

Tilting Tables and Moving Minds: Some Studies of Ostensible Macroscopic Psychokinesis (Macro-PK)

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Whether it's raising one's rational hackles or stirring the reaches of the imagination, few things seem to move the human mind as much as the thought that a person could possibly move an object...by mere thought alone. Is such a thing possible? On the basis of known physics, some individuals might be quick to say that such a "mental force" is *a priori* impossible, and belongs strictly in the realm of science fiction and fantasy. But yet, throughout history, there have been a number of instances in which people claim to have witnessed profound demonstrations of *macroscopic psychokinesis* (macro-PK) – ostensible displays of "mind over matter" that are so overtly apparent that they can be perceived with the naked eye, without the need for statistical evaluation (unlike with microscopic psychokinesis, or micro-PK, where one must rely on finding statistically significant deviations from nominal randomness in the output of an electronic random number generator, or RNG). Are any of these macro-PK claims genuine, or are they all merely due to ordinary factors?

Some of the earliest claims for macro-PK extend back to the height of the Spiritualism movement in the late 19th century, when it was quite socially fashionable to attend parlor room séances for evening entertainment. In many cases, these séances were focused around a certain medium who claimed to be able to communicate with the dead, and there were two approaches that were generally taken toward facilitating spirit communication: In *mental mediumship*, the medium brought through verbal messages (alleged to be from spirits of the dead) while in a state of trance. In *physical mediumship*, communication was facilitated through PK-related physical manifestations by the spirits who were supposedly being brought through with the aid of the medium. These manifestations included table tilting and levitation, object movements, percussive sounds (e.g., knocks, raps, and thuds), cold breezes, and materializations such as ectoplasm.

Efforts to subject these claims of spirit communication to serious scrutiny were also on the rise around this time, with the founding of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882 by a group of prominent Cambridge University scholars. And in the course of sitting in on many of these parlor room séances, the early members of the SPR eventually found a number of mediums to clearly be fraudulent.

However, they also came across a certain few who seemed to be genuine enigmas, appearing to produce phenomena even while being physically restrained or confined. Among them was Eusapia Palladino, an Italian washwoman who reportedly had a number of macro-PK manifestations occur around her during séances, including raps, lights, object movements, and table levitations. However, it was eventually discovered that Palladino unhesitatingly took the opportunity to falsely and surreptitiously produce some of these manifestations through ordinary means whenever she could, prompting one to heed advice about advancing cautiously whenever trying to evaluate claims such as these.² But as the late John Beloff once asked³, does “once a cheat, always a cheat?” really apply to Palladino – and to other physical mediums, in general?

Certainly a question like this drives at the heart of a critical issue regarding macro-PK: How can we possibly tell what might be genuine, and what might be fraudulent? That often is a very hard issue to fully resolve, considering that many reported macro-PK manifestations were often witnessed under less than optimal conditions. For instance, many physical mediumship demonstrations took place under very dim light or even near-total darkness, leaving open the possibility for concealed trickery. It is also difficult to more widely assess the possible effects of ordinary factors such as physical tremors or vibrations, puffs of air, minute muscular hand and finger movements, and the natural “settling” of wood in response to variations in the surrounding temperature and humidity. And of course, we always have to be mindful of situations like this: 😊



At best, what might be said is that early claims of physical mediumship and other reported instances of macro-PK do stimulate the need for closer investigation. And for that, one must move out of the comfortable atmosphere of the parlor room and into the more controlled confines of the research laboratory.

Sitter Groups: “PK by Committee”

One way that modern parapsychologists have attempted to investigate macro-PK under (semi-)controlled conditions is by forming a *sitter group*, which consists of a small, tightly-knit group of people who socially convene at (fairly) regular intervals with the intent of producing spontaneous, short-lived displays of macro-PK. As the late D. Scott Rogo once put it⁴, a sitter group can be seen as a form of “PK by committee,” a sort of modern-day adaptation of the old parlor room *séance* setting.

Perhaps one of the most recognizable examples of a sitter group is the “Philip” group formed by Iris Owen and the members of the Toronto Society for Psychical Research in the early 1970s⁵⁻⁶, and it can serve here as one illustrative example of how a sitter group works.

The Philip group first began convening in September of 1972, in a series of weekly group meetings. Their intent was to partly emulate the traditional *séance* setting by adopting certain spiritual assumptions, one of which was to conveniently attribute any macro-PK manifestations to the activity of discarnate spirits. To help evoke the feeling of spirit presence in the back of their minds, the group members decided to invent a fictitious spirit that they dubbed “Philip,” who was said to have been a British nobleman living in the mid-1600s. To make him seem more real, the group gradually developed a fuller character background for Philip, in which he was said to have taken his own life over the guilt he felt in being caught up in a scandalous affair with a gypsy girl.

During their meetings, the Philip group would gather around a standard card table and develop a social rapport with each other, initially by meditating on and discussing their thoughts relating to Philip. Later on, they also began to establish a group rapport by engaging in activities which help stimulate a warm and relaxing social atmosphere, such as chatting, singing songs, and telling jokes. At times, they would address Philip out loud, greeting him and asking him to produce a manifestation. Before long, they would start to hear occasional knocks or raps that seemed to emanate from the card table. And after a few weeks, the manifestations grew into sharp jolts and shifts of the table, causing it to move about the room. In some instances, the table reportedly rose up into the air and even flipped once or twice.

By being semi-controlled, sitter group settings like the Philip group seem to provide a somewhat better condition for assessing the possible occurrence of macro-PK. Though dimmed, the lighting conditions in the Philip group setting were said to still be bright enough to allow observation of everything happening around the table. The card table itself was often undraped, so there was less chance of somebody concealing their hands underneath the table. The group members reportedly placed their hands lightly on the table, with only their fingertips touching the surface. The floor on which the table stood was covered in thick carpet, which helped reduce sliding. And in being members of the Toronto Society, the group members were quite familiar with one another and may have been more agreeable to adhering to the stated aims of the group. While this does not completely rule out ordinary factors as a cause for the phenomena

that reportedly occurred during the group meetings, it does provide a better basis for assessing the likelihood of their influence.

Some sitter groups have also reportedly been successful at producing alleged macro-PK manifestations without necessarily adopting the spiritualistic assumptions of the traditional séance setting. Earlier sitter groups formed by the late Kenneth Batcheldor⁷ and Colin Brookes-Smith⁸⁻⁹ seemed to be guided more by the notion that, rather than spirit activity, any apparent displays of macro-PK could potentially be due to the collective PK abilities of the group members, based on the idea that PK (and psi, in general) may be an ability that everyone has to some degree. But because it's usually latent, certain psychological conditions may be necessary for PK to manifest.

And indeed, extensive exploration by Batcheldor¹⁰ seemed to indicate that certain conditions tended to be more favorable to the occurrence of PK among sitter group members. For instance, it seemed helpful if members went into the sitter group session with some degree of "instant" belief – meaning that they momentarily suspend any doubts they might have about PK and be more open toward its possible occurrence for the sake of the session. It was also considered important to try and lead members' thoughts away from any potential fears or anxieties they might have toward the occurrence of PK (something which might perhaps be linked to fear of the unknown – "one fears what one does not understand").

In order to minimize any inhibiting effects that doubt, fear, and anxiety might have in the sitter group setting, it was found helpful if group members adopted certain techniques intended to be more favorable to facilitating PK. For example, group members might choose to create their own "pseudo-spirit" that they could attribute any PK occurrences to, just as the Philip group did. Or as Batcheldor¹⁰ suggested, group members might quell their initial fears and anxieties by seeking to create a relaxed social atmosphere through chatting, singing, joking, and making something of a "jolly ruckus." Such an atmosphere could also help stir up a state of excited arousal, which may perhaps be conducive to PK (as one might infer from cases of recurrent spontaneous PK, or "poltergeist" phenomena, in which object movements tend to occur whenever the suspected RSPK "agent" is emotionally aroused due to stress or turmoil¹¹). Brookes-Smith⁹ further suggested that doubts about PK could potentially be overcome if one of the group members initially tried to "mimic" a PK manifestation in secret (such as by rapping underneath the table surreptitiously) so as to give the impression that PK was starting to occur. And if other members start to share that impression, doubtful thoughts might be lessened and the potential for genuine PK manifestations to occur might increase. Partly by employing techniques such as these, Batcheldor⁷ and Brookes-Smith⁸⁻⁹ generally found that some sitter groups reported experiencing many of the same PK manifestations as the Philip group. Additional support for the positive effects of these techniques was later found by Pamela Heath in a study she did of the subjective feelings and viewpoints that people took toward facilitating PK while participating spoon-bending sessions.¹²

And in an attempt to verify the occurrence of a PK manifestation in a more objective manner, Batcheldor⁷ and Brookes-Smith⁸⁻⁹ both employed certain monitoring instruments to record and document the occurrence of table movements. Batcheldor made use of a custom-made electric sensor system that would light up a small lamp (or sound a buzzer) whenever the system circuit was allowed to close as pressure on the sensors gradually lessened (owing to reduced weight from the table legs on the sensors, as the legs rose up during a moment of table

movement). According to the observations made by Batcheldor during one eventful session in which this system was used, the sitter group members were "...delighted to see the lamp light briefly, indicating a small total levitation [of the table]. Gradually the movements became bolder and the lamp was lit for longer periods. By its red glow, we were able to see our hands on top of the table"^{7,p.347}, indicating that no one had removed them from the surface in order to lift the table from underneath.

Brookes-Smith⁹ obtained interesting results with a chart recorder connected to some strain-gauge springs that were placed on the surface of the table to record any upward forces (working against the effects of gravity) on the table as it moved. Ordinarily, the gauges registered the table as weighing about 30 pounds. But in at least one sitter group session, the chart recordings "...showed that the total upward force frequently fell to less than 15 pounds – a discrepancy of over 15 pounds."^{9,p.81}

Monitoring instruments have also been employed in at least a few other sitter group studies¹³⁻¹⁴, and although some changes in physical variables such as temperature and magnetic field strength have been reported, they have not yet been observed frequently enough to be certain that they are reliable correlates of macro-PK.

In addition, various other sitter groups have documented notable macro PK-related occurrences over the years. In the 1930s, the late Montague Ullman (best known for his contributions to the dream ESP studies conducted at New York's Maimonides Hospital in the 1960s) and his friends had formed the "Bindelof" sitter group, focused around a fictitious spirit named "Dr. Bindelof."¹⁵ One of the most intriguing occurrences they reportedly witnessed was the production of psychic photographs of hands and target objects, with one of the photographs resulting in the fuzzy portrait of a man that was allegedly to be Dr. Bindelof himself (based on supposed communications from the pseudo-spirit).¹⁶

A sitter group formed by students at Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire in the mid-1990s had reported some interesting effects involving a lit candle on the table during their group sessions, such that the candle flame would seem to flare up when the group engaged in fun social activities. In contrast, it would seem to nearly die out whenever they talked about technical things or about subjects that "Alexander" (their designated pseudo-spirit) had supposedly considered taboo.¹⁷

Interesting effects with a candle flame were also reported by the "Spenser" group, established by Lance Storm and his colleagues in Adelaide, Australia in late 2001.¹⁸ Careful monitoring revealed that the times between the flickers of a candle flame (enclosed behind glass) were significantly shorter for periods when the group was asking questions to "Spenser" (their designated pseudo-spirit) while focusing on the candle, as compared to other periods. However, there were also indications that the candle used may have burned differently than most other candles, which may limit the likelihood that this significant difference in flicker times was due to PK.

Macro-PK Studies with Exceptional Participants

While sitter groups do help create an atmosphere that is somewhat more controlled than the parlor room setting, the test conditions remain relatively lax compared to the typical laboratory environment. And while the number of studies which have extensively explored

macro-PK in the lab is relatively small (perhaps due in part to the small number of macro-PK claims that have surfaced in recent years), at least a few have produced findings worthy of consideration.

One of these is a study conducted in the early 1970s by Graham and Anita Watkins, which focused around the macro-PK displays allegedly being produced by Felicia Parise, a New York medical technician who was inspired to try produce macro-PK herself after seeing a film showing informal PK demonstrations by the Russian adept Nina Kulagina. Following several weeks of practice, Parise was apparently able to affect small objects – including a plastic medicine bottle and the needle of a compass – either by intense fixating her attention upon the objects, or by working herself up into a high state of arousal.¹⁹⁻²¹ (This is another thing which seems to suggest that getting worked up into a state of excited arousal may help facilitate the occurrence of macro-PK.)

To test her ability under laboratory conditions, the Watkins constructed a test device consisting of a compass placed within the field coil of a metal detector. As Parise attempted to mentally affect the compass, its needle slowly turned 15 degrees westward over a period of two minutes and finally stopped. At about the same time, the audio signal from the metal detector noticeably changed frequency, as though its coil was sensing a few pounds of solder. About five minutes later, when Parise rose from her place and went to a far corner of the room, the Watkins noticed that the compass needle had remained in place and wouldn't respond to the presence of a bar magnet. However, when the compass was moved about four feet away from the spot that Parise had been focusing on, the needle gradually began to move back toward north. When the compass was returned to the spot of Parise's focus, the needle again deflected 15 degrees westward, and continued to do so each time the movement was repeated. It took approximately 25 minutes for the apparent linger effect at the focus spot to finally dissipate, at which time the compass began functioning normally again.²² This seemed to indicate that the PK effect seemingly being produced by Parise had persisted (or "lingered") even after she'd stopped trying to mentally influence the compass needle.

In some instances, sitter group settings have led to the gradual discovery of other individuals who appear to be adept at producing macro-PK. This was recently the case for members of the "Red Lights" sitter group in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in which it was found that table tiltings and other PK manifestations most often occurred when one particular male member of the group, Ariel Farias, was present. It was soon learned that Farias reportedly had a history of poltergeist-like occurrences extending back to childhood, and although he was reluctant to consider the idea that he may have been the source of the sitter group phenomena, he was persuaded to try and produce similar phenomena under semi-controlled conditions. Video recordings of some informal demonstrations seem to show Farias willfully raising the legs of a test table in fairly good light, although additional observations have yet to be made under more strictly-controlled conditions.²³

Conclusion

As fascinating as it is, there are still a lot of "unknowns" surrounding macro-PK. One of these unknowns relates to the degree of uncertainty involved when attempting to better assess the likelihood of its occurrence. Sitter groups and lab studies are gradually inching closer

towards lessening the influence of ordinary factors, although many more efforts along these lines are still necessary. Another unknown relates to explanatory mechanisms: If macro-PK really does occur in some instances, then how does it work? What are the underlying physical processes involved? We don't yet know, but some insightful theoretical in-roads have been made so far, especially when it comes to the study of recurrent spontaneous PK ("poltergeist").²⁴ But we're still a long way from a fully working theoretical explanation. May our minds now be moved towards finding better answers. ☺

References and Notes

- ¹For a good lay reader background on the founding of the SPR and the research activities of its early members, see the book *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death* by Deborah Blum (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).
- ²The online presentation entitled "The Mediumship of Eusapia Palladino," given by Dr. Carlos Alvarado in October of 2013, offers great insight into Palladino, her macro-PK claims, and studies of them by the early members of the SPR (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUqg1OoL2Lc>).
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- ¹⁶For more details about these photographs and the other occurrences witnessed by the Bindelof group over the course of their sessions, see Ref. 15, as well as the book *The Spirit of Dr. Bindelof: The Enigma of Séance Phenomena* by Rosemarie Pilkington (San Antonio, TX: Anomalist Books, 2006).
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²¹Additional details about these alleged macro-PK displays (including a personal viewpoint offered by Parise herself) can be found in an interview that Rosemarie Pilkington conducted with Parise as recently as three years ago. See Pilkington, R. (2015). Interview with Felicia Parise, August 6, 2013. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 29, 75 – 108.

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²⁴For instance, the findings produced by the late William Roll and engineer William Joines seem to initially indicate patterns in poltergeist phenomena that are remarkably similar to patterns observed for electricity and magnetism, suggesting that recurrent spontaneous PK may not be outside of known physics. See Roll, W. G., & Joines, W. T. (2013). RSPK and consciousness. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 77, 192 – 211.