

WOMEN AND PARAPSYCHOLOGY

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I have been actively involved in psi research for over a decade. I have had the pleasure of working with some of the most creative, rigorous, and psi-conductive experimenters. Based on numerous research experiences in and out of the laboratory, it is my position that the field of psi research lends itself to stereotypical characterizations frequently associated with the ideal of femininity in our society. Empathy, intuition, sensitivity, spontaneity, and concern for others are traditional gender constructions attributed to Western women. These are also characteristics associated with the successful elicitation of psi within a laboratory setting. This is a significant reason why women have been allowed to excel in parapsychology. We are seen to possess important skills for interacting with people and for putting them at ease. These are valuable skills for a field in which many of our experimental participants enter the laboratory with misconceptions and fears. Our perceived superiority in the realm of intuition and sensitivity places us in a privileged position in efforts to understand, produce, and reproduce psychic phenomena. Our spontaneity allows us to be flexible in the face of the numerous complexities inherent in psi research.

However, my experience leads me to conclude that although most researchers acknowledge the value of these "female" characteristics in psi studies, they (both male and female) frequently fail to incorporate them into practice. This is directly tied to the emphasis that psi researchers have placed on credibility and conformance to standards set in the natural sciences. Within the scientific academy, the emphasis is on stereotypically "male" traits of objectivity, depersonalization, abstraction, and authority (Keller, 1985; Merchant, 1980). Competition and the quest for power have become hallmarks of the male-dominated scientific establishment (Namenwirth, 1986).

¹ I wish to express my appreciation to Jane Parker, who helped guide me to the feminist literature.

The original mission of psychical researchers was to refute materialism, a task that fit well with the stereotypical "female." With the increasing authority of Western science, "male" characteristics associated with materialism gained power and authority by attempting to manipulate, control, and predict the physical world. In an effort to gain respect, recognition, and a sense of belonging, parapsychologists have modeled themselves on an institutionalized set of values that do not necessarily conform to the nature of the phenomena under study (Schlitz, 1985). Researchers have placed primary value on obtaining adequate sample sizes, prespecifying experimental conditions, manipulating and controlling the proper variables, and getting significant probability values. Issues of scientific uncertainty, so prevalent in our attempts to harness and understand psi processes, are ignored by the dominant culture (Fee, 1986), leading psi researchers to search for regularities and consistencies where it is possible that none may be found.

These priorities lead us to collapse the subjective phenomena of human experience into objective units susceptible to scientific scrutiny. In the process, however, we remove ourselves and the phenomena of our inquiry from the "female" dimensions of emotionality, spontaneity, intuition, and empathy. As noted by Haynes (1982, p. 10): "An innate lack, or an acquired repression, of warmth and sympathy may be useful for the mathematician, the physicist, the astronomer; but it is the reverse for those who deal with human individuals." This is even more to the point in the field of psi research. While researchers frequently pay lip service to "human factors," "female" traits rarely make their way to the laboratory, let alone to the technical reports summarizing our methods, procedures, and results. The dominance of "male" traits in science has led psychical research further, rather than closer, to the phenomena of our inquiries.

One way out of our quagmire is to recognize that "female" and "male" characteristics are not natural categories of "womanhood" or "manhood" (Harding, 1989). Such constructions are cultural and therefore subject to modification by social actors. The gendered dichotomies must be superseded by a fusion that acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of both gender stereotypes. I again quote Haynes (1982, p. 11):

It is fairly rare for an experimenter to combine the warmth and enthusiasm needed to elicit paranormal activities with the ability to

examine and evaluate the results of his [or her] work in a statistical form. For much of the time there must be an interaction between two types of mind. I will modify this to say that there must be an interaction of two types of gender. The marriage of these gender "types" must be more than superficial, however.

Although I am not arguing that we abandon the rigor of our research procedures or our commitment to the scientific method, I am advocating what Sandra Harding (1989) refers to as a robust gender-sensitive reflexivity practice. The research process must be conceived as being on the same plane of significance as the overt subject matter. We must forge a respectful interplay between the subjective and the objective, the emotional and the rational, the intuitive and the logical. We must move away from a view of experimental participants, psychics, and mediums as objects of scrutiny and manipulation. In this way, psychical researchers may regain the "female" caring and empathy that is lost in the process of scientific "male" training. We must cultivate, rather than eradicate, the intuitive and spontaneous sides of our potential as researchers in parapsychology. Rather than approaching the issue of "experimenter effects" with disdain and frustration (see Stokes, 1990), we should position ourselves within the experimental process, learning what we can from our own thoughts and experiences (Schlitz, 1985). Likewise, we must be willing to attend to the unique and spontaneous, rather than restricting ourselves to a focus on that which is lawlike and regular. In this way, we may learn more about the phenomena of psi on their own terms, rather than as a product of power relations and social domination. By adopting a "female" approach we may give birth to a new parapsychology—one that is fresh and alive in its quest to understand, rather than control, the world in which we are a part.

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