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Chapter 8  
Psychic Powers & Talking to the Dead

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- Types of Psychic Powers**
- While the word “psychic” is only 150 years old or so, stories about these date back millenia
  - Today, they are often lumped together under the term *psi* and tend to be three main things:
    - Extrasensory perception
    - Psychokinesis
    - After-death communication

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## Extrasensory Perception

- Includes telepathy, or direct mind to mind communication of information
- Like Professor X of the X-Men




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## Extrasensory Perception

- Another kind is clairvoyance, being able to “see” things not actually present, either physically or temporally
  - Precognition
  - Retrocognition
  - Remote viewing



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## Psychokinesis

- Also called telekinesis, this is the manipulation of physical objects using only mind power
- Bending objects, stopping watches, making dice fall a certain way, levitating...




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### After Death Communication

- Speaking to the dead, usually done by a “medium”
- Stories of this throughout history, but there was a major resurgence in the late 1800s




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### Belief in Psychic Powers

- Stories about these sort of things for thousands of years across all cultures
- 41-50% of people in US and UK believe in ESP, some 15-21% believe in ADC
- But what does the evidence say?

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### Studying the Psychics

- Long history of skeptical and scientific inquiry, dating back to Lucian of Samosata
- 2<sup>nd</sup> century satirist who exposed a priest who had “amazing powers” as a fraud




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### Spiritualism and Science

- The rise of Spiritualism in the U.S. caused massive interest in psychic powers in mid-1800s
- This same time included a rise in use of scientific methods to study all phenomena
- These collided in 1882 with the formation of the Society for Psychical Research in London

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### Rise of Parapsychology

- The SPR was originally dedicated to “exact and unimpassioned enquiry” about psi
- Led to similar groups being formed in other countries, as well as the international Parapsychological Association in 1957
- Several journals started, dedicated to the topic

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### J.B. Rhine

- Most prominent early researcher, had graduate degrees in botany, but switched fields and studied psychology at Harvard
  - Change was inspired by a talk on the paranormal given by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
- Coined the term *parapsychology* and founded the Duke Parapsychology Lab in late 1920s

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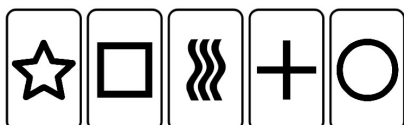
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### Rhine's Research

- Early on he exposed two famous mediums as frauds, earning the wrath of Doyle
- Earliest research often involved the use of [Zener cards](#) to test psi in various ways




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### Psi-Positive Research

- In two books published by 1940, Rhine detailed the results of studies supporting psi
- Numerous studies, some by quite well-known scientists, have been published since then that also support the existence of various psi
- Not limited to psychology, includes work by physicists, engineers, and many others

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### Daryl Bem's Research

- Cornell professor and one of the most influential social psychologists in the world
- Began research on psi in late 1980s, his first major publication examined Ganzfeld protocols




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### Bem's Ganzfeld Study

- Reviewed 20 years worth of research, concluded that there was strong evidence
- Expected rates of "hits" would be 25%, and then found rates of 32-35% in the literature
- Bem was convinced the data showed evidence for the existence of telepathy

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### Bem's Precognitive Study

- Next major publication in psi tested *retrocausality* – if stimuli presented after the fact could influence one's current behavior
- Of 9 reported studies, 8 showed evidence that precognition existed
- Published in top tier social psychology journal

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### Critically Examining Psi Research

- Over 80 years worth of research have had positive findings
- But, most scientists do not think psi is real, like 98% of the National Academy of Science
- To understand why, we need to use our critical thinking skills to examine the studies

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### Critically Examining Psi Research

- *Replicability and ruling out rival hypotheses* need to be examined first
- Rhine's research was replicated by *five* other university teams, each finding no evidence for ESP in thousands of trials
- So why did Rhine find it?

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### Methodological Problems

- Rhine's findings seem to be an artifact of having poorly controlled trials and analyses
- Huge amounts of sensory leakage
  - Same cards were repeatedly used
  - Cards were very thin, almost see-through
  - Fronts of cards were able to be seen in eyeglasses of experimenter

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### A Repeated Pattern

- Poor experimental controls, methodological flaws, and lack of replicability are an all too common pattern in psi-positive research
- All of the major studies pointed to by believers have massive flaws and cannot be taken seriously by outside researchers

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### Debunking the Psychics

- Proper controls help prevent us from fooling ourselves when it comes to psychics
- Long history of skeptics helping people avoid being fooled, from Lucian 2000 years ago to Harry Houdini in the early 1900s to James Randi over the past 40 years

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### Houdini vs. the Psychics

- Houdini knew all the tricks of the mediums from his days in a traveling circus
- Even demonstrated them to staunch believers, like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle




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### Houdini & Doyle

- They were close friends, but Doyle's wife was a "channeler" and medium
- Lady Doyle even "channeled" Houdini's mother for him
  - The message was in English, which he mother didn't speak, and incredibly generic

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### Houdini & Doyle

- Their friendship completely dissolved after Houdini partnered with *Scientific American* to investigate and actively debunk claims
- Time and time again, he found “mediums” using common magician’s tricks to levitate tables or have “spirits” ring bells

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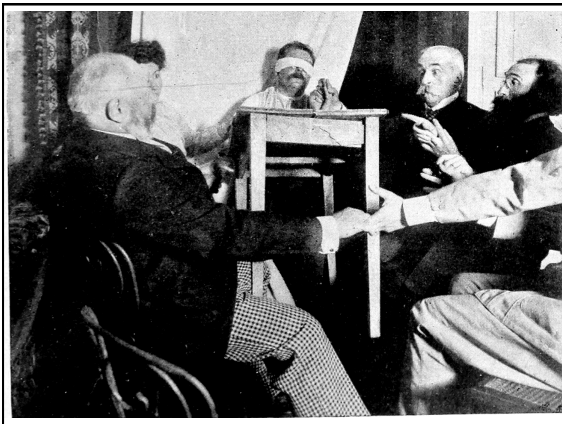
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### James Randi & Project Alpha

- Magicians like James “The Amazing” Randi had for years tried to help parapsychologist set up protocols to prevent being fooled
- In late 1970s, he learned of the newly funded McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research and set in motion “Project Alpha”

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### Project Alpha

- Randi asked two young magicians he knew to say they had “psychic powers” and apply to be studied at the lab
- He also offered his free help to the researchers to make sure they weren’t tricked by magicians
- His offer was turned down, but the two men were asked to come in and be tested

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### Project Alpha

- Over the next 4 years, the two men went through over 160 hours of testing
  - Randi repeatedly wrote to the lab, suggesting controls to use in the tests and was ignored
- Then, Randi demonstrated how their “powers” could be duplicated at the Parapsychological Association’s conference

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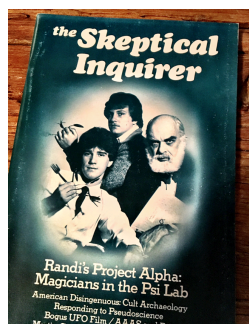
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### Project Alpha

- The whole affair was revealed, to mixed reactions
- Many praised it as exposing the poor rigor in parapsychology, other deemed it as unethical




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### Lessons (Not) Learned

- Emphasized the need to for researchers to collaborate with those skilled in fooling others
- Frequently done by skeptics and those conducting research, but infrequently by the parapsychologists

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### Speaking to the Dead

- Mediums purport to be able to speak to those who have died and relay messages from them
- Long history of people claiming these powers and making others believe, from the Fox sisters and Madam Blavatsky in the late 1800s to John Edward and Teresa Caputo today

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### Investigating Mediums

- Equally long history of them being exposed as frauds and hoaxers
- Even the Fox sisters, founders of the Spiritualist movement, admitted their tricks




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### Modern Mediums

- Tend to rely less on dark rooms and magic tricks, and more on “reading” people
- Cold reading and hot reading exploit our natural biases, can be learned by anyone, and have *nothing* to do with the supernatural
- Can be used to mimic different psi powers

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### Cold Reading

- Exploits the *Forer effect*
  - If someone is given generally positive statements that supposedly are tailored to them from a trusted source, they rate them as being accurate
- Rowland (2002) outlines several aspects to making a cold reading work well

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### Making a Cold Reading Work

- Being highly personable and likable
- Encouraging cooperation and volunteering of information
- Establishing a ritualistic atmosphere that is intimate but also dissuades challenges

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### Making a Cold Reading Work

- Medium conveys that they are experienced, knowledgeable, and confident
- Discuss exactly how the process “works”
- Makes excuses in advance for any failures that may occur

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### Making a Cold Reading Work

- Begins with a barrage of statements and questions (the “shotgun”)
- When you get a “hit,” focus on that and ignore anything else you have previously said
- Use statements that seem specific, but rely on statistical or trivia-type knowledge

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**COLD READER BINGO**

"J" (or "I" sounding" - includes "G") NAME	"YES YOU DO!"	FATHER FIGURE / OLDER MALE	SHOW HOST PRAISES GUEST - "WOW!" OR SIMILAR	"CHEST AREA" or "BREATHING TROUBLE"
"BIRTHDAY" "WEDDING"	"BOXES"	"CANCER"	WILD-ASS GUESS	ANY NUMBER FROM 1 TO 12
"S" NAME	"WRITE THIS DOWN"	"R" NAME (Includes "Bob")	"JEWELRY"	ASKS ABOUT CHILD or "TOYS"
PERSON ACCEPTS MISS AS A HIT	MULTIPLE FISHING QUESTIONS	COMPLETE MISS ON ALL GUESSES FOR A PERSON	DOG OR CAT	MOTHER FIGURE / OLDER FEMALE
"HEAD AREA"	"M" NAME	"BADGE" "FLAG"	THE DEAD RELATIVE IS "OK" "FINE"	"DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

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### Making a Cold Reading Work

- Turn your misses into hits via excuses
- Remember the “golden rule” – always tell people what they want to hear!




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### An Actual Example

- This video shows purported medium John Edward performing a group reading
- Watch how he exploits the cold reading techniques discussed
- [Psychic Medium John Edward Reads Our Audience | The Meredith Vieira Show](#)

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### Hot Readings

- When the medium has gained information beforehand and uses it as if it is from the dead
- Many different ways to do this
  - Online searches for established clients
  - Accomplices circling in audience
  - Having audience members filling out cards

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## Conclusions

- The evidence is not on the side of psychic powers being real
- We see a consistent pattern of
  - Claimed powers being found out as hoaxes
  - Psi positive research not being well controlled or replicable
  - Lack of psychic powers making themselves known in the lab

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