TACIT INFORMATION IN REMOTE STARING RESEARCH: THE WISEMAN-SCHLITZ INTERVIEWS

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Readers of the Paranormal Review will be familiar with the question of parapsychology’s experimenter effect. Here we present an edited transcript of interviews with two researchers who have consistent track records in psi research, and who have conducted joint remote staring studies that continued to repeat their earlier pattern of results, thus demonstrating an experimenter effect. Dr Richard Wiseman tends not to obtain evidence for psi, while Dr Marilyn Schlitz tends to obtain results supporting the psi hypothesis. In their published joint studies (Wiseman & Schlitz, 1997, 1999), information is given about the similarities in procedure between the two researchers, for example using the same equipment and participant pool.

Such ‘experimenter effects’ are common within parapsychology and are open to several competing interpretations (see Palmer, 1990, 1992). For example, it is possible that experimenters create desired results via their own psi abilities or fraud. However, many parapsychologists have suggested that the experimenter effect is best explained in terms of the different ways in which experimenters conduct the study — how they behave beforehand, how they interact with participants, etc. Unfortunately, there is very little qualitative evidence about the different ways in which psi-conducive and psi-inhibitory experimenters carry out their studies. Indeed, Schlitz and Wiseman present no anecdotal information about how the two researchers may have subtly differed in how they approached and conducted their sessions. In August 2001, CW tackled this issue by video-recording interviews with each investigator separately, and then together, to elucidate any previous tacit knowledge and make it available to the wider parapsychological community.

It is hoped that this information provides a richer context for the Wiseman-Schlitz studies and may help researchers to develop an understanding of this aspect of the experimenter effect.

Edited Transcript of interviews with Dr Marilyn Schlitz and Dr Richard Wiseman, Institute of Noetic Sciences, Petaluma, California, August 2001.

Dr Marilyn Schlitz

CW: I’d like to ask you some questions about the studies that you did with Richard, and I’m going to go through it roughly chronologically, in terms of how a session would proceed. Before the participant comes into the session, is there anything that you do yourself by way of preparation for the session?

MS: Yes, I just try to get centred. It’s really nice if the situation is such that the equipment is well set up and you do the prep work in advance so that there is a moment or two to just sit down and get centred. I think that’s the main thing.

CW: When you sit down and get centred, what do you think about? Do you focus on the session ahead, or do you do anything to clear your mind?

MS: I usually pray actually. I usually pause and ask the Divine that the highest purpose be revealed through the experiment. And then I just try to breathe and be calm. I am trying to do something that allows one to focus their attention and intention. If you’re really distracted by a zillion different things, it becomes very difficult.

CW: When the participant comes in have you some sort of conversation with them presumably. How does that conversation run?

MS: Again it’s all situational. I think that trying to script any of it is probably something you don’t want to do, because it is so important that the interpersonal piece be developed. For example, in the experiments I did at Stanford, I gave a lecture at Stanford for Phil Zimbardo’s psychology class on mind control. Phil did something at the end of the lecture that was memorable and controversial. I had actually done the lecture with the hopes of recruiting subjects for the experiment and it worked very well for that. So when the students came in to participate, I would ask them something about the incident in the classroom, because it was something we had in common. Usually it’s just something to try and build rapport and break the ice, so people are not nervous. If I feel they’re nervous I try to identify, evaluate and meet where they are, within a very quick amount of time. Even things like body language, and if you can move with them and begin to breathe with them I think you can help to put people at ease.

CW: Do you discuss with them psychic experiences? Do you get them into the frame of mind of thinking about psi before the session starts?

MS: Yes, we talk about the experiment. For example in the remote staring studies I’ve done, I tell people that there is background research that’s been done already that suggests this works. And certainly people’s experience is it works, so how do we go about showing that in the laboratory. And I give them a very positive expectation of outcome.

CW: Are there any particular kinds of participants that you would feel more comfortable with? And, are there any kinds of participants that you feel uncomfortable with? Are you able to establish a rapport with anybody who walks through the door?

MS: Yes, there are people I like better, people that seem more open, you can tell if you’ve really connected. I remember one time a guy coming in and I just could not connect to this guy at all and at the end of the session — it was a blocking study we were doing actually — he just laughed at me and he said “ha ha, you thought I was going to do what you told me to do; I did exactly the opposite”. I remember that not being a very pleasant experience. I remember working with a few well-known psychics that I didn’t really enjoy the process with. Because it was just too much hoop-la and I think they felt very threatened by being in the lab. I have not had that experience with all people who are psychics, but I would rather work with people who come in and want to have fun with it. That’s a much easier situation.

CW: Now imagine that you and the participant have now separated, so that you’re going to be the starter and they’re going to be having their physiology monitored. While you’re doing the staring, what do you do?
MS: I think that the most important thing about getting psi in these kinds of experiments is being able to cultivate attention and intention — to hold it and then to release it. There is something about a real strong desire or intention for a result to happen, but not so much attachment to it that that gets in the way. I know that I move. If I’m trying to excite somebody’s physiology then I’ll just try to do things that I know would excite mine. I also think there’s something about the motor stimulus, the moving of the hands. For example, you’re just watching this little screen with somebody’s picture on it. And it’s real-time. I prefer to work with real-time images. So you can actually see them.

CW: Do you say their name?

MS: Yes, I say their name. And in the rapport session beforehand I would make an attempt to try and identify things that are provocative for them. Do they love snakes, do they hate snakes, that kind of thing.

CW: So you customise each session.

MS: Definitely, definitely customise it. I think that there is really something important about that relational aspect of it. And I don’t think it is all about one person. I think it’s a system. And it’s also divine grace that says this is some way in which the universe wants to speak. I think my approach is trying to be in the flow of all of that.

CW: When you’re not staring and not trying to activate the participant, what are you doing?

MS: Again it depends on what’s going on. Often I’ll just be working on a project, the paper I’m reading, or have a magazine, or sometimes I just use it as an opportunity to look out the window and be. But I would not be focusing on the person. There have been experiments where what we would look for is a difference. So the experimental period is when you’re trying to get an arousal, but in the control periods I often try to visualise them being calm and try to keep myself very calm too.

CW: Imagine you’ve come to the end of the session now and you and the participant are back together again. Do you discuss how you felt the session went, how they felt the session went? What do you talk about at that point?

MS: Yes, we would definitely talk about how they felt, and what was going on. I would probably show them their chart record, or try to give them some feedback even if we don’t have feedback. Because it’s frustrating for people to have given their time and not get closure. So that’s something that I think is a good thing to build into a session. And usually there’s not a lot of time spent there. That’s not a time-consuming part of the process for me.

CW: Is there any special way you have of dealing with the data? Is there any significance, for example, with who looks at the data first — do you think there’s any action in that part of the system?

MS: In the experiments to date we’ve been mindful of that. Wanting to make sure that we were both there to watch the results at the same time. It’s not where I put my energy, but I think it’s all part of it. By that point maybe release of effort comes into play.

CW: Are there any other aspects of the interaction with the participant, anything else that you can think of that might help differentiate from Richard, that you’ve noticed?

MS: I think this issue of intent is really important. I think intention is what it’s about, it’s about holding attention and intention in some systematic way. Some disciplined way. And I don’t think you can have an intent without a belief. I’m not a die-hard believer, I’m really not. And yet I am completely open to the possibility that these things are real. Particularly when it’s an area like that where I have a long track record of getting positive results, I now believe that it’s possible. I did not come into this field because of my own personal experiences, but I certainly was always open to the possibility that these things could be real. So a willingness to suspend disbelief is really important. And I would say that if there is a possibility of even for the moment of the experiment, believing, then you can actually have an intent. Otherwise I can’t understand how it could work. With Richard, for example, after we had finished the first experiment together, I remember saying to him “Did you move during the session?”. And he said “No”. I think that’s because he doesn’t sufficiently believe so there is not sufficient intention for him to then become full-bodied in a way that could actually lead to some kind of outcome.

Dr Richard Wiseman

CW: Before the participant came in, did you do anything yourself to prepare yourself for the session?

RW: In terms of preparing myself for the session, absolutely nothing. I would think rather that everything was in place and that I’d got the right questionnaires and so on, but other than that, no absolutely nothing.

CW: Then the participant comes in and you have a chat with them presumably, before the session. How did that chat run?

RW: In terms of the initial chat, before we wired them up to the physiological equipment, I would simply explain what the experiment was about. It would be a fairly matter-of-fact description. In Herts, because it was a more sceptical set of participants, sometimes I’d say “I know this sounds like quite a weird experiment, but let’s try it”. If the participant was sceptical I’d say “well let’s give it a go, you’ve been some success with it in the past”. I didn’t mention the fact that there were two experimenters, and that Marilyn was running half and I was running half, because I didn’t think that particularly matters. So I didn’t mention that unless a participant said “Hold on a minute: I thought there were two of you doing this. Is there a reason for that?”. Then I’d cover it. I wouldn’t say that I was sceptical about the effect, but the degree to which that carried I’ve got absolutely no idea. I certainly didn’t say “I’m sceptical about this”.

CW: Before you describe your procedure and what the experiment’s about to the participant, did you do any more general chat to establish a rapport with them?

RW: It varies from person to person, but for the most part no. So they would come in, then it was fairly much straight into it. I think my sessions were much much shorter than Marilyn’s. I might say how are you doing today, or if they were very engaging people, then they might say, well, this has just happened to me on the way here. But for the most part no, there’s not a great deal of other chat. I would describe it as more businesslike, but not unfriendly.

CW: Are there any kinds of participants that you particularly enjoyed or felt comfortable working with and were there any that you didn’t like or felt uncomfortable working with?

RW: On the whole I actually feel more comfortable working with females than males. But saying that in terms of the psi results there’s no difference when we did same sex pairs versus different sex pairs. And some people I just get on with and it’s fun. Other people are more straight or they treat it more seriously. Over in IONS it was slightly more difficult because the participants for the most part were further up the belief scale. So if some of them started to talk through their experiences with me, I found that quite difficult to relate to because I’m quite sceptical about these things. You don’t want to be confrontational with people and so you end up nodding and going “oh that’s interesting. Anyway, back to the experiment”.

CW: Did you specifically discuss psi experiences at all, apart from talking about the staring experiences?

RW: No, we talked about the staring experience. I don’t think that I spoke about any other psi experiences with them. In fact to some extent I would have avoided the issue.

CW: Imagine that you and the participant have now separated and you are now the stare and the participant is sitting with their physiology being monitored. What did you do when you were staring at the participant?

RW: In terms of the stare and non-stare periods, for the most part I found it an enormously boring experience. You have this monitor in front of you. When you’re looking at an image of the participant they’re not doing anything except maybe reading a magazine or looking at the camera. You hope they’ll look up at the camera, because that feels like some sort of connectedness. You’re running two or three sessions a day and all you’re looking at is someone on a TV screen not doing anything particularly interesting. So I found it hard trying to sit there and say, “Okay, I’m staring at you”. I might try and get them to respond. It wasn’t that I was being massively passive. But that would wear off pretty quickly so after those initial
epochs I would be pretty passive about it, switch on the monitor, look at them, switch it off, look around.

CW: In your pre-session chat with participants, did you do anything to establish what might activate them, for example, when you stared at them?

RW: No. I didn’t talk about what might freak them out or what might relax them. And as far as I can remember they never volunteered that information. So they didn’t say “Oh, I’m really scared of spiders, so if you were to think about spiders that would do it for me”. I don’t remember a single time that happened.

CW: So when you weren’t staring, what were you doing?

RW: Afterwards I would have gone in, taken off the physiological sensors, and then I thanked them, and let them go. For some people, particularly if they weren’t accustomed to seeing physiological recordings, I’d take them back and show them their trace. At that point it made more sense to them because they’d got the whole trace on the screen.

CW: Did you have any special ways of dealing with the data? Did you have any sense for example that it was important to look at the data first?

RW: No, that didn’t matter. I think for the second study when we did look at the data, certainly we looked at our own data first. We had it all on the computer. Marilyn looked at her trials, which meant that I looked at mine.

CW: Did you want to do that or was that just...

RW: No we did it because Marilyn looked at hers so therefore that left me to look at mine.

CW: Is there anything else that you’d like to talk about that you think makes a significant difference between how you and Marilyn approach the experiment?

RW: I don’t know how she’s approaching it. I would imagine that the placing on of the equipment and leaving the participant alone in the room is an important moment for some experimenters. So we should perhaps talk through potential differences there. From my perspective, I put the equipment on, made certain that we had a reading, and left them alone. I didn’t do anything other than that.

Dr Richard Wiseman & Marilyn Schiltz

CW: One of the major differences between the pair of you is in the preparation that you would do yourselves before the actual session. Richard said he did none whatsoever. But for Marilyn, I think one of the very important parts of the session was centring and even praying before each session.

RW: Actually I didn’t know Marilyn did that, quite interesting. I did none because it didn’t really make any sense to do any. If you’re doing a normal experimental psychology study you wouldn’t really do anything. What did you do then, Marilyn?

MS: I don’t think of it as a normal psychological study. I think that there is something other that we’re trying to pull in. And I think it is all about some sense of right alignment. There is a metaphysic for me in doing these things. Probably before every session, it might not have been before we actually talked to the subjects, but it could have been as I was leaving the subject and going down the hall to the experimental room, I would briefly think “please let this work, let this express what is intended to be expressed here”. Prayer seems too strong a word because there are certain assumptions about what that means, but there is a surrendering. I do a surrendering. I feel that this is part of a bigger story, a bigger unfolding. And I think that there is something that is wanting to be told through these experiments. And when I say prayer, don’t interpret that as I have an idea of a person up there who’s directing the whole thing. I don’t. I think it is more about getting out of self into a flow that is bigger than self.

So what are the ways in which to get out of ego? I actually think a big thing in our experiment was the humour. We laughed a lot in both experiments. That released the stress and the pressure of doing the experiment and it made it playful and fun. In the same way it’s about not being. I never would say that I’m the reason it got significant results. So maybe the prayer is partly how I get myself out of it. It’s like surrendering to something else. There’s a paradox because on the one hand I’m talking about how you need this effortless intention, and at the same time I think there’s a surrendering to something else. And I’m very clear that it is a package. Even if there isn’t some transpersonal component to it, it is about the relationship between the different parts in the experiment.

CW: Richard, you mentioned experimental psychology. Do you think you would be treating your participant as if they were basically a datapoint in your experiment?

RW: I wouldn’t say datapoint. But running it like a normal psychology experiment. The person comes in, it’s business-like, you’re pleasant to them, and you’re polite to them and you explain what the task is. But it’s no bigger than that. That’s what I do. This particular one, given it’s a parapsychology experiment, presents a problem for me in terms of how you present the effect to them. It’s fine for me to say in the past some people have got significant results with this. I didn’t actually say I haven’t but I suspect that was fairly implicit. So I suspect there are probably big differences in that initial chat with them, just in terms of how much they walked away thinking that yes indeed this was a procedure that was going to work.

CW: Richard, you said that you actually avoided discussing psi with the participants before the session. I didn’t get that impression from you Marilyn.

MS: No, in fact I would really emphasise how it had worked in the past in experiments. I don’t tend to spend a lot of time talking about people’s personal experiences. Rather, I would try to give them every reason to feel optimistic that this particular thing we’re doing together could actually produce something.

CW: I got the impression from Richard that the session was very business-like, that you came in and there were very few preliminaries before you got into discussing the procedure and explaining what was going to happen. And that therefore your sessions were probably shorter than Marilyn’s because I think Marilyn spent more time establishing a rapport. One of the differences between you was that Marilyn tried to establish from the participant what would activate them in a psychophysiology experiment. What sort of things would activate them, so each session was customised for the participant. So if they had a fear of snakes then she might use imagery of snakes to frighten them. Whereas Richard didn’t do that.

RW: I can’t remember doing that in a single session. On your sessions then, Marilyn, how much are you saying I believe this will work and it has worked for me in the past?

MS: I don’t say “this works, this is an established fact”. It’s not how I convey things, but I could easily see myself saying to them that this is an experiment that I’ve done before and that we found significant evidence.
that there was a remote staring effect. And that Richard on the other hand had done these experiments and hadn’t found an effect. So the point of doing the study together was to see if there were differences.

RW: That’s interesting, because I never mentioned that. I thought that just muddied the water, so I said this is the staring effect. And if they said, “Well, why are there two of you then?”, if they knew about that, then I would explain it, but I can only remember that happening on a handful of occasions.

MS: I don’t know that I did it every time, but I certainly would do something to let them believe it was going to work, to give them a positive expectation for outcome. But I do think that for me it is about creating a field, creating a context for the team. Their job really is to stay open. And I think I’m sure I would say that every time to people, I would just encourage you to stay open. And be responsive. Don’t try to guess. But just stay open. Did you ever do that, Richard?

RW: I can’t remember. It’s just interesting that it’s not the hard sell. You’re not saying that this is all true, I’m a successful experimenter, I’m sure this is going to work. That’s not what you’re doing. It’s actually far closer to a middle position, isn’t it? I mean I don’t want to put words in your mouth Marilyn, but is that what . . .

MS: Right, but in the context that I have had great success with this in the past. We have found significant evidence for this working in the past, so there’s good reason to think it’s going to work well. And your job is really just to stay open and responsive. And not to get too calm either.

RW: Another difference was that Richard said during each session he would be interested and motivated at the start during the stare epochs but gradually if he didn’t feel the participant was responding at all he would get bored. And would lose interest. Did you feel that yourself, Marilyn?

MS: There were times when it got boring. I knew there were times when I was ready for it to be over, especially when it was super-busy and there were other things to do. That I tried to work against. I would try to really say here’s this window of 25 minutes, I can afford 25 minutes to sit still. And so that was part of my discipline and part of my reward. I tried to turn it into a reward for myself, here I am having a little rest period. But yes it was a bit tedious going back and forth and just doing the same thing over and over again. That’s why I think that motivation, that there’s something bigger trying to be stated here, trying to unfold here, helped me get through the boredom periods.

CW: I think that’s something that you’ve emphasised, Marilyn, in that order to have the intention during the session, you have to have the belief behind that. That I don’t think came out of Richard at all. The sense that in order to stare and feel like you can influence someone, there’s got to be more than just the basic intention.

RW: There’s the action of just looking at the camera. That’s the supposed effect, just by looking. That’s when you get the effect. But there’s also all the intent that goes along with that. Now if you’re skeptical and don’t think this is going to have an effect, it’s very difficult. You can go, well, let’s pretend it does. But at one level that’s what it is, it’s just pretending.

MS: I wonder what would happen, Richard, if you were able to go into the session and just suspend disbelief. Not be a believer, but suspend. And embrace the possibility, I know magic’s not the right word, but that there is a charm in the universe and that maybe it could get funnelled into this experiment. And that this would be a way of going with that. And then once the experiment’s over you could close the door and go back to the position. I don’t know whether you could do that. I’m sure actors can get into a place where they become that other person. And really good actors probably begin to dream like that other person, I wouldn’t be surprised. I just wonder if that wouldn’t be something that could be done.

RW: In terms of making a more psi-conducive experimenter, that’s certainly one thing. I don’t know if it has been tried or not. It wouldn’t be an easy thing to do.

CW: It’s hard to put these things into words.

MS: I think this is a really good exercise, because I don’t even think about my own procedure when I do experiments.

CW: You seem to be saying a lot of it is to do with the experimenter’s openness. Do you think that is as important as the interaction with the participant?

MS: Yes. I think the openness is necessary for the effective interaction.

RW: What about the looking at the data? Because in the second experiment you were very keen to look at your data first.

MS: Before we get to that, while we’re still talking about data collection, I wanted to mention moving. If you think you really can affect the person, then I would really try to affect them. It was ‘still-bodied, animated, come on!’. And then I would take little signs as an indicator that it was working. It all sounds crazy. Whoever listens to this conversation should note that it’s all randomised, double-blind, objective. So none of this stuff is anything more than superstitious behaviour, potentially. It can’t in and of itself bias the outcome. So I think you can do anything you want. But I’m full-bodied, and it’s a somatic experience for me. And if I’m not then I don’t think those sessions work very well — for example, if I’m really tired and just not into it.

RW: How about the moment when you attach the physiology equipment to the participant and then leave them alone. Does anything go on there: do you touch them, do you say anything?

MS: Well frequently I will touch them and say good luck, or see you in a little while. Something that puts them at ease, helps them feel connected. Then in terms of the data evaluation inter, I don’t have a strong take on that. I think it’s another doorway in, but it isn’t the doorway that I hold the greatest confidence in. But in terms of completing the circle, people like Bierman would say just make sure you observe the data first. So I think that’s probably why I was more emphatic about it than I might have been.

RW: But you think that the action as it were is between you and the participant during the session?

MS: That’s what I think. But I really do think, and maybe this is my psychological defence strategy for separating ego out, but I think ego is the worst thing that you can get into these experiments. If you think “oh this is about me” then you’re biased. So all the ways that one can get oneself out of it I think help. One thing would be this idea that it’s about the relationship. Another thing is it’s about the procedure. I think there is really something about the fun of it and trying to keep a playful fun-filled perspective on it. And again this sense of connection to something deeper and bigger. I don’t lead with that ever but I guess it’s big part of who I am, and has been for a long time. And even in the early days, with my first remote viewing experiment, I think I prayed then too. I think that early on I would think “please let this work”. So there’s an intention for the overall outcome. And then a “why will be done” kind of thing. But I’m not Christian, so don’t misunderstand what I’m saying here. It is all about separating from ego and then knowing ego drives intention — you need ego for intention, but you need to have a non-detached ego.

RW: But the interaction with the participant is coming from that. It’s not that you’ve got a formula for interacting with people. It’s coming naturally from that position that you are holding.

MS: Yes, but if you’re working with fifty people sometimes there’s a day when you think I don’t really want to see this person. But I go in and I meet this person who is so genuinely interested and open and took the time to come here and do this thing. And I am won over in a new way. So that’s nice because that allows me to stay fresh. And that freshness thing is a big one. When you try to begin to power up for these huge experiments and then you lose the momentum half way through, I think that’s a really difficult thing. That’s part of the reason I think about this as standard science, because it’s not. I don’t think it is. And that’s both the good and the bad of it.

References