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Editorial Comment

After a rigorous review process, involving a large set of extremely thorough reviews by distinguished experts in social cognition, we are publishing the following article by Daryl J. Bem, entitled "Feeling the Future: Experimental Evidence of Anomalous Retroactive Influences on Cognition and Affect." We have also decided to publish a commentary by Eric–Jan Wagenmakers, Ruud Wetzels, Denny Borsboom, and Han van der Maas entitled "Why Psychologists Must Change the Way They Analyze Their Data: The Case of Psi." This too went through the usual rigorous review process.

To some of our readers it may be both surprising and disconcerting that we have decided to publish Bem's article. The paper reports nine studies in which the author aimed to "time-reverse" classic social-cognitive phenomena (e.g., approach–avoidance, evaluative priming, habituation, facilitated recall) by changing the typical order of cause and effect. In a deviation from the original paradigms, participants' responses in these studies were obtained before the presentation of the causally effective stimuli. The general finding is that participants' responses were significantly related to the subsequently presented stimuli, even though these stimuli were selected by a hardware-based random generator after participants had made their response. The findings are described as evidence for anomalous retroactive influences of future events on an individual's current responses, a phenomenon that falls into the domain of parapsychology.

What makes these findings so remarkable and certainly controversial is that they turn our traditional understanding of causality on its head. A central assumption in lay and scientific conceptions of causality is that a cause precedes its effect, not the other way round. The claim presented in the current article that participants' responses were influenced by randomly generated stimuli that followed these responses poses a serious challenge to traditional views of causality. Needless to say, such a challenge to firmly held convictions is destined to ignite a lot of controversy.

We openly admit that the reported findings conflict with our own beliefs about causality and that we find them extremely puzzling. Yet, as editors we were guided by the conviction that this paper—as strange as the findings may be—should be evaluated just as any other manuscript on the basis of rigorous peer review. Further, as with every other paper we publish, we can only take the author at his word that his data are in fact genuine and that the reported findings have not been taken from a larger set of unpublished studies showing null effects.

At the same time, we do find compelling the argument implicit in the Bayesian approach to data that strong claims, running strongly counter to expectations and existing understandings, require exceptionally compelling evidence. And in cases such as these, we resonate with the arguments made by Wagenmakers et al.

Our obligation as journal editors is not to endorse particular hypotheses but to advance and stimulate science through a rigorous review process. It is our hope and expectation that the current two papers will stimulate further discussion, attempts at replication, and critical further thoughts about appropriate methods in research on social cognition and attitudes.

——Charles M. Judd, Editor
——Bertram Gawronski, Associate Editor