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## 'Physics Envy': The Politics of Parapsychology

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An Essay Review of *Women and Parapsychology: Proceedings of an International Conference Held in Dublin, Ireland, September 21-22, 1991*. Edited by Lisette Coly and Rhea A. White. New York: Parapsychology Foundation, 1994. Pp. xvi +289. \$20.00, cloth. LC 94-66458. ISBN 0-912328-45-2.

Having dawdled too long over the writing of this review, my inspiration to begin came this morning when I entered the psychology department of the University of Edinburgh. There is to be a party for the fourth year students whose final exam is today. Staff have been invited to contribute dishes for a buffet. This year, as in previous years, the coordination and preparation for this party is being done by two women. They are well-established and well-respected researchers and teachers of psychology yet they find themselves in the stereotypically female role of caterer.

There they were, scurrying about arranging tables and setting out dishes. It struck me that the members of this department, both male and female, should be more aware than most of the existence and operation of social and sex-role stereotypes. Hence, one might expect to see more involvement in the food preparations from at least the more enlightened male department members<sup>1</sup>.

I climb the stairs to my office, open the fridge and find a very tasty-looking salad that my male boss (who is one of the least prejudiced folk I know) brought for the party. However, I know for a fact that the

salad was prepared by - his wife - who has her own full-time job to do in another department of the University.

And then I look at myself, who has reduced her full-time employment in parapsychology in order to be a mother to two young boys (and I am very happy and lucky to be able to be both a mother and a parapsychologist). I feel that I haven't encountered much explicit gender prejudice in my career, and yet looking around me there is evidence everywhere of the operation of subtle but all-pervading expectations about the appropriate characteristics of, and roles for, men and women. Usually, I believe, we are unaware of these stereotypes until they are challenged when, for example, we see that the departmental party is being organised by men and that the women staff members' husbands have taken time out from their own careers in order to prepare a salad for their wives who are busy with more important matters. See what I mean?

This is the context in which I come to review the Proceedings of the 1991 conference of the Parapsychology Foundation (PF), on the topic of *Women and Parapsychology*. This volume has already been admirably reviewed by Harvey Irwin (1995) and those readers who want an informed review of the detailed contents of the Proceedings should turn to Irwin's work. Though I have some familiarity with psychological research on sex role stereotyping, parapsychologists such as Marilyn Schlitz, Rhea White, Nancy Zingrone, Car-

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<sup>1</sup> I must confess to using a bit of artistic license here, in order to illustrate the point that is, in general, quite valid.

los Alvarado, David Hess and Harvey Irwin are far better acquainted than I with the feminist and sociological literature. I would like to present a more personal perspective on the issue, from my point of view as a woman parapsychologist.

Despite the tone of my introductory paragraphs, I hope I have not discouraged readers. Those who have stuck with me to this point should be reassured that I will not be presenting some kind of 'feminist ranting'. Indeed, I expect I was not alone in having an initial knee-jerk reaction against the title of the Proceedings along the lines of 'oh dear, I hope this is not another women=good, men=bad, characterisation of the issues'. I wonder how many other parapsychologists, males and females, who would usually read the PF Proceedings with interest, paused this time because of their anticipation of the contents of the volume. However, I gritted my teeth and began to read and discovered that some of the political debate within parapsychology could be informed by the feminist literature.

In this essay-review, I will attempt to share my elementary understanding of how parapsychology may be viewed from a feminist perspective, based on what is contained in the *Women and Parapsychology* volume. My rationale is that, like me, many readers will have had a prejudiced reaction to the 'F-word', leading to a failure to give serious consideration to arguments with a feminist orientation. I will then consider the contemporary position because already five years have passed since the conference was held, and I will consider suggestions for the future. Firstly, though, some factual information about the conference.

#### *Women and Parapsychology* Outline

The conference ran from September 21-22, 1991. As usual, it was organised by the Parapsychology Foundation, particularly Lisette and Eileen Coly, on a single theme. Because the PF was celebrating the 40th anniversary of its inception by Eileen Garrett, the conference venue was Dublin, Ireland, close to Garrett's birthplace.

Most presentations took one of three possible perspectives on the chosen topic: 1. women in parapsychology from a historical and/or cultural viewpoint; 2. a feminist approach to psi; and, 3. the experiences of contemporary women parapsychologists. The moderator of the conference was Rhea White, who spoke on 'The relevance to parapsychology of a feminist approach to science'. There were eight other participants. Jessica Utts - 'Social, institutional, and cultural influences of gender on science'. Beverly Rubik - 'The feminine archetype: A missing factor in contemporary psi research'. Susan Blackmore - 'Are women more sheepish? Gender differences in belief in the paranormal'. Nancy Zingrone - 'Images of woman as medium: Power, pathology and passivity in the writings of Frederic Marvin and Cesare Lombroso'. Joanne McMahon - 'Eileen J. Garrett: A woman who made a difference'. Marilyn Schlitz - 'Women, power, and the paranormal: A cultural critique'. Anjum Khilji - 'Behind the veil: Muslim women's contributions to parapsychology'. Ruth-Inge Heinze - 'Life patterns of women active in parapsychology'. Each participant also presented a 'position paper' on the final day, whose aim was to make recommendations for action. In addition, there were eight 'observers', who contributed to the discussion periods: Carlos Alvarado, Marco Bischof, Gerd Hövelmann, Rebecca Hughes-Hartogs, Denise Iredell, Wanda Luke, Hans Michels, and Sean O'Donnell.

The aspect of the conference that I would like to dwell upon is the 'feminist' approach to psi because I feel that this approach can allow some debates within parapsychology to be viewed in a new light.

#### A 'Feminist' Approach to Psi

Before I elucidate the meaning of a 'feminist' approach to psi, I want to make a very important point. When we talk of 'feminist' and 'masculinist', or 'female stereotyping' and 'male stereotyping', we are referring to a *group of traits* that are socially defined as being appropriately char-

acteristic of 'typical' women and men, respectively.

To illustrate such traits, consider the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) that lists 60 adjectives. Items for the inventory were selected by student judges who were required to rate the desirability in American society of approximately 400 personality characteristics. Those desirable traits that were judged to be more desirable for one sex than for the other were designated 'masculine' and 'feminine' and those traits judged equally desirable for either sex were designated 'neutral'. The 20 'masculine' items include 'acts as a leader', 'analytical', 'competitive' and 'dominant'. The 20 'feminine' items include 'affectionate', 'gentle', 'sympathetic' and 'understanding'. The 20 'neutral' items include 'adaptable', 'happy', 'reliable' and 'theatrical'.

We are not, however, suggesting that these traits are indelibly and uniquely linked to the sexes, so that only men can have 'masculine' traits and only women can have 'feminine' traits. In reality, you can get 'feminine' men and 'masculine' women, and various shades inbetween (and thank goodness for that!).

Perhaps I can best convey this point by overstating it somewhat. Let us for the moment discard our biological sexes as irrelevant (though I realise that hormones and other physiological factors suggest otherwise). When we talk of 'masculine' and 'feminine' we are *not* referring to the male and female sexes, but to 'male-type traits' and 'female-type traits'. Therefore, although some of the conference participants may have been tempted to characterise parapsychology in terms of the 'battle of the sexes', this would be a gross oversimplification. Having defined my terms, I will omit the rather irritating inverted commas henceforth.

I'm glad to say that most of the participants resisted claiming the moral high ground. Instead of saying (and here I caricature) 'women are sensitive and intuitive, something you men can never be, and we are better than you', the tone was more like 'here are the characteristics of a feminist

approach to science/psi, see how it could complement a masculinist approach'.

I think the term *masculinist approach* is merely another way to conceptualise the prevailing empiricist paradigm that has tended to dominate scientific endeavours. In parapsychology, we often see a dichotomy drawn between this paradigm and more subjective approaches. See for instance the paper by Fiona Steinkamp elsewhere in this issue contrasting experimental and experiential approaches to parapsychology. Other terms that are used to denote the same dichotomy include androcentric view (versus feminine view), agentic research (versus communal research), hard versus soft research, quantitative versus qualitative research, and so on.

In her paper, White notes that

every field took for granted the basically androcentric view that science is "unambiguously based on observation of 'facts' or 'data', linked by rigorous logic to hypotheses and theories... and... progresses through an accumulation of such knowledge" ... Increasingly, marginalised groups, including feminist scientists in the physical, social, and behavioral sciences, have begun to question this paradigm and to initiate new conceptions of the nature of science... they became skeptical concerning the scientific method and the objectivity of its findings, eventually even questioning the basis of scientific knowledge itself (p.2)

Utts too remarks on the cultural context that has influenced how science is conducted:

The male-oriented culture emphasizes authority over majority rule, "hard" data over "soft" data, the impersonal over the personal, and dualism over unity. This cultural context has resulted in the myths that science is always objective, and that a complex system can be explained by examining the function of each of its parts... Advances in medicine, electronics, and many of the other "hard" sciences have led to a

complacency and trust in the current scientific method (pp. 40-41)

In other words, the scientific method has had notable successes when dealing with relatively simple and deterministic systems. It has enabled us to predict and control, so that we know what to expect when we press a light switch. There obviously *has* been an accumulation of knowledge with this method, and parapsychology aspires to gain respectability for its controversial subject-matter by aligning itself with the hard sciences. In her passionately-argued contribution to the Proceedings, Beverly Rubik suggests parapsychology has 'physics envy':

The subjugation of the feminine goes deep in Western culture. Consider the metaphors "hard" and "soft". These are frequently used in value judgments, and they implicitly reflect gender. "Hard" facts are good; the connotation "soft-headed" is bad. The hard sciences are considered to be more difficult, more important, and have larger budgets than the soft sciences. There is a hierarchy within the sciences, with the "hard" sciences at the top reigning above the "soft". The dominant notion of causality in science involves the reduction of the "soft" to the "hard", which is regarded as more fundamental. It is no wonder that parapsychology has evolved in recent times in the way it has, with attempts to move toward greater "hardness" (p.53)

Like many other parapsychologists, I suspect, I have been educated and socialised to regard the scientific method as being the most appropriate method to use in order to identify causal relationships. Other qualitative methods are useful in describing phenomena in their natural settings and, like Louisa Rhine's case collection, for suggesting hypotheses for more 'rigorous' testing in the laboratory. There are subtle and not-so-subtle reinforcements for this assumption. For instance, I feel that selection processes for the presentation of papers at Parapsychological Association (PA) conventions can, depending on the orienta-

tion of the program chair, encourage experimental research and disparage qualitative or field research. This is something of which I am as guilty as my male peers. I am not alone in feeling this tension. In *Women and Parapsychology*, Marilyn Schlitz eloquently describes her own mixed orientation:

In an effort to overcome some of the prejudices against parapsychology, I, like my predecessors, have worked within the "male"-dominated objectivist tradition. I have been recognized by the scientific establishment as one who has successfully controlled the appropriate conditions, manipulated proper variables, used correct statistical methods, and achieved statistical significance... Having done so, I am convinced that this perspective reveals only a small part of the psi story. What is lacking is the stereotypical "female" side that gives primacy to spontaneity, subjective experience, emotions, feelings, and other intangible components (p.165)

In her position paper, Rhea White too makes the point that the PA may be constricting the range of approaches to psi, and thus narrowing ways in which we may understand psi: 'Science should be pluralistic. People with different agendas should be courted and encouraged, not excluded. Instead of trying to bend everyone to one way, as the Parapsychological Association attempts to do with its stringent membership requirements, we might progress much more rapidly by diversification and cross-fertilization' (p.248).

Some theorists of science, including those with a feminist orientation, are making a strong argument that the traditional masculinist methodology is ill-suited to dealing with complex systems - and this point should be particularly telling for a parapsychology whose subject-matter is so ineffable that we have to introduce the neutral term 'psi' in order to describe it without making any unwarranted theoretical assumptions. There is encouragement also from developments in modern physics, where matter is seen to have indeter-

minate features, and where the act of observation may itself affect that which is being observed. This differs from the previously described mechanistic and reductionistic approaches and, in this sense, perhaps physics envy is no bad thing. Rubik argues for a more humanistic framework for parapsychology that would be gender-balanced:

In a typical modern psi experiment, the participant is regarded as the one who affects a "target" or experimental outcome. Alternatively, we may consider the psi participant, the experimenters, and the ground of their being in that particular moment in space-time as an integral unit. The paradox of being separate (masculine archetype) and wholly interconnected in a unity (feminine archetype) both need to be incorporated in a new paradigm for parapsychology... a systems approach... Rather than putting all the emphasis on the psi participant, acknowledgement of a holistic ideology may be an important step forward for psi research, both philosophically and methodologically. (p.56)

Such a holistic, systems approach need not be mystical and vague. For instance, Rubik argues that it would require a more complete description of the context in which the experiment is taking place, including factors such as solar activity and geomagnetic fields. This is something that parapsychologists are already beginning to take on board, and we begin to see why reproducibility-on-demand is such a challenge. Later, Rubik states that 'The real challenge for parapsychology is not simply to refine a method for reproducibly measuring and documenting psi, nor to enhance the magnitude of the psi phenomena observed, but to create a paradigm that appropriately addresses the fullness of the phenomena and is gender balanced and holistic in scope' (p.57). Schlitz describes how she has attempted to introduce more balance to her research by exploring more qualitative strategies:

Using myself as an experimental subject... has allowed me to circumvent the subject/object dichotomy so pervasive in a science dominated by stereotypical "male" traits... In conjunction with rational discussions of methodology in formal publications, I have tried to include my personal experiences. This provides an integration of gender styles, although objectivity and reductionism are still privileged by my commitment to experimentation... I have begun to study the beliefs and practices of successful psi experimenters... In this process, however, it is clear that the qualitative dimension remains subordinate to objective research paradigms. Like the women before me, I have played with the gender boundaries inherent in the practice of parapsychology without offering a direct challenge to the stereotypical "male" dominated research paradigm. (pp. 165-166)

Although some parapsychologists might be put off by the F-word and related terminology, actually the participants at this conference are presenting a framework in which to conceptualise the old qualitative-quantitative debate within parapsychology. The debate is not new, but to locate it in terms of gender relations may be new to folk like me who have tended to shy away from too-strident preachings in the past. Although there is some preaching in *Women and Parapsychology*, I think it should be read for the new perspective it gives on an old problem for parapsychology.

As I read the volume, I got the impression that the participants were still at the stage of organising their thoughts; this was indeed a ground-breaking conference. The basic characteristics of a feminist approach to science were fleshed out. For me, one of the most useful comments was made by Jessica Utts, in the context of the concrete signs of progress for parapsychology that she and others have found through recent meta-analyses. The prevailing paradigm has led to proof-oriented research that has enabled parapsychologists to demonstrate a statistical anomaly. The introduction of a feminist perspective would shift the em-

phasis somewhat towards a greater understanding of people's psychic experiences: 'we would like to know more about those experiences. Whether they are what we think they are or not, statistics is not going to tell us. We need other methods for doing that' (p.269).

We still need the experimental approach, but there is a growing body of considered opinion, not restricted to feminists, arguing that a more complete understanding of complex phenomena is to be gained by the introduction of a feminist approach to complement the prevailing paradigm.

#### The Contemporary Position and the Way Forward

Well, the girlies have tidied away the last crumbs from the departmental party and I am left to reflect on the position of women parapsychologists (here, the men start to get restless!) When, over ten years ago, I first contacted Robert Morris about the possibility of my working with him, I was favourably impressed that in his reply he addressed me as a 'Ms' (I didn't have my PhD at that time). This was a good omen, I thought, a sign of progressive thinking (especially so in the context of the traditional Scottish culture!). He hasn't disappointed me, but I know that other female parapsychologists haven't been so lucky.

In her position paper for the Proceedings, Nancy Zingrone reports on the outcome of a survey of nine women with various degrees of interest and involvement in parapsychology. On the negative side, most felt that they had been disadvantaged in one way or another because of their sex. For example, one said 'I was an underling where I was working... and so I wasn't considered for a position of power as a rule, and when such things were considered they were in traditionally female roles like editing a journal... for which we had female precursors... the fact that you had a female there before made it easier for a female to come after' (p.223). I could give further examples, but I am sure that readers have already got the point.

On the plus side there was a feeling that parapsychology was a less gender-biased field than most. Perhaps it is because psi phenomena themselves seem to be gender-blind (despite common assumptions to the contrary). Perhaps, also, it's important that parapsychologists, whether they be male or female, are already a marginalised group. Internal schisms become less relevant when an even stronger prejudice is felt from outside the group. Let's be positive and see how progress could be made, both in enhancing the position of women in parapsychology, and in progressing parapsychology towards a more balanced treatment of our subject-matter. The suggestion is, of course, that the first may lead to the second.

The point made by the woman quoted above in Zingrone's survey can be turned around to women's advantage and, I hope, to the advantage of the field as a whole. It is through having role models, mentors, and having women in influential positions that a self-perpetuating system can change. Jessica Utts makes this point in her contribution to the Proceedings:

I believe the climate on most campuses will not change significantly until there is a critical mass of women in administration. The daily climate on any campus is strongly influenced by department chairs, deans, and higher level administrators. On most campuses, these are the people who are responsible for pay rises and promotions. By their actions, these people send messages to the campus community about what constitutes acceptable behavior (p.37)

Zingrone's position paper concludes with a list of guidelines for the future, specifically aimed at women in parapsychology, to help to counter gender-based prejudices. These include: being an active member of the PA, prepared to take on responsibilities; never accepting second authorship on a paper when you deserve first and writing sole-authored papers whenever possible; gently prodding male colleagues when you feel that they are be-

ing unfair, to raise their consciousness; mentoring young parapsychologists, particularly women; and helping to build an "old girls" network. In my experience, the operation of gender-based prejudices is usually so subtle that the perpetrators do not even realise that they are being prejudiced, until that is tactfully pointed out to them.

Of course, prejudice can work in both directions. For instance, I have recently noticed a backlash in the printed media against the high profile of 'women's health' issues. Men are poorly represented in the health lobby and consequently less provision is made for them, to their detriment. We shouldn't get too 'hung up' on the gender issue. As Utts says:

we must learn when it matters that we are women and when it does not. Accusations of bias when it does not exist will ultimately destroy our credibility. Labeling ourselves as victims and behaving accordingly is the best way to ensure that we are treated as such. On the other hand, we are in the best position to identify inequities that our male colleagues may not even be aware exist (p.239)

### Concluding Comments

Because a conference can be a rallying point that leaves participants buoyed up and full of optimism for the future, I decided to contact some of the original participants in *Women and Parapsychology* to see how they felt about these issues now, five years later. Lisette Coly was glad to see that Susar Blackmore and she were not alone in trying to juggle with career and children, though I agree with Lisette that we can't have it all and the career is suffering. On a more positive note, though, the PF perception was of an increasing involvement of women in parapsychology since the conference (Coly, personal communication).

Rhea White felt that the situation had not improved in the interim; she was concerned that with funding becoming more restricted and the 'old boys' network mak-

ing most of the funding decisions, women would inevitably suffer. On the plus side, White felt that as younger women entered the field, with some knowledge of feminist views and with technical familiarity becoming widespread, 'it will trickle on down eventually, and I think the conference itself, and the proceedings, have injected impetus to the trickle' (White, personal communication).

Nancy Zingrone made some comments that validated my instincts that many would have been put off by the topic of the conference: 'some otherwise intelligent men in the field expressed disinterest in the content of the conference because it was just "a woman thing"'. However, Zingrone was pleased to note the favourable reaction from male colleagues and friends to her arrangements as 1995 Program Chair for the PA convention, despite the fact that she had increased the profile of women through invited addresses and session chairs. I was sad, but not surprised, to hear that since the conference Zingrone has continued to hear dispiriting tales from female colleagues of gender-based discrimination. She concluded:

there is still a long way to go to get true parity for the women in the field, to make sure that there are equal opportunities for research jobs and places in PhD programs, on substantive, important panels at conventions, in the "places that count"... I believe strongly that parapsychology is more gender-blind than other disciplines... (but) if we don't make the inequities known and/or work to end them, many of the men will just assume that everything is fine and nothing will change (Zingrone, personal communication)

The most up-beat feedback came from Jessica Utts, who I would like to quote at length to end this essay-review:

The most significant change affecting the lives of all academics and scientists in recent years is the wide-spread use of the internet, and parapsychologists are no exception. One of the advantages of the internet is that it is truly

"gender-blind" in terms of access to both placing and receiving information. Whether it be in participating in private email lists or placing information on a web page, women are able to have as much access as are men. As one conservative U.S. politician has said, those with the upper hand are no longer those who can carry the most weight, but those who can type the fastest. Further, the use of the internet for intellectual discussions creates a community spirit and atmosphere that is more conducive to the traditional way in which women are perceived to "do science" than the way in which men are perceived to do it. I think this has created a wonderfully positive change that could not have been anticipated at the time of the conference. (Utts, personal communication)

Oh well, that's this job finished. Time to go change the baby's nappy!

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