Publishing and Funding Parapsychology in the Mainstream: A Mail Survey of Experiences and Strategies for Success

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Abstract: The mail survey reported here was designed to obtain accurate information about the chances of parapsychological publications and grant proposals being accepted by non-parapsychological science journals and major funding bodies. All 242 members and associate members of the Parapsychological Association were sent a four-page questionnaire asking for details of the last 15 years of any such publishing and funding attempts and any experiences of being asked to referee parapsychology papers for non-parapsychology journals. They were also asked for their views on what factors might affect success rates, and what strategies parapsychologists might adopt to improve their chances.

A 30% overall response rate, representing a 44% response rate for actively publishing PA members, was achieved. The apparent acceptance rate of parapsychology papers in non-parapsychology journals was 73%, and of funding proposals by major, multidisciplinary funding institutions, 26%, although these figures are likely to be overinflated. Likelihood of success, particularly for grant applications, appeared to increase with the number of a researcher’s publications. Research reviews had a particularly high apparent acceptance rate for publication of 100%. All those who had been invited by non-parapsychology journals to referee parapsychology papers believed they had been recruited via non-parapsychology contacts and information sources, none by editors monitoring the parapsychology journals. The factors affecting success rates, and strategies for improving success rates suggested by respondents are listed. The most frequently mentioned strategy was the development of increased contact with scientists in other fields.

Publication in a scientific journal is both the main way to inform other scientists about new ideas and discoveries, and a major route to achieving professional status and access to funding. However, many have doubts about the fairness and consistency of the peer review process in science. This appears to be particularly the case in the biological and social sciences: the topic is taken so seriously in the medical profession that the American Medical

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Association have recently held two con-
venors devoted entirely to it. 1
Within psychology, bias in peer review
has for some years been subject to empiri-
cal enquiry. One of the most well-known
investigations was conducted by Peters and
Ceci (1982), who took previously published
research papers by authors at prestigious
institutions, and resubmitted them for
publication under the names of fictitious,
and therefore unprestigious, authors and
institutions. Eight of the nine papers were
rejected, and the most likely interpretation
of the evidence appears to be that reviewers
are unduly influenced in their judgments of
a paper by the prestige of its source. Simi-
lar research suggests the possibility of re-
viewer bias against papers written by
authors with female names, on the part of
both male and female reviewers (Goldberg,
1968; Paludi & Bauer, 1983).
Most relevant for parapsychology,
however, is research that suggests that
reviewers are inclined to think highly of the
methodology or papers whose results con-
firmed the reviewer's own beliefs, and poorly
of those with disconfirming results.
Mahoney (1977) invited reviewers to eval-
uate a paper on a controversial topic in
behavioural parapsychology for a (non-existent)
book on the subject. The papers had identi-
cal introduction and methodology sections,
but differed in terms of whether the results
confirmed or contradicted a reviewer's own
position on the controversy. Reviewers
rated 'confirming' papers as almost twice as
high in quality of methodology and
accuracy of presentation as 'disconfirming'
papers; the usual recommendation for a 'confirming'
paper was acceptance with moderate revis-
ion, and, for a 'disconfirming' paper, rejec-
tion or major revision.2

When a parapsychologist submits a
paper to a general psychology or general
science journal, it is likely that he or she
will have to contend with a presumption
against the very existence of the phonome-
na under study. Unlike other types of
research, which are mostly reviewed by
specialists in the same field, parapsychological
work submitted to mainstream journals appears often to be
assessed by non-specialists, and non-spe-
cialist psychology reviewers appear likely to
have an atypically low level of belief in
paranormal phenomena. Surveys of US
college professors (Wagner & Monnet,
1979) and of elite members of the United
States' most prestigious scientific associa-
tion, the American Association for the
Advancement of Science (McClenon, 1982),
suggest that the scientific scepticism of the
elite are more
tional masses, and that psy-
chologists are one of the most sceptical
groups out of all of the scientific disci-
plines. Only 5% of the elite psychologists in
McClenon's sample expressed ESP as a
sensible or likely possibility, compared to
roughly 50% of the social and
natural science college professors in
Wagner and Monnet's survey. Editors and
reviewers tend to be drawn from this elite,
and, if Mahoney's work is representative,
the scepticism of the elite psychologists
might lead them to reject a paper with
results favourable to the existence of psi
phenomena, when they would have
accepted a paper with the same methodol-
gy but that obtained null results.
This is not necessarily an unjustified
approach. Parapsychologists are familiar
with the concept that 'extraordinary claims
require extraordinary proof' (although see
Palmer 1987), which scientists regularly
apply to all types of claims, not just parapsychological ones.
However, whether parapsychologists view
the rejection of any paper as fair in this
context will depend upon whether the
reviewer offers a counter-explanation of

any positive results that appears plausible.
If this does not seem to be the case, the
paper's author may suspect that the
reviewer has a presumption against para-
psychological phenomena so strong that it
is impervious to empirical evidence.
That parapsychologists and reviewers
may have different perspectives on this
issue is suggested by the contrasting results
of the groups surveyed by Allison (1973)
and McClendon (1982). Many parapsy-
chologists surveyed by Allison considered
that scientists resist parapsychological
work because the existence of psi phenom-
ena would conflict with the world-view of
those scientists, rather than because there is
any serious problem with the quality of the
research, whereas the elite members of the
American Association for the Advance-
ment of Science surveyed by McClendon
did not attribute such reasons to themselves;
they considered that an insufficient level of
evidence for psi phenomena, and a lack of
competence in the conduct of parapsy-
chological work were the main barriers
to science's acceptance of parapsychology.
It is not clear whether this difference
in views is due to the elitism of the two groups
requiring different standards of evidence,
or whether there is, in some quarters, an
absolute position among the possibility
that parapsychological phenomena exist
that, even when a paper cannot be faulted in
methodological terms, it will be rejected if
it obtains positive results. This is difficult
to determine without a Mahoney-style
investigation with a methodology modified
to allow a distinction between the data
hypotheses.3 In the absence of such infor-
mation, it is, however, worthwhile obtai-
ing current information concerning para-
psychologists attitudes towards and expe-
riences of the referees.
The present survey of Parapsychologi-
cal Association (PA) members was de-
signed to attempt to clarify parapsycho-
logist's views of the current situation and to
form a basis for them to improve their
position, whatever it might be. Specifically,
the survey aimed to examine how wide-
spread any concern about mainstream
reviewer bias still is among parapsycholo-
gists; to determine whether the low number of parapsychology papers and grants in the
mainstream is due to high rejection rates or
to demoralised parapsychologists not
submitting their work in the first place; to
ascertain how many parapsychologists are
called upon to act as referees for parapsy-
chological submissions to non-parapsy-
chological journals, and on what basis the
editors choose them; and to identify factors
that appear to influence success rates,
which researchers might be able to exploit
to their advantage in the future.

Method

Questionnaire

A four-page questionnaire (see Appendix) was mailed, early in 1993, roughly five weeks before the stipulated
reply deadline, to all 242 PA members and
associate members whose addresses were listed in the 1992 PA mem-
bers' directory. A covering letter assured respondents of complete confidentiality for their
to answers, apart from their answers to free-response Questions 12 to 15 if they
expressly gave permission for their names to be used. The questionnaire dealt with
publishing and funding attempts during the last 15 years (since 1978).

Participants

Seventy-two replies (30% of all PA members) were received by the deadline.
Forty-one (57%) were from the US, 7 (24%) from the UK, 12 (17%) from the rest of
Europe (Belgium, France, Germany,
Iceland, Italy, The Netherlands and
Norway), and 1 (1%) each from Australia, Canada, China, and South Africa.
Apart from the UK being over-repre-
sented (only about 10% of all PA members are from the UK), this distribution is
PUBLISHING AND FUNDING PARAPSYCHOLOGY

roughly representative of PA membership as a whole. One hundred and six current PA members have published in a PA-affiliated journal or in Research in Parapsychology in the last 15 years, and at least 47 (44%) of them took part in this survey (seven respondents were anonymous).

Eighteen questionnaires returned after the deadline are included in the analysis of responses to free-response Questions 12 to 15 only.

Results

All analyses reported below were exploratory and unplanned.

Estimated and Actual Success Rates

Publishing: Most respondents to Question 1 felt that it was likely that proportionately fewer parapsychology than other papers are accepted by non-parapsychology journals (78%); 15% gave no answer, 4% guessed the acceptance rate to be the same, and 3% thought that parapsychology papers stood a better chance. The average acceptance rate for parapsychology papers submitted by PA members was estimated at 18% by those 45 respondents who answered Question 10. The actual average acceptance rate4 for those 215 who indicated that certain papers were purely 'anomalous' (not concerned with whether 'psi' effects really exist or what properties they might have) rather than strictly parapsychological, those data were discounted in order to produce a conservative measure.

5 The data of 11 respondents are excluded from analyses involving the number of parapsychology papers published in non-parapsychology journals, because the number of accepted papers that they claimed cannot be reconciled with a bibliography of such papers that I have recently compiled (Milton, in press, a, b). The discrepancies were too large in six cases (between five and twenty extra papers each) to be attributable to minor differences in definition of journal types or to the slightly different time period covered by the bibliography. These respondents may simply have misread the question and included papers in non-academic periodicals, or papers published well outside the correct timespan. In case other respondents had encountered similar problems, another respondent who had claimed only one more paper than could be accounted for, and four respondents whose data could not be checked (three who were anonymous and one who is no longer a PA member) are similarly excluded from the relevant analyses.

Funding: Similarly, most respondents to Question 4 thought that parapsychological research proposals have a proportionately lower chance of obtaining funding from major funding institutions that fund research in many disciplines, rather than other proposals (85%). Fourteen per cent gave no opinion, 1% thought that parapsychology proposals' chances were higher, and no one thought they equal. The 45 respondents who tried to estimate PA members' probable acceptance rate for such funding (Question 11) guessed an average of 8%. The actual rate of acceptance5, based on those 23 respondents who gave details in response to Question 6, was 26%.

Type of Research and Success Rates

Publishing: A detailed breakdown of responses to Question 3 is given in Table 1. The highest success rate was for research reviews (100%), followed by spontaneous case work (88%), theoretical/philosophical research (75%), and experimental papers (66%). One person whose survey data was not consistent with the bibliography submitted historical papers, but he did not specify how many.

Funding: Responses to Question 6 are detailed in Table 2. The highest success rate was for proposals for research reviews (100%), followed by spontaneous case work (40%), experimental research (23%), theoretical/philosophical research (18%), and historical work (0%). Only the figures for theoretical/philosophical and experimental papers are based on sufficient cases to be likely to be representative.

Researchers' Publishing Record and Success Rates

For respondents who had attempted to publish parapsychological research in non-parapsychology journals6, the more papers they had published in parapsychology journals, the more parapsychology papers they had published in non-parapsychology journals (r = .593, N = 21, p < .005, one-tailed) and, to a lesser and non-significant extent, the more non-parapsychology papers in non-parapsychology journals (r = .144, N = 20)7. The number of publications of different types was related to respondents' acceptance rates (proportion as opposed to number of items accepted) as described below.

Publishing: The acceptance rate of parapsychological papers submitted to non-parapsychology journals4 was not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of research</th>
<th>Acceptance rate (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All types</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research review</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spontaneous case</td>
<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretical/philosophical</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>60</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of research</th>
<th>No. of respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All types</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research review</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous case</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretical/philosophical</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>10</td>
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6 There are more papers of all types than of the categories combined because some papers did not fit any category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of research</th>
<th>Acceptance rate (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All types</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research review</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous case</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical/philosophical</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>0</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Total proposals submitted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research review</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spontaneous case</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theoretical/philosophical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
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<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

7 There are more proposals of all types than of the categories combined because some proposals did not fit any category.
PUBLISHING AND FUNDING PARAPSYCHOLOGY

Table 3
Mean number of papers published by referees and non-referees\(^{4,6}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of paper</th>
<th>Non-Referees</th>
<th>Referees</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney U (N1, N2)</th>
<th>p (one-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parapsychology papers in parapsychology journals</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>688.5 (56,16)</td>
<td>&lt; .0007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parapsychology papers in non-parapsychology journals</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>372.5 (51,10)</td>
<td>&lt; .00012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-parapsychology papers in non-parapsychology journals</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>571.0 (55,15)</td>
<td>&lt; .012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

significantly related to the number of a respondent's parapsychology papers published in parapsychology journals (r = .011, N = 20\(^8\)) or to the number of non-parapsychology papers published in non-parapsychology journals (r = .048, N = 19\(^7\)); however, it was correlated positively with the number of a respondent's parapsychology papers published in non-parapsychology journals (r = .387, N = 20, p < .05, one-tailed\(^9\)), a correlation that is likely to be at least partly artefactual.

**Funding:** The acceptance rate of parapsychological research proposals submitted to major funding institutions was positively related to the number of a respondent's parapsychology papers published in parapsychology journals (r = .376, N = 17, n.s.), and significantly so to the number of parapsychology papers published in parapsychology journals (r = .387, N = 23, p < .05, one-tailed), and the number of non-parapsychology papers published (r = .399, N = 23, p < .05, one-tailed).

These results suggest a generally positive, though not always strong, relationship between publication record and success rates.

**Author's Country and Success Rates**

It had been intended to compare success rates for publishing and funding for researchers working in different countries, but the numbers of respondents who sought publication or funding in each country were too low for such a comparison to be meaningful.

**Parapsychologists as Mainstream Referees for Parapsychological Papers**

Sixteen respondents (22% of the sample) had been asked by an editor of a non-parapsychological journal to act as a referee for at least one parapsychological paper. Those who were chosen had published many more papers than those who were not chosen, as summarised in Table 3.

Thirteen referees indicated, in response to Question 9, why they believed they had been chosen. None thought that it had been because the journal editor had seen their work in a parapsychological journal. Six thought they had been selected because the editor had seen their parapsychological work in a non-parapsychological journal; five, because they had previously refereed non-parapsychological work for that journal; four, because the editor had met them and knew of their interest in parapsychology; three, because a colleague had recommended them to the editor; one, because he was in charge of a special parapsychology section within the journal; one, because he was a friend of the editor who knew him well enough to trust his judgment; and one, because he was on a shortlist of referees submitted by the author.

**Reasons for Not Trying to Publish or Obtain Funding**

Publishing: Twenty-four respondents who had written parapsychological papers but who had not attempted to publish any in non-parapsychology journals gave reasons for not having tried (Question 2). Fourteen thought non-parapsychology journals so hostile to parapsychology that it wasn't worth trying; eleven considered their papers too specialised to be of interest outside the field; five believed that parapsychologists should support the parapsychology journals as a priority; five were concerned that other parapsychologists would be less likely to see their work in mainstream journals; one did not want to advertise his interest in parapsychology too widely in case his career or reputation were damaged; one respondent had submitted work to parapsychology journals because he thought them easier to get into; another, because she felt that the referees for the parapsychology journal would review her paper more knowledgeably than mainstream referees; one felt that, as a newcomer to the field, it was important to establish communication with parapsychologists first; and one respondent whose work had been funded by one of the parapsychological research societies that publish a journal felt honour-bound to offer the work there first.

**Funding:** Of those 18 respondents who had wanted funding and said why they hadn't applied to major funding institu-

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\(^4\) Respondents who were not specific about the number of their publications in any given category were necessarily excluded from relevant analyses.

\(^5\) A number of proposals, based on the results of the survey and respondents' suggestions, were put to the August 14, 1993 meeting of the PA's Board of Directors. The Board agreed to have a directory compiled of specialists competent to review parapsychological submissions for use by non-parapsychology journals and major funding institutions; to encourage Program Chairs to circulate more widely the call for papers for, and announcements of PA conventions; and to encourage the setting up for the 1994 convention a panel at which outside experts would advise on ways to facilitate mainstream funding and publication of parapsychological work. In addition, an annual bibliography of PA members' recent publications will appear in future issues of Research in Parapsychology, for purposes that include enabling parapsychologists to monitor their publication success in non-parapsychology journals, and demonstrating to non-parapsychologists who monitor RIP the range of PA members' parapsychological and non-parapsychological work.

\(^7\) The (London) Society for Psychical Research has abandoned its former policy of requiring grant-holders to give first refusal of their research report to the SPR's own journal, because publication in any journal is seen as benefiting parapsychology as a whole (Gaule, personal communication 1993).

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lish the personal credibility of parapsychologists on a face-to-face basis. Parapsychologists were recommended to:

- meet and forge links with other scientists, including attending the conventions of other disciplines and joining other professional organisations;
- initiate and engage in dialogues with others outside the field, including not letting unjustified criticism go by default; publication of papers on the sociology of disputes between parapsychologies and extreme critics might help;
- organise or take part in interdisciplinary meetings (some respondents gave examples of having done this successfully);
- hold workshops on parapsychology at mainstream conventions;
- invite other scientists, including editors and funders, to parapsychology conferences and meetings, as both listeners and speakers;
- present the problems as parapsychologists see them to editors and funders, and ask for their advice, perhaps in a special PA symposium, both for the direct benefit of having their opinion and because, having had some input into parapsychologists’ efforts themselves, the decision-makers would tend to be favourably inclined towards any resulting efforts;
- lobby, via the PA, bodies such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Psychological Association, British Psychological Society, etc.;
- attract more members to the PA from the outside, especially from other professional groups; the PA should advertise for members in academic journals, which would improve its currently poor name recognition even if it attracted new members;
- extend the diffusion of parapsychology journals to the libraries of other fields;
- try to take up positions on mainstream committees, including editorial boards and funding committees that make decisions about funding parapsychological work;
- offer to be consultants and reviewers for parapsychological papers and proposals; the PA could offer to monitor any government-funded research to ensure that it is well-conducted and that no inappropriate conclusions are drawn from it.

(b) Academic reputation

A related factor, and one of almost equal concern (mentioned by 28 respondents), was that of the researcher’s academic reputation and the prestige of the institution to which he or she belonged. Specifically, respondents felt that the researcher’s reputation for his or her parapsychological work would have little impact, but the researcher’s reputation for mainstream work would, particularly a good reputation in the field of a specialist journal or funding institution. Researchers who don’t already have such a track record were recommended to:

- get one;
- collaborate with others who do have such a track record, including those who favour conventional explanations for parapsychological findings;
- cite in their papers or proposals high-quality parapsychological research conducted at prestigious universities;
- have larger parapsychological research groups support individual researchers seeking funding by assuring funders that necessary research facilities are in place and available.

(c) Selection of and adaptation to journals and funding bodies

The careful choice of where to send papers and proposals, and the tailoring of work to suit those specific institutions were issues for 16 respondents. Also, 20 respondents considered that the beliefs, open-mindedness, and even the psychological health of editors and referees were factors in whether a parapsychology paper or proposal was likely to be accepted. Non-specialist reviewers’ lack of knowledge of parapsychological research methods was also of concern. It was suggested that parapsychologists should:

- make sure that their research is relevant to the journal’s or funding body’s subject matter, including their theoretical concerns, terms of reference, and, especially, their current interests;
- consider the attitudes and interests of those people who make the decisions;
- announce successful publication attempts in the PA newsletter;
- use the appropriate style and language for the target institution (including the appropriate layout and format specified by each journal);
- select journals where any parapsychology bias may not be so strong;
- go for the mid-level journals in which there is space to present an argument before working up to the more prestigious journals.

(d) Presentation style and tone

There were also some suggestions made concerning the style and tone likely to increase the acceptability of parapsychological research in general. Sixteen respondents thought that a sceptical stance, or one that supported an orthodox interpretation of anomalous findings, would increase chances of success. Betty Markwick wrote:

In the long term, parapsychologists should work towards presenting parapsychology as a science directed to the resolution of anomalous experiences and happenings, free from any assumptions as to a psi interpretation. Individual parapsychologists may of course believe the psi hypothesis to be correct, but parapsychology itself needs to be presented as a neutral science, and to draw friendly sceptics into its ranks. Papers and research proposals issuing from such a broadened perspective would inevitably attract a more favourable response from non-parapsychological journals and funding institutions. Moreover, the new parapsychology should appeal to open-minded scientists in other fields, and would enable parapsychology to gain a stronger foothold in academia.

Strident assertion of claims of paranormality were warned against. David Stevenson wrote:

...aggressive assertion of the actuality of ‘psi’ may deter, suggestion that results have interesting implications which deserve further study may be more acceptable... Present findings and ideas in such a way that they will be thought about, rather than starting with assertions which you know are likely to be rejected before the paper has been read and digested... non-parapsychologists may want to be seen to be arriving at their own conclusions rather than being dragged into a new world-view by outsiders.

As well as taking care that papers were well-written, several respondents warned against using parapsychological jargon. Five respondents felt that the use of terms such as ‘anomalous’ rather than ‘paranormal’ were more likely to be acceptable, as well as perhaps more appropriate in terms of our current state of knowledge, although one respondent was against the use of such terms.

(e) Methodological quality

Eighteen respondents mentioned high methodological, conceptual or general quality of the research as a factor in success. Researchers were recommended to:

- emphasise the methodological rigour of their design;
- make the design and methodology very clear;
- set the research in a theoretical or philosophical framework wherever possible, and emphasise any links between the research and mainstream theories and concepts;
- get detailed criticism from knowledgeable parapsychologists before submitting the research in the mainstream;
bear in mind that editors, referees and funders are generally unfamiliar with parapsychological research methods, so researchers should whenever possible anticipate and counter such criticism before it has a chance to be made.

(1) Choice of research topic and methodology

Apart from high methodological and intellectual quality, a number of other aspects of research were felt to be influential. Researchers were recommended to:

- choose parapsychological research topics with interesting interdisciplinary or general relevance (22 respondents), especially with relevance to disciplines of interest to the target journal or institution: the research might be a mix of parapsychological and non-parapsychological elements;
- choose research topics that are timely in terms of what is going on in mainstream science;
- choose topics of great interest to the general public;
- for funding proposals, make sure that the research is such that the funders will have got something useful even if there is no evidence of anomalous effects, and point that out to the funders;
- don’t waste time on procedures that are known to be likely to give weak effect sizes; good potential results should help funding proposals;
- for funding proposals, ensure that the research will stand up to trustees’ and public scrutiny and will make the funding institution look good;
- choose socially relevant topics;
- choose applied parapsychological research topics (13 respondents) such as paranormal healing, psychic detection of criminals, or topics that might have potential for application: applied research of social or military relevance, and applied research for making money, were proposed as being particularly likely to succeed;
- do anomalous psychology research, such as examining correlates of belief in the paranormal;
- concentrate on review articles and meta-analyses;
- only submit groups of thematically related studies and keep one-off experiments that haven’t been replicated for the parapsychology journals;
- use exact rather than conceptual replications;
- don’t use procedures that are conceptually difficult;
- use traditional statistical methods;
- do research that is limited in scope;
- include physical variables in the study, such as physiological measurements;
- stick to the most intuitively plausible forms of the paranormal, such as telepathy rather than precognition;
- concentrate on the less frightening aspects of the paranormal;
- avoid research with a high ‘giggle’ factor;
- base research on large databases;
- do research in groups rather than individually, especially in groups with non-parapsychologists, or at least do research in areas where many researchers are working.

(g) General comments

Although a few respondents were very despairing of parapsychology’s chances in the mainstream, most who directly addressed the issue felt that persistence would pay. Dean Radin wrote:

It is difficult to repeatedly try for big name journals because of unfair rejection, etc. However, we have to continually push the prejudicial envelope because persistence (and high quality research) does eventually open doors.

The point was also made that initial rejection of a paper or proposal should not be taken as evidence of an anti-parapsychological bias; competition for publication and funding is fierce for all research, and mainstream referees often made good points that could improve the work before its resubmission, elsewhere if appropriate. Things were generally seen as improving, particularly in the light of recent developments in the situation of ganzfeld research.

Discussion

The findings of the survey confirm that there are still many parapsychologists who feel that there is a strong presumption against parapsychology in the mainstream, beyond what might be justified by the principle of ‘extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof’. The vast majority of respondents (78% for publishing, 85% for funding) felt that parapsychological research was more likely to be turned down than other types of research; for those who never tried to publish or fund their work in the mainstream, the most common reason for not trying was the expected hostility of their reception.

The data are more equivocal on whether these concerns about bias are justified. Acceptance rates were apparently quite high: 73% for papers, 26% for grant proposals. Respondents, however, underestimated these acceptance rates roughly by a factor of four. Are parapsychologists paranoid, or is the apparent acceptance rate, as measured in this study, highly inflated? Response bias is an obvious factor to consider here; researchers who have been unsuccessful might be embarrassed about it and not have taken part in the survey. However, at least 44% of actively publishing PA members did take part; even if we assume that the remainder had none of their papers or proposals accepted, that would still leave publication success rates at a very respectable 32%, and funding rates at 11%. A more difficult factor to gauge is that researchers may have an accurate idea (based on previous experience or, as a few respondents volunteered, informal ‘sounding out of institutions’) of when rejection is certain and it is not worth trying at all; such strategies would have reduced the number of formal rejections measured here. It is also possible that care-ful selection of appropriate material and the most promising (perhaps less prestigious) journals and institutions meant that success rates are not representative. More careful wording of Questions 3 and 6 might have ensured that repeated submissions were always included.

The position concerning the use of parapsychology referees by non-parapsychological journals, on the other hand, appears much clearer. Those chosen to be referees had many more publications, both parapsychological and non-parapsychological, than non-referees. However, the comments of those chosen indicate that non-parapsychological journal editors recruited these parapsychologist referees either through personal contacts or through seeing that person’s work outside the parapsychology literature. No referee thought that they had been chosen because the editor had seen their work in a parapsychology journal. The identities of the referees support the respondents’ views. Some respondents, whom most parapsychologists would identify as being especially competent to spot methodological flaws, were not chosen as referees; some who were chosen have their main scientific interests in fields other than parapsychology, and have not tended to have been active in methodological controversies. A proven track-record of concern with methodological issues in parapsychology does not appear to be a criterion that mainstream editors are using extensively. Personal contact, and an individual’s visibility in the mainstream, appear to be more important.

Given that parapsychology has a least a toe-hold in the mainstream, but that there may be a strong presumption against the existence of psi phenomena and refereeing selection practices inspire less than confidence, what should parapsychologists do to improve the situation? Respondents have put forward many valuable suggestions, and there is no need to rehearse them here, but I think that there is a useful way for judging the relative merit of any particular suggestion.

Call up in your mind a research topic that you consider totally null and bogus, that is pursued by a small number of researchers personally unknown to you, using a methodology with which you are unfamiliar. Now imagine that you are the
editor of an important general science journal with a one in five acceptance rate, and that you have been sent a paper with positive findings on this research topic. You know, if the views of some are correct, in the position of a mainstream journal editor who has received a parapsychology paper. What would you make accept that paper for publication? How would you choose someone to referee it?

From this perspective, we can perhaps see how tempting it is to take more seriously the work of someone well-known, or from a reputable institution, or whom we have met and who appeared personally credible. Respondents' suggestions that parapsychologists should increase their personal contacts with mainstream scientists, establish a reputation in the mainstream, employ a neutral, jargon-free tone, point out the methodological safeguards in their work, produce timely research with interdisciplinary relevance, and so on, make good sense from this point of view. Any activities that make parapsychologists appear to be a group involved in special pleading, or that involve applied research with questionable ethical implications, look less good.

Some suggestions for success deserve further comment. In general, it seems best to begin publication and funding attempts with the type of research at present most acceptable to the mainstream, and then build on that foundation. In terms of publications, the survey data support some respondents' opinions in suggesting that research reviews in particular have a relatively high chance of success, and may therefore be a useful route to establishing credentials. However, this finding should be matched with some caution: types of research with lower apparent success rates may simply be reflecting lower general acceptance rates of the types of journal to which they are usually submitted.

The need for methodological excellence for success was another important factor stressed by many respondents. However, mainstream researchers are generally unaware of parapsychological research findings and methods, which places the burden on parapsychologists to demonstrate the soundness of their research every time that it is presented. For an experimental paper, for example, the author might point out that the research fulfills the latest relevant meta-analytic quality criteria, which in turn are based on decades of critical discussion of parapsychological methodology. The author might forestall criticism for false flaws that are regularly pointed out by non-specialists, such as the need for a "non-ESP" control condition (Bem, 1982). Such a strategy would help both to protect the author against a mistaken non-specialist reviewer, and to protect the journal against incorrect critical correspondence on the issue if the paper is published, as sometimes happens (e.g. Baron & Stapp, 1971). Parapsychologist reviewers could suggest that authors include such information, if they haven't already, and generally bear in mind the need to defend papers against erroneous criticism from other reviewers.

If a paper is nevertheless rejected because of a mistaken but unanticipated criticism from a non-specialist reviewer, the author can respond with a letter or an erratum, pointing explicitly with the misconception, in a way that will make it difficult for another reviewer to make the same error when the paper is resubmitted elsewhere. If non-specialist reviewers persist in inaccurate criticism, then it would be possible to document the problem and draw attention to it, bearing in mind that parapsychology papers don't have a monopoly on being subjected to incompetent assessment. However, by no means all non-specialist referees' comments will be of this nature; many will contain useful suggestions for improving the paper. A paper that is rejected, but not fundamentally flawed, can be revised and resubmitted to another mainstream journal, working down the prestige ladder if necessary. This is of course a common strategy among scientists in all disciplines, a number of respondents mentioned having been successful with it, and urged others similarly not to give up after just one rejection.

Although it is clearly desirable that parapsychologists as a group submit papers and proposals to the mainstream, a few poorly conducted submissions can harm the chances of good quality work being accepted. Anyone who is new to the field or who has not previously published their work in one of the leading parapsychology journals where specialist reviewers is likely to be at its best, owes it to themselves and their colleagues not to send work for mainstream consideration without having their work thoroughly checked out by more experienced researchers, preferably ones who have a special interest in methodological issues and who have experience of mainstream publication themselves. However, for those established researchers who are confident that their research represents some of the best that the field has to offer, it is important to submit papers and proposals to the mainstream in some numbers. If only a few researchers are venturing into the mainstream, it perpetuates the illusion that the field consists of a few lone eccentrics, easily dismissed. Gertrude Schneider, after a presentation of an earlier version of this paper, suggested that parapsychologists might from time to time concentrate their efforts on a particular mainstream institution by sending it several proposals or papers from different researchers, which would help decision-makers to get a more realistic context for the research. This is an interesting idea.

Only time will tell whether parapsychology's access to the mainstream will improve. It may help that parapsychology itself has, I believe, improved in recent years in terms of the attention paid to methodological safeguards and of the use of more revealing data analysis techniques (e.g. Hyman & Honorton, 1986). As one respondent wrote, 'I do think times are changing. I wouldn't use the results of the past to try to predict the future.'

References


Appendix

Publishing and Funding Questionnaire

1. How would you estimate the probable current publication rate of parapsychological papers submitted to non-parapsychological academic journals?
   (a) the rate is about the same for parapsychology and non-parapsychology papers
   (b) proportionately fewer parapsychology papers are accepted than others
   (c) proportionately more parapsychology papers are accepted than others

2. If you have not attempted to publish any parapsychological work in non-parapsychological journals in the last 15 years (from 1978 onwards), please check the reason(s) listed below.
   (a) I haven't written any parapsychology papers in this period
   (b) my papers were too specialised to be of interest to non-parapsychologists
   (c) these journals are so hostile to parapsychology that it wasn't worth trying
   (d) parapsychologists should support the parapsychology journals and so I always sent my papers to them
   (e) parapsychologists would be less likely to see my work if I published it in a non-parapsychological journal
   (f) I did not want to advertise my interest in parapsychology too widely in case it damaged my career or reputation
   (g) some other reason; please specify:

3. If you have attempted to publish any parapsychological papers in non-parapsychological journals in the last 15 years (from 1978 onwards), please indicate how many of each type were submitted and how many accepted:
   (a) papers of all types in total
   (b) experimental papers
   (c) spontaneous case papers
   (d) research review papers
   (e) theoretical/philosophical papers
   (f) historical papers

4. How would you estimate the probable current success rate of parapsychological research proposals submitted to major research funding institutions that fund research in many disciplines (government research councils, major charitable foundations, etc.)?
   (a) proportionately more parapsychology proposals are accepted than others
   (b) proportionately fewer parapsychology proposals are accepted than others
   (c) the rate is about the same for parapsychology and non-parapsychology proposals

5. If you have not attempted to get funding for any parapsychological work from any major funding institutions in the last 15 years (from 1978 onwards), please check the reason(s) listed below.
   (a) I haven't wanted funding for parapsychology in this period
   (b) these institutions are so hostile to parapsychology that it wasn't worth trying
   (c) some other reason; please specify:

6. If you have attempted to get funding for any parapsychological work from any major funding institutions in the last 15 years (from 1978 onwards), please indicate how many funding requests for each type of research were submitted and accepted:
   (a) research of all types in total
   (b) experimental research
   (c) spontaneous case research
   (d) research review work
   (e) theoretical/philosophical research
   (f) historical research

7. How many papers have you published in parapsychological journals in the last 15 years (from 1978 onwards)?

8. How many non-parapsychology papers have you published in non-parapsychological journals in the last 15 years (from 1978 onwards)?

9. How many parapsychological papers have you been asked to referee for a non-parapsychological journal?

If you have been asked, please check the reason(s) why you think that you were chosen.
   (a) I don't know
   (b) the editor had seen my parapsychological work in a parapsychology journal
   (c) the editor had seen my parapsychological work in a mainstream journal
   (d) the editor had met me and knew of my interest in parapsychology
   (e) a colleague recommended me to the editor
   (f) I had refereed non-parapsychological work for that journal previously
   (g) another reason; please specify:

10. What do you estimate is the overall acceptance rate for parapsychological papers submitted by PA members to non-parapsychological journals?

11. What do you estimate is the overall acceptance rate for research funding requests for parapsychological work submitted by PA members to major funding institutions?

12. What factors do you think might be important in determining whether a parapsychological paper gets published in a non-parapsychological journal, or whether a parapsychological research proposal to a major funding institution is successful?

13. What, if any, strategies do you think that individual parapsychologists could use to increase their chances of such publication or funding?

14. What, if anything, do you think that parapsychologists could do collectively to increase their chances of such publication or funding, including through the PA?

15. Do you have any other comments to make on the topics covered in this survey?

16. May I credit you by name in my report for your comments in reply to Questions 12, 13, 14 and 15?

17. Name (optional)

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PUBLISHING AND FUNDING PARAPSYCHOLOGY

Publier et financer la parapsychologie dans la ligne du courant dominant: Une enquête par courrier des expériences vécues et stratégies pour réussir.

Résumé: L'enquête par courrier rapportée ici a été mise au point afin de savoir quelles sont les chances exactes pour les publications parapsychologiques et propositions de bourses d'être acceptées par des journaux scientifiques et corps de financement majeurs non-parapsychologiques. On a envoyé à tous les 242 membres et membres associés de la Parapsychological Association un questionnaire de quatre pages demandant des détails sur les 15 dernières années de tentatives de publication et financement et toute expérience vécue d'avoir été sollicité pour être référencé d'articles de parapsychologie pour le compte de journaux non-parapsychologiques. On leur a aussi demandé leurs vues sur quels facteurs peuvent influencer le taux de succès, et quelles stratégies les parapsychologues devraient adopter afin d'améliorer leurs chances.

On a obtenu un taux de réponse global de 30%, représentant un taux de réponse de 44% pour les membres de l'PA publant activement. Le taux d'acceptation apparent d'articles de parapsychologie dans des revues non-parapsychologiques a été de 72%, et de 26% pour les propositions de financement par des institutions de financement multidisciplinaires majeures, quoiqu'il soit probable que ces chiffres soient gonflés. La probabilité de réussite, en particulier pour des propositions de bourse, a semblé augmenter avec le nombre de publications du chercheur. Les comptes-rendus de la recherche ont un taux d'acceptation pour publication de 100% apparentement élevé. Tous ceux qui ont été invités par des journaux non-parapsychologiques à être référencé d'articles de parapsychologie croient avoir été reçus via des contacts et sources d'information hors parapsychologie, aucun par des editors contrôlant les journaux de parapsychologie. On fait la liste des facteurs affectant le taux de succès, et les stratégies pour améliorer les taux de succès suggérés par les répondants. La stratégie la plus fréquemment mentionnée a été le développement de contacts plus nombreux avec les scientifiques d'autres domaines.

MILTON

Publicando y Obteniendo Fondos en Parapsicología en Relación a el Establecimiento: Una Encuesta Postal de Experiencias y Estrategias de Éxito

Resumen: La encuesta postal que reportamos aquí fue diseñada para obtener información precisa sobre las oportunidades de obtener aceptación de publicar artículos en revistas y obtener fondos de instituciones no-parapsicológicas. Enviamos cuestionarios a cuatro páginas a todos los 242 miembros y miembros asociados de la Parapsychological Association preguntando por detalles de los últimos 15 años de esfuerzos para publicar y obtener fondos y de experiencias de ser invitado a publicar artículos parapsicológicos para revistas no-parapsicológicas. También preguntamos sus opiniones sobre los factores que pueden afectar la tasa de éxito en estas actividades, y cuáles estrategias los parapsicólogos podrían adoptar para aumentar sus tasas de éxito. Se obtuvo un 30% de respuestas, representando un 44% de los miembros de la PA que están activos publicando. La tasa de aceptación de artículos parapsicológicos en revistas no-parapsicológicas fue 73%. La tasa de becas de instituciones de gran escala y multidisciplinarias fue 26%. Pero estas figuras posiblemente subestiman la situación. La posibilidad de éxito, especialmente en aplicaciones de becas, parecen aumentar con el número de publicaciones de los investigadores. Artículos sobre revisiones de investigación obtuvieron una tasa de aceptación de 100%. Todos los que fueron invitados por revistas no-parapsicológicas a revisar artículos parapsicológicos creen que fueron reclutados a través de contactos y fuentes informativas no-parapsicológicas, pero no a través de editores que prestan atención a la literatura parapsicológica.

Se presentan listas de las sugerencias de las personas que respondieron sobre los factores que afectan y que pueden aumentar las posibilidades de éxito. La estrategia más frecuentemente fue el aumento de contactos con científicos de otros campos de estudio.

Publikation und Subsidie in der Parapsychologie: schriftliche enquete über erwartungen und anpak

Samenvatting: De hier behandeld schriftelijke enquête wilde nagaan hoe groot de kans is dat parapsychologische artikelen worden geaccepteerd door niet-parapsychologische wetenschappelijke tijdschriften en dat subsidies worden verstrekt door onderzoekers van buiten de parapsychologie. De 242 (vol en associé) leden van de Parapsychological Association (PA) ontvingen een enquêteformulier van 4 pagina’s. Dat bevatte gedetailleerde vragen over pogingen tot dergelijke publicaties en tot subsidieaanvragen. Over de afgelopen 15 jaar. Bovendien werd gevraagd hoe vaak men in die periode was benaderd voor het beoordelen van parapsychologische manuscripten voor niet-parapsychologische tijdschriften. Ook werd gevraagd welke factoren het succes van die activiteiten beïnvloedden en met welke strategieën de parapsychologen daarmee geslaagd waren.

Van de formulieren kwam 30% terug. Dat is 44% van de actief publicerende PA-leden. In 73% van de gevallen werden parapsychologische artikelen door niet-parapsychologische wetenschappelijke tijdschriften geaccepteerd en in 26% kregen subsidie van belangrijke multidisciplinaire instituten, maar beide scores lijken geflateerd. De kans op succes, vooral bij subsidieaanvragen, leek te stijgen als een onderzoeker meer publicaties heeft afgeleverd. Onderzoekswijzen lieten zelfs 100% kansen op publicatie hebben. Iedereen die gevraagd was te commentate of te stemmen, kon dan per contactpersonen buiten de parapsychologie waren gekomen. Niemand heeft echter dat een redacteur of on parapsychologisch tijdschrift hen had gekroond. Het artikel geeft een overzicht van factoren en strategieën die de kans op publikatie of subsidie zouden kunnen vergeten. De meest genoemde aanpak was intensiever contact met wetenschappers in andere disciplines.

Publikationsmöglichkeiten und Forschungsmittel für Parapsychologie in der Normalwissenschaft: Eine Umfrage über Erfahrungen und Erfolgstrategien

Zusammenfassung: Die hier vorgestellte, schriftlich durchgeführte Umfrage sollte genaue Angaben über die Chancen für parapsychologische Publikationen in nicht-parapsychologischen Wissenschaftszeitschriften und für Anträge auf Forschungsmittel für Parapsychologie bei den
PUBLISHING AND FUNDING PARAPSYCHOLOGY


Pubblicazioni e finanziamenti per la parapsicologia entro la cultura ufficiale. Un'indagine sull’esperienze e sulle strategie di successo

Sommario: L’inchiesta postale che viene qui riferita è stata progettata per ottenere informazioni attendibili sulle possibilità che i giornali scientifici e gli enti erogatori non parapsicologici accettano articoli di argomento parapsicologico e richiedano di finanziamento per ricerche in quest’ambito. Tutti i 242 membri e associati della Parapsychological Association (PA) è stato inviato questionario di quattro pagine che chiedeva informazioni dettagliate sui simili tentativi di pubblicazione e di finanziamento compiuti negli ultimi quindici anni e sull’eventualità di essi stati contattati da riviste non parapsicologiche per compiere revisioni specialistiche di articoli parapsicologici. Il questionario chiedeva inoltre l’opinione personale degli interpellati sui fattori che potrebbero influire sul tasso di riuscita di questi tentativi e sulle strategie che i parapsicologi potrebbero adottare per aumentare le possibilità di successo.

Sì è avuto un livello di risposta complessivo del 30%, che comprende un tasso del 44% relativo a quei membri della PA che pubblicano attivamente. La percentuale di accettazione dei lavori parapsicologici nelle riviste non-parapsicologiche risulta apparentemente del 73% e quella di proposte di finanziamento, da parte dei principali enti che erogano fondi in una molteplicità settori, del 26%: ma è possibile che tali dati siano sovrastimati. La probabilità di successo di ricercatore, in particolare per quel che riguarda la richiesta di finanziamenti, sembra aumentare il numero delle sue pubblicazioni. Gli articoli di rassegna sulla ricerca sembrano venir accettati dalla pubblicazione a un tasso particolarmente alto, pari al 100%. Tutti coloro i quali sono stati intervistati da riviste non-parapsicologiche per giudicare articoli di parapsicologia ritengono di essere raggiunti attraverso fonti e contatti personali non-parapsicologici, in quanto nessuno responsabili editoriali consultava le riviste parapsicologiche. Vengono elencati sia i fattori che parere degli interpellati influenzano la riuscita delle richieste, sia le strategie che secondo essi migliorano le probabilità di successo. La strategia menzionata più spesso consiste nell’accezione di contatti con scienziati di altri campi.