

Dedicated to my late brother Gilbert (1980-2003)

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Part I: Graduate School Golden Years (2005 – 2007)

Chapter 1

1. [opening scene; the BIG HOOK]

May 17 2010

The Abruzzi Italian restaurant was busy. The atmosphere was light-hearted, but pleasant. We were out for dinner with a visiting post-doc who was interviewing for an available position in our lab.

We were finishing our entrees, while various conversations were being exchanged. All of a sudden, Bertram announced:

“So all the peer reviews are in and it looks like Bem’s ESP paper will soon be accepted for publication at JPSP.”

“Are you serious?” Kurt exclaimed.

“Indeed,” Bertram said. “Actually, the preferred term is ‘pre-cognition’ or ‘psi’ rather than the stigmatised term ‘ESP’. And yes I’m serious. The paper was reviewed by four domain experts, each of whom provided very thorough reviews of the manuscript. Critically, none of them, including myself, was able to find any fatal flaws with respect to the experimental designs and statistical analyses.”

“But the conclusions are simply absurd!” Kurt exclaimed with incredulity.

“Well, the results are definitely very surprising,” Bertram replied. “Some effects are particularly surprising, for example, his retroactive recall effect whereby rehearsing words after a memory test actually boosted memory performance!”

I noticed Kurt’s eyeballs roll back in his eye sockets.

“Bem, however,” continued Bertram, “followed all of the same research rules we all follow, using the accepted methodological standards of our field. We didn’t really have any other choice.”

“Yes, but in this case, wouldn’t we want stronger evidence?” Kurt responded.

“Why?”

“Because isn’t that the nature of scientific beliefs? Bold claims that challenge core beliefs should require a lot more evidence before changing our beliefs.”

“I can empathize with that view, but that’s not how things work in psychology,” Bertram responded.

“Indeed,” Kurt continued. “Physicist Carl Sagan said it best: ‘Extra-ordinary claims require extra-ordinary evidence!’” Kurt exclaimed.

“Perhaps, but the situation is tricky,” Bertram replied. “What *is* clear, however, is that it would be a logical fallacy to impose different research standards based on the nature of the research question.”

As Bertram and Kurt continued their philosophy of science debate, I immediately started writing a methods paper in my head.

This event has very serious implications for the field of psychology. The publication of Bem’s paper seemed to tell us that the accepted research methods used in social psychology are flawed or insufficiently rigorous somehow. So it doesn’t really tell us anything about ESP, but rather tells us something about our field’s research standards more generally. In one fell swoop.

Or so I thought.

I communicated this idea to the group. Some of the other researchers seemed to agree. Most didn’t react either way to my conjecture, including Bertram.

We finished our desserts and coffee, wrapped up our conversations, and called it a night.

* * *

2. [scene]

On my way home, it felt like millions of thoughts were racing through my head. So many things were started to make sense regarding several methodological oddities I had noticed many years earlier. This was really exciting!

At the same time, this evoked several questions. How will the field of social psychology react to the eventual news? Will researchers believe the findings? Will they protest the findings? Or perhaps feel embarrassed about their discipline? Will this lead psychologists to change their research practices and advocate for higher research standards?

So many burning questions, my mind literally felt on fire. I quickly rushed home so that I could jot down ideas for that paper.

I guess only time will tell what the future holds in store.