Critical Analysis: Some Possible Reinforcers/Consequences for Psychic Behavior (What Are Some Possible Consequences at Work for Those Making Claims of Extraordinary, Psychic, Paranormal or ESP Powers?)

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It is probably true that many of the readers of this material accept to some degree the concept of reinforcement (positive and negative) as important factors in influencing certain aspects of their lives. Some readers may not have considered the specific ways that principles of behavior work in various aspects of our daily life. Training in the analysis specific applications of the principles of behavior in daily life is one of the purposes of this material. Hopefully, these tasks will encourage you to look for specific illustrations or applications of the principles of behavior at work in your life.

Two considerations for interacting with this material:

One: Do note that the consequence or possible positive reinforcer should be something (a stimulus) that is presented. It can be material that is given, it can be words that are spoken, or any stimuli that is presented, i.e., a stimulus acts on the senses. In the example below, illustrative hypothetical spoken words are indicated by quotation marks.

Two: This type of exercise has to have a speculative feature. The purpose of this part of the material is to consider stimuli that could serve as possible positive and negative reinforcers. The actual decision of whether a stimulus is a reinforcer is an experimental question.

Part I

Possible Positive Reinforcers: Let us look to the list of possible reinforcers for a class of behaviors commonly called "psychic" or "paranormal."

1. Money: Consider the many ways that money can be made by individuals in the paranormal area:

A. Paid Subjects: Money is a pay off for the claims of the psychic's powers in many different situations. Some of the old E.S.P. "heavy hitters," those who received supposed high E.S.P. guess scores regularly, were paid. (There is no need to pay you if you are not successful.) The psychics traveling companions, the E.S.P. stooges constitute another group that gets paid.

B. Promoters: Shopping mall promoters, for example, make money by introducing an appealing E.S.P. type performer or item in the mall. Its purpose is to bring people to the mall. Once people are in the store or mall, they may spend money.

C. Even Used Car Dealers Make a Buck With Psychics: A famous supposed "real" psychic in Phoenix, Arizona once read the serial number of the first author's dollar bill as part of a promotion at the local used car dealer. He wasn't
supposed to be "peeking down the nose" or any other magic trick (Gardner, 1966); this was supposed to be the real thing. However, he did use a commercial "peek down the nose" routine.

D. Dirt Digging for Private Readings: Private readings can bring in large amounts of money. The book A Magician Among The Spirits (Houdini, 1924) shows the means that some "spiritualists" went through in that era to get information for these sessions. At times, these spiritualists hired separate people to dig up "dirt" (information). These "dirt" diggers also were paid as part of the "spiritualist's business." Not all psychics do make it big, but every buck "helps pay the rent." The methods used are old, but when one reads the methods of some current faith healers it is like reading this chapter out of Houdini's book.

E. Private Readings: Considerable literature is available on how perform a private reading, i.e., videos, booklets, brochures, groups, stores, etc. There is a buck to be made for authors, inventors of the effect, and in the sale of the products. Close to countless numbers of such products are out there.

F. Writers: Authors such as Charles Berlitz and VonDaniken, have had "psychic" best selling books. These books are not offered as fiction. Readers have not bought books that explain the tragedies of the Bermuda Triangle in terms of bad weather or a treacherous sea. If paranormal forces are the cause of disappearances, or if psychic vibes of some form are blamed, then the book appears more likely to be a success. If a writer makes New Atlantis the reason, it looks as if it will sell even faster!

G. Media: Not just the National Enquirer, but the use of sensationalism in our daily press helps to sell newspapers, magazines, TV shows, etc. Certain tabloid TV programs pay a high price for sensational journalism.

H. Magicians: Many can make bigger bucks doing supposed real psychic things, compared to the money available for the traditional role of a stage magician. These may be the same gimmicks, just a different pattern. Geller and Kreskin do much better as supposed "psychics" than they would as straight magicians.

I. Products: "Buy my special crystal stones, lotion, pendulum charms, rheum stones, tarot cards, Ouija boards, etc. and you will get the better life."

J. E.S.P. Churches: In my visits to this type of church, I saw bigger bucks in the free will offering than in the traditional churches of organized religions.

K. A listing of some big money "winners."
   a. James Randi claims that Uri Geller, the supposed premiere psychic of our time, made 2 1/2 million dollars in his first few years in this country. This amount includes government support to study his special powers.
   b. It is reported that a book, Chariots of the Gods, sold 40 million copies.
   c. Some large psychic money making groups have been reported in the Skeptical Inquirer, 1981, Vol. VI, #3, Winter 81-82, Page 13. Below are 4 examples of the kind of money made by just a sample of these groups:
One. Silva Mind Control of Laredo, Texas grosses about $15 million a year.

Two. Mind Probe Inc. of Los Angeles takes in over $15,000 on each monthly lecture.

Three. EST of San Francisco takes in over a quarter million dollars per month. EST put on a lecture series in which over 100 people paid $350 each to attend. This is a box office receipt of $35,000.

Four: The Skeptical Inquirer (same issue as above page 12) also reports the story of five former TM (Transcendental Meditation) participants who paid more than $60,000 for one of their Sidhi courses. One of them, Linda Pearce, had this to say: "It was nonsense; we were all completely taken in. He only taught people to hop around like frogs. No one ever learned to fly. You get into a room with springy rubber mats, then you meditate in the squatting position. Then you chant at one another and bounce up and down on the mats. With practice you can get several feet off the ground but there is no way you can describe it as flying."

Another TM'er said, "I've watched hundreds of so-called flying experts, but not one of them could hover in the air for even a split-second. All they do is bounce and scream with a contorted face in a kind of religious fervor."

Some other big profits for TM are reported in this same issue of Skeptical Inquirer.

2. Academic Degree

A. The Pratt-Woodruff experiment was a study that famed E.S.P.'er J.B. Rhine selected as a good illustration of an E.S.P. experiment. This study constituted part of the requirement for a higher degree. The Soal-Goldney experiment gained Soal his Doctorate at London University. Would that degree have been given for a series of experiments with negative results? (Hansel, 1966, Chapter 8 & 9)

B. Classes have been given supporting the area of Biorhythms and other supposed psychic events. John F. Kennedy University gives degrees for this kind of thing. (see Randi, Flim Flam, Chapter #1).

3. Attention

A. To some, being wanted for murder is better than not being wanted at all. Personal attention can be a powerful reinforcer, and you can get it for paranormal claims.

B. The Press Of Sensationalism: The writing in the pro-paranormal area often uses colorful language, interest value of a story per se, and writing style as primary goals of getting the public's attention. Presenting the facts is not the starting point or the essence of the writing. Facts are incidental to the writing style that sells. Sensationalism is where it is at; that is what is bought by many people in our culture. With many people, E.S.P.
and paranormal claims now have a head start; western culture in many ways trains us to buy the sensational.

4. The Supposed Special Power Effect: The "Survival Of The Fittest" concept suggests that the spoils/survival go to the winner, the one with power (to use the everyday term). In Jonestown and Waco, for example, one sees a certain person claiming some sort of special "status", and thereby gaining "the spoils" (the winnings).

A. Claims of material gained for the supposed psychics clients or the users of the supposed E.S.P. great gift is a use of this power as the means to attract clients.

B. Supposed Look at the Future: To some, power is gained by this kind of statement or implied skill; "My powers indicate you will be rich and famous one day in the future."

C. Supposed Contact With Dead Loved Ones: "I feel your departed spouse's presence in the room, and you will have to come back next week (more money needed) and again we will make contact to see if there is a message for you."

D. Answer to Investor: "The crystal ball or cards, leaves, etc., will predict which horse will win the big race."

5. Appeal of Answers to the Supposed Big Q's: The current status of the human condition lends itself to certain "big question" appeal. This appeal can set up the conditions where, if you have a certain learning history, a trip to your "local psychic" can be mutually reinforcing to both client and psychic.

A. Death: "I will tell you what people call death is all about. Listen as I, Wam-Wam the Psychic Wonder, tells you what it will be like when you have reached the new age stage I call, dead to life in one big scoop, or let me tell you what it is like for a deceased loved one from your past. I will go to the other side and tell you from the other side what it is like. I will tell you what it is like at the end of the tunnel for you, and/or your loved ones?"

B. Why Human Tragedy: The areas where currently unanswered questions exist are particularly attractive as areas for the E.S.P.'er to emphasize, e.g.: "What will the future be like for my crippled husband?", "Will I run into some terrible misfortune someday in the future?", "Should I divorce the jerk I have for a spouse?" "Is there true love in my future?" There is an apparent power in being asked such questions if you have had a particular learning history. For many of us with a different learning history, the questions are just plain silly.

C. Infinity, the Nature of the Cosmos/Universe, Outer Space and Me: "Is there life on other planets way out there?" "Will humans from this earth one day live on another planet?" "Are UFO's and aliens from Mars or beyond here on earth now and living next door to me?" Asking a mystic for an answer is a lower response cost than learning astronomy & biology so that you could answer certain questions correctly yourself.

D. Communication Beyond the Senses and Beyond Life On Earth: Can people
send out "vibrations"? Can these supposed vibrations be transmitted, and can a special receiver pick up/catch them? (If one were to play the role of a spoiler, you might ask, "Are these vibrations like radio waves or a pass in football?")

E. The Origin of All of It and Us: The inside scoop on the origin of things in this world - e.g. ancient astronauts (VonDaniken).

6. Having any answer, to some people is better than admitting that certain questions can not, at the present, be answered.

7. The Inside Scoop on Weirdest of Events:

   a. Real or made up events: Does the Bermuda Triangle really suck? That is, does it "suck" down ships and planes?

   b. How did Grandma Smith know that Uncle George fell off the ladder? In this instance it seems relevant that Grandma knows that Uncle George shingles roofs every Sunday afternoon and has fallen more times than anyone can recall. Grandma has been predicting an accident daily, but she only claims having a special gift when Uncle George makes his periodic fall or when she is reminiscing about long forgotten events.

8. Quick Equalizer: A quick easy way to get the inside track on complex issue is to play the E.S.P. games. For example, "Even if you have studied nuclear physics for 50 years, you didn't know of E.S.P.'s new Agent X', and since I do, I am numero uno." The claims of such power are like a quick fix.

9. Success in Life For Some Means Accepting Other Person's Position: In many people's life, the behaviors associated with success are characterized by following what authorities say. Given this situation, the person who lives, "Just following orders," is open to the suggestions of those who say they know about the psychic life. When a person learns that more scientific rigorous evidence is needed, the person does not as readily accept only proclaimed beliefs. Many people tend to reinforce behaviors that they themselves do.

Part II

Possible Consequences: Now let us take a look at some possible negative consequences of E.S.P. and psychic behavior.

The behaviors generally called by such terms as attitudes, beliefs, or opinions are often not viewed as behaviors affected by environmental consequences. As shown in part I, they often can be controlled by a positively reinforcing environment. Below are some examples of how behaviors that show a "belief in the paranormal" might be maintained in a person's repertoire by avoiding or escaping aversive stimuli that are technically called negative reinforcers.

A. Troublesome Times and Personal Problems: A favorite joke of mine relates to this escape or avoidance behavior; "Every time I look at a newspaper, I read of murders, wars, more inflation, grief, and disasters, and all of these are so aversive and depressing that I gave up reading the newspaper." Psychic powers
are offered, by some, as relief from similar aversive troubles.

B. Escape the Aversive Properties of the Rigor of a Science of Life: E.S.P.
behavior is a vacation from the rigor that a scientific analysis requires. An analogy could be made between drugs and the paranormal. The psychic world can act as, "The opium of the mind." It gives one an escape from what is to some, an aversive look at the world around them.

C. Inferiority: The psychic world is the instant equalizer for those lacking the amount of technical training as their peers, i.e., "I am holier than thou for I know it is psychic. If you do not grasp the psychic relevancy that I do, too bad for you. You are the inferior one for not understanding."

D. Aversive Reality Problems: Some have proposed that when daily life is very aversive the behaviors of "schizophrenia" or "psychic" are realistic. It is what you might guess would happen given the aversiveness of the real life situation.

E. Lack of Belonging: (The ego trip) "I am a member of E.S.P.'ers #1 group. I am somebody. I now belong. Before I discovered my psychic powers, I was nothing, and I found the nothing state aversive."

F. Escape From Where Life Has Taken the Person: "Maybe the next time around things will not be as bad for me; maybe I will be reincarnated as someone rich and famous."

G. "No, Not Me" Phenomena: "I don't really believe in this psychic stuff, but I pay him/her just to be in-the-know ...(or to help others, or just to please my uncle)."

H. Beat the Russian Scares: Examples of this one appear in headlines in the popular press:

a) "While American researchers are busy trying to prove parapsychology phenomena exist, the Russians are busy seeking practical applications." (Krippner & Davidson, 1972)

b) The E.S.P. Gap: Moscow is desperately trying to read Washington's mind, and vice versa - in one of the least publicized "battles" of the cold war. (Blochman, 1967)

I. Death "Scare": The hope reigns eternal that the psychic area can offer something beyond the grave. The psychic world then offers a connection to the after-life.

J. Loneliness: Joining any group offers a termination of what some see as aversiveness of being alone.

K. End Your Lack of E.S.P. Powers: "Now that I also am psychic, Jean Dixon and Uri Geller have nothing over me. As it was once worded, "If Uri, why not you?"
L. Nothing to Talk About: E.S.P. gives people something to talk about, "I went from nobody to the life of the party with my personal E.S.P. stories."

M. Being Unpopular: Before, people avoided me like the plague, now they seek me out to read their minds and predict their horoscopes.

N. Rejection Slips: Authors go from rags to non-rags when they liven up their books with the paranormal.

O. The Pain of Being Objective: "It hurts my head to rationally write about behavior," but you can almost have automatic writing if irrational can prevail. If you don't have to be objective it can make stories of life so much easier to explain.

P. Don't Hurt People: "When I make up paranormal explanation, it is not really fraud. They are just white lies that help people, for I don't say things that hurt anybody."

Q. Existential, The Ultimate Big Concerns: Supposed contact with the beyond can answer big questions of what death is like, future doubts, love problems, investment questions, the origin of it all, anxiety, etc.

R. For Some Learning Histories, The Paranormal is Counter Intuitive but Also Counter Disruptive: The counter intuitive, for some, is fun to believe. The psychic counter intuitive leaves people off the hook. With a certain learning history, aversive questions are removed by supposed psychic explanations.

References:


Houdini, Harry, 1924, A Magician Among The Spirits, Harper, N.Y.

