



A Multi-Method Perspective on Psi

SPECIAL SUBSECTION

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SUBMITTED May 15, 2024

ACCEPTED June 1, 2024

PUBLISHED June 30, 2024

<https://doi.org/10.31275/20243461>

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James McClenon has many years of experience with sitter groups (McClenon, 2018); he has studied Kenneth J. Batcheldor's work (Batcheldor, 1984; Batcheldor & Giesler, 1994), knows the trickster effect (Hansen, 2001) and the predictions of the Model of Pragmatic Information (Lucadou, 2015). This led him to the fundamental view that controls hinder the occurrence of PK, and he was, therefore, reluctant to introduce controls. Without controls, however, the observations remain dependent on many possible factors, are difficult to interpret, and have little scientific significance. For example, if participants increasingly observe synchronicities or supposed PK phenomena, which has been described in some impressive ways, then this may be related to expectations and the associated selective perception. Another question that is not addressed: If the alleged psi phenomena observed during the sessions are actually psi effects, then it is still open whether they are experimenter psi, especially since there is no blinding at any time. McClenon took a long time before some control or quantitative approaches were introduced, after a period in which there was little systematic experimentation and variation. Often, something was abandoned if it did not seem to work, even if it was an interesting approach (e.g., placing a burning candle near the pinwheels as a kind of control).

It seems to me that McClenon's project suffers from a lack of clarity as to which theoretical model it is based on. He explicitly refers to Batcheldor's model, which assumes a *Universal Creative Principle* (UCP) creating and sustaining "normal reality" as well as "paranormal" phenomena in another way with "no normal causes"¹ under certain conditions. Under these conditions, the causes of paranormal phenomena experienced are ambiguous – Batcheldor calls this situation a "*pocket of indeterminacy*." The emergence of such a pocket of indeterminacy is contingent on the observers' state of mind. McClenon also takes his own *Ritual Healing Theory* (RHT) into consideration, which models the development of spiritual specialists (e.g., shamans) via an evolutionary principle, who are able to experience trance and hypnosis as well as cause spiritual healing in the community through creating belief in the paranormal and allegedly anomalous experiences. Healing processes can then be understood as the result of hypnotic and placebo effects (McClenon, 2005). Another theoretical influence is only mentioned in passing in McClenon's paper, but nevertheless seems to play a major role, is linked to the name Walter von Lucadou. His *Model of Pragmatic Information* (MPI) and the *Generalized Quantum Theory* (GQT; Walach et al., 2014), which are based on quantum physical principles, with its predictions on the elusiveness of psi phenomena, also appear to have a strong influence on McClenon's experimental approach (personal communication).

All three theories have points of commonality, but also incompatibilities. McClenon's own RHT is consistent with Michael Winkelmann's approach of understanding



shamanism on an evolutionary-biological basis (e.g., Winkelman, 2009), and is ontologically reductionist in that neither genuine psi phenomena nor an otherworldly agent need to be assumed. In contrast to the MPI and the UCP model, it tends to be person-centered, while those are explicitly non-person-centered, i.e., the occurrence of (alleged) psi phenomena is not caused by special abilities of particularly gifted persons. In the following, I will briefly describe the similarities and differences between the MPI and the UCP, as these are illuminating for the interpretation of the results of McClenon's series of experiments.

The core structure of the MPI and the GQT is derived from findings made in quantum physics. They have been transferred to the macrophysical and psychological realms. A central role is played by a property of quantum systems that allows "spooky action at a distance" (Einstein), i.e., a non-local correlation between two entangled particles, but which cannot be used to transmit information, as this use would cause the entanglement correlation to collapse immediately. This property, which has been confirmed for quantum systems, is transferred in the MPI and GQT as a non-transmission axiom (NT axiom) to macrophysical phenomena, psychology, and other areas of life. The axiomatization of the non-usability of psi for information transmission has significant consequences for the interpretation of the elusiveness of psi. Although it is a powerful explanation, it sometimes seems counterintuitive when one considers the phenomenology of some psi phenomena (e.g., concerning occasions of crisis telepathy and clairvoyance). The MPI and GQT allow psi-phenomena under certain circumstances, i.e., as long as the NT axiom is not violated. Their basic assumption and their method of argumentation are therefore anchored in modern physics and a mathematical formalism, although they also claim validity for the fields of psychology and art, and GQT thus also becomes a kind of epistemology (Römer, 2023).

Batcheldor's UCP concept, on the other hand, is a metaphysical theory according to his own characterization. He calls it "an abstract dynamic creative principle" (Batcheldor & Giesler, 1994, p. 109).² Both Lucadou and Batcheldor give explanations of the elusiveness of psi, the decline effect, and the trickster effect; both claim that reality³ is made up of "normal-causal" phenomena and "paranormal" phenomena, with the latter referred to by Batcheldor as *phenomena without a normal cause* and by Lucadou as *non-local* and *acausal phenomena*; both argue that strict experimental controls weaken the results of psi experiments. However, the basic assumptions of Batcheldor and Lucadou are completely different. The quantum physics-based models (MPI, GQT) exclude in-

formation transmission by psi due to the NT axiom. Since non-local phenomena are entanglement correlations and not causal relationships in this model, the question of the observer plays a central role. Direct observation causes the entanglement of a system to collapse. Psi phenomena are no longer possible under strictly controlled observation. This automatically leads to decline and displacement effects. Elusiveness is, therefore, to be seen as the consequence of observation and – in the MPI – as a decline in the novelty and thus as a loss of pragmatic information (Lucadou, 2015).

In Batcheldor's model, however, the elusiveness of psi is rooted in the conception of reality itself. Batcheldor writes: "Normal reality resists paranormality and prevents it (in various ways) from destabilizing the rest of reality" (Batcheldor & Giesler, 1994, p. 105). According to his theory, psi phenomena are not part of our stable physical reality, do not follow its laws, and therefore cannot be studied scientifically as a matter of principle. Psi phenomena only can occur outside of normal reality, in what he called *pocket of indeterminacy* situations or areas, "where there is an *ambiguity of causes*" (ibid., p. 100; italics in the original). In earlier writings, Batcheldor focused more on another factor that could hinder psi from occurring: the fear of psi. It leads to emotional resistance, which comes in two types, "ownership resistance" and "witness inhibition" (Batcheldor, 1984). Psi phenomena challenge our "normal" and stable reality and are therefore perceived as a threat. This is one reason why *pockets of indeterminacy* are necessary for psi phenomena to occur.

Both Lucadou's and Batcheldor's models consider ambiguous situational conditions to be psi-conducive. But again, the reasoning is different. While in the physical model the "macroscopic uncertainty principle" prevents the entanglement situation from collapsing, which makes psi possible, whereas in Batcheldor's model, the ambiguity of causes of the *pockets of indeterminacy* are conducive to the occurrence of paranormal phenomena because they are "blank spots," so to speak, that the UCP requires to create or express itself most easily.

Although Batcheldor's and Lucadou's predictions are the same in many respects, e.g., regarding the trickster quality of psi phenomena, they have different consequences for the researcher. To put it metaphorically in a nutshell: While quantum-physics-based models call for methodically *tricking the trickster*, Batcheldor's model encourages *playing with the trickster*. The integration of psi phenomena into a scientific theory, as is the case with the former, basically enables exact predictions and thus its verifiability.⁴ The latter, however, is considered a "metaphysical theory," a rigorous scientific investigation of paranormal phenomena impossible by definition. Batch-

eldor assumes, “that paranormal phenomena *have no normal causes* in terms of current science, and that they are created from outside of normal reality” (Batcheldor & Giesler, 1994, p. 98, emphasis in original). And further:

According to my definition, “paranormal” phenomena, *by definition*, are uncontrollable, unpredictable, and unrepeatable (in terms of normal science). (...) But I don’t say that the phenomena are totally uncontrollable, unpredictable, and unrepeatable, as I will discuss below – but only that *strict* control, repeatability, and prediction are impossible. (ibid., p. 99)

This relativization of the statement of the complete impossibility of the scientific investigation of psi phenomena is based on a differentiation made by Batcheldor. He distinguishes between *embryonic paranormal phenomena* and *paranormal phenomena with a track record*. While the former cannot be scientifically examined without destroying them due to their nature, this does not fully apply to the latter. According to Batcheldor, embryonic paranormal phenomena begin *a track record* with their first occurrence in a pocket of indeterminacy. The participants of sitter groups, for instance, get more and more accustomed to the phenomena and lose their fear – Batcheldor calls this “acclimatization” – which favors the reoccurrence and prolongs the track record of these phenomena.

This model allows repeated observation of psi phenomena with a track record and makes it, therefore, accessible to scientific investigation. It still initially requires ambiguity of causes (pocket of indeterminacy) but not an NT axiom and, therefore, does not necessarily have to reject a signal model of psi. The acclimatization of the “observers” (e.g., participants of sitter groups) as well as the track record help to overcome ambiguity and elusiveness of the phenomena and lead to a stabilization necessary for scientific investigations. This shows a significant difference to MPI, where reoccurrences do not lead to a stabilization in the long term, but to the disappearance of psi phenomena – due to decreasing novelty and pragmatic information.

McClenon seems to have been more guided by Batcheldor’s theory, although this is not clear from the project description in the article. The personalization of the pinwheels by giving them names, together with the variations in the experimental setup, represents a “playful approach to the trickster” and may have contributed to the occurrence of the sometimes impressive effects described.⁵ This also includes the malfunctions of recording devices or technical equipment, which are known from

many anecdotal descriptions in the field of anthropology,⁶ but also play a major role in the field of parapsychology, especially when it comes to macro-PK phenomena (Morris, 1986).⁷ After frequent camera malfunctions, it would have been obvious to immediately install a second camera to control technical failure as a variable. According to my understanding of the UCP theory, a second camera should not have a hindering influence on the occurrence of PK phenomena after they had a track record, especially since the recording cell phone camera was permanently present, anyway. Quantitative analyses of the pinwheel movements recorded by the blink camera also show that these anomalies do not escape observation, even if they react in a “trickster-like” manner.

McClenon’s experimental setup does not provide 100% proof of the existence of paranormal phenomena. There still remains a certain amount of macroscopic uncertainty due to a setting that is not perfectly controlled. Together with the possibility of assuming the existence of a group entanglement situation, this is sufficient to consider it a confirmation of the MPI. However, it also does not contradict the UCP theory. More systematic experimentation and the earlier use of better controls would have been appropriate in order to derive more scientific findings from the interesting session reports.

Considering the *group effect hypothesis* investigated by McClenon in this context, a similarity to the Global Consciousness Project (Nelson, 2015) comes to mind. According to this paradigm, a potential influence of assumed collective consciousness structures on the behavior of random number generators (RNGs) was investigated, not only on a global level but also with smaller groups such as the audience of a movie theater (Shimizu & Ishikawa, 2012). Placing an RNG in the room with the pinwheels would have been an interesting addition to the exploratory experimental design. This combination of different measurements on a micro- and macro level is not new and has already been applied in investigations of reported haunting (Maher & Hansen, 1992, 1995).

McClenon’s approach of conducting online group PF experiments is innovative and seems to work in that macro-PK phenomena actually appear to have occurred. The method of quantitatively recording the behavior of the pinwheels using blink cameras is also very interesting. The trickster quality of psi phenomena does not seem to influence the result of the quantitative measurement of camera activation during the sessions compared to the relaxation phases, even though pinwheel activity itself appears to respond to direct observation. It’s recurring “hide-and-seek” behavior that finally led to the personalization of the pinwheels, as well as the apparently non-occurring decline effect, speak a little bit more for

the UCP theory than for the MPI. The fact that the burning of candles in the vicinity of the pinwheels during the sessions was abandoned due to inconsistent results seems a pity because it appeared to be an anomaly itself. Reasons for giving up would rather be found in the fact that one would have to assume an influence as a heat source directed to one side of the system, which should then lead to a systematic deviation from the random behavior of the pinwheels. However, this was obviously not established.

A critical feature from a methodological point of view is that the pinwheels were not completely insulated from possible convection currents of the ambient air by plexiglass hoods or other covers. The fact that the pinwheels no longer moved when completely isolated from the surrounding air may be enough for a skeptic to find random local air currents as an explanation for the movements. It is also consistent with Batcheldor's model, according to which the elimination of the ambiguity of causes and, thus, the pocket of indeterminacy prevents the occurrence of (embryonic) paranormal phenomena.⁸ However, this initially obvious explanation should be viewed critically so that Occam's razor is not applied too early. On the one hand, controlled experiments with gifted subjects are described in which the turning of pinwheels was also successful under a cover through an effort of will (Dullin, Jamet & Frosio Roncalli, 2023; Varvoglis & Dullin, 2023). On the other hand, there are reports from parapsychological research in China, for example, according to which a minimal hole in the sealing of a container is necessary to produce a macro-PK effect, as otherwise the alleged "qi" of the test subjects cannot penetrate and exert its effect (Zha, 2001). This suggests that ideas about what is possible or not with paranormal means can be decisive for the actual occurrence of such effects. This is also consistent with the findings I obtained in interviews with magic practitioners. Absolute belief in the possibility of the success of magic is necessary for its actual success. There must not be the slightest doubt during the magical procedure (Mayer, submitted). This inner attitude, which is necessary for success, is all the easier to achieve the smaller the desired effect is. An open-top container for the pinwheels can then greatly facilitate the occurrence of psi effects, even if de facto, there is no significant difference to a completely closed container as far as possible environmental influences on the pinwheel inside are concerned. This is also consistent with Batcheldor's model because he emphasizes the "right state of mind" in order to establish "the necessary *pockets of indeterminacy* so that paranormality can occur. This is where *belief* comes in, and *track record* again is key." And further, "Speaking figuratively, the UCP can do advanced 'magic' (...) But we *can't*, until there is a track record involving a

stable causal pattern. In that case, we can evoke the result by evoking the UCP. This could be 'mental intention,' but other mental conditions are more likely – easier – to develop" (Batcheldor & Giesler, 1994, p. 102).

Fear of psi plays a decisive role in magical practice (Mayer, submitted) as well as in parapsychological macro-PK experiments (Batcheldor, 1984). Fear can be conscious, but it can also act on an unconscious level and in this way prevent the occurrence of psi effects. This influencing factor is better taken into account by Batcheldor's work than by the MPI.

However, I am a friend of the strategy of not committing to just one explanatory model, but considering several, possibly contradictory models, as James McClenon has apparently also done. Every model has its limitations, as can easily be seen if you take empirical data from different areas and disciplines seriously and evaluate them neutrally.⁹ I think that the described results of the online group sessions can also be reconciled with James C. Carpenter's First Sight Model (Carpenter, 2012), a model of psi that, like the other two, I also value highly. But, it is crucial to be aware of the basic assumptions of the models and their differences and to take them into account appropriately in the experimental design and the interpretation of the results. In this case, a multi-model perspective can provide a considerable gain in knowledge.

In sum, I read McClenon's article with great interest, but also with some skeptical thoughts. James McClenon's basic approach is stimulating. However, there seemed to be a lack of systematic implementation, so that one sometimes gets the impression, at least from the manuscript, that none of the participants were really clear about what should be investigated. The lack of systematics could be explained by the grounded theory approach, according to which the series of experiments develops over time as knowledge increases. However, even with such an approach, at least the research question should be clearly defined and established from the outset, which is what I missed in the description. I hope this will be fixed in the future!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Michael Nahm and Patric Giesler, who helped me to formulate the commentary more clearly and sharply in terms of argumentation. I owe Patric, in particular, a much deeper understanding of Batcheldor's UCP theory.

ENDNOTES

1. Batcheldor distinguishes phenomena "with normal causes" and phenomena "with no normal causes"

- (Batcheldor & Giesler, 1994, pp. 97–98). The first are phenomena that underlie the law of efficient or moving causation of classical physics. He calls this the “horizontal perspective” (ibid., p. 101). The UCP creates the “normal reality” as well as paranormal phenomena with no normal causes from a “vertical” perspective, the latter in *pockets of indeterminacy*.
2. Batcheldor uses the term *metaphysical* in a non-religious, but ideologically neutral sense with the fundamental meaning that the theory cannot be tested by the means of classical natural science – one would have to add that he means classical physics. The term was introduced in this neutral sense by Andronicus of Rhodes, who published the works of Aristotle in the 1st century BC and brought together various writings that could not be categorized in the other philosophical fields in a volume entitled “*Metaphysics*”, which means “after physics” or “following physics.” The meaning of the term at the time was presumably simply that the topics of the volume should be treated after physics in the curriculum (Cohen & Reeve, 2021).
 3. Terminological caution is also required here, as Batcheldor distinguishes between “normal, stable reality” and situations in which paranormal phenomena occur that do not belong to this “normal reality.” Since Batcheldor regards paranormal phenomena such as raps in the context of sitter groups as physically documentable phenomena and not merely as hallucinations or as the result of manipulations (artifacts), they are, of course, part of reality, understood as all that exists, even if they only occur under very specific circumstances.
 4. I will leave aside the problems of defining the system boundary for entangled systems in the macro area (who and what is assigned to the entangled system in the macro world and who and what to the observer outside the system?) and the precise definition of information or information transfer. They entail a considerable risk of self-immunization with regard to the falsifiability of the theory, which is exacerbated by the fact that classical-causal and non-local effects overlap.
 5. A tendency towards personalization can also be observed in the MPI, since psi phenomena or the area of non-local entanglement connections also prove to be “intelligent” with regard to trickster behavior and respond sensibly to human attributions of meaning. In contrast, Batcheldor writes about the characteristics of the UCP, saying that it “can be thought of as suggestible and as following suggestions immediately, blindly, and unintelligently. So, like a hypnotized person, it won’t care if the products look bizarre or ludicrous. (...) Like the designer of dreams, the UCP doesn’t mind incongruity” (Batcheldor & Giesler, 1994, p. 106).
 6. To name just one example, which can be found in a report by anthropologist Peter Gardner on an experience during a field study: “Hearing a fight, I looked out my window to see a middle-aged woman on the doorstep of her cabin, two doors away, arguing with two men. This is the neighbor I described earlier who was heavily involved with power. (...) I picked up the camera and shot the scene. There was a strange noise as I pressed the shutter release. For some reason, the camera stopped working. I borrowed a replacement camera and mailed my own to a repair shop in Chicago. In due course, the shop wrote back asking what I had done to the camera. Its entire shutter mechanism lay in a puddle at the bottom of the instrument, every single piece undone. When my film came back from processing, I got another shock. The picture of the fight had come out, but over the powerful woman’s head, there was a black vortex. This I report as a skeptical scientist, for whatever it is worth. None of it was ever explained” (Gardner, 2007, p. 32). One could argue that the malfunction or damage to the camera only occurred after the “anomalous” extra was recorded on the film, but the black vortex could represent an artifact that was caused by the camera damage and therefore does not represent an anomaly.
 7. Batcheldor himself has experienced these kinds of malfunctions or strange coincidences that prevent reliable and unambiguous recording of macro-PK effects (Lucadou, 1995, pp. 210–214).
 8. However, we can assume that the phenomena of turning pinwheels had a quite distinct track record at the time McClenon applied the plexiglass hood.
 9. Batcheldor’s model seems to have been developed mainly from the point of view of macro-PK phenomena in sitter groups. He considers the fear of psi to be a central factor in this context. However, if one considers the occurrence of alleged paranormal phenomena in other contexts, such as metal bending, the activity of ghost hunting groups, or in shamanic contexts, then this key position of fear of psi as a supposedly self-evident fact must be viewed more critically, apart from the fact of how strongly fears and the handling of the paranormal are also culturally shaped (Lange & Houran, 1999).

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