

EDUCATING PARAPSYCHOLOGISTS

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers a number of issues relating to education in parapsychology. It is suggested that the scarcity of active researchers in parapsychology is due to (a) the current lack of reliability and applicability of parapsychological research findings and (b) how parapsychological research is perceived by “mainstream” scientists. A brief overview of some of the educational opportunities in parapsychology currently available is presented. Suggestions for future developments in the education and training of researchers in parapsychology are made, with reference to the present situation in the United Kingdom and the role of the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh. It is argued that parapsychology is likely to thrive through the increased integration within larger disciplines (such as psychology) and by exploiting connections with other subdisciplines (such as consciousness studies and transpersonal psychology).

A central concern in any discipline is, or at least should be, the education of its future researchers. This is because the future of a discipline is largely dependent upon those future generations of individuals who choose to devote their time to its study. A discipline’s future success depends upon what these individuals decide to study, how they decide to study it, how important their findings are, and how successful they are at disseminating these findings.

In a subject area such as parapsychology the issue of education is particularly acute. This is because there are relatively few active researchers and even fewer educational opportunities. At present, the American Psychological Association—probably the largest of the professional bodies in Psychology—boasts around 155,000 members. Meanwhile, the Parapsychological Association can only claim a little under 250 members (including student affiliates). While we may assume that a sizeable proportion of this number are currently, or have been, actively engaged in research, relatively few are involved in teaching parapsychology. Given that there appears to be few individuals involved in educating parapsychologists, there are few opportunities for potential researchers to receive the valuable guidance and experience they need if they are to devote a significant amount of their time to parapsychological research. If parapsychology is to flourish as a discipline, this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

This paper is based upon an invited address delivered at the 42nd Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association at Stanford University, California, August 1999.

In this paper, a number of issues surrounding the education of parapsychologists are considered. First, I will explore the question of why there are so few parapsychologists, and therefore so few educational opportunities. Following this, I will present a brief overview of some of the current educational opportunities that are available to aspiring researchers. Finally, I will aim to make a few suggestions in regard to prospects for future developments in the education and training of researchers in parapsychology.

WHY ARE THERE SO FEW PARAPSYCHOLOGISTS?

One might argue that parapsychology has potential implications for so many other areas such as philosophy, psychology, and religion. If this were the case, why are there not more people researching the area? The study of parapsychological phenomena may cast light on the philosophy of science, the philosophy of mind, the nature of consciousness, and, at a more practical level, our relationship with the environment in which we live. These would all appear to be important contributions to the study of humankind, to which any self-respecting high-school or college graduate might deem worthy of devoting some time. Yet the number of full-time researchers in the field is probably less than the typical number of people employed in a single medium-sized McDonald's restaurant. I would have thought that the prospect of making important potential contributions to the world in which we live would lure countless students towards parapsychology (and away from employment with McDonald's) perhaps feeding their desire to make a real difference in the world (as opposed to feeding burgers and fries to people who are in a hurry).

However, in practice it does not seem to work this way. In practice, while there are plenty of opportunities for large numbers of college graduates to take the fast-track to management with Ronald McDonald, the opportunities for aspiring researchers of the paranormal are near zero. Therefore, in order to seek an answer to the question of why there are so few parapsychologists, we need to address the question of why there are so few opportunities for would-be researchers.

Possibly the single most important reason for the scarcity for funded research posts in parapsychology stems from the nature of parapsychological phenomena themselves. It is only too well known that parapsychological research findings lack the level of replicability that would allow them to become accepted by the majority of scientists. Although the level of replicability that has been demonstrated to date with the help of meta-analysis may be sufficient to convince a sizeable number of the people who regularly read this journal, this level of reliability still falls far short of the level at which many scientists will accept that a true

anomaly has been demonstrated, and that we should devote precious resources attempting to explain and understand these anomalous effects.

Let us assume, however, that we have demonstrated such a level of reliability. Let us assume that even the most skeptical observer would be happy to concede that the evidence for an anomaly is so statistically overwhelming that to attribute the data to "chance" would be nothing less than intellectually dishonest. Let us also assume that the methodology of the studies that have provided this evidence is so rigorous that explanations such as sensory leakage, experimenter error, or experimenter fraud are effectively ruled out. If this was the position in which parapsychology found itself, would funding for more research posts suddenly become abundant? I doubt it. A demonstrated anomaly, in and of itself, does not tend to attract funding. Even if this anomaly is found to show a reliable relationship with various psychological and physical variables, few of the really big funders are still likely to be interested.

The point at which potential funding organizations are most likely to give serious consideration to parapsychological research is when the applications of such research can be clearly demonstrated. If they can be shown that psi is not only a reliable effect but also that it can be applied to help solve real problems then investment in psi research is likely to be more forthcoming. So, the question now becomes "Can psi be applied?" The good news is that psi most definitely has the *potential* to be applied to a number of situations. For example, readers who are familiar with the parapsychological literature will be well aware of research on remote influencing and distant healing (see, e.g., Braud & Schlitz, 1991). From such research it would appear that, under certain conditions, conscious intention may interact with physiological processes at a distance and may even aid the healing process in a way that goes beyond what is commonly understood by currently accepted medical science. If it can be shown that ostensible applied-psi effects such as these can be demonstrated to a reliable level, then I believe funders of medical research will soon show an interest. Similarly, ESP research such as that using the ganzfeld procedure (see Bem & Honorton, 1994) or remote-viewing techniques (for reviews see Hyman, 1996 and Utts, 1996) clearly has the potential (again, once an acceptable level of reliability has been demonstrated) to attract financial interest from those keen to develop new forms of telecommunications. Finally, we should also not overlook the potential commercial applications of RNG-PK findings (e.g., Radin & Nelson, 1989) which suggest that human conscious intentions can interact with electronic equipment, and so may pave the way for some kind of "psychic switch." There are most likely other areas of parapsychological research which have the potential to be applied in similar ways, but these examples illustrate my point.

In my opinion, if parapsychologists wish to see their field of study prosper, then it is research that has the potential to be applied in ways

such as these which should be encouraged. Not only would research in these areas have the potential to shed light on the process of psi (e.g., the limits of psi, mediating variables, and so on) but it would also be the kind of research that would be relatively easy to justify to colleagues in other disciplines and, more specifically, to the major sources of research funding.

This brings us to a related issue concerning the way in which parapsychology is perceived by so-called “mainstream” scientists. In the past, parapsychology has received a pretty bad press. In the minds of many people, parapsychology may still be linked to the occult and the supernatural, leading to the perception of parapsychology as little more than a pseudoscience. Furthermore, time after time, researchers have been accused of sloppy methodology, inappropriate use of statistics, or even outright fraud. To make matters worse, those accusations of fraud that have been supported by evidence (and even those which cannot be supported) have taken on almost mythical status leading the cynical observer to tar all parapsychologists with the same brush. Seeing as it is scientists from disciplines other than parapsychology who are typically the funding decision-makers, then the importance of creating the right image for parapsychology when seeking financial support should not be underestimated. Therefore, although the focus of this paper will be to discuss issues surrounding the education of parapsychologists, we must not overlook the importance of also educating nonparapsychologists. In addition to increasing our chances of gaining financial support for our research from some of the major funding sources, educating researchers from other disciplines might even result in tempting some of these researchers to engage in parapsychological research themselves.

In short, we can take a number of approaches to reduce the suspicion with which parapsychology is often regarded by so-called “mainstream” scientists. First and foremost, we need to clarify the conditions associated with enhancing the reliability of psi effects. Second, we should be emphasizing, and testing, the applicability of our research findings to important problems facing society and/or the potential commercial applications of our research findings. Of course, when operating in these contexts, it is of utmost importance to ensure that claims are not made which cannot be justified by the data. Finally, we should continue to do what we can to rid parapsychology of its image as little more than a pseudoscience. I believe that it is these approaches that will allow parapsychology to prosper, creating more opportunities for individuals to devote careers to this potentially wide-reaching scientific discipline.

No longer will we need to advise prospective students of parapsychology to choose something else to study, and to put them off studying parapsychology for the sake of their long-term academic careers. Although I believe we still need to be careful about the advice we do give students

who wish to include parapsychology in their studies, which I will discuss in more detail later, this advice might actually emphasize the strengths of such a choice rather than focusing purely on the restrictions of studying parapsychology.

OVERVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN PARAPSYCHOLOGY

When I presented this paper at the 42nd Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association in August 1999, I conducted an informal survey of attendees in an attempt to identify the percentage of those attending who had received some kind of formal education in parapsychology. Although the vast majority of attendees were, or had been, active researchers in the field, less than 20% had received any formal education in parapsychology. This small percentage reflects that there has traditionally been a lack of educational opportunities. Moreover, more than half of those who had received some formal education had received at least part of their training through just one institution—the Rhine Research Center (RRC) in Durham, North Carolina. This demonstrates the important role of the RRC in providing training in the research methods, findings, and implications of parapsychological research. Indeed, the RRC continues to be at the forefront of providing educational opportunities in parapsychology. Their 8-week Summer Study Program (SSP) is still probably the best known and most comprehensive course for individuals wishing to gain a thorough grounding in all areas of parapsychology from experimental research to spontaneous case investigations and case studies. Moreover, as the course is delivered by active researchers (whether they be guest lecturers or those based at the Center itself), students get the chance to interact with many of the major contributors to the field. In short, as an SSP alumnus myself, I would recommend the SSP to any serious student of parapsychology.

The prevalence of the RRC in the educational experiences of a high proportion of researchers (or at least a high proportion of those who have received some formal education in parapsychology) might also be taken to highlight the lack of alternative sources for such training. However this situation appears to be changing.

Those of us who do not live in North Carolina may be pleased to learn that there are also a handful of educational opportunities available elsewhere. For example, no matter where you may be located in the world, it is now possible to take an on-line academic course in parapsychology at the University of Utrecht over the internet thanks to the efforts of Professor Dick Bierman. The course runs between March and June each year, during which one key article per week is made available on the internet for students to read, critique, and answer specific

questions by email. The emails are re-distributed to all participants along with comments by the instructor, Prof. Bierman himself. There are also “meet-the-expert” chat sessions where students can ask questions in real-time to authors of some of the selected articles. Students who are based at a Dutch university can take the course for academic credit and there are plans for similar arrangements at a US university.

In addition, it is also occasionally possible to take courses in parapsychology as part of a regular undergraduate degree program. For example, at Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire, psychology students are able to take several courses in parapsychology as part of their degree.

Perhaps the most striking proliferation of undergraduate degree programs which include an option in parapsychology can be found in the UK. At present I am aware of at least five higher education institutions in the UK which offer parapsychology courses as part of a BA, BSc, or MA degree program (usually as part of a degree in psychology). These are Coventry University, University of Edinburgh, Liverpool Hope University College, Liverpool John Moores University, and University College Northampton. In addition, some other UK universities run courses that include parapsychology as part of a wider consideration of the paranormal, such as those offered in the Department of Psychology at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and in the Department of Behavioural Sciences at the University of Huddersfield. At all of these institutions, undergraduate students may also choose to examine a parapsychological topic for their independent research project (for example, their final year dissertation). Such projects typically link parapsychology with some other area of psychology by, for example, conducting a study to explore the relationship between performance on a psi task and selected psychological variables (such as extroversion, belief in psi, and so on).

Even at the graduate level the opportunities are greater than they have been for some time. For example, at the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California, one can study towards a PhD in Transpersonal Psychology by including courses in parapsychology and conducting research on parapsychological topics. Also in California, the Saybrook Institute in San Francisco offers opportunities to study for an MA or PhD in an area that could include parapsychology, while the California Institute for Integral Studies offers a graduate course in Intuition, Parapsychology, and Consciousness as part of the Institute’s distant learning program.

In the UK, one can undertake research towards a PhD including a parapsychological element, usually linked with one or more other areas of psychology, at practically all of the institutions I mentioned earlier as well as one or two others (most notably the University of Hertfordshire).

In short, although we are not at the point at which parapsychology features on the majority of psychology degree programs, nor is it yet possible to obtain a degree in parapsychology, the opportunities to obtain some kind of formal education in parapsychology (usually as part of a wider education in, say, psychology) are better than they have been for a long time (at least in the UK).¹

So much, then, for the present state of education in parapsychology. What about the prospects for the future? In the final section of this paper, I would like to give some consideration to various educational strategies that are likely to give parapsychology the best chances of prospering as an academic discipline.

PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION IN PARAPSYCHOLOGY

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, the education of future researchers in parapsychology is of utmost importance if the discipline is to flourish and expand in a way that many of us may believe it deserves to. How, then, should we go about ensuring that the educational opportunities we do provide give the kind of training that is most valuable to those people who may wish to contribute to the field of parapsychology?

In order to set a context for some of the comments and suggestions I will make in response to this question, I will focus on the situation in the UK. Given that in the UK there appears to have been some apparent success in finding a place for the inclusion of parapsychology at both an undergraduate and graduate level, it might be worth spending a few moments examining the reasons behind that success.

The situation in the UK is one which has developed over the past seven years or so. Prior to 1992 there was only one British university which was providing educational opportunities in parapsychology: the University of Edinburgh. As many of you will be aware, the University of Edinburgh's instrumental role in educating parapsychologists dates back to the 1970s during which time John Beloff supervised five PhD students with projects on parapsychological topics while he was a lecturer in the University's Psychology Department. All went on to make significant contributions to the field. Then in 1985, it was through a bequest by the writer Arthur Koestler that the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology was

¹ Although I make no apologies for the Anglocentric nature of this brief overview, I am aware that my perspective is likely to be biased by the fact that I am most familiar with the UK educational system and the opportunities available within it (and, to a lesser extent, opportunities in the USA). I am currently compiling a directory of educational opportunities on behalf of the Parapsychological Association and would welcome being sent details of other educational opportunities. Likewise, if you would like further details of any of the educational opportunities to which I have referred, I would be more than happy to pass on as much as I know.

established at the University, also based within the Psychology Department. Since then, another 13 students have gained their doctorates under the supervision of the Koestler Professor Bob Morris.

So it is safe to say that the University of Edinburgh has played, and continues to play, an important role in training a relatively large number of individuals in parapsychology. However, as I noted regarding the apparent prevalence of the Rhine Research Center in the educational background of many parapsychological researchers, this impressive tally might also be taken to highlight the lack of alternative sources for such training.

So what has happened since 1992 that has led to the proliferation of other institutions that are happy, if not eager, to offer graduate opportunities for parapsychological training as well as include parapsychology on their undergraduate curricula? I believe the answer to this question is due to the combination of two factors. The first factor concerns the changes in the structure of the British Higher Education system during the 1990s, while the second factor might be best described as the legacy of the approach adopted by Professor Morris in guiding his students.

In the early 1990s a government review of Higher Education in the UK led to changes that would allow polytechnics and other Higher Education institutions to use the title "University." Broadly speaking, prior to these changes the emphasis in polytechnics had been upon teaching, while the emphasis at universities had been upon research. The aim of the exercise was to eliminate the two-tier system, and to increase competition among all universities, both old and new, for various sources of funding for both teaching and research. One of the consequences of the changes was that, due to the increased availability of funding for the new universities, these institutions were able to take on more academic staff to engage in both teaching and research. Furthermore, posts in disciplines that were capable of attracting large numbers of students, such as psychology, increased dramatically in number. Thus, from the early 1990s there was an increased demand for lecturers in psychology, and so greater career opportunities for individuals completing PhDs in psychology.

Meanwhile, the approach taken by Bob Morris and his team at the University of Edinburgh was to ensure that his students not only gained knowledge and experience of research in parapsychology, but also that they gained expertise in one or more other areas of psychology. By encouraging his students to integrate their parapsychological studies with more conventional areas of psychology, Morris's students were able to demonstrate expertise in areas of psychology that were commonly taught as part of undergraduate psychology degrees such as social psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, clinical psychology or personality theory. What's more, their thorough grounding in research methods and statistics, issues which are fundamental to both parapsychological research

as well as research in other areas of psychology, meant they were strong candidates for many of the newly created lecturing posts.

So, the combination of these two factors has meant that five of Professor Morris's recent graduates have now secured lecturing posts at four of these new universities. The result is that each of these is now in a position to supervise PhD students themselves. Indeed, there are currently graduate students at all four of these institutions pursuing parapsychology-related projects. In addition, one individual has already gained his PhD from one of these institutions on the psychology and parapsychology of luck and now finds himself in the daunting position of writing a paper making suggestions about how we should go about educating parapsychologists.

Further encouragement that the new universities are keen to support parapsychology is demonstrated by the fact that three of these four institutions also include parapsychology options as part of their undergraduate degree programs. It would appear that they recognize that not only is parapsychology a popular subject choice among students, but that it can also serve as a context in which to develop students' critical thinking skills. In addition, parapsychology can be used to illustrate the importance of rigorous methodology, the relevance of relatively advanced statistical issues, and the need for replication of experimental findings. All of these are not only important in parapsychology, but are also important in psychology as a whole. Thus, much of what students might learn in the context of parapsychology may be applied to other aspects of their studies.

So, given the recent successes of the graduates of the Koestler Parapsychology Unit, I would be inclined to recommend the educational strategy employed by Bob Morris which, I believe, will increase the chances that students who study parapsychology are employable academics who will go on to contribute to the field of parapsychology. That is, wherever and whenever possible, we should integrate parapsychology within larger disciplines. At this stage, I feel that our best chances still lie within psychology because psi phenomena are, if nothing else, fundamentally psychological phenomena. That's not to say that parapsychology cannot, or should not, be integrated into other disciplines (such as philosophy or physics), but simply that I feel that it is currently psychology that has the most to learn from, and contribute to, the study of psi phenomena. Indeed, it is encouraging to note that this view also appears to be shared by the examining boards of "A" Level Psychology in England. "A" Levels are the school-leaving qualifications that many 17-year-olds will use to secure their place at university, and it is only within the past 10 years that students have been able to take an "A" Level course in psychology. The encouraging part is that the "A" Level curriculum, something which is set by the examining boards and not by individual

instructors, now includes a small section on parapsychology. This means that many students now arrive at university *expecting* parapsychology to be included in their studies in psychology.

One approach which may help to integrate parapsychology within psychology is to emphasize links between parapsychology and other areas which are already becoming increasingly integrated within the psychological sciences. Two such areas are the scientific study of consciousness and transpersonal psychology. In Britain, these areas are becoming increasingly recognized as important subdisciplines of academic psychology as illustrated by the inauguration of two new Sections of the British Psychological Society in 1997: The Consciousness and Experiential Psychology Section and the Transpersonal Psychology Section. In Liverpool, we have built upon this growing interest by establishing a Consciousness and Transpersonal Psychology Research Unit. The Unit is based within the Centre for Applied Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University although it also comprises members who are based in the Psychology Department at Liverpool Hope University College. Not only are the members of the Unit engaged in research, including experimental research in parapsychology, but we are also very much involved with teaching these areas at both an undergraduate level (as part of a BSc in Applied Psychology at John Moores University, and as part of a BSc or BA in Combined Subjects at Liverpool Hope University College) and graduate level (through supervising PhDs and through teaching an MSc in Consciousness and Transpersonal Psychology). The teaching and research of parapsychology sits comfortably within this framework.

Another approach is to emphasize the central importance of rigorous scientific methodology and statistical analysis in parapsychological research. Research methods and statistics are typically among the least popular courses among undergraduate psychology students. However, illustrating their relevance and utility in a popular and controversial context like parapsychology can be a way of engaging all students.

In short, I believe that the teaching of parapsychology in the wider context of psychology alongside other, perhaps more conventional, areas of psychology is not only of value to students but is also likely to enhance the prospects for the future development of the field.

I mentioned above that, as far as I am aware, it is still not possible to obtain an undergraduate degree in parapsychology. Personally, I do not see this as a problem. Indeed, I would not regard undergraduate degrees in "pure" parapsychology as a desirable aim of educators for the foreseeable future. Until parapsychology gains a greater standing in academia (which, as I have argued, is most likely to be achieved through increased integration with disciplines like psychology), or until research posts in parapsychology become more common (which, I suggest is only likely if and when funders can be convinced of the potential applications of psi),

I fear that a degree in parapsychology will be worth very little. Instead, as I have argued, we should aim to introduce students to the methods and findings of parapsychology as part of a wider education in, say, psychology. Suitably qualified students may then go on to research and teach parapsychology within the wider context of psychology (or whatever the larger discipline may be).

Finally, in order to ensure that prospective students are fully aware of the potential educational benefits of studying parapsychology as well as being aware of the educational opportunities available to them, we need to do what we can to promote what research is being done and the educational opportunities on offer. In general, parapsychology as a field has been actively involved in doing this. Most notably, in the past few years, parapsychologists have been quick to recognize the value of the internet in providing resources for individuals with a blossoming interest in parapsychology. The majority of active research establishments now have well-developed (and much visited) web-sites. Indeed, some have internet-based experiments and, as I mentioned above, it is now possible to study a course via the internet. In addition, the main parapsychology-related organizations such as the Society for Psychical Research, the American Society for Psychical Research, the Parapsychology Foundation and the Parapsychological Association all have web-sites. Finally, the guidance provided by the Parapsychology Frequently Asked Questions pages (which can be reached through the PA web-site) are a valuable resource for any would-be student wherever in the world they may be. The internet also plays host to global bookstores from which one can order some of the highly recommended texts that give an intelligent overview of the field (e.g., Broughton, 1992; Irwin, 1999; Radin, 1997). No more need for those frustrating visits to your local bookstore in the vain attempt of obtaining the book of your choice. Students can even order via the internet an interactive CD-ROM, Mario Varvoglis' *Psi Explorer* which will allow them to explore a multimedia encyclopaedia of parapsychological knowledge, as well as participate in controlled ESP and PK trials.

All in all, we should applaud the efforts of those who have been instrumental in making sure that parapsychological research activities are well-represented in a forum that allows the widest access to such information. Indeed, we should welcome and support all efforts to raise the profile of parapsychology education among both our colleagues and the public.

It is with this in mind that I am, therefore, grateful to the Parapsychological Association (and the editor of the *Journal of Parapsychology*) for allowing me this opportunity to highlight what I believe to be important issues in the continuing development of parapsychology. I appreciate that, by and large, I am probably preaching to the converted, in that I guess many readers of this journal will agree with me that the

inclusion of parapsychology (taught in a balanced and responsible way) in a program of studies can be a valuable and rewarding experience for both teacher and student alike. Indeed, to quote John Beloff (Beloff, 1975): “There is no other discipline that I know which engages at the same time a person’s critical faculties and his [or her] imagination and then stretches them both to a comparable extent” (p. 11).

However, if we are to ensure that as many people as possible are able to benefit from such a rewarding educational experience, we need to spend some time considering how this might be best achieved. As a first step, I hope this paper has, at the very least, been an opportunity to open this discussion.

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