# Social Psychology of the Paranormal

## Welcome!

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Most institutions demand unqualified faith, but the institution of science makes skepticism a virtue.

Robert K. Merton (1910-2003)

# Starting Assumptions

- Most people believe some paranormal claims.
- Most people don’t challenge their paranormal beliefs.
- Beliefs are reinforced by physiological, psychological, and social processes.

# Starting Assumptions

- Critically evaluating claims requires an understanding of research methods and, often, statistics.
- Substantive knowledge in other relevant fields, *including conjuring*, often helps.
- Critical thinking about paranormal claims fosters generalizable skills.
- It’s better to be uncertain than to be wrong.

# Hard Pills to Swallow

- Gut feelings cannot make facts out of beliefs.
- Science isn’t closed-minded. (Some scientists are.)
- Science is *inherently* self-correcting. (Most people aren’t.)

# Hard Pills to Swallow

- Beliefs are profoundly impacted by our
  - minds
  - bodies
  - self-identities
  - group-identities
  - other beliefs
- We’re unaware of severe limitations in our ability to
  - perceive the physical world
  - make judgments in novel or complex settings
  - encode, store, and decode memories

The good thing about science is that it's true whether or not you believe in it.

Science is a way of trying not to fool yourself. The first principle is that you must not fool yourself, and you are the easiest person to fool.

-- Neil deGrasse Tyson

# What's so wrong about being wrong?

- Bad information is rarely good for anything
- False beliefs increase vulnerability to harms
  - loss of health, finances, autonomy, life
  - exploitation by those seeking money, influence, power
- False beliefs increase chances of perpetrating harm
  - Arguably, it's bad to spread questionable beliefs just because they're "sincerely held"

# Theory, Evidence, & Skepticism in Science

- "**Theory**"
  - Abstract, general, logical, precise, testable
  - Example: F = mA
- "**Evidence**"
  - Observations/measurements used to test a claim
  - Empirical, objective, reliable
- "**Scientific skepticism**"
  - Questioning claims using theory & evidence
  - Treating claims as provisional (at best) until well-supported

# Syllabus Highlights

- Two-pronged approach
  - Consider a claim's soundness (theory + evidence)
  - Reasons we believe
- Open-minded scientific skepticism considers
  - quality of evidence
  - quality of explanation
  - alternative explanations

# Course Approach

- We examine
  - the specific claim being made
  - rigor of explanations offered
  - quality of evidence being offered
- We further
  - seek normal explanations for extraordinary claims
  - apply multidisciplinary knowledge
  - are willing to remain uncertain
- As **social** scientists, we consider
  - social origins of beliefs
  - social influences
  - social consequences

# Psychic or Mentalist?

- What's the difference?
- Lior Suchard, Amazing Kreskin
- Matt Fraser, The Psychic Twins, Uri Geller

# Psychic at work: What to ask

- What claims are made by the mentalist/psychic?
- What special abilities does he claim to have?

- Does he offer any explanations for his abilities?
- If so, are they clear and plausible?
- Can you think of alternative explanations?

- Why does he say why he does these demonstrations?
- Can you think of other reasons?

- Do you believe that he has psychic powers? Why or why not?

# Video: Lior Suchard, Mentalist


LIVE
KELLY
AND RYAN

**VIDEOS**

Kathryn Shultz: TED talk, “Being Wrong”

Lior Suchard: Mentalist

end