

WOMEN AND PARAPSYCHOLOGY

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I got interested in parapsychology when I was a teen-ager. Louisa Rhine's (1961) *Hidden channels of the mind* influenced me more than anything else. Here was a wife and mother who did important work with her husband's blessing. Before I knew how marginal her work really was in the field, she symbolized for me the successful integration of the woman I most wanted to be (writer, researcher, scientist) with the woman society most wanted me to be (helpmate, wife, mother). I got the idea that in parapsychology my intellect would be valued, my contributions would be welcome, and I could still lead a "normal" life.

For a long time I missed the perjorative assumptions that underpinned my aspirations: that a woman scientist was a freak unless she was a wife and mother; that a woman who wanted to be someone important could only escape the costs of ambition by being attached to a man. Until I got my first job in the field, I also missed what life as a woman in parapsychology was really like. This is not to say that on my first day on the job oppression suddenly descended upon me—far from it. My experiences with male colleagues in parapsychology have been very good. I have been mentored by several supportive males. My boss provided me with opportunities to work, think, and learn that were liberating on many levels. Soon after, however, I discovered that some men expected very little of me. They were surprised by or ignored my accomplishments. Although I was grateful for the comparatively few barriers I found here, I still found some. I have been behind the barricades. I have watched the receding backs of my male colleagues as they rushed unimpeded towards their goals without so much as a backward glance at me.

We are stopped dead in our tracks as women in this field both because of structural barriers and because we are too quick to blame ourselves. There is some truth to the notion that we impede our own progress, however. I willingly accept subordinate roles, do invisible work. I interrupt my intellectual work for household tasks, kin work, or the labor of relationships. I am easily distracted by new ideas and methodologies whether or not they fit into my present set of priorities.

I'm not happy unless I'm trying to do it all—an impossibility that leads only to fragmentation and fatigue, frustration and resentment, to an impotent anger that flashes and fades as I reorganize my priorities and start out again. Turning inward can be a trap though; it is a common defense mechanism of the disadvantaged. When I convince myself I deserve what I suffer, I stop spinning strategies to overcome the barricades others place in my path. Instead, I weave more debilitating obstacles for myself.

I've always wondered how common my experience is, and I've always wanted an empirical answer. In 1985, Julie Milton, Carlos Alvarado, and I spent a number of sultry summer evenings hashing out plans for a survey such as the one I've done for this paper. Although I haven't searched for my notes on our conversations, I'm sure some of the questions I've asked here were among those we three discussed.

I interviewed nine participants by phone and in person. I asked eight questions two ways—once to probe personal experiences and once to assess perceptions of women's place in the field in general. I asked about "sexism" in parapsychology. My participants defined the term for themselves and answered first in general and then in particular. I asked them what they hoped to accomplish, whether here or in another discipline.

I chose my participants with an eye towards representativeness. One is a newcomer, a recent M.A., full of ambition and optimism. Three received their doctorates in the 1980s, two of these with parapsychological dissertations, and one in another discipline. The parapsychology Ph.D.s never found steady employment after their degrees. Both struggle to remain active on their own. The third works full-time in another discipline and part-time in parapsychology, sometimes for pay, sometimes not. I interviewed two doctoral candidates, one in parapsychology and one in a related discipline. The latter plans to work in the other discipline. She hopes to remain active in parapsychology on the side. The former, although she has many years of full-time paid work in the field behind her, isn't sure she'll continue at all post-Ph.D. I interviewed three who left the field after many years of employment. One, an M.S. student in another discipline, left to pursue a more marketable career. The parapsychology chapter of her life, she says, is irrevocably closed. The second works at the career for which her second masters degree trained her. She sees parapsychology as a step

along a path to broader interests. The third, who never completed a college degree, would jump at a chance to return, although she doubts she'll get the opportunity. That I have interviewed no currently employed women parapsychologists is largely a matter of serendipity. One was out of town; others did not return my call. Eventually this survey will form the nucleus of a systematic study of women in the field, comparing their experiences to those of a matched sample of men.

My participants told me that although parapsychology relegates women to a secondary status, things are better here than elsewhere. One said:

You just have to work harder as a woman but that's something you're going find in other fields. . . . it's actually better than I expected.

They generally agreed that women are taken less seriously than men. One participant complained that when she was a student in parapsychology her questions were ignored or answered less completely than questions posed by male students. Another commented:

All of your interactions within the field, even your . . . formal interactions like the submission of a paper [are different] . . . one time I got a 27-page, hand-written criticism [from a referee] which just was a rambling on and on. . . . I just don't think that a man in our field would get that kind of criticism from someone. I think they would make it their business to be a little formal. . . but after all I'm only a woman.

In general, my participants felt strongly that they were encouraged less often than their male colleagues had been, although a few women dissented from this view. One said:

It's hard for me to say what it would have been . . . I think that had I decided to pursue a future in parapsychology rather than the field I did . . . I would have been encouraged . . . I don't think I've been discouraged . . . on the other hand I don't think anybody went out of their way to take me under his or her wing.

Another described her experience this way:

I would say that there's been no difference but it's really hard for me to say . . . because in my situation I work so closely with such a few people in the

field and what I do is so unrelated to what most people do . . . I would think that most parapsychologists haven't encouraged me one way or another. But the people I have worked with . . . [have been] very encouraging.

Another woman said:

My contacts with people who might have encouraged me to obtain my professional goals were limited to the people I worked with and my boss was not really interested in having me become more academically qualified . . . When the opportunities presented themselves they were such that he denigrated the institutions offering the opportunities and so I never followed up on them. . . . even though [a man in the laboratory] was encouraged . . . My boss was on his dissertation committee.

For another participant, lack of encouragement was not necessarily tied to gender. She said:

I think it's . . . the more academic and scientific you are, the more you're encouraged whether you're a man or a woman. Because I feel like [a research-oriented woman in the field] . . . is right up there with the top people and being heavily encouraged and backed up and doing unbelievable work and she's female. . . . In our field intellectualist approaches are really where it's at, and if you're not there, then you're looked down on . . . probably even more so than most fields.

All my participants felt that women are "tracked" in parapsychology in a variety of ways, some of which affect the males as well. One said:

Not tracked in terms of the topic areas. Tracked somewhat in that while I did get into the computer work, and into statistics and so on . . . it was less expected. It was more socially acceptable for me not to know about something technical than it was for the guys. . . . the women were more into running the subjects and interacting and that kind of thing.

Another said:

Well in a way, yes. . . . Being that when I finished my Ph.D. I basically had . . . my academic education in [a psychological subspecialty within parapsychology but] I had received no encouragement in terms of any job prospects . . . in a way there was no opportunity to pursue that and I kind

of got forced into . . . doing [field investigations not related to my original subspecialty] . . . not that I mind or anything, that's always a lot of fun, but it wasn't my first love. So I never got to do what I was trained and qualified to do. . . . But . . . I'm not sure that if I were male, there would have been any opportunities either.

Another put it more more bluntly:

Men get tracked into actually doing the research and women get tracked into being assistants. . . . The thing that's doubly annoying is that most of us tend to just go along nodding submissively . . . to nod and smile and go ahead and do it.

Most participants believed that women act as second authors or assistants more often than men, and they sometimes get into relationships with men in the field in which the man's work overshadows, shapes, or curbs their own work. One woman said:

I fight rather ferociously for my authorships, more so than I would have to if I were a male. Because you know you really have to fight really hard to keep getting whatever due you can.

Another said:

I always took the subordinate role and I'd accept second authorship or third authorship. Nobody ever said to me why don't you write this paper . . . I could write communications to others but nobody ever said to me why don't you write this paper and then run it by me.

Responses to questions about access to power and information were also multidimensional. One woman said her male colleagues had power

because they were more hard-lined science the more hard-line and statistically oriented . . . and methodologically focused you are, the more power you have in the field, and everybody else is considered not serious and not to be taken seriously.

Not being unable to avoid secondary status has its costs. One woman noted:

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 or . . . that kind of thing . . . for which we had female precursors . . . not to diminish the achievement of those who had done it, but the fact that you had a female there before made it easier for a female to come after.

All the women interviewed portrayed male parapsychologists as advantaged. One participant said:

I think that if I had been male I would have gotten more credit, in particular for the kind of management and administrative work that I did. . . . [and] the times when somebody's work was disparaged was when it was exclusively done by a female . . . there were some snickers and there was . . . the famous comment "Well you're really rather badly wrong here" . . . I've never heard anyone address a male colleague in that way.

Many of my participants felt that lack of advanced degrees interfered with a woman's ability to get ahead in the field. One said:

Clearly men do hold the key positions of power. It's a numbers game. . . . [membership in the Parapsychological Association (PA)] is more reflective of the fact that it's more common for men to achieve degrees and so on, that allow them to become the members, are encouraged more for their work, get more publications out, do all the things that wind up making them suitable for membership.

For women, however, having the Ph.D. did not necessarily translate into any of the usual institutional rewards that men with doctorates seemed to be getting. One woman said:

I noticed when the men got their Ph.D.s they were placed in laboratories and if they didn't work out in one laboratory they were placed in another laboratory. When I got my Ph.D. and had to get equal pay, the response usually was, there's no money. . . . I wasn't put up for positions and things like that. I did get some rewards on the outside but not within the PA. . . . As long as I was a student and was willing to take \$3,000, or \$7,000 a year, you know, I was given every opportunity to do all the work. . . . There was a man who came to work and he was given a much larger salary than myself even though he had no training in parapsychology and I did, and when I questioned this [her male superior] told me that he had a

wife and a child and was buying a home . . . and that's why he gets more money than me.

As for sexism, although it was generally acknowledged that it exists in parapsychology, a number of interesting perspectives surfaced. One participant noted:

I think in the older generation [sexism] lies in men and in the younger generation it lies in women. . . . By their nature the older generation of men do tend to be more sexist. But I think that some of the younger women in parapsychology . . . are apt to look to sexism when they have problems. . . instead of saying is it something I did, it's more comfortable to say well they're sexist . . . rather than looking towards their competence. It's a self-esteem protector.

Another said:

There's sexism and there's sexism. There's sexism where somebody's being discriminated against and the best candidate is not chosen because she's female. We have sexism in which males look over an article that is written by a female and they kind of assume that it's not done as well. I've had one person tell me that . . . he was very sorry but he just knew that when he saw an article in whatever field if it had a female's name, he just didn't view it the same way.

A number of participants noted that although women could get pretty far on competence and hard work, they could never run laboratories or hold visible positions of power. This ceiling on their aspirations disturbed them. When I asked how they felt about these inequities, my participants expressed resentment, disappointment, and anger that such things could happen here. One woman put it poignantly:

I thought that they wanted dedicated workers who were willing to strive to be educated, to be good workers, and I put my whole heart, and soul, and mind into the work for many, many years, at extreme sacrifices to myself, and when I got my degree and they no longer had any use for me it hurt real bad.

I was saddened by these responses—they mirrored my own experience, and in some cases depicted much greater inequities. To

counteract the disheartening impact of the interviews, I made a list of guidelines for the future. My advice to us is this:

- *Go the distance. Get the Ph.D. no matter how little others encourage you.
- *Learn what you need to know. Don't rely on others to pull you through.
- *Develop a network of contacts with other women. An "old girls" network is a necessary corrective.
- *Obtain full membership in the PA.
- *Run for office.
- *Volunteer to be Program Chair.
- *Support the candidacy of other women.
- *Never do subordinate work for male colleagues if you can help it.
- *Never accept second authorship when you deserve first.
- *Write sole-authored papers when you can.
- *Collaborate with other women.
- *Resist being tracked.
- *Agitate gently with male colleagues. Let them know when they trod on your rights, your sense of self, your ideas. The best of them think of themselves as fair and egalitarian. They don't want to be sexist. Become their allies. Make them yours.
- *Promote equal access and equal participation for everybody, male or female, white or minority, Anglo-American or of another culture. People must be judged on the quality of their work, not on ethnocentric or androcentric criteria.
- *Mentor young parapsychologists, especially young women. Role models are key to success in any field.
- *Build your own self-esteem.
- *Confront inequities directly, peaceably.
- *Don't accept invisibility.
- *Make like Eileen Garrett. Start your own "business" in parapsychology.
- *Carve out your own territory and publish, publish, publish.
Things are better now than they were, but we still have a long way to go.

REFERENCE

Rhine, L.E. (1961). *Hidden channels of the mind*. New York: William Sloane.