

FIRST SIGHT: A MODEL AND A THEORY OF PSI

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First Sight is a model of psi and a theory of how psi works (Carpenter, 2004; 2005; 2008). It asserts that every person, and indeed every living organism, exists in ongoing, active commerce with an extended reality far beyond ordinary physical and perceptual boundaries. We then employ this engagement unconsciously at every moment as a part of the holistic process of construction that leads to all experience and all action. Other implicit processes such as subliminal perception and procedural memory are also known to contribute to the construction of experience and behavior (e.g. Bargh, 1989; Schacter, 1997) and psi processes are presumed to function similarly. Since this psi-engagement permits access to information well before it could possibly impinge upon sensory perception, psi is not spoken of as second sight (something occasional and derivative) but as first sight. The essence of the First Sight model can be summed up in two basic premises:

1. It is in the basic nature of an organism that it participates actively, continuously and unconsciously in an extended universe of meanings. This universe of participation is far broader in time and space than the organism's immediate boundaries.
2. All experience and all behavior are constituted perpetually out of unconscious psychological processes. These processes are carried out purposefully on multiple sources of information including psi information.

First Sight theory has been held up against large areas of our parapsychological literature and it can be seen to be consistent with what has been reported. In some cases it is able to help resolve apparent contradictions among findings in domains as varied as the relationship between psi and memory, the importance of creativity and openness for psi expression, and the connection between psi and extraversion (Carpenter, 2005, 2008, manuscript in preparation). It has also been used prospectively in research on the formation of aesthetic judgments (Carpenter, 2009), in the unconscious construction of spontaneous social activity (Carpenter, 2002), and in other contexts. More work is underway.

First Sight departs in several important ways from the assumptions about psi that have been implicitly dominant in our understanding for a long time. Some of the changed assumptions include:

- Psi is not unusual or non-normal; it is a characteristic of all living organisms.
- Psi is not rare; it is continuously ongoing for each organism.
- Psi is not capricious or non-replicable; it is lawful in its functioning and quite accessible to our efforts to understand it better given appropriate methods.
- Psi is not an ability; it is a perpetually active aspect of our engagement with reality.

This last departure in assumption is especially important, although it may seem rather subtle and not immediately easy to appreciate. At least since J. B. Rhine and his

colleagues founded a laboratory science of parapsychology, it has been understood that research was “about” a little family of rare abilities: ESP, psychokinesis, precognition.

This implicit assumption led to a certain way of thinking about the meaning of research on psi. From this point of view, a study is an attempt to call up and demonstrate a rare ability. Since the ability is rare, the stage must be set carefully to find it and evoke it. Persons with the right ability (the “gifted subjects”) and the appropriate “psi-conducive” conditions must all be provided for the rare demonstration to occur. Somewhat like those experiments in physics in which elaborate situations are provided to try to produce very rare and transient sub-atomic particles, the rare psi event is ardently courted but may still be fickle and withhold its presence. Some researchers have gone so far as to personify these presumed qualities of psi, calling it a trickster or saying that it is innately elusive and non-replicable by its nature.

For First Sight, psi is not an ability. Instead it is a universal characteristic of living organisms, a basic feature of their being-in-the-world. It is the fact that we are all unconsciously and perpetually engaged in a universe of meaning that extends far beyond our physical boundaries in space and time. It is not an ability, stronger in some than in others, called up sometimes and not other times. It is always going on for all of us. It is less like riding a bicycle or discriminating red from green, and more like being perpetually engaged as physical bodies with the reality of gravity, or as social beings with an interpersonal world of others. It is an unconscious and ubiquitous but still largely unmapped aspect of our nature.

For First Sight, research is not understood as an attempt to coax a rarely-used ability into action and measure it. Instead, it is an effort to design situations in which the ongoing psi activity can be discerned in the context of everyday actions and experiences where it always is. Research will not try to catch psi, it will try to reveal it.

In fact, a shift in research perspective toward this point of view has been going on in parapsychology recently, although its full implications have not been spelled out. The time is ripe for First Sight theory. A new generation of studies has begun to demonstrate the unconscious expression of non-local information and influence in the course of ordinary experiences and behaviors. Consider these examples.

Radin (1997, 2004) and others have shown that one’s subtle electrodermal responses to emotional pictures include an element that *precedes* the exposure to the picture alongside the larger, well-understood responses that follow it. Carpenter (2002) has demonstrated that spontaneous social behavior is a function not only of the unfolding stimulation that group members are providing for each other in the room, but also reflects the content of a distant ESP target being chosen randomly by a computer in another city. Palmer (2006) has shown that in the course of efforts to discern subtle order in strings of numbers, people are showing an influence not only of the numbers that they are seeing, but also of the numbers that they will be seeing shortly. Bem (2005) has shown that people who are expressing emotional evaluations of pictures are showing not only the influence of the picture facing them in the moment but are also affected by whether or not they will be exposed to that picture in the future.

In each of these cases, the psychic feature of the experiment may have been mentioned to the participants but they were not being asked to “show ESP or PK.” They were simply responding to events viscerally, or trying to discern the patterns hidden in a situation, or developing a social encounter with a group of friends, or evaluating the

attractiveness of something. In other words, they were doing entirely ordinary things on entirely conscious and immediate grounds, so far as they knew. But in the process of doing these things they were also implicitly expressing an ongoing engagement with reality that was unconscious and beyond their immediate sensory boundaries.

No rare ability was coaxed and caught. An ongoing implicit process was revealed. The experimenters managed to design and control the situation in such a way that these ordinarily invisible elements of psychic participation in everyday experience could be exposed. First Sight theory provides a way of thinking about the fact that psi is not an occasional ability but is instead an unconscious, ongoing engagement with reality which constantly expresses itself implicitly.

First Sight draws heavily upon contemporary work in mainstream psychology on unconscious or implicit mental processes. It highlights the fact that psi, far from being extraordinary and anomalous, appears to function harmoniously with other processes that have been more deeply studied and accepted, such as suboptimal perception and procedural memory. Integrative work with other disciplines will be fruitful. First Sight is intended in part as a way of making our efforts more accessible and interesting to other cognitive scientists.

It is also intended to shed light on just why obvious expressions of psi engagement appear so rarely in everyday consciousness. This phenomenon itself can be understood as part of the greater lawfulness of psi. Understanding this lawfulness should help us better construct ways to bring our psi engagements into consciousness and use them when we wish to do that.

Presumably psi is inherently unconscious, and if this is so, parapsychologists have been like the blind studying sight. It is not surprising that our efforts have been inductive and groping. Still, we have accumulated more knowledge than we might have thought, and this fact is clearer when seen through the lenses of theory. We can borrow methods from other fields that are also studying unconscious mental processes. This should help us find a more meaningful coherence in our phenomena and a congruent place in this larger arena of work.

First Sight is primarily intended to help guide research toward our greater understanding of psi. Our subject matter has been held to be rare, anomalous, unruly and innately unpredictable. None of these things may be true after all, and First Sight is one way of understanding it differently. With the help of this developing theory, and other theories it may hopefully inspire, parapsychology may find a program.

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