
Experimentation or Experience? Issues about Validity

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Abstract: There are a number of related debates in parapsychology, but the focus of this paper is the controversy about whether parapsychology should concentrate on experimental methods or on purely experiential approaches (i.e., those that are not concerned with the validity of the psi hypothesis). I compare and contrast issues in this particular debate with the controversy in memory research over whether one should focus on experimental methods or on naturalistic approaches. I argue that, in parapsychology, the issues in this debate are conceived in such a way that the two alternatives veer towards two extremes of subjectivity and objectivity. It is due to the experimentation or experience controversy that the question of whether or not parapsychology should be a science arises at all. What ultimately underlies the whole debate is a failure to address the issue of the precise nature of parapsychology's leading questions. I conclude that parapsychology should use a variety of methods and that a closer investigation of some of the issues arising from the paper about validity and about parapsychology's aims may be beneficial.

Introduction

There are a number of controversies within parapsychology as to the direction that the field should take and the methods that it should use. One of these, in its crudest and most exaggerated form, is whether experimentation is the best way for parapsychology to approach its subject matter or whether the primary focus ought to be on the experiences themselves regardless of whether the experiences are genuinely paranormal in nature.

There are at least two examples of similar debates in mainstream academia about the tension between experimentation and everyday experience. They are (i) the

debate in psychology about research on memory, where the arguments centre on whether naturalistic or experimental methods are the more fruitful approaches; and, (ii) the (currently informal) tension in philosophy about whether "analytic" philosophy is better than the more experience-centred approach of "continental" philosophy. Little of value has been published on the latter debate, although it has aroused enough controversy and confusion for there to be a call for papers on the issue in the *Monist* (a prestigious Philosophy journal) for 1997. In the former — the debate on memory — however, there has been a flurry of publications on the very "experimentation versus everyday experience" issue.

My aim here is to review some of the arguments in the mainstream psychology literature on the debate and to see to what extent these arguments mirror or differ from those advanced by parapsychologists. This review will bring to light some problems that are peculiar to parapsychology. In this way a clearer idea of the central problems for parapsychology should come

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into view. It may also help parapsychology to learn from the history of the debate in another discipline.

The Attack on Experimental Method in Memory Research and Parapsychology

In 1978, at what has since been termed an infamous conference (Klatzky, 1991) in the field of memory research, Neisser (1978) launched an attack on the experimental method. At least, this is how Neisser's talk was received, although the editors of the published papers (including Neisser's 'attack') claim that the aim of the conference (of which Neisser's paper was the opening address) was not to 'drive a wedge between theoretical and practical aspects of memory' (Gruneberg, Morris & Sykes, 1978, p.v). Interestingly, for historical record, Neisser claimed in his paper that the same discontent with experimental methods had been expressed almost 40 years earlier by Bartlett but, Neisser noted, the challenge to experimentation had remained largely ignored (Neisser, 1978, p.3).

Even a quick glimpse at some of Neisser's arguments will demonstrate the superficial similarity between the debate in parapsychology and the debate in memory research. Neisser's (1978) paper focused very much on the meaning of memory for the individual. He argued, for instance, (i) that failures in memory are better understood by examining 'what actually happens in them, rather than the theoretical manipulation of abstract and *a priori* concepts' (p.10), (ii) that 'going public' (p.16) with one's memories can have profound consequences for an individual and (iii) that in everyday life there may be functionally different types of memory (p.14). All of these points have been echoed by parapsychologists who believe that parapsychology should attempt to approach its subject matter by means other than experimentation. For instance, White has advocated an approach based on the meaning and understanding of experiences (White, 1993c). She has encouraged people to 'go public' (White, 1993b) about them and she is trying

to compile and categorize various 'exceptional human experiences' (White, 1993e).

White is not the sole parapsychologist to take a similar view to Neisser. In his paper *Parapsychologie tut man* Gauger likens parapsychology to a character in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* called Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker. This character continually observes himself in the novel but never actually takes part. Gauger writes that similarly 'the self-criticism which parapsychology continually desires and in which it forever engages works in such a way that parapsychology becomes linear, parasitic and self-destructive because parapsychology thereby remains *outside* of its subject matter and it would prefer to sacrifice its subject matter rather than to let it be said that its subject matter is unobjective.' (Gauger, 1992, p.52). Here, the criticism is that parapsychology is so concerned with itself that it often fails to investigate its purported subject matter. For Gauger the scientific approach is too narcissistic; it fails to extend out to its true subject matter (i.e., experience). Correspondingly, Neisser notes that when memory researchers tell people of their line of research, people will often describe all sorts of interesting things — such as how they were able to find their way round their home town after a thirty year absence, how their aunt has a formidable capacity for remembering Shakespeare, how they have a tendency to forget appointments, and so on. Yet, Neisser claims, memory researchers have nothing to say to people about these issues; they fail to address people's questions about their memories.

To take a third and final example, Braud (1994) remarks that in many ways what he has learnt from parapsychology he knew already from his own experiences. This echoes Neisser's contention that the empirical generalizations from scientific memory research are unsurprising and that most people already know them from their own experience.

These are just some of a variety of possible examples, but one could go through virtually the whole of Neisser's paper and find striking parallels with points made by

those advocating a move away from experimentation in parapsychology. Thus the unease with experimentation is evident in both disciplines and the unease superficially appears to be for very similar reasons.

Is laboratory experimentation, therefore, an approach in decline?

The Arguments in Support of Experimentation in Memory Research and in Parapsychology

A decade after the release of Neisser's paper, Banaji and Crowder published a similarly controversial paper, this time arguing for a return to experimentation in memory research and claiming that the "everyday memory" approach was bankrupt (Banaji & Crowder, 1989). They argued that in the early 1970's there had been some controversy in social psychology when it started to try to become an experimental science. The controversy was settled, Banaji and Crowder said, in favour of hypothesis testing in the laboratory.

In response to the naturalistic workers' criticisms that experimental memory research does not provide us with anything that is applicable to everyday situations, Banaji and Crowder argued that internal experimental validity is crucial for memory research. Without internal experimental validity — i.e., rigorous experimental setups in which all factors are sufficiently controlled — there can be no relation between those results and the external world at all. They claim, moreover, that the layperson's intuitions about memory can be "complete nonsense" and that experimental results are not always what one would intuitively guess.

It appears, superficially, that the criticisms of experimental research in parapsychology are the same as those put forward by Neisser in advocating naturalistic methods in memory research. Therefore, one might expect the response from the experimentalists in parapsychology to echo those advanced by Banaji and Crowder. Berger (1988) effectively mimics Banaji and Crowder's point about internal validity and

generalizability in his review of Susan Blackmore's *Adventures of a Parapsychologist* when he writes that 'My training taught me to begin the criticism of an experiment with its design. If the design is seriously flawed ... then one cannot draw *any* conclusions from the study' (p.377). However, it is nevertheless a fact that within the actual "experimentation versus experience" controversy most of the experimentalists in parapsychology remain strangely silent.

Although Radin (1991), for example, has argued that experimental statistics can compel belief in psi phenomena and although Irwin (1994) has noted that without an extensive experimental foundation parapsychology would have been dismissed to an even greater extent than it already is, neither of these points is directed at counteracting the issue about experimentation's lack of generalizability to everyday experience. Irwin's point, for instance, is aimed purely at showing how experimental work is (and should be) relevant to the external world called "science" rather than at defending experimentation's relationship to the external world in which people live and work (that is, presumably, the external world to which the memory researchers refer). And Radin's argument is not relevant to the issue of generalizability, for it does not show (nor was meant to show) that the findings of experimental research in parapsychology are *related* to the outside world. Rather, Radin's argument is intended to show how the outside world (i.e., outside attitudes) may *change* when faced with experimental results. The emphasis in both of these points is entirely different.

Both responses above are effectively defending the notion of parapsychology as a *science*. Irwin notes that parapsychology's acceptance is due to its being a *science* and Radin's argument too is that *scientific, experimental methodologies* will be what some people will find persuasive.

Thus, the arguments above defend the notion of parapsychology as a *science*. Also, they do not tackle the issue of experimentation's relevance to people's experience. Consequently, one may be

tempted to assume that in parapsychology the central issue in this particular debate is whether or not parapsychology should be a science and not whether or how science can generalize to the outside world. A more careful study of the experimentation versus experience debate in memory research will bring out more clearly the contrast between that debate and the way in which superficially similar controversies are conceived in parapsychology. The main difference in debate between the two disciplines is due to various and conflicting notions of validity and it is precisely the issue of validity that is controversial. Examples of the different types of validity that come into play will include what I shall term as 'scientific validity' (defined loosely here as the attempt to show, by means of experimentation, what holds true under which conditions), 'phenomenological validity' (defined loosely here as the examination of experience for its own sake and bracketing out questions about whether or not such experiences are, for example, truly due to anomalous means) and 'academic validity' (defined loosely here as corresponding to the rigorous and accepted methods of an established academic discipline (whether arts or sciences)). In the following I shall briefly outline the arguments for and against the perceived need for scientific validity (i.e., the need to determine truth conditions experimentally in the quest for knowledge) in both parapsychology and memory research.

The Need for Scientific Validity

Regarding validity, Banaji and Crowder argue that in memory research internal, experimental validity is the crucial factor. The essential question is one of discovering what is true under which conditions and what is not. And, according to Banaji and Crowder, this notion of scientific validity is most easily achieved in laboratory settings and is attainable only with difficulty in naturalistic settings. In the latter there are many other factors at play and as a result generalization is often not possible.

There is a parallel here with parapsychology. It is generally acknowledged that there is rarely any guarantee that an experiential report is of an experience that was genuinely 'paranormal' or anomalous in nature. Indeed, a person's attribution of paranormality to such experiences may well be due to mistaken perceptions, misremembering or a whole variety of such factors. I would even surmise that this problem about the genuinely anomalous nature of the relevant reported experiences was the primary impetus for parapsychology having used precisely the *scientific* method as its model. Banaji and Crowder (1989, 1994) argue that naturalistic memory research is incapable of controlling the environment with sufficient rigour for generalizability to be possible. Likewise in parapsychology it is because many reports of spontaneous psi experiences cannot be shown indisputably to be due to anomalous means (rather than, for example, due to misperceptions or coincidences) that parapsychologists have generally opted for the scientific approach. As a result, one would expect agreement about moving psi into the laboratory. One would also surmise that those in parapsychology who advocate a move away from laboratory experimentation would make much the same arguments as those who argue for naturalistic rather than experimental methods in memory research. Namely, those arguing for a move away from experimentation would criticize laboratory experimentation on the grounds of its inapplicability to real life psi. They would urge parapsychology to investigate psi scientifically in its natural, everyday settings.

Stanford (1990), for example, has voiced a similar unease about the applicability of the results from experimental parapsychology to everyday life (citing, for instance, the sheep-goat effect). Beloff (1995) too has claimed that a purely experimental parapsychology 'is a discipline that has no historical roots and little relevance to real life' (p.26). However, in the main parapsychologists have not taken this path in criticising the experimental method. One sector argues that experiential data and

reports of anomalous events can themselves be evidential in nature (e.g. Stevenson, 1968, Braude, 1991). These approaches, however, have not taken the view that experimentation lacks relevance to *everyday* life. They have focused on either (i) the way in which certain *exceptional* cases can be viewed as good evidence for psi or (ii) how experiences can be used collectively as evidential data. The issues here, therefore, are *primarily* (but not exclusively) about what constitutes good evidence for psi. They do not focus on the nature of experience itself and its context within the experiencer's life. Other parapsychologists, however — and it is with their arguments that I am concerned — do not aim to retain scientific validity in everyday settings. Instead, they are interested in whether there are other (non-scientifically) valid approaches to psi. This sector questions whether experimental methods really are the best ways in which to study psi.

The Need to Move Away from Scientific Validity

The following paragraphs will illustrate just three approaches advanced by parapsychologists that set the notion of scientific, experimental validity to one side. Although these approaches are all distinct they do nevertheless all submit that experimentation is not necessarily the best way for parapsychology to proceed. For this reason I will subsume them all under the title of 'experiential' approaches, even though they are all distinct in methodological flavour. There are, naturally, many other similar approaches (White, 1992, lists a number of diverse methods), but the three following instances will serve as general examples. More importantly, all these methods differ from the everyday memory approaches. These experiential approaches differ too from the 'evidential' experiential approach of, for example, Braude and Stevenson above. I will indicate later where I think this different controversy over what is evidential fits into the overall schema. The focus of my paper lies with the broader

issues about how a *purely* experiential approach is conceived in contrast to experimental methods and how this particular type of approach both mirrors and contrasts with the debate in memory research. The way in which this approach differs from naturalistic methods in memory research is now my concern.

(a) *Experiential data approach*

I will take Schouten (1983) as my first example. Schouten has used experiential data in an objective way by collecting and categorizing various aspects of the spontaneous experiences in L.E. Rhine's database (amongst others) without particularly concerning himself about the veridicality of the experiences. He has cogently argued that such an approach can lend insight into the sorts of experiences that may provoke someone to *believe* that their experience was paranormal in nature. He maintains that the aim of parapsychology is to gain a better understanding of the experiences and that the question of the existence of ESP should be the final result and not the premise. If there are correlations between (i) the phenomena, (ii) the attribution of paranormality to them, and (iii) the personality characteristics of the people who believe they have experienced something of a paranormal nature, then this alone would provide sufficient reason to investigate them further. Thus, although Schouten takes an objective approach, his view is not as sympathetic to experimental research as naturalistic workers in memory are towards laboratory experimentation in their field. For Schouten the existence of psi is not what parapsychology should concern itself with at this point in time. White (1993a) too suggests that experimentation should not be pursued until much later in parapsychology's endeavour. Thus neither Schouten nor White are concerned about the scientific validity of the phenomena in the first instance. Most of the naturalistic workers in memory, however, are quite happy for laboratory work to continue (Klatsky, 1991). In memory research there is no debate at all about whether or not

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laboratory work should be carried out because most agree that it should be.

(b) Meaning-Centred Approach

To take an example of a different and yet related approach in parapsychology, White (1993a) argues that the essential element of psi experiences lies in their meaning and in their effect on the individual who has the experience. White's position appears to shift from time to time, sometimes seeming to promote a dual (i.e., experimental and experiential) approach (White, 1992), sometimes seeming to advocate a specifically anti-science approach (White, 1993c) and sometimes saying that she is deliberately exaggerating (White, 1991). One could, however, describe her overall view as advocating a move away from science, knowledge and explanation, instead endorsing a meaning-centred approach. Gauger (1992) is of a similar opinion. He writes, for example, that 'Naturally, parapsychology lies at the point of intersection between the arts and the sciences. The former are defined as the sciences of 'understanding': a painting, a drama, a historical event — all these are only partially and trivially describable in causal or purely objective terms' (p.54). In similar vein he later remarks that 'Two years ago I had to listen to an objection from a horrified referee who said I was trying to make parapsychology into an art. Yes, that is indeed what I would like to do. From this one can even gain a new kind of rhetoric.' (p.61) Both of these views differ from the debate in memory research because both views want a move away not only from what I have termed as scientific validity, but also from science *tout court*. One reason for advocating this move away from science is the contention that experimental parapsychology simply has not produced strong enough results to justify continued (predominant) use of the experimental method. The "old rhetoric" in many ways fails its subject matter. This, though, is not the case for naturalistic workers in memory research. For those in memory research the sole issue is whether

or not scientifically valid results can be gained even in everyday settings.

(c) Phenomenological approach

Irwin will serve as my last example. Irwin, like White, appears to be in two minds at times. At the beginning of one paper he writes that 'without an extensive experimental foundation parapsychology would be dismissed out of hand by an even greater extent' (Irwin, 1994, p.10) and yet at the end of the same paper he suggests that it is the phenomenological method that might provide parapsychology with greater acceptance' (*Ibid*, p.65). Thus on the one hand he appears to think that scientific, experimental validity is the way forward for parapsychology and on the other hand he believes that the phenomenological approach (that brackets out the question of scientific validity) will bring mainstream acceptance for parapsychology. The two approaches can, of course, go hand in hand. However, these two citations demonstrate the conflict between how to gain acceptance (academic validity) in two distinct areas of validity (scientific and phenomenological validity) that appear to belong to two distinct fields of inquiry (experimental, "hard" science and humanities/social science).

Moreover, Irwin notes that in parapsychology the experiential data approach is sometimes the principal way in which to gain information on some types of experiences. Some things — such as NDEs — that may be thought to fall under the rubrik of parapsychology are inaccessible to experimental study. This is similar to the contention in memory research that long-term memory is inaccessible to laboratory experimentation. The difference here, however, is that even in naturalistic memory research long-term memory is examined in terms of its scientific validity, that is, in terms of discovering the conditions under which long-term memory is likely to be correct. Contrastingly, in parapsychology NDE research, for example, does not focus so much on whether, for instance, the person *really did* die or whether their report

of their experience is *correct*. It centres rather on the commonality between reports and on the effect that people claim the experience had on their life (White, 1993a). Similarly, Irwin remarks that experiential reports (i.e., everyday psi) are informative on issues *other than authenticity*. It seems that the aim of the experimental method, for Irwin, is primarily that of determining authenticity and that experiential approaches have different aims and different ways of being valid areas of research. In memory research, however, even the everyday methods still focus on the issue of authenticity and on methods for determining scientific validity.

It should be clear from the above that the arguments against the experimental method in memory research differ from those put forward in parapsychology. In memory research those advocating naturalistic methods maintain that their research is sufficiently rigorous and that their results are scientifically valid. In support of their view they stress (a) the amount of control that is available in naturalistic settings and (b) the advantages and additional insights that such research can lend to experimental research. Certainly, they never question the need for *scientific* validity. Consequently, the naturalistic response to Banaji and Crowder is to deny that laboratory situations are the only ones in which scientifically valid results and truly scientific research can be found.

In parapsychology, however, those who use the purely experiential approaches wish to move away from issues about scientific validity in using those methods. This applies whether the approach objectively analyses experiential reports, focuses on the meaning of experiences, or concentrates primarily on the phenomenology of the experiences. Whereas naturalistic memory workers never claim their subject should move away from issues about scientific validity, those advocating the purely experiential approaches in parapsychology do make this claim.

It is natural, and perhaps informative, to ask why this difference between research

in memory and research in parapsychology has come about. It is possible that the reason is in part due to the reactions of proponents of various views. The experimentation versus everyday memory debate rose in importance in the early 1990s after Banaji and Crowder's controversial article in the *American Psychologist* in 1989 arguing that naturalistic research was "bankrupt". Thus, the naturalistic workers replying to Banaji and Crowder's article were defending themselves against criticisms — published criticisms — about their methods. The criticisms raised against naturalistic research focused on the alleged lack of proper controls and the scientific ineptitude of such research. It is understandable, therefore, that responses to the criticisms primarily argued for the scientific viability of naturalistic research.

With parapsychology, though, the matter is different. There have been few, if any, *published* critical responses to the experientialists' criticisms of experimental parapsychology. And, whether or not one believes that there is a divide about this issue in parapsychology, it is clearly evident that some parapsychologists are critical of the idea that parapsychology should adopt a specifically experimental approach. Few responses at all have been made in response to, for example, Schouten's claim that experimental work should follow only much later in parapsychology's enterprise and White's recommendations that parapsychology needs a change of emphasis. This lack of response does not mean that the criticisms of experimentation (e.g., it requires too much initial commitment to the psi hypothesis, it has not produced much in the way of worthwhile results, etc.) do not exist or are, therefore, not an issue. In memory research it was some 50 years after the initial unease with experimentation that any experimentalists responded with their own replies, so it may simply be that parapsychology is at an earlier stage of debate. Thus the comparison offered here may provide some insight into possible future debates in parapsychology.

If one looks at Neisser's original paper that sparked off the everyday memory

controversy, the overriding impression is that at this initial stage the memory research debate mirrored the debate in parapsychology much more closely. To some extent, it is even questionable whether Banaji and Crowder's paper actually touched many of the points that Neisser originally made. They did, however, succeed in turning the debate back towards an agreement about the importance of scientific validity. And it is precisely here, of course, that the debate in parapsychology currently differs from that in memory research. Moreover, if Banaji and Crowder's paper did not truly address many of Neisser's points, then perhaps the issues in parapsychology will take on an altogether different flavour.

Evidently this quasi-historical explanation for the difference in debate between parapsychology and memory research is by no means the whole explanation. Although Neisser's arguments emphasized meaning, he never argued for a move away from experimentation (cf Klatzky, 1991). Moreover, papers identified as 'naturalistic' were also intrinsically experimental in nature. Thus Ceci and Bronfenbrenner (1991) conclude that 'this is not the time to foreclose on rigorous research in everyday settings or to write premature epitaphs for a scientific approach that appears to be alive and thriving' (p.31). Although Neisser's paper emphasized meaning, it did not advocate a turning away from experimental methodology. Those following Neisser likewise generally approached their subject matter in accordance with the principles that apply to laboratory experimentation. In parapsychology, however, even at this (presumably) early stage in debate, the arguments from those advocating non-experimental approaches emphasize far more those methodologies that are not concerned with scientific validity at all.

The question therefore remains: why is the necessity for scientific validity a controversial issue in parapsychology when, even in the very beginning of the debate, this was never truly an issue in memory research?

The answer may in part lie in the fact that the notion of validity covers two different things in the parapsychology debate. In memory research the overriding concern lies with showing that the *results* obtained are scientifically valid. That is, when naturalistic researchers defend their field, they show how many controls they were able to put in place, how the results can be replicated and so on. In parapsychology, however, the question of scientific validity cuts straight into the question about whether its very *subject matter* is a 'valid' area for *scientific* research. Research into memory, for instance, does not need to ascertain that memory is in general possible. It is uncontroversial that the vast majority of the human population will have memories and that in ordinary circumstances those memories usually bear some relation to events that really did happen. With parapsychology, however, there is no consensus in the general population that there are such things as veridical psi experiences to be investigated. Indeed, for the majority of the *scientific* community parapsychology is a bogus scientific endeavour (McClenon, 1982) because in their view there simply is nothing there to investigate or to elicit.

As a result, when parapsychology enters the laboratory and thus the field of experimental science, at least part of what is always at stake is whether or not there are going to be results that may be indicative of some form of genuinely anomalous interaction. Parapsychology becomes a field whose inquiry is in part an attempt to demonstrate its own validity. That is, in parapsychology the question of the scientific validity of the results is also inevitably a question about the very validity of parapsychology itself. It is in part because some view it as problematic that parapsychology comes to be dependent on its results for its own validity as a scientific discipline that some parapsychologists are inclined to argue that parapsychology can be a valid field of research (e.g., as a phenomenological discipline or even as an arts subject) without having to rely on the validity of the psi hypothesis. That is, the argument is that the two types of validity

('academic' validity and 'scientific' validity) are not interdependent.

As a result the notion of validity in parapsychology is controversial on two accounts. Firstly, it is controversial because the validity of the psi-hypothesis is uncertain — i.e., it is disputed whether there is such a thing as psi that parapsychology could elicit in scientifically controlled conditions (cf Ellison, 1996). It is from within this dispute that approaches such as Stevenson's and Braude's — that maintain that experiential data can serve as evidence for psi — enter in as a separate, though linked, set of controversies. Secondly, it is a matter of contention whether questions about the validity of the psi hypothesis (and thus scientific validity) should be abandoned in favour of increasing the validity of parapsychology as a field of academic (rather than scientific or experimental) inquiry. That is, the contention is often that parapsychology may do better to pursue, for instance, a phenomenological approach rather than to seek experimental grounding. These two issues are often intermingled and confused. Both controversies are distinct from the issues that are raised in memory research.

It is because validity is a less controversial issue in memory research that the controversies in memory research are often less extreme than those in parapsychology. The following sections will show how the issues about validity in parapsychology — when compared to similar issues in memory research — tend to foster more extreme methodologies than in memory research. For ease of reference I will term these extremes as the objective and the subjective approaches. The objective approach concerns itself primarily with the problem of the validity of the psi hypothesis and the subjective approach focuses on (a) problems with the former and (b) promoting a parapsychology that is independent of the psi-hypothesis.

(a) *The objective approach*

In parapsychology, investigating psi in its everyday environment may appear to be

absurd, because it is presupposed that psi experiences do not readily occur *every* day in a manner that easily lends itself to scientific investigation. Thus, one cannot go out and observe on demand people's psi experiences. Even field investigators have to wait until they are alerted that there is (may be) a case they can investigate. Thus, the primary way to study psi objectively and on demand is to attempt to elicit psi in laboratory conditions.

In bringing the study of psi into the laboratory, though, the emphasis comes to be one of trying to find "evidence" for anomalous interaction. Here, any occurrence of statistically significant results is noted. Even when one considers process oriented research in parapsychology a primary factor is always to note whether or not there is any evidence that may point to psi. To this extent, then, (whether or not parapsychologists want to admit to it) in the laboratory psi is treated in a manner similar to attempts to discover a hypothesized physical element by experimenting with variables (e.g., trying out different mental strategies, various experimental setups, differing environmental conditions). That is, the whole study of psi — including psi itself — comes to be objectified in so far as psi is understood as something "there" to be elicited by primarily experimental means. In experimental memory research, however, memory is treated less as an object to be obtained because the emphasis is on the effect of variables on memory rather than on whether memory is actually occurring.

Consequently, parapsychology laboratory research has a far greater emphasis on the notions of objectivity and scientific validity than does memory research because parapsychology treats its subject matter as something there to be elicited. If naturalistic memory workers object that experimentalists in their field treat memory too much like an object, then the same criticism applied to parapsychology will be doubly acute.

Precisely because of this constant need to determine whether or not psi even occurs in a given experiment and because of

parapsychology's dependence on statistically significant results, some people are calling for a different approach altogether.

(b) *The subjective approach*

One can sense a frustration with scientific parapsychology's inability to provide *strong* evidence for psi or *strongly* replicable results. Since this is not remotely a problem for experimental work in memory (i.e., there is no need to provide evidence for memory *tout court*), it is hardly surprising that memory researchers do not rally against the experimental approach *per se*. But in parapsychology it is often *because* the evidence is perceived to be *unconvincing* (albeit statistically significant) that there is a faction advocating a move away from questions of scientific validity *at all*.

When parapsychologists play down the need for scientific validity, the arguments in memory research about whether naturalistic methodologies are scientifically valid become irrelevant to parapsychology. Once scientific validity is thought to be irrelevant, the experientialists in parapsychology *encourage* subjective input. They stress validity purely (a) in terms of the experiencer (e.g., they ask about the meaning of the experience for the experiencer, irrespective of whether the reports are 'true' accounts of what happened) or (b) in terms of how parapsychology can be viewed as an accepted field of research by putting aside the question of whether there is supportive experimental data and advocating, for example, sociological approaches (McClenon, 1991). The subjective parapsychological route is thus far more subjective in content than is naturalistic work in memory.

In parapsychology, therefore, the extreme objective approach arises through the concern for parapsychology to be scientifically valid. On the other hand, the extreme subjective approach that puts the notion of scientific validity to one side, arises through the concern for parapsychology (a) to hold true to the experiencer or (b) to be academically valid (occasionally even proposing that parapsychology be conceived

of as an arts discipline). As a result these two paths in parapsychology appear to be exaggerated modes of the memory research controversy. Experimental work in parapsychology seems to treat psi more like an 'object' than experimental work in memory research treats memory. The 'experiential' approaches above appear to be even more 'subjective' than the naturalistic approaches in memory research.

Moreover, it would appear that parapsychology's inclination towards two extremes is due to the arguments being conceived in such a way that academic validity is retained by *dropping*, at least temporarily, the notion of scientific validity. In memory research what is emphasized is ways in which other approaches can *complement* and *enrich* traditional methods without dropping the agreed notion of (scientific) validity. Arguments in memory research show how diary studies, for example, have helped reveal the nature of flashbulb memories (i.e., those memories of what one was doing when one heard about an important world event). In parapsychology, however, the reasons for dropping scientific validity are often couched as if dropping scientific validity were a tactical measure to increase parapsychology's standing in the academic community. Fundamentally, though, the reasons for dropping scientific validity are based on deep-rooted questions about the suitability and scope of experimental methodology. White (1994), for instance, argues that the quest for scientific validity is inconsistent with parapsychology's original aim of understanding psi experiences (because science aims only to explain them). Schouten maintains that the quest for scientific validity endorses an undesirable predisposition to accept the psi hypothesis. Thus the experimental and experiential approaches are far more opposed in parapsychology than in memory research. This is not only because the notion of scientific validity is dropped by the experiential approach in parapsychology, but also because the very utility and presuppositions behind scientific validity are questioned therein.

Behind these questions about the utility of scientific validity there lies the more fundamental issue of whether parapsychology knows or is clear about which question(s) it wishes to answer. What are parapsychology's aims, what presuppositions would it want to endorse/not endorse? What are the particular questions that parapsychology needs to answer? Neisser's original controversial paper was entitled 'Memory: What are the Important Questions?'. A similar paper in parapsychology, or even a retrospective look at Rhine's (1959) article entitled 'What do Parapsychologists want to Know?', may well be enlightening.

What should be clear now, however, is that it is vitally important for the various notions of validity to be clearly conceptualized and structured in order to understand what the root problems and issues are. It is not entirely clear that when the issues that underlie the essentially divisive questions about the pros and cons of experimentation are untangled, parapsychology will necessarily have to take only one particular path.

Concerning memory research Tulving (1991) writes, for example, that: 'Memory, like countless other objects of scientific curiosity, can be studied and described at many different levels, from many different perspectives, using many different approaches and methods. There need not be, and there usually is not, any conflict between these different approaches and different levels. Normally they are complementary' (pp.41-42). Ceci and Bronfenbrenner (1991) similarly argue that the choice between laboratory and non-laboratory methods should be one that is made in the context of particular research questions.

Thus, the conclusion may be that just as much as experimentation may not always be the appropriate method in memory research, so too may this hold for parapsychology. For instance, if one's research question is about the meaning of parapsychological experiences, then it is inappropriate to use the experimental method. Similarly if one's interest and desire is to see whether or not psi can be proven and to

determine the precise conditions under which it occurs, then case studies are rarely going to be the most appropriate means for determining this with any certainty. The primary issue is whether these are both the 'important questions' in parapsychology. If they are, then both questions need to be answered using the appropriate methods (cf White, 1994).

Of course, the suggestion that a variety of methods should be embraced by parapsychology is nothing new. Braud (1994), for example, writes 'In parapsychology, laboratory experimentation certainly has its place; but this is one place among many. Field work and the study of the spontaneous experiences of others also have their places. But these are only two additional places among many' (p.294). Watt (1994) argues for theoretical research to be driven more by data and for data collection to be driven more by theory. Irwin (1994) writes that 'In addition to proof-oriented and process-oriented research, parapsychology could inquire into the nature of parapsychological experiences from the experient's own viewpoint' (p.13, own emphasis). White (1996) even identifies these types of pluralistic strategies as 'feminist standpoint' ones. Nevertheless, there has been little emphasis on the *danger* of conceiving the issues in an essentially divisive manner (i.e., by focusing on issues that question scientific validity). This danger is not only political; the danger has *practical* consequences. I will end by briefly listing some examples of the dangers below.

Firstly, it is because there is a conceptual divide between what I have termed as experimental and experiential approaches that parapsychologists seem to have the impression that their field is 'something special'. For example, McConnell's belief that 'it is the seemingly hopeless difficulty of the parapsychological challenge that is keeping professional scientists away from the field' (McConnell, 1975, p.275) and Gauger's comment about parapsychology being at the cutting point between the sciences and the humanities both point towards parapsychology as being 'especially difficult' or challenging. It may be tempt-

ing to think that because psi is especially elusive parapsychology has this dilemma over which direction to pursue. Of course, anyone involved in studying any subject will regard their field as 'special' and it is even desirable that this is the way that they should think. However, as Banaji and Crowder (1991) note: 'The notion that human behaviour is vastly more complex than chemical reactions can only emerge from a lack of acquaintance with other sciences' (p.79). One need not — or should not — draw the conclusion from the alleged 'particular difficulty' of doing parapsychology that the field as an academic subject is necessarily in itself more special or difficult than any other field. Nor must one believe that only parapsychology is ambiguously seated at the borderline between disciplines. Some comments from those working in memory research may be sobering in this respect. Conway (1991), for example, writes in relation to memory research that 'it falls to the psychologist to determine the limits of such methods [i.e., the methods of the physical sciences] when these are applied to people' (own emphasis). Here, then, it is *psychology* that is perceived to be at the cutting point between two fields of inquiry (human sciences and physical sciences). Ceci and Bronfenbrenner (1991) ask of the subject matter of memory: 'What if the essence of what is being studied is variable and systematically differentiated by the ecology in which it unfolds?' (p.30). This citation shows how 'especially difficult' memory research is. Both of these comments, one feels, could have been written by parapsychologists about their field. If one sees the problems of parapsychology in a broader, more unified context, one can also see that parapsychology is not facing its problems alone.

Secondly, the conceptual divide over the direction in which parapsychology should proceed encourages parapsychologists to think that parapsychology is still finding its feet and is a young discipline from which too much cannot yet be demanded. Perhaps, then, it is somewhat disillusioning to read Morton's comment about the current status of experimental

work in memory research. He writes: 'Whenever I see psychology described as 'our young endeavour' I know I am in the presence of a losing argument. Viewed from where most of the scientific action is at the moment, 100 years and more is aged indeed' (Morton, 1991, p.32). This comment could have been directed at parapsychology merely by adding four extra letters ("para") to the fourth word in the first sentence. The standard reply, of course, would be that parapsychology cannot be expected to have progressed very far because there are so few active researchers. However, I am reminded here of Braude's contention that micro-PK is what is found because it is only (laboratory) evidence for micro-PK that is considered to be valid (Braude, 1991). The standard "so few researchers" reply may well be fine to stave off the skeptics, but if one's *true* attitude is that one cannot expect much from parapsychology after 100 years, it is a depressing testimony to the way in which parapsychology limits itself methodologically and conceptually (and, presumably, in the questions it has deemed important to ask).

Thirdly, conceptualizing methodologies in ways that encourage two extremes will inevitably result in an attempt to argue for one method over another. This political struggle, however, only limits parapsychology. Limiting and arguing over the 'correct' areas of inquiry is simply a case of limiting the possible results. In memory research the findings of the experimental and naturalistic approaches are frequently compared and fed into each other. As Winograd writes: 'There are two possibilities in comparing across the two domains, one being convergence and the other divergence. When there is a divergence... we clearly have learned something new... When there is convergence, our confidence in the empirical basis of our science increases. Either way, we have made progress' (Winograd, 1994, p.292). The danger of conceptualizing a divide in parapsychology is that no progress will be made at all.

Fourthly, the divide so conceived encourages people in the field to think that

there is an issue about whether or not parapsychology should be a science. Because the debate is conceived in this either-or manner, the issues turn into an argument about what parapsychology is or should be. Such a discussion is, however, a purely internal one. To this extent the divide drives parapsychology back further into itself. Parapsychology discusses itself and itself alone and thereby distances itself ever further from the mainstream (Cf Stevenson, 1988).

Finally, the divide, by emphasizing two extremes, detracts attention away from the possibility of following 'middle' paths. It is, in a way, astonishing that Sheldrake's work — which is probably the closest analogue to 'naturalistic research methods' in parapsychology — is rarely, if ever, brought into the 'experimentation versus experience' debate. Sheldrake (1994) focuses on apparent everyday experiences of psi — such as the feeling of being looked at and the phenomenon of pets awaiting their owner's arrival — in their natural setting. Unlike in memory research, there has been little published discussion in parapsychology about issues of control and rigour in this sort of set-up. There has also been remarkably little effort to explore ways in which psi might be operative more commonly than one may be inclined to believe. Indeed there has been remarkably little work of this 'naturalistic' kind at all (but, e.g., see Pratt, 1953; Stanford, 1990). One may wonder about why this should be, but if one considers the literature in parapsychology one finds that the conceptual issues with which I have concerned myself here focus on the experimental versus non-experimental approaches. Given that there is this extreme conceptual divide, then, it is perhaps not so remarkable after all that parapsychology should almost totally neglect any possibilities that lie in the 'excluded middle'. This can only be detrimental to parapsychology's progress.

My conclusion, therefore — that parapsychology can and should use a variety of methods — is neither particularly stunning nor particularly new. Morris (1982) too has advocated the "development of new meth-

odologies", so the idea of an additional (or reinstated) "middle path" is not in itself new either. However, what I regard as the importance of this paper is (a) that I have shown that the conception of the "experimentation versus experience" debate in parapsychology emphasizes two extremes and that this extremity is to parapsychology's detriment (b) that there are many competing notions of validity to be untangled in the debate (c) that there needs to be a clearer idea of parapsychology's leading questions and (d) that insights can be gained into the nature of parapsychology and its direction by comparing debates within parapsychology to those same debates raging in other disciplines. This paper has merely outlined a few of the problems entailed by each of these points. It will have been successful if it encourages people to think more clearly about the issues involved, the questions that they think that *parapsychology* needs to solve (rather than, for example, merely what a given individual happens to find interesting or what is merely provoked by an unexpected experimental result) and if it promotes greater cross-fertilization with similar arguments and results in other disciplines.

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EXPERIMENTATION OR EXPERIENCE?

Winograd, E. (1994). Naturalistic approaches to the study of memory. In P.E. Morris & M. Gruneberg (Eds) *Theoretical Aspects of Memory. Second Edition*. London: Routledge.

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Experimenteren of ervaren? Een kwestie van validiteit

Samenvatting: In de parapsychologie vinden nogal wat thematische discussies plaats. Dit artikel legt de nadruk op de vraag of parapsychologie zich moet richten op experimentele methoden, dan wel op puur ervaringsgebonden benaderingen (d.w.z. die zich niet bekommeren om de validiteit van de psi-hypothese). Ik vergelijk en contrasteer aspecten van deze tweestrijd met de in geheugenonderzoek aanwezige controverse tussen een experimentele en een ervaringsgerichte aanpak. In de parapsychologie worden onderwerpen zo benaderd dat beide alternatieven in de richting gaan van de twee extrema objectiviteit en subjectiviteit.

Deze controverse tussen experiment en ervaring zorgt dat de vraag of parapsychologie een wetenschap moet zijn überhaupt wordt opgeworpen. De eigenlijke reden voor de hele discussie is dat we ons niet bezighouden met de exacte aard van de cruciale vragen in de parapsychologie. Volgens mij moet de parapsycholoog verschillende benaderingen gebruiken en kan een nader onderzoek van enkele vragen die ik stel bij validiteit en bij de doelstellingen van de parapsychologie daarbij goed van pas komen.

Experimentieren oder Erfahren? Geltungsfragen

Zusammenfassung: Es gibt eine Reihe themenbezogener Auseinandersetzungen innerhalb der Parapsychologie. Die vorliegende Abhandlung legt ihr Hauptaugenmerk jedoch auf die Kontroverse über die Frage, ob sich die Parapsychologie auf experimentelle Verfahren oder auf rein erfahrungsbezogene Ansätze (d.h., jene, die sich nicht mit der Geltung der Psi-Hypothese befassen) konzentrieren sollte. Ich stelle die in dieser speziellen Debatte aufgeworfenen Fragen der in der Erinnerungs-Forschung entstandenen Kontroverse über die Frage gegenüber, ob man sich dort auf experimentelle Methoden oder naturalistische Ansätze konzentrieren sollte. Ich versuche zu zeigen, daß die in der Parapsychologie diskutierten Fragen so gefaßt sind, daß die beiden Alternativen auf zwei Extrempositionen von Subjektivität und Objektivität hinauslaufen. Es ist eben dieser Kontroverse von Experiment vs. Erfahrung geschuldet, daß sich die Frage, ob die Parapsychologie eine Wissenschaft sein soll, überhaupt stellt. Letztlich liegt der ganzen Auseinandersetzung das Versäumnis zugrunde, sich über die Art der eigentlichen Leitfragen der Parapsychologie zu verständigen. Ich komme zu dem Schluß, daß die Parapsychologie vielfältige Methoden verwenden sollte und daß sich eine eingehendere Beschäftigung mit den hier auftretenden Fragen bezüglich Geltungsgründen und den Zielen der Parapsychologie als hilfreich erweisen könnte.

Expérimentation ou Expérience? Questions sur la Validité.

Résumé : Il y a un nombre de débats reliés en parapsychologie, mais le point central de cet article est la controverse pour savoir si la parapsychologie devrait se centrer sur les méthodes expérimentales ou sur des approches purement expérientielles (c'est-à-dire, qui ne sont pas concernées par la