

## Guest Editorial The Continuing Evolution of Parapsychology

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John Palmer has kindly invited me to provide a guest editorial to this issue of The Journal of Parapsychology, reflecting on the changing scene in parapsychology. This past summer I spent two months at the Rhine Research Center, participating in the last Summer Studies Program to be taught in its present location and consulting on their future plans. By the same time next summer the RRC will have moved into its new location, probably the very first building constructed specifically for the purpose of parapsychological research, teaching and publication. This dramatic change, coupled by the advent of the new millennium, provides strong impetus to consider parapsychology's likely future in the US and elsewhere.

In September I had occasion to give a talk on the Duke University campus on the topic, Parapsychology's Problems and Prospects: Implications for the History of Science. In preparing the talk, I was led to consider the ongoing evolution of parapsychology, as a continuation of the views I presented in the 1990-1991 issue of the *European Journal of Parapsychology* and updated last year in the June issue of the *Journal of Parapsychology*. One of the important functions parapsychology or any other controversial area of science can serve is to inform the study of science itself, as conducted through the history, philosophy, sociology and, most recently, the psychology of science.

In fact, parapsychology had already served as a case study in the history of science, in a 1980 book written by my Duke host, Dr. Seymour Mauskopf, and his colleague, Dr. Michael McVaugh, of the University of North Carolina, *The Elusive Science: Origins of Experimental Psychical research*. A major part of their study was to assess the extent to which the Rhines had succeeded in establishing parapsychology as a part of the academic and scientific scene. They concluded that there were several factors contributing to the difficulties the Rhines and others had encountered. Three had to do with the phenomena themselves: they were very uncommon, at least in such a way as to be identified as good instances; they appeared to have unsettling implications for our existing scientific knowledge and methodologies; and they were so far difficult to control and replicate. Six others were social factors emerging during the course of the initial academic efforts: there were no consensually accepted criteria for replicability such that opponents and proponents were free to adopt different criteria; other researchers were led to have initial high expectations for success which then tended not to be met; most independent researchers decided that their initial results were insufficient to justify further effort; there was insufficient presentation to other researchers within an academic or scientific context; there was too much emphasis on an anti-materialist philosophy by some of the key researchers; and, establishment of a separate research laboratory at Duke had led to diminished contact with other academics and reduced opportunities to train new researchers.

In the Rhines' Afterword, they argued that if one extended the time of coverage to the present (e.g. 1980), there had indeed been good progress in gaining scientific acceptance of the evidence for the existence of psi and that there were several academic institutions that now had staff members conducting parapsychological research (Rhine & Rhine, 1980). The Parapsychological Association, formed in 1957, had been an affiliate of the American Association for the Advancement of Science since 1969. Perhaps reflecting an increased confidence in the academic potential of the field, when Arthur and Cynthia Koestler died in 1983, they had provided in their wills for the endowment of a Chair of Parapsychology to be established at a British university. It was accepted by the University of Edinburgh and begun in late 1985, with myself as first holder. Because it was to be a permanent post, we were able to formulate and implement some long term planning, much of which I had outlined at my interview. This planning was based on my previous eleven years teaching and researching in a series of short term university posts, plus what I had learned from my primary mentors, J. B. Rhine, Louisa Rhine and William Roll; as well as the stellar academic example of Gertrude Schmeidler and of course the writings of Mauskopf and McVaugh themselves. At Edinburgh we currently have five staff members and to date sixteen of our students have successfully completed their doctorates in psychology, specialising in parapsychology.

In the 1991 article, I presented my own list of ten problems facing parapsychology's scientific development, plus the strategies we were developing at Edinburgh to cope with them (Morris, 1990-1991).

The problems included: problematic metaphysical origins, linkage with concepts that had been exploited and misused in the past, linkage with psychopathological states and beliefs, threats to the tidiness of scientific methodology, involvement with theoretical issues that science has found problematic in the past, perceived threats to various fixed beliefs about the way the world works, problematic ethical issues raised by potentially powerful research procedures, involvement with the study of complex and open systems, difficulties in generating and testing theory-based hypotheses, and being labelled as a pseudo-science by some public commentators. In the article written last year (Morris, 2000) I revisited these ten problem areas and focussed on six additional specific strategies for dealing with them: evaluating more completely what we have learned, learning more from our negative results, focussing on measures that have good track records in terms of consistency and strength of effect, reducing the distinctions between critic and researcher, incorporating more expertise in other research areas and more effective interaction with the public and the media. In the remainder of this essay I would like to consolidate and expand upon the above, by looking at some developing trends likely to affect the evolution of parapsychology over the next few years.

First, the overall structure of parapsychology research facilities is likely to become increasingly diverse, as academic and other social institutions themselves become more diverse. Some may remain administratively completely separate, others completely within a larger institution, others a mix of the two with partial affiliation. As internet-assisted distant learning becomes more accepted, affiliation with remote sites and individual researchers should become more common. The internet allows a variety of interactive research strategies amongst those at separate but linked sites. This can facilitate resource sharing, extension to institutions in many different cultures and so on. Many of those involved may prefer terms not directly linked to parapsychology. This is today increasingly true of complementary medicine research where distant or remote healing protocols are being employed, ones that are looking for distant interaction effects that do not differ essentially from those found in the standard parapsychological literature.

Second, and perhaps related, there are increasing attempts to clarify what we mean by the term psi and evidence for its existence. For instance, in both the natural world and occasionally even in controlled laboratory environments one can observe spontaneous, unplanned co-incidences that appear meaningful, generally involving an organism event and an environmental event that appear not to be linked via presently understood causal mechanisms. If they occur often enough and with some suggestion of pattern to them, then they appear to offer some evidence that our knowledge of the world is incomplete but do not have much to say about the nature of any additional mechanisms that may be involved. To say that such correspondences offer evidence for psi then is more meaningful for a very general definition of psi, of the kind that does not presuppose mental involvement, special abilities and so on. Taking a step beyond this level, both in the natural world and in the controlled laboratory environment, there are instances in which individuals deliberately intend to interact with some kind of target set up in advance, under conditions in which there appears to be no presently understood causal mechanism available to link the two of them conventionally. Should procedures along these lines be sufficiently successful and not easily amenable to alternative interpretations, then they provide evidence for something a bit more specific: a new means of interaction between organism and environment, apparently involving intention of some sort. Studies using such procedures may be designed to test even more specific models of the nature of such new means of interaction. When we talk of evidence for psi, ESP or PK, in other words, we need to make sure that our evidence is consistent with the definitions of these terms that we have in mind and that we include these details in any communications about such evidence. This also would make it harder to assume that parapsychology researchers all adhere to a non-physicalistic metaphysics that they were attempting to validate.

Third, parapsychology is dealing more directly with its interactions with religion. One reflection of this is the need to sharpen the distinction between paranormal, as involving as yet unknown aspects of the natural world; and supernatural, involving matters above and beyond nature. Most would place religion in the latter, as involving posited entities not constrained by laws of nature. Our thinking gets sharpened as we come to consider what constitutes laws of nature. Psychology has found lawfulness in some aspects of human behavior and experience (for instance in sensation, perception and cognition) that are not yet tied down to specific laws of biology. This lawfulness is noisy, in part because we are studying very complex systems, in part because we are unable to measure these events very directly and precisely, and so on. It is difficult if not impossible to specify whether something that appears lawful may in fact have chaos and unlawfulness hidden beneath, or when something that appears unlawful may in fact have lawfulness at another level of description. At any given time we can only specify the apparent lawfulness given our current abilities to observe and describe. In general, the more lawfulness, the more regularity we

find, the more we tend to regard ourselves as studying aspects of nature. The same would hold true for parapsychology. Just as religious physicists might regard themselves as studying God's laws of the physical world, religious parapsychologists might regard themselves as studying God's laws of the psyche. The world's structured religions and other belief systems (including secular humanism) offer many models of the interactions between natural and supernatural processes, and the implications of parapsychology for a given religion or belief and vice versa thus depend upon the specific models involved.

Fourth, parapsychology continues to focus more specifically on strategies for obtaining effects of sufficient strength and consistency that we can make genuine progress in our search for understanding and eventual application. Some of this has to do with our methodology. Included is more effective measurement of all the various components in the systems we study so that we not omit important features. This includes environmental features ranging from general geophysical ones down to particulars of the micro-environments of each event or session; psychophysiology, both central and peripheral, using the best and least invasive of recently developed procedures; psychological, including the psychometrics of individual differences measures; and phenomenological, including rich tools of qualitative analysis such as discourse and conversational analysis. Comparably our statistical techniques need to be improved, with better use of existing tools and development of additional tools where needed. Included would be: multivariate analyses as appropriate, better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of modern meta-analysis and an understanding of the use of effect size measures. For instance, although we are increasingly encouraged to use effect sizes in calculations of how many trials we need to achieve a significant result (statistical power calculations), this makes the debatable assumption that effect size is independent of number of trials. This assumption may be valid in some circumstances and not for others. Effects may drift during the course of a long study due to increasing experimenter fatigue or boredom, the onset of holidays and so on. Long studies may be planned and conducted using different strategies such as shorter or more automated sessions.

We are studying complex systems whose boundaries are difficult to specify, and apparently include the researchers themselves as well as certain other potential observers. These systems are composed of potentially heavily interactive components, especially if one argues that some of the components may be interacting with each other through more than just the conventionally understood means. Yet most of the tools of present day science are designed for use with tidy, linear causal chains. Recent developments in areas such as fuzzy set logic, chaos theory and so on may be indispensable in setting up our research systems as well as in helping us define replication more precisely and aid in the development of models of any effects we obtain. Some researchers are deliberately focussing on simpler systems such as presentiment/prestimulus paradigms that rely less on conscious mentation, as opposed to free response procedures with their added complexity.

Fifth, in the course of setting up research procedures strong enough to have adequate ecological validity and resemble the circumstances of the strongest anecdotal evidence, we have various ethical challenges to overcome. Some examples include: training studies which aim to produce long term changes in participants; studies involving individual intense experiences or states of consciousness, either self induced or induced externally; studies involving emotionally powerful target material and situations; cross-cultural studies, including those in which participants may not have the culturally provided tools to cope with the practices involved, or which involve potential cultural clashes of values and so on; studies which potentially stretch their participants in any way beyond their present coping abilities; and studies which may provide people with strong indication that they have special abilities, yet do not set a supportive environment to allow personal adjustment or realistic evaluation of what is genuine and what is not. There are various guidelines provided by research and professional bodies such as the American Psychological Association and the British Psychological Society, that can cover some issues such as privacy safeguards, informed consent, medical supervision and so on, but may nevertheless not be specific enough to cover some of the situations that might arise in certain parapsychological research projects. As researchers if we are to move beyond the many procedures currently in use and currently known to produce relatively weak effect sizes at best, then we must work to find solutions in which we can feel sufficient confidence. Most ethical principles involve having a realistic assessment of the short and long term costs and gains of the procedures being considered. Although it is easy to note then that we need to have a solid understanding of the costs and gains for what we are considering, this is hard to do in areas where we know so little about the consequences and the factors that may affect them. Costs can include: potential physical damage; the stress of change and the unexpected; entering a state that brings forth unwelcome mental content; loss of self esteem including the induction of false expectations; negative

consequences for significant others; and other costs in general economic, social and personal terms. Major strategies for dealing with these would involve at least: effective initial screening of potential participants to include only those at low risk; effective monitoring of the progress of individuals by qualified monitors; effective communication among all concerned; ensuring researchers, trainers and others all have adequate expertise; learning from the past and from other social groups that have confronted similar situations; and adequate understanding by all concerned of how to evaluate what's not psychic but looks like it. Each of these is far easier to say than to implement, yet this is one of the most important issues facing parapsychology as it attempts to progress.

Sixth, following directly from the above, parapsychology recently has been making strides in building up an understanding of how we can mislead ourselves in all innocence and also be misled by others who are intentional deceivers. This is a topic that has been largely neglected within parapsychology until recently and it is vital that we continue to expand our knowledge in this area. It enables us to design more ecologically valid studies, in more real world contexts while being better able to take artefacts of some complexity into account. It enables us to interface more easily with existing bodies of knowledge. It helps us be more responsive to the needs of the public to be able to evaluate their own experiences and the claims of others, and to respond to the needs of clinicians to provide clients with alternative interpretations of their experiences to explore. And it thus enables us to maintain both academic and media integrity. Although it is important that we develop this knowledge, its dissemination can raise some difficulties. We do not want to provide potential exploiters with the information they need if at the same time that information does not also reach those who are at risk of being exploited. Thus we need to make sure that this information gets in the hands of those who do need it, without boring them or turning them off by appearing to insult them or implying that we therefore are trying to tell them there is nothing to it all.

Finally, it seems to me that as a result of the above, it is time for extensive co-operation among research groups to pool resources and embark upon larger scale research programs with complementary expertise involved, to solve these problems as well as possible. It ideally should involve mixed groups of those already involved in parapsychology and familiar with its strengths and weaknesses as well as additional experts brought in to blend in their expertise and help develop fresh approaches. Such an approach would call for a proper level of support to do the job well, support from multiple sources. It would involve institutions both within and outside academia and could include linkages of parapsychology to other areas as well. It could draw on the existing research of many present day contributors. The programs would be composed of smaller interlocking projects as well as stand along studies, organised to progress through various stages to build up a more comprehensive picture. If such a program can be implemented it would go a long way towards ensuring the continuing evolution of parapsychology and its strong role in our understanding of ourselves and our nature. We need this understanding more today than ever before.

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