

WHAT USE CAN PARAPSYCHOLOGY MAKE OF SPONTANEOUS PSI EXPERIENCES?

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In every science, reported natural occurrences raise questions. A trial answer—an hypothesis—is made, thus challenging further inquiry. In most branches of science this eventually leads to experiment or to a comparative field study of equivalent value. Sometimes this process is hindered by a tendency to make the study and interpretation of anecdotal material an end in itself. On the other hand, some experimental enthusiasts reject the case report as useless "anecdotal material." Because these two extreme valuations of case material are still encountered in this branch of science it seems worth while to try to determine what proper use reports of spontaneous occurrences can have and, as a preliminary step, to see what the classification really means.

The common distinction between spontaneous and experimental psi is of doubtful clarity. Every psi phenomenon, even the most experimental, is still largely spontaneous. Elaborate procedures for testing psi have to wait upon its uncertain appearance. This is why statistical method must be used to distinguish its functioning from the random events of chance. Every experiment, however, does take one characteristic of psi for granted—*recurrence*. Yet recurrence applies not only to experimental psi. Practices that (if valid) involve psi, such as dowsing, mediumship, and even the more spontaneous manifestations like hauntings and poltergeists, all assume repetition of the effects. So recurrence cuts straight across any such distinctions as

“spontaneous vs. nonspontaneous.” Still another principle of classification is the subject’s effort to *solicit* an effect; this always occurs in experiments and in psi practices, but it does not in the more spontaneous cases.

The experiment, then, in distinction from the more spontaneous types of psi and all its practices, involves effort on the part of a (known living) subject to produce under certain limiting conditions a recurrent effect designated by the experimenter. It appears that in the characteristics here listed experimental and spontaneous psi are but opposite extremes of emphasis in a graded series that might be viewed roughly as in the following four classes:

1.	2.	3.	4.
Simple, nonrecurring spontaneous experiences and other psi effects. (Intuitions, dreams, compulsions, objective effects, etc.)	Recurrent spontaneous effects. (Hauntings, poltergeists, repeated warnings, visions, etc.)	Psi practices and performances (dowsing, mediumship, healings, divination, etc.)	Experimental psi effects (Extrasensory perception and psychokinesis).
So-called Spontaneous		Solicited	
Recurrent			

The investigator wanting the most reliable answer to his questions will logically operate as far as possible toward the experimental end of this four-section distribution. Obviously, the difficulty of securing acceptable proof increases toward the purely spontaneous end of the scale. In fact, one should turn to the more spontaneous type of source material, not to look for answers to questions already raised, but to search for renewed perspective, a more original approach, and the stimulus of new questions. When the inquirer does gain from the study of case material some new insight which he can formulate as a hypothesis,

it is at best only a suggestion, a potentially good idea that must still be validated (if possible) by proper experimental tests. Such ideas, however, are the very germs of science.

By recognizing the limited *evidential* value of individual case reports and by shifting to the experimental stage the emphasis on verification, the need for the slow and costly efforts at authenticating cases can be eliminated. With free methods of appraisal and classification, from 100 to 500 times as many case reports can be handled effectively as under older studies designed primarily for proof. Moreover, the collection can be made not only larger but broader in coverage. Whole types of experience may be included that would not be verifiable.

Properly extensive collections of well-classified case material that allow comparisons of results from one collection to another can offer not only the priceless research suggestions parapsychology needs but, when combined with the more purely experimental findings, a certain quality of realism and rational assurance that statistics fail to give. With a restrained use of the case material as primarily question-raising, and with complete reliance for proof on experimental findings, parapsychology has in this dual approach a sound foundation of method.