THE CONCEPT OF THE TARGET

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the target in parapsychology has become increasingly flexible and perhaps vague as well. This may be due in part to early research suggesting, for ESP at least, that psi is unconstrained by space, time, complexity or physical characteristics of the target. Targets became viewed as less important in our understanding and less attention was paid to them. We may need to review and rethink the ways we conceptualise targets, perhaps by regarding them as involving three interlocking systems: the target system itself, the target determinant system and the target descriptive system. By refocusing our attention on targets, with fuller awareness of the many complexities involved, we may develop a clearer picture of whether their specific characteristics are really irrelevant for our research, suggestive of a very general, unitary kind of psi functioning, or whether we may be dealing with multiple new communication systems, each specific to particular kinds of target systems.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most basic concepts in experimental parapsychology is that of "the target". In most of our studies, following the metaphor, we designate someone as the psychic, select out a chunk of the environment as a target, set it up and ask our psychics to aim at it and hit it. For ESP procedures, we know we hit the target because the ball we threw bounces back to us bringing useful information. For PK procedures, we know we hit the target because we then observe that the target has fallen over. The target in short is the part of the environment with which the subject is supposed to interact "psychically".

The target has been defined formally as well. The first issue of the Journal of Parapsychology to have a glossary was Volume One, Issue Three. It defined a target card as "The card which the percipient is attempting to perceive (i.e. to call, or otherwise indicate a knowledge of)". A target deck is "The deck of cards the order of which the subject is calling". There is no separate definition for target per se. In the most recent Journal of Parapsychology, a target is defined as: "In a test of ESP, the object or event that the percipient attempts to identify through information paranormally acquired; in a test of PK, the physical system, or a prescribed outcome thereof, that the subject attempts to influence or bring about". Other recent definitions such as those in the Handbook of Parapsychology and in Foundations of Parapsychology resemble the latter - they are fairly flexible as to the nature of the target but emphasize that it is the focus of an effort of some sort, a "trying" or "attempting". In what probably is the most thorough and thoughtful attempt to define the terms of parapsychology, Michael Thalbourne's A Glossary of Terms used in Parapsychology (1982), target is defined as "In a test of extrasensory perception, the object or event, physical or mental, constituting the information to be paranormally acquired by a percipient; in a test of psychokinesis, the physical system, or a prescribed outcome thereof, which the subject is attempting to influence or bring about". For PK, the concept is the same. For ESP, the flexibility is retained, with the target being any designated source of information and the acquisition of information being the process by which the subject accomplishes a goal or task. The task element is still there ("to be acquired") but it is no longer necessarily linked to an active or deliberate effort by a percipient or receiver. ESP studies with covert targets have been acknowledged thereby. Somebody (e.g. the experimenter) is still setting aside a target and defining a task, but the percipient need not be aware of it or consciously oriented toward it. PK studies can also have

covert targets, as in animal studies where an RNG (obviously unknown to the animal) is linked to an environmental stimulus germane to the needs of the organism. Yet the recent definitions of PK have still retained the idea of a target being the focus of an attempt of some sort. It's still something the psychic is trying to hit.

Probably the most thorough attempt to deal with this set of issues theoretically is that of Stanford (e.g. 1978), who reconstrues the interaction between designated psychic and designated target as a "conformance" between two systems, a disposed system, generally an organism with a need or other disposition such as a conditioned fear or attraction, and a random event generator (REG), a labile system of some sort capable of producing events that are relevant to the disposition of the first system. There is thus still a motivational aspect, but no need for specific effort or "attempting" on the part of the disposed system or organism. For PK, the REG is an external event, the target in the sense used above. For ESP, both conforming systems are located within the organism. The organism is the disposed system, disposed to access relevant information. A portion of the brain state of the organism serves as the REG. Conformance takes place and the disposition is addressed whenever that REG settles in a state that reflects the presence of information relevant to that disposition. Disposed systems can include experimenters and anyone else "disposed" to see the experiment have a specific outcome. In his discussion of ESP, Stanford is not specific about the role of the target, except to note that in experimentation there is an aspect of the environment that serves to define successful conformance. He is noncommittal about any causative role of that aspect, but continues to use the term "target" to designate this aspect in his later writings. For Stanford and for others such as Braud (1981) using the conformance model, targets are regarded as systems rather than as just one discrete chunk of the environment. The ESP target for Stanford is defined by the dispositions of those involved, and may in principle be whatever environmental aspects contribute to the final conformance.

The concept of the target has seemed to change gradually, taking on an increasingly general and flexible character, especially for ESP, less tied down to specific physical events and more tied to systems and information.

TARGET RESEARCH

Much of the reason for the increasing flexibility (some might say "vagueness") of the target concept is the result of the findings from a sizable number of studies from the 1930s, including Rhine's seminal work, to the present. The picture

that emerged was that the physical properties of targets seemed not to matter, but their psychological salience for the organism (generally a person) did. This, plus the stronger findings relating psi success to state and trait organism variables, turned the focus of attention toward the organism and away from the physical environment. It also fed quite nicely into the Rhinean notion that psi was a mental property, of a nonphysical mind, and that psychic functioning was not explainable through physical principles.

A concise presentation of this argument can be found in Chapter Four of Rhine and Pratt (1962). At the start, they state, "For the last two decades it has been possible to define the field of parapsychology in a clear-cut fashion as one that deals with phenomena not explainable by physical principles. There is a great part of mental life that may or may not be nonphysical, but parapsychology at the present stage is not concerned with effects for which the interpretation is ambiguous. In order to be considered as parapsychological the phenomena must be demonstrably nonphysical". They then go on to build their case on the basis of a consideration of the "facts" about targets and their relationship with the subject. According to them, distance between percipient and target does not seem to matter, at least for ESP. Successful series have been carried out over sizable distances, hundreds and even thousands of miles, with no apparent decline. Precognition procedures have also seemed to work quite well, in that the target can apparently be an event or object in the future. Thus the spatial and temporal relationship between subject and target does not appear to constrain success. Additionally, target complexity does not appear to matter. For instance, they argue, ESP would seem to be necessary for success in most, if not all PK experiments in that the subject must know where and when to apply whatever force is being used to accomplish the task. You've got to know what to do and then do it. That's complex. (Although they do not cite it specifically, by this time Foster's (1940) work indicating that blind matching results were very similar to those of open matching, despite the increased complexity of the former, was quite well known.) Rhine and Pratt add, "Perhaps the most rationally reassuring of all the types of evidence of the nonphysical nature of psi is the range of target material on which it is capable of functioning; that is, the range of stimuli or starting points with which it can deal (and for which some physical theory of intermediation would have to be provided)". They note that successes have been had with targets of a great variety of materials, sizes, shapes, and so on.

In short, the physical characteristics of the targets, including the physical characteristics of whatever barriers appeared to separate organism and target were labelled

irrelevant. During the preceding years, target features had been increasingly regarded as such by many of the researchers in the field, "reassuringly" so for those inclined to identify parapsychology as studying "phenomena not explainable by physical principles". Some researchers were unconvinced that psi was nonphysical but regarded the experimental work to date as valid nevertheless valid. Most still generally found themselves acknowledging that so far there was no solid evidence that the physical characteristics of the target do matter. There were exceptions, of course, such as Āsis (1956) who provided evidence that ESP scores may in fact decline with distance (but see Morris, 1980, for a critique).

The upshot of this was that, for both philosophical and empirical reasons, researchers shifted their attention increasingly to psychological rather than physical variables. That was where the action seemed to be, where the functional relationship and correlations seemed to be emerging when they emerged at all. An important consequence was that, in planning research, in conducting it and in describing the procedures used, researchers paid less attention to the physical characteristics of the target, especialy for ESP studies. In research reports, these characteristics for the most part were and are underdescribed. Psychologically salient target properties are often described in detail, in keeping with the fact that many studies have found evidence that such psychological properties can affect results (see Palmer, 1978, for a summary). Various aspects of target preparation and the barriers between target and subject are also usually described, since they relate to the adequacy of the design of the study. It should also be noted that, especially in recent years, there have been more people from physics and engineering in parapsychology. They tend to be more open to physics-based theories, are more knowledgeable about physical variables and how to describe them, and thus tend to be more thorough in their descriptions of the physical characteristics of targets, especially for PK studies, where much of their efforts are concentrated. Social scientists describe people well, physical scientists describe targets well. A few are good at both.

SOME CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS REGARDING ESP TARGETS

As noted above, ESP targets have been underemphasized in recent years, in part because research has failed to define limiting characteristics. Attention has been redirected away from targets, in terms of their properties and in the thought given to them conceptually. Yet, just as the analogous concept of the stimulus in psychology has recently come into question, likewise it may be time to reconsider exactly what we mean by a target and what role it plays, in controlled

research as well as in anecdotal material. The remainder of this paper will explore the concept of the target and suggest some modifications that may help us re-evaluate our past research and design our future studies more effectively.

For present purposes, a target will be defined as an aspect of the environment with which an organism appears to interact through some additional, not presently understood means of communication, hereafter known as psi. In experimental studies, an investigator selects and designates an aspect or aspects of the environment to serve as target. The investigator may or may not be the actual experimenter who works with the agent or percipient. In a broader sense, in any given experiment there are one or more observers, (including experimenters), aware of the proceedings, who arrive at some understanding of what has been designated as target. If communication among them is good, they will all agree. A skilled pseudopsychic may attempt to interrupt the agreed-upon protocol, however, and force a reinterpretation of what the target actually was. This may occur during the test, if the pseudopsychic finds his ploy, for the intended target blocked but access to another potential target system open; or it may occur after an unfavourable outcome is known, in an effort to turn failure into success.

In anecdotal cases, especially spontaneous cases, target designation becomes much more complex, with more room for error and deception. In informal tests, targets may be only loosely defined until the outcome is known. In purely spontaneous anecdotes, no target has been designated in advance at all. Some observer at some time notices a correspondence or matchup between organism and environment events and declares that aspect of the environment after the fact to have been a target. The designation of target is thus quite arbitrary and does not allow mathematical analysis of "the odds against chance" of such a matchup occurring. It is important for us to appreciate the factors that affect such after-the-fact designations as they are vital to our understanding of the contribution of anecdotal material to our understanding of psi processes.

Another issue concerns the distinction between target and task. In an experiment, an investigator designates a target and assigns a task declaring a particular kind of interaction to be accomplished by the percipient with respect to the target. In ESP tasks, the percipient is expected to respond to some but not necessarily all characteristics of the target. Any barriers designed to prevent ordinary exchange between percipient and target must be tailored to the specifics of the task. If I am asked to guess the identities of symbols on a deck of ESP cards, that and that only is my task. Whether the cards are made of plastic or cardboard is not relevant to my task and knowing which will not help me.

This raises the question of how to handle target anomalies that are not directly relevant to the formally designated task. Roll (1976) brought Julio Vasquez, the RSPK agent of the Miami poltergeist case, back to North Carolina to undergo various tests. He was presented with dice in a rotating cage and asked to influence their behaviour as the cage rotated and they tumbled from end to end. Although he was unsuccessful, one end of the dice cage fell off twice during the experiment. The dice cage and dice, as a target system, showed evidence of being influenced but not in a task-related way. Since the cage itself was not directly part of the task, it was not extensively inspected, checked or described in advance and the investigators felt unable to regard what happened as solid evidence for PK. A followup session was conducted, but with no further anomalies. Was the target system influenced, and if so was it related to some sort of secondary, non-explicit task? We must be careful here, and avoid declaring after the fact that any system producing an anomaly must have been a target even though we didn't realise it at the time. On the other hand, we would be foolish to ignore a target-related anomaly completely just because it was not part of the formally designated task.

Although the target is a portion of the environment specifically designated by an investigator as part of an exploration of psychic functioning, the research protocol itself involves an eventual comparison of two descriptions. One is a description of a set of events in an organism, the other a description of a set of environmental events, of those aspects of the target relevant to the task. As we have seen, the latter has become a somewhat flexible but vague area conceptually. It may be useful to view it as composed of three interlocking systems. One is the target system, which is the system of all representations of task-relevant information. It can extend considerably beyond the system envisaged by the investigator, including additional representations of the target, coding sheets, experiences of various observers, and so on. A second system is the target determinant system, composed of the various events, both formal and informal, serving as factors determining any elements in the target system itself. Sometimes components of the target determinant system contain enough information to be regarded as part of the target system itself. A third system is the target description system, the system of events generated by various elements of the other two systems to produce the information that will finally be used by observers to compare with organism events and define success or failure. Such systems can be made fairly simple in well-controlled studies, particularly restricted choice studies. When applied to free response procedures, such as remote viewing, they can become more complex.

If the concepts of these systems are applied to informal evaluations of psychic functioning, and especially to spontaneous cases, they can become extremely complex and allow multiple interpretations of what the true target is, or whether there are multiple potential targets, or whether there are multiple potential tasks as well. In a free response study, is the task to describe the actual remote location as I see it; to describe it as the agent sees it; to describe it as a blind judge will see it; to produce descriptors that will help a blind judge differentiate selectively between target and controls; or is it to produce descriptors that can be encoded in a classification system that will generate more correspondence with the coding of the target than (a) would be expected by chance or (b) the coding of the nontargets? Perhaps instead of any of these, the task is merely to produce a sufficiently interesting and complex set of descriptors that other participants in the protocol such as target selectors, blind judges and other observers, can act upon in various ways so as to bring about a target that will match it adequately? The last option serves to remind us that there may be many paths of psi-medited information transfer in a given experimental procedure or a spontaneous occurrence, as the author has described elsewhere, especially for precognition procedures (Morris, 1980).

Any time that we are comparing two descriptions as we do inevitably in any psi study, we are dealing with two sets of systems - for the target, the three systems described above, and for the organism the three analogous systems. Within those two sets of systems, any experience or decision by anyone sufficiently involved may be psi-mediated and may increase the likelihood of a final correspondence, if we take ESP seriously. If we take PK seriously, any physical event in either system may conceivably be influenced by volitional activities of other interested parties. If we allow such free rein of psychic functioning, then the idea of taking seriously the designating of one subject and one target becomes totally inappropriate and oversimplified.

CONCLUSION

Given the complexities raised above, the concept of the target may be so general, so flexible, so vague as to be useless. On one hand, it may be that this is an accurate analysis, and that the designation of specific targets by an investigator is arbitrary and misleading. Psi may function in such a way that the nature of the target really is irrelevant and that what counts most in any psi testing or spontaneous situation is the whole range of informational exchange between participating organisms and those aspects of their environments capable of providing meaning.

On the other hand, perhaps the target was consigned prematurely to its secondary position, a position maintained by the dearth of attention paid to it in anecdotal descriptions and experimental writeups. Perhaps if we returned to focussing attention on the target more pattern would emerge. We may even come to develop evidence for more than one new communication system, each specific to targets having certain characteristics. Psi may not be as independent of space, time, complexity or other constraints as may presently seem to be the case. One way or the other, it is important for us to clarify the concept of the target and make better use of it in our research.

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