

EDITORIAL

On a few previous occasions I've documented my misgivings over certain terminological fads or conventions in parapsychology. In fact, I've done so in this *Journal* (Braude 1998). I'm now writing an entry on macro-PK for a promising new handbook of parapsychology (a long-overdue update to Wolman 1977), and this exercise has reminded me about a concern I expressed many years ago (in Braude 1997), and which I hope is worth mentioning again.

One of the most widespread views within parapsychology is that there is a viable distinction between micro and macro forms of psychokinesis. The general (and rough) idea is that there's a difference worth making between (on the one hand) apparent PK on the kinds of systems used in most laboratory PK experiments (i.e. random event generators of one kind or another), and (on the other hand) PK of the sort reported from mediumistic séances and poltergeist cases (e.g., object levitations, apports, and materializations).¹ However, there are reasons for thinking that the distinction between micro-PK and macro-PK might not be worth making—or at the very least that it's in critical need of clarification. So let's look at it more closely.

Note, first of all, that that it's unclear how “psychokinesis” should be defined, even provisionally (see Braude 2002). Nevertheless, the following would be a reasonable and relatively undogmatic beginning. Let's define “PK” as “the causal influence of an organism's mental state on a region r of the physical world, without any currently scientifically recognized physical interaction between the organism's body and r .”

This definition obviously leaves certain questions open. For example, because it doesn't specify that region r is *extra-somatic*, it leaves open the possibility that PK might operate on the organism's own body. Given our present (and still considerable) state of parapsychological ignorance, this feature of the definition would seem to be a virtue. Some have suggested that ordinary volition might be a form of PK in which an intention directly produces a bodily change. Similarly, psychosomatic ailments and self-healing through hypnosis might be classed as types of PK. For now, it would be hasty to rule out these possibilities by definition.

I realize many recoil at what they usually—and disparagingly—label *negative* definitions, that is definitions framed in terms of our ignorance, or in terms of what the thing defined is not. In fact, some would argue that when we say that a puzzling phenomenon is due to PK (or, similarly,

telepathy or clairvoyance) we're actually saying that the phenomenon can't be explained. But these objections are seriously confused. First, explaining a phenomenon in terms of PK as defined above actually does have content.² It entails (a) that the phenomenon is not produced by ordinary means (including trickery), and (b) that a necessary condition of the phenomenon's production is a mental state of some kind, even if rudimentary—either a conscious or unconscious willing or intending, or perhaps something more along the lines of an undirected emotional outburst (say, in a poltergeist case). It may also entail that the agent's state is an efficient or proximate (i.e. unmediated) cause of the phenomenon.

Second, although to explain a phenomenon in terms of PK (telepathy, etc.) is not to offer a *theory* of PK (telepathy, etc.), there's no reason to demand (as some do) that we be able to provide such a theory. In fact, anyone who thinks we need a theory of PK to invoke PK as an explanation simply doesn't understand the logic of explanation. As Michael Scriven correctly noted in connection with telepathy,

To explain a remarkable performance by a stage mentalist by saying that he memorizes a list of key words may be perfectly legitimate, even though one cannot give an explanation of the phenomenon of memory. Explanations all come to an end; explanations all leave other things unexplained. Explanations [in terms] of telepathy are perfectly legitimate, even though telepathy is not explained. (Scriven 1976:193)

Now most parapsychologists use the categories of micro-PK and macro-PK as if they marked a distinction between genuinely different and possibly independent kinds of phenomena. Typically, parapsychologists use the term "micro-PK" to refer to those PK phenomena whose existence can be demonstrated only by statistical tests. The underlying idea is that REGs, if left to themselves, will inevitably produce apparently nonrandom sequences, and dice will land with a face up independently of any PK influence. What inclines us to regard certain such sequences or events as evidence for PK is their statistical improbability. By contrast, no quantitative analysis is needed to conclude that an apparent table levitation or materialization is an ostensibly paranormal phenomenon. So the distinction between micro-PK and macro-PK seems in practice to be no more than a distinction between two methods of determining ostensible paranormality. But in that case, it would seem more appropriate to rename it the distinction between quantitatively and qualitatively anomalous PK.

However, there's more here than meets the eye. If the distinction is so straightforward, why use the terms "micro" and "macro"? Why, for example, should dice tests provide evidence of micro-PK? One can understand the use of "micro" in connection with tests in which PK appears to affect (say) radioactive

decay or thermal noise. But dice are observable objects, and it seems odd to call PK influence on dice micro-PK simply because statistical tests are needed to determine whether a PK effect occurred. After all, if a die levitated, the phenomenon would probably not be considered an instance of micro-PK.

Nevertheless, there may be a reason for this peculiar terminology. It may be a holdover from a more traditional use of the micro/macro distinction in PK research, one that reflects an underlying general view of how PK works. (And incidentally, this common presupposition reveals another respect in which there's plenty of meat in the hypothesis of PK, defined "negatively.") To the extent there's a received view within parapsychology on the nature of PK, it's that every observable PK effect is a causal consequence of PK effects on systems too small to be observed by the naked eye. Presumably, the original use of "micro-PK" was to refer to these unobservable events, so that they could be distinguished from PK effects on observable systems. But curiously, from that theoretical standpoint it would seem as if the term "macro-PK" had little or no utility. One would think that if micro-PK and macro-PK were distinct phenomena, then macro-PK would be the direct PK influence on macroscopic systems, bypassing the sorts of microscopic causal interactions ordinarily thought to be causally necessary for the macroscopic events in question. But PK on observable systems, unmediated by PK on the micro level, is precisely what the received view rejects.

So it seems that the present confused situation in PK theory has at least the following two outstanding features. First, parapsychologists tend to use the term "micro-PK" in two distinct ways. According to one, it refers to

(a) PK phenomena detectable only by means of statistical tests.

According to the other, it refers to

(b) PK effects on systems too small to be observed by the naked eye.

Second, considering the prevailing view that primitive PK effects occur only on the micro level, sense (b) of "micro-PK" has no corresponding contrast with "macro-PK." On the received view of PK, it would be a mistake to treat REG deviations or thermistor fluctuations—but not table levitations, spoon bending, or materializations—as evidence for micro-PK. According to the received view, all PK evidence is ultimately evidence for micro-PK. But then there's no clear and non-arbitrary way in practice to distinguish micro-PK from macro-PK, because in order to have *evidence* of micro-PK, there must be some observable effect, whether it's an overt object movement, instrument reading, arrangement of balls in a cascade, or a flashing light.

So when "micro-PK" is used in sense (a), the micro/macro distinction has limited taxonomic value but no explanatory utility. And when it's used in sense (b), the distinction has at least possible explanatory value but no taxonomic utility.

As it happens, the explanatory value of the second sense of “micro-PK” is itself highly questionable. There are serious reasons for doubting the prevailing view that all observable PK effects result from PK interactions on the level of the very small. That’s because it may be a deep mistake to suppose that observable PK phenomena can be explained in terms of underlying processes or mechanisms. However, that thread must be pursued on another occasion (but see Braude 1997 for more details).

At any rate, given the fuzziness of the micro/macro-PK distinction, it’s hardly surprising that researchers display no more clarity when considering whether those two alleged forms of PK are nomologically continuous. For example, should we assume that PK influence on dice or RNGs results from processes fundamentally like those that produce object levitations, materializations, or D.D. Home accordion renditions? That is, should we regard all these forms of PK as manifestations of a single, and as yet mysterious, process? Or should we regard the superficial dissimilarities among the various PK phenomena as manifestations of deeper differences? Parapsychologists undoubtedly have hunches about which of these two general pictures of PK is closest to the truth. But research in the field is nowhere near the point where we can confidently choose one over the other. One would think, then, that theorizing about PK would reflect or acknowledge our ignorance concerning the possible unity of PK phenomena.

But in fact, a great deal of recent PK research and theory seems oblivious to that issue. For at least the last 30 years, most PK researchers have concerned themselves primarily with apparent PK effects on random processes (usually, only REGs), without considering whether their work has any bearing on the most interesting phenomena reported in poltergeist and mediumistic cases. To be sure, some parapsychologists do attempt to extend their conclusions or theories about statistically identified forms of PK to other PK phenomena. But with few exceptions they feel the need to account, at most, only for small-scale and relatively non-dramatic effects, such as slight movements of small visible objects (e.g., compass needles, pinwheels, or matches). Certainly, none of the recent experimentally rooted and superficially high-powered theories currently (or at one time) in vogue (e.g., the various forms of the “Observational Theory”—see, e.g., Schmidt 1975, 1976, 1984, Walker 1975) even pretends to explain, say, the better-documented cases of mediumistic materializations or object movements.³

Perhaps the most egregious recent example of this theoretical trend is “Decision Augmentation Theory” (or DAT), formulated initially as an attempt to reinterpret the evidence for laboratory PK, apparently retrocausally, as a form of precognitive ESP (see May, Spottiswoode, Utts, & James 1995, May, Utts, & Spottiswoode 1995a, 1995b). In a gesture

uncharacteristic of the technical theoretical literature on PK, the authors actually mention a possible form of non-laboratory PK. They concede at one point that DAT would not account for human levitation (May, Utts, & Spottiswoode 1995a:458, May, Utts, & Spottiswoode 1995b:200). But apparently they don't take the possibility of levitation and other forms of non-laboratory PK seriously, because they assert, "DAT leads to the idea that there may be only one underlying mechanism of all anomalous mental phenomena [their absurd proposed synonym for "psi"], namely, a transfer of information from future to past" (May, Utts, & Spottiswoode 1995b:198).

It's difficult to see how such scientific myopia could lead to any decent theorizing about psi generally or PK in particular. After all, for all we know at this stage, the motley array of phenomena labeled *PK* may be related in such a way that we can't adequately understand one of them in isolation from the others. If so, PK phenomena would resemble (say) the various forms of humor or aggression. We can't pretend to understand humor (or aggression), much less propose a theory of humor (or aggression), based on just one of its manifest forms—for example, slapstick (or overt physical assaults). Similarly, it seems foolish and misguided to theorize about the nature and mechanics of PK while ignoring the achievements of great and scrupulously investigated physical mediums.

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While we're on the subject of PK, I should mention that researchers can now access digitized copies of many of the Ted Serios Polaroid photographs housed in the University of Maryland Baltimore County Library Special Collections. The url is <http://cdm16629.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/search/collection/Eisenbud>. For more on the history of that collection, see my Editorial in *JSE* 25(3) Fall 2011 and also the chapter on Serios in Braude 2007.

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Finally, as another year (and another *JSE* volume) draws to a close, I'd like to express my appreciation and admiration again for the splendid service rendered by my editorial colleagues: my hardworking (indeed, overworked) and mind-bogglingly patient Associate Editors, our alert and seemingly indefatigable Book Review Editor, David Moncrief, and our Managing Editor, Kathleen Erickson, who somehow pulls it all together and manages to make the rest of us look more competent than we really are.

Stephen E. Braude

Notes

- ¹ Interestingly, one common opinion within parapsychology (perhaps even the prevailing view) is that the only evidence for PK worth mentioning is the evidence for micro-PK. I can't examine the problems with that posi-

tion here, but (as I've argued elsewhere—Braude 1997, 2007) I'd say that the evidence for large-scale PK is much clearer and more compelling than the evidence for so-called micro-PK.

² See Scriven (1976) for a similar point, with respect to explanations in terms of telepathy.

³ I should mention that Walter von Lucadou's Model of Pragmatic Information (MPI) has been applied, commendably, to both poltergeist and table tilting phenomena. But as far as I can tell it's still not applicable to many of the more interesting phenomena of physical mediumship. In any case, it seems that one can go only so far in maintaining, as the model does, that "psi is . . . a correlation in an entangled physical system" (von Lucadou 2001:13), or that "psi phenomena are . . . entanglement correlations in a generalized quantum theory" (von Lucadou, Römer, & Walach 2007:50). (See also von Lucadou 1995, von Lucadou & Zahradnik 2004.)

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