiedler & Mcconell,1958) coined the words SHEEP (believers in psychic phenomenon) and GOAT (disbelievers in psychic phenomenon). Even varying **Sheep-goat ability** also is considered to affect replicability. Main stream science does not accept theories which cannot be replicated and, hence, this is, also, one of major factors which goes against PSI being accepted by mainstream science.

4. Lack of continued progress in research: - Seemingly credible findings in Parapsychological Research at one time, do not get pursued in future since new research puts question marks on credibility of so-called credible findings. Rhine's experimental findings in card guessing experiments (1937-1940) were considered as solid proof for existence of psi, but the next generation found the data to be flawed and difficult to replicate and hence future researchers totally lost interest in pursuing research further on the lines of Rhine.

Similar fate was met for remote viewing experiments by Targ and Puthoff (1974). Soal's research (Soal and Bateman 1954) which was, once, famous was later forgotten. There has been no real growth in understanding of psi, hence, further progress is not happening and we are moving in circles.

In absence of lack of growth on research of psi, "Parapsychology-study of psi", does not enter in mainstream science.

5. Methodological flaws in experiments: - In parapsychological research many instances are found that seemingly credible psi experiments lost credibility once a flaw was found in experimental design. Even trickery was discovered in seemingly credible phenomena. However carefully we plan our research experiment, there remains a doubt whether we overlooked a methodological flaw. Hyman (1996) was one amongst many to point out experimental design flaw in seemingly impeccable Ganzfeld experiments. Presence of methodological flaws are one of the factors coming in the way of Study of psi getting accepted as mainstream science.

6. Reliance on statistical methods in PSI research: - Jessica Utts (1999) is of the view that it is the role of statistics to identify and quantify important effects and relationships before any explanation is found in research. Statistical methods are of use at discovery phase of research. Only after such a study indicates a possibility that a relationship or effect exists, the justification stage of research starts where use of that particular field of science attempts to find causal aspects of the effect. In psi research the statistical tool assumes a null hypothesis that the effect seen is not caused by chance only and the data collected is subjected to statistical tests of significance. In case when null hypothesis gets rejected strongly, the effect can be thought of due to some assignable cause. But finding out what those causes are is not within scope of Statistics. Absence of chance causes does not necessarily mean that psi is the cause. Thus, even the use of statistics is not sufficient for psi getting accepted by mainstream science since causal research for psi is beyond Statistics.

7. Theorizing the event before it comes out of data: It is amusing to note Alcock (2003) referring a quote by Sherlock Holmes, "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data.

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Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.”In mainstream science, we establish a theory by interpreting lot of data. In psi research, still the current database is not sufficient for the development of explanatory theory. Notwithstanding the absence of good database, psi researchers, still, attempt to build theories to explain psi Phenomenon e.g., Some quantum theory models viz a quantum mechanical theory (Walker 1984) and the Thermal fluctuation model (Mattuck, 1982) proposes that mind affects the outcome of an event by manipulating the thermal energy of molecules. Such theorizing in absence of reliable data to interpret quantum mechanical theory in such a way as to accommodate psi does not have any credibility in the eyes of a scientist, especially, a researcher in Physics. Very aptly said by Alcock (2003) “Parapsychology is motivated by belief in search of data rather than data giving explanation.”

This is major flaw which pushes Parapsychology away from mainstream science

8. **No Physical Explanation possible for PSI” -- John Beloff (1980)** staunchly believes that there cannot be physical explanation to psi. He admits that it is generally believed by some researchers that with exploration of unexplored portion of mind, many unexplained happenings will get explained. He says that even then, psi cannot get explained because a theory which is physical cannot cover psi and conversely a theory which encompasses psi could not be strictly physical. To make it clearer, he goes on to define what is meant by “Physical theory or explanation”. He categorizes psi into **communicational happenings or observational happenings**. Communicational happenings are analogous to radio, radar or telecommunication, i.e there is a transmitter and a receiver. Psi component ESP is an example of communicational happening. Observational happening of psi are those happenings in which mind matter relationship of psi event is observed e.g PK (Psychokinesis).

Further, he goes on to define what is **physical explanation or physical theory**—This is a theory which can be explained in physical terms (i.e in terms of space, time, mass, energy).

He takes up Telepathy from communicational psi phenomenon and gives arguments why it cannot come under the category of Physical explanation and with same logic the finding extends to other constituents of communicational psi.

Telepathy is nothing but transference of thoughts from one mind to another person’s mind. It is difficult to surmise it in physical terms because in this type of thought transference, the channel of using words or language does not happen because its main characteristic is that the thought transference will take place without the normal physical channels of communication e.g language. One can suggest that the thoughts could produce signals / impulses / vibrations in mind of sender and these could move and get received in minds of receptor. Question is what are the physical terms of medium which carry these and which physical means decode these vibrations in thought form in the receptor’s mind. In absence of any meaningful answer, there are no physical terms explaining Telepathy so it cannot have physical explanation and, hence, it cannot be a physical theory or explanation.

Observational psi also cannot be explained by physical theory. He considers PK experiment where the person’s mind tries to influence RNG machine in generation of random numbers. Involvement of the person’s mind is taken as weak link for physical theory. The observational

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theorists tell that the result will depend on state of mind i.e attitude, expectations, belief, hopes, and mood –all these will affect the outcome of results. Physical theory is not possible because we cannot specify in physical terms as to what state of mind will produce good results of PK because such state may not come in existence because state of mind will alter for two persons or for even same person at two different times. Hence physical theory is unlikely to explain observational psi also.

Since physical explanations are not possible for psi, mainstream science cannot accept it because it is pre-requisite for a phenomenon to be explainable in physical terms for it to be accepted as scientific phenomena.

9. Possible trickery and other unscientific explanations of psi – Wiseman (2011) demonstrates with logic how so- called psi is nothing but trickery or psychological way of fooling people. I will just take one example to prove his point e.g take case of **Fortune telling** i.e predicting future of a person:- He believes that the so- called paranormal specialists know that people see what they want to see and they use this knowledge to frame questions/ comments keeping contradictory meaning phrases and the subject conveniently associates himself / herself with the alternative which suits him/her.

He claims that anyone of us can demonstrate ability to convince a stranger that you know all about them if you become adept in using 3 techniques, namely: - **Flattery; Double Headed Statements and keep it vague.**

- **Flattery:** Start by telling them what they want to hear---- look at their palm, birth date or pretend to do face reading and say that it reflects a very balanced personality, you appear to be very caring, responsible, friendly, creative and polite and very intuitive
- **Double headed statements:** - Work your way through 5 key personality dimensions using double headed sentences to describe their personality as follows: -
 - Open-ness:** - At times you can be imaginative and creative, but are more than capable of being practical and down to earth when necessary.
 - Conscientiousness:** - You value a sense of routine in some aspects of your life, but at other times, enjoy being spontaneous and unpredictable.
 - Extroversion:** - You can be outgoing when you want to, but sometimes enjoy nothing better than a night with good book.
 - Agreeableness:** - Your friends see you as trusting and friendly, but you do have a more competitive side that emerges from time to time
 - Neuroticism:** - Although you feel emotionally insecure and stressed but in general you are fairly relaxed and laid back
- **Keep it Vague:** - It is fine to drop in the odd specific statement—I am getting an impression of a significant change in your life may be a journey or a change in job. I have a feeling that you are worried about a member in your family. Something gives me an impression of an important event 3 years ago in your life etc.

Come out with abstract statements like: I can see a circle closing-- does that make sense to you or I can see a door shutting –it will not open with whatever force you pull it etc.

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The subject will relate himself with the ones which are close to his /her thinking and will omit other statements from his/her memory ---this is a normal human trait. Thus, you will be taken as a knowledgeable person knowing past or future.

Wiseman takes psi components one by one, be it Psychokinesis, Apparitions, etc. and he has explanations such as above for all these psi components which do not relate them to science. Naturally such explanations suggest deceptions in so called psi happenings.

There is another example where the seemingly psi event can have explanations other than proving it a scientific happening. I cite an example of a dream narrated on radio (refer-transcript of radio broadcast) where the anchor **Peter Forrest** talks about anomalous happenings around the globe and he, then, refers to an incident narrated by Arcady Blinov who talks about a fisherman's son Mikailo Lomonosove who saw a dream that something terrible is happening to his father in midst of rough sea where he had gone fishing. Later he gets the sad news of death of his father and he accepts the news calmly because he had seen all this in dream. The son astonishes the messenger when he goes on to describe finer details of incident of his father meeting death at rough sea-- which could be possible only if he was personally present there.

Discussions happen to analyze why such a dream was seen by the son.

The logical reasoning given is that mind can store infinite situations as perceived or heard in past and can reconstruct them in logical sequence to connect them in dream when we go to sleep with anxiety on the topic. Various possibilities are there, in past the fisherman could have taken son on fishing expeditions and told him about the dangers that lay in fishing in rough sea, his mother could have forewarned about the dangers in sea and all those got registered in subconscious and finally culminated in dream which encompassed fine details as to how his father could meet a tragic end. It is possible that similar dream could have come many times earlier also but did not register importance. Only on this occasion since death actually happened it looked like a psi happening. Wiseman (1999) also touches on this point in the way as explained above as he goes on to say that daily we see dreams but we forget them as nothing relating to dream comes near to actual happening but the day we have some incident faintly resembling the dream, it becomes a memorable event.

Point made in the above narration not only points out that psi cannot relate itself to mainstream science but goes on to bring MIND's interference to explain how the mind's working can make an event look like a psi event when in fact it is not. This is an important aspect which I would like to connect to when I am concluding the article with a futuristic view of PSI and mainstream science.

CONCLUSION

The above obstacles and also Broad's views on psi violating basic principles of science together go on to build a strong case that Parapsychology cannot become a part of mainstream science.

Way forward

psi violates scientific principles but still the incidents happen and we are not able to deny their happening. It is true that we are unable to find causative reasoning because the self-imposed definitions has limited scientific scope to explain the happenings in physical terms.

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In above discussion on dream ----mind is stipulated to work in a way to create a dream which is very-very near to the incident that really happened. Mind played a pivotal role to construct the dream and make it look as if psi event has happened.

It is a fact that ESP / PK brings mind as a factor because mind to mind or mind to matter is the base to the paranormal phenomenon. Causal explanation is currently not possible because most of the capabilities of mind are still hidden and beyond our reach.

Parapsychology researchers and Neuroscience researchers must collaborate so that they take findings seriously and this would be first step towards bringing psi into the mainstream science. I tend to agree to above and my logic is simple. psi does not come under helm of mainstream science because, by definition, the psi happenings are not physically explainable as these are not being perceived by known five senses.

Brain is still not fully explored, may be there exist a psi sense which is still not explored. Neuroscience researchers while researching brain may come out with a nerve circuitry system in brain consisting of, hitherto unknown, arrangement of neurons and synapses (Michael O' Shea, 2005) which can sniff and make psi happenings explainable through a sixth sense, a psi sense, which presently is a proverbial sixth sense. If that happens, then we shall not have to take recourse to negative way of defining psi and it will be defined in a positive way as it will be linked to the researched sixth sense. Then psi will have positive and deterministic physical explanation which will be, probably, the first step to pave way for it to be recognized by mainstream science and philosophy.

Causal reason for Consciousness is, also, not fully understood yet. Further advances in research on "consciousness" will throw open answers to hitherto unknown channels by which the paranormal is getting perceived.

Mystery will unfold with advancement in neuroscience research concerning brain, mind and consciousness and the advancement in research will prove as a boon to parapsychological research---- but that is future and future is unpredictable.

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Conflict of Interest

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