

GERTRUDE SCHMEIDLER:  
PSYCHOLOGY AND PARAPSYCHOLOGY

by JAMES CARPENTER

For over fifty years Gertrude Schmeidler presided over her chosen field of work: the interface between general psychology and the renegade findings of parapsychology. Perhaps we should describe her as a psychologist who very intently studied parapsychology. She began with a good background in the rich mixture of humanistic approaches that characterized general psychology in much of America and in New York in particular in the 1940s. She knew gestalt psychology, and psychodynamic theory, and the New Look in perception, and Murphy's psychosocial field theory. She took the challenging findings of J. B. Rhine, as aridly methodical as any dustbowl S-R experiment out of the Midwest, and wrapped them in meaning. Rhine's group had been finding that the relatively simple, perhaps universal, hidden ability that they hoped their methods might uncover was not to be found. Understandably enough, they had wished they might use repetitive trials and statistical analysis to uncover a stratum of knowledge about things that everyday experience had somehow simply overlooked. But it wasn't so simple. Not that they had found no evidence for such a stratum. They found plenty. But it was disorderly. Some people were much better at it than others and even the high scorers suffered uncontrollable dips in performance. It was clear that lots of complex human factors were at work, such as moods and motives and what experimenter they happened to be working with.

When Gertrude Schmeidler first confronted this body of work it was clear to her that if ESP was real, it was something people *did*, not merely a mysterious thing that happened to them. It would have to be effected by, and be expressive of, their attitudes and beliefs and values and relationships. It would have to serve their situations and meet their needs. And it should be of a piece with all of their psychological functioning.

She inaugurated several important lines of research, added to and enriched others, and gathered them all together and interpreted them together in the light of what is known about human cognitive, affective and social functioning.

At some point Schmeidler had written so many summary reviews and thoughtfully edited so many research compilations that she had become a meta-researcher, a scholar of scholars. She came to understand that she had been working with an implicit theory of psi, and that many others had too, in fact for over a hundred years. She decided to lift this unarticulated theory into the realm of explicit discourse. Clearly an explicit theory is much more useful than an implicit one. Once explicit, a theory can be tested and revised and retested consciously. She mentioned this theory in several writings, but most clearly and forcefully in her masterful book, *Parapsychology and Psychology, Matches and Mismatches*. It is often gratuitously said that this or that book is essential for a researcher's bookshelf, but it is a true statement about this one, and it should be kept close at hand. The essence of the theory is simple: psi is a psychological function. What does this imply? I quote her:—

If psi ability is a psychological function, then psi responses will be processed as other psychological responses are. Variables that affect how other abilities are used will also affect how psi ability is used. Psychological findings about what facilitates or inhibits effective responses to other tasks will correspond to parapsychological findings about facilitation or inhibition of psi scoring.

This is the essence of it. She understood that this theory could be tested both prospectively and retrospectively: prospectively by carrying out new studies designed to test some aspect of it, and retrospectively by looking at the findings of earlier research and seeing how well they stack up in light of the expectations of the theory. She did both.

Early in her career, when this theory was still implicit for her as well as for others, she carried out research that was guided by it. Her teacher, Gardner Murphy, had contributed to the development of the New Look in perception research. Classical psychophysics, like early Rhinean parapsychology, had hoped that the laws of perception could be thoroughly specified by physical variables like intensity and duration, and was vexed when organisms showed individual differences in response. The New Look theorists made reference to psychoanalytic and other motivational points of view and demonstrated that even the apparent givens of perception are guided in part by personal needs and proclivities. For example, poor children tended to see coins as larger than wealthy children did. Should not the same principle apply to extrasensory perception? What simple way to assess people's motivations regarding perceiving something in an extrasensory way?: Why not ask them if they believe firmly that it is impossible or not? She did this, and separated the sheep from the goats.

I think it is interesting that in addition to Murphy, Schmeidler collaborated early in her career with another of the giants of humanistic experimental psychology: Gordon Allport. During the war they worked on using psychological methods to assist in the wholesale personnel decisions that the war effort required. Allport had his own version of a sheep-goat distinction for psychologists. He said that some theorists were 'nothing but' and others were 'something more'. The 'nothing but' people were always trying to keep their constructs as close as possible to a physically reductionistic substrate, and saw nothing other than that as having any scientific credibility. The 'something mores' aspired to a more adequate account of the real complexity of behavior and were prepared to make reference to things that were timidly called 'intervening variables', like motivation and intention. Schmeidler clearly understood herself as one of the 'something mores'.

Schmeidler was also a teacher of psychology, and I think the breadth of the courses she chose to teach must have suited her temperament and her commitments. Most of us know how much it teaches one to teach. She had a firm grip on the state of the art in work on cognition, learning, memory, personality, social psychology and clinical psychology, in addition to everything that was being reported by parapsychologists. She brought all of it to bear on her pursuit of the understanding of psi. After seeing how reliable her early motivation-and-psi results were, she seems never again to have doubted that there was something real and important to psi, so she was determined to use all her tools to help understand it.

The Duke group and others had been noticing that when repetitive runs of ESP guessing were carried out, performance was often significantly better at the beginning of the run and again at the end. Why, this is just what is found in rote-learning experiments, she declared in 1944, and both effects can be attributed to motivation. She also knew that Freud was on to something when he pointed out that often important motivation is unconscious. When such unconscious motivation is measured appropriately it could very nicely help predict how well people succeeded at various tasks of learning and performance. Isn't it interesting that such measures (using inkblot responses) also clear up a lot of the variance in ESP experiments? She asked this in 1947, with a lot of good data to back up her point. Do we want to understand still more about this secret ability? Why not try to assess how the testing procedure affects the participants emotionally? Do they find it interesting and easy, or frustrating and irritating? This matters in a lot of psychological research. She reported that it matters in exactly the same way with psi, when she assessed people's individual styles for experiencing frustration using standardized implicit measures.

She also moved quickly beyond the Duke paradigm as well, preparing the way for Americans like Chuck Honorton and others to use the British free-response approach to testing by successfully repeating Hereward Carrington's work with free drawings. Later she moved on more broadly still, developing objective ways to investigate allegedly haunted houses and working with mediums and other especially gifted persons. She also set out to find out whether systems that claim to teach paranormal ability really succeed in doing that. She found that one of them was very successful in making people believe that they were more psychic, but not successful at all in helping them develop more objective ability. By the mid-1960s, Schmeidler had contributed to our understanding of the importance of the interpersonal relationships in the testing situation, shown that more creative persons are more likely to demonstrate real effects, and demonstrated that individual differences in ways of experiencing time matter a lot in how persons respond to targets that will be selected later in the future.

By the mid-1970s she was hard at work trying to understand just how ESP really works. Again, she followed her theory that psi processes should follow patterns similar to those found in general cognitive psychology, and it was clear to her by then that this idea was important and fruitful. She reviewed large bodies of other persons' work, and carried out studies of her own to strengthen certain conclusions and answer troubling questions left by other research. The pictures she drew were nuanced, and respectful as always of individual differences and particular states and situations. She cleared up the relation between ESP and memory by demonstrating that positive correlations between them could be expected when material was only partially learned. She demonstrated that subliminal perception and extrasensory perception are related as well, but only when the subliminal information was deeply unconscious. I want to illustrate the breadth of her work and the richness of her findings by saying a bit more about two areas in particular: the relation of psi performance to mood, and how extrasensory perception obeys general perceptual laws of figure-ground relations.

Phenomenologists describe moods as states of attunement. Schmeidler noted from the earliest days of her research that some individuals who seemed to be in marked and distinctive moods seemed to score in ESP tests in marked and distinctive ways. The patterns were similar to the ones those individuals displayed in other areas. One writer, for example, generally scored near chance but when her state was such that her writing was flowing smoothly her ESP scoring was strongly above chance. Schmeidler surveyed earlier research and ended up with a more nuanced model that held that moods were important but that they would always interact with individual differences and situational variables. One illustration of this is a pair of studies she carried out on the effect of states of mind induced by psychotherapeutic sessions. In the first one, the patient's analyst rated each of a series of sessions in terms of how therapeutically productive he thought they were. Scores following the good sessions were significantly higher than ones following the poorer sessions. Any one who has experienced serious analytic work knows that a session considered 'good' by the analyst may not much resemble what polite society calls 'good'. Another study looked at changes in scoring before and after analytic sessions of a single patient. This man also provided mood ratings of his own state following the session. This obsessive man was working through a negative transference with his analyst and was experiencing hostile feelings in a way that he had probably needed to for much of his life. On days when his mood of hostility toward his analyst was particularly strong, his scores were high. On other days when his mood was more suppressed (presumably his characteristic state before analysis) his moods declined following sessions. In this case a mood that might generically be described as "negative" accompanied a release of positive access to extrasensory targets, as it probably accompanied access to other unconscious material as well. One of Schmeidler's general conclusions about ESP and mood is that mood is important but simple generalizations ignoring other things are ill-fated, except perhaps in the case of a general psi-facilitating effect of relaxation accompanied by a moderate level of arousal or motivation. She did find more generality, however, if predictions are made about the relations of a particular individual or group in a particular situation. She reported such within-subject and within-group consistency in several papers. The moods that were facilitative varied across these groups and situations, but were consistent within them. Her moral held: pay attention to the whole person and situation, and findings will generally make sense psychologically.

Schmeidler deeply pondered the question as to just what is being accessed when someone responds positively to ESP targets. Clearly many of the variables that affect visual perception, for example, do not affect ESP unless they do so as a function of the individual's different attitude toward them. However, there was one matter of the formation of perceptions that she thought might pertain to extrasensory perceptions as well. This has to do with the earliest stages of the formation of a perception, when one is still quite unclear as to what is being perceived. The gestalt psychologists had demonstrated that when a figure is just beginning to be discriminated from the ground surrounding it, elements of the ground can influence the figure, contaminating it as it were. Might this apply to ESP as well? She examined this question by surveying a series of studies in which the extrasensory context seemed to contaminate

response to the extrasensory target. What targets would follow the correct one, and which had preceded it? What targets were in the spatial proximity of the target in the array of targets? What targets were more and less densely present in the body of targets used in the whole study? She found a meaningful pattern in all of this, showing that elements of background often entered into the ESP responses to the targets. This contamination was inadvertent, unconscious and uncontrollable. It followed the familiar process called "assimilation" by the gestaltists and later students of perception. A related process studied in perception is called "contrast" and refers to the opposite effect: once a particular percept becomes more distinct then elements of background are strongly suppressed and kept out of the perceptual content. Schmeidler noted that this was reported occasionally by parapsychologists as well. What made the difference? Remember that Schmeidler was a great respecter of the more gifted participant. When she divided the studies into those that used selected, gifted participants from those that did not, she again found meaning where confusion had been before. The less gifted participants tended to show assimilation of background material into their responses, as if their nascent perceptions were still quite unformed and primitive. The more gifted, selected participants showed the opposite pattern: they tended to have stronger access to the targets and show suppression of background material. It was as if their extrasensory perceptions were more like the normal perceptions of everyday life, in which we see what we see and succeed in screening away background material that would be distracting.

There are many other areas that could be mentioned in regard to the wealth of knowledge that Dr Schmeidler has left for us to absorb and develop. I leave them unmentioned because I do not want to create the illusion that any brief review like this can exhaust her contribution. You will simply have to follow her tracks yourself, if you have not already. You will be amply rewarded. Like the map drawn by Lewis and Clark, her work has gone a long way to making a wilderness comprehensible, ready for inhabiting for even more timid and conventional souls. Psi is a psychological function and because of her work we can begin to understand just how that is so.

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